

The murder of Samuel S. Taylor 100 years later

The untold story of the first New York State Game Protector slain in the line of duty

In New York, we are now called Environmental Conservation Officers, but this was not always so. In 1880, we were brought into existence as Game & Fish Protectors. In the beginning there were only eight of us for the entire state. The starting annual salary was \$500 (equivalent to about \$14,000 today). The early days were not easy for Game Protectors. Most were shunned by a society that considered poaching an acceptable activity. It was (and still is) a dangerous job. Threats were numerous and assaults were not uncommon. Despite this, they carried on. Then, one fateful day in April of 1914, one of them paid the ultimate price. Game Protector Samuel S. Taylor was killed.

SAMUEL S. TAYLOR is a name synonymous with courage, valor, and exceptional service within the ranks of the New York State Environmental Conservation Police. Our Division's highest award is called the Samuel S. Taylor Award. It is given to both Environmental Conservation Officers and Investigators who, "by a conspicuous act of valor, courage, integrity, resourcefulness and bravery in the protection of our natural resources and/or public safety, have clearly set themselves apart in the performance of their duties." This award is aptly named in honor of the first Game Protector in New York State killed in the line of duty.

NYS Game Protectors (our official title until 1964) enforced fish and wildlife laws at a time when deer, beaver and fisher populations were dangerously low. Turkeys were a rare sight around the state. Many other species were swiftly becoming extinct. Species such as the eastern Elk, Labrador duck, and heath hen were completely wiped out. Moose, gray wolf, and lynx were extirpated from the landscape of New York. The wood duck (one of the most common waterfowl species today) was nearing extinction. This was a period of market hunting, more aptly defined as the killing of everything and anything that would bring money to the sellers at market. The fur trade was lucrative and booming. The millinery trade was just as large, providing the much sought after bird feathers for the decoration of women's hats. As a result, many species of birds were shot at will for their plumage.



These early days were not easy. The idea that the government had a right to regulate the taking of fish and game (provided by God for all to take as they saw fit) was an alien concept and one that was not well received. Game protectors were not afforded a great deal of respect, and public sentiment was most often on the side of the poachers. Early game protectors were threatened and assaulted routinely. Their homes were vandalized and their horses poisoned. One game protector had already been injured by a firearm in 1909. He recovered from his injuries, which were not life threatening.

By all research and accounts, Samuel S. Taylor was born, raised, and resided his entire life in the small town of Bouckville, New York. He was born on June 5, 1876 to Clesson F. and Ella (Scranton) Taylor. Little is known of his early life but it appears likely that as a

young man he had a strong desire to pursue a career in law enforcement. Extensive research has suggested that he became a constable and a deputy sheriff for the Madison County Sheriff's Office in the early 1900s. It is even mentioned in some articles that he was one of the exposition guards for the 1901 Pan American Exposition in Buffalo, NY. One article suggests that he was close at hand when President McKinley was shot by an assassin at the Exposition.

Samuel S. Taylor became a New York State Game Protector on August 5, 1912 at the age of 36. Hired by the NYS Conservation Commission at the annual rate of \$900, his duties were to enforce the Fish and Game Laws of New York State. By that time, the New York State Game Protector force had grown to 110 men. This was a far cry from the original eight-man force that started in 1880. Even for 110 men, there was a lot of ground (and water) to cover – about 550 square miles per officer. Samuel S. Taylor was assigned to his home area of Madison County. Although each officer had an assigned area, they often traveled to adjoining areas of the state to assist other officers in the protection of the state's natural resources. We still operate this way today.

Game Protector Taylor was a superior officer from the beginning. Despite being new in 1912 and 1913, he had an arrest record better than most seasoned officers. In a written statement issued shortly after his death in 1914, the NYS Conservation Commission called him "an exceptional game protector who showed no fear in the performance of his



duties.” This was a trait that may have contributed to his downfall in the end, but this attribute is also what placed him in the forefront of the game protector force at the time.

