

THE FIRST ORGANIZED USE OF FINGERPRINTS

IN THE U.S.A.

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It has been standard practice, since well before the turn of the century, for appointments to the New York City Police and Fire Departments to be made based on competitive examinations. After one of these examinations given in 1900, it was discovered that fraud and impersonation had been perpetrated by one man taking several examinations for several different people for varying fees.

In June of 1902, Dr. Henry P. de Forest was appointed medical examiner for the New York City Civil Service Commission, and as such was in charge of the physical exams for all applicants for appointment under the Municipal Civil Service. In July of 1902, Col. Ogden, the City Civil Service Commissioner, informed Dr. de Forest that he wanted him to devise some method of preventing a repetition of the fraud and impersonation that had taken place earlier. Dr. de Forest suggested that the Bertillon System of Identification be adopted, Col. Ogden agreed, and in Aug. 1902, Dr. de Forest departed for Europe to learn more about the System firsthand from Mr. Bertillon.

On his way through England, Dr. de Forest read an article in the London Daily Telegraph telling about the detection of a burglar by means of the new Fingerprint Identification System. After making several inquiries about the new System, Dr. de Forest was invited to New Scotland Yard's fingerprint branch, and there studied the fundamentals of the System under the tutelage of Sgt. Charles Collins of the C.I.D.

Dr. de Forest returned to New York in Oct. 1902, a firm believer in the value of the new Fingerprint System. The Doctor then met with Col. Ogden and explained the advantages this new System had to offer. By taking the applicants fingerprints and comparing them at different stages during the examining process and before final appointment, it would enable the examiner to establish the applicants positive identity each step of the way. Col. Ogden came away from the meeting convinced the Fingerprint System was the best method of eliminating impersonation. New forms were then printed, equipment assembled, and the new System was put into operation. The first person fingerprinted was an applicant for the City Fire Department by the name of James Johnson on

December 19, 1902. Thus began the first official use of the Fingerprint Identification System in this country.

As a footnote to the above, in January 1935, a testimonial dinner was given to Dr. de Forest in honor of his many years of dedicated service. In attendance was Mr. James Johnson, the same Mr. Johnson, Dr. de Forest had printed in Dec. 1902. Mr. Johnson's fingerprints were retaken at that dinner and a copy given to each guest as a memento of the first organized use of fingerprints in the U.S.A.

References:

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