It was an early spring day, Sunday, April 5, 1914, when game protector Samuel S. Taylor and fellow game protector John Willis, another exceptional officer who was assigned to Oneida County, were working together in Willis' patrol area. Together on a foot patrol within the city limits of Rome, they walked along the banks of the Mohawk River. East of the city proper, near the present-day Riverside Park, they were looking primarily for waterfowl poachers (the season was closed) when they overheard gunshots in the distance. They cautiously proceeded in the direction of the shots expecting to deal with unlawful duck hunting activity. As they worked their way closer to the origin of the gunfire, they observed two individuals shooting songbirds. As they watched from cover, one man was shooting protected songbirds as the other was retrieving them and bagging them up. By all accounts the two game protector continued watching, noting, and developing their case against the two violators of the fish and game laws: no differently than a modern Environmental Conservation Officer would do today.

Then came the time when the game protectors decided to reveal themselves in an attempt to arrest the two poachers.

The research conducted indicates that Taylor and Willis stepped from concealment and confronted the two men, ordering them to put down their weapons and advising them that they were under arrest. The man with the shotgun, a firearm later determined to be a 12-gauge double barrel, without response raised the gun and fired both barrels at close range at Taylor. Taylor was struck with a double load of #6 shot in the abdomen and lower chest area. The shooter quickly turned and fled. Taylor, mortally wounded, fell to the ground as Willis drew his service revolver and fired. The second man pulled a revolver from his pocket, discharged two rounds at Willis and then also fled the scene. Unharmed in the incident, Willis then turned his full attention to his wounded fellow officer. Picking him up from the ground, Willis physically carried Samuel Taylor (who by all accounts was a large-framed athletic man) a good half mile to the Oneida County Hospital. Willis got Samuel Taylor to the hospital alive, but in the early morning hours of April 6, 1914, Taylor died during surgery. It was determined that Taylor had succumbed to internal injuries far too numerous for the attending physicians to deal with. In fact, the physicians marveled at how the man could have possibly survived as long as he did. It was the final testament to the tenacity of Samuel S. Taylor.

The Rome City Police had been summoned and quickly responded to the

tragic event. Interviewing Willis, the police had a firsthand account of what had taken place at the scene of the incident. Officers were then sent to the scene and began gathering evidence. Game protectors from adjoining counties came to help investigate the murder of their fellow officer. One of them located the shotgun that was used to shoot Taylor, tossed by the fleeing poacher near the area where the murder took place. Newspaper articles of the time indicate that later the same day, Rome police located the wife of one of the men involved. A search of the home uncovered the revolver used to fire at Willis, wet hunting clothing and wet boots that matched the “hobnail” boot prints discovered at the scene. The two men were quickly identified and it was determined that they were brothers-in-law living in Rome who hunted the area frequently.

The Rome Police, Oneida County Sheriff's Office, and NYS Game Protectors, as well as surrounding law enforcement agencies were alerted to the identities of the two men and searched extensively for months after the incident. They followed leads and eliminated persons of interest thought to be the two men. Unfortunately, all leads proved fruitless in locating the men. Common laborers with shallow roots in the community, they fled the state and escaped capture. Later, a grand jury was convened and the two men were eventually indicted: one man for murder



in the first degree in the killing of Samuel Taylor, and the second for assault in the first degree for firing at Willis.

Twenty-four years after Taylor's murder, in April of 1938, the New York State Conservation Commission received some interesting written correspondence from the Rome City Police. The letter advised that the whereabouts of the two men involved in the murder of Taylor (complete with home addresses) had been discovered. One was purported to reside in the Chicago area. The second, the man who fired the fatal shotgun blast that took the life of Sam Taylor, was currently residing in Italy. The letter also indicated that the District Attorney of Oneida County did not wish to undertake extradition proceedings from Italy. The Rome City Police was unsure how to proceed and asked the NYS Conservation Commission for advice on how to proceed. Sadly, it appears that there were no further attempts to bring the men to justice and the matter was dropped. The two men got away with murder. Additional research tends to indicate that they never returned to the Rome area.

After the coroner's release, the remains of Game Protector Samuel S. Taylor were sent by train to his hometown of Bouckville. Newspaper accounts of the time indicate that his funeral was one of the largest ever witnessed in the area. He was a man well respected in his hometown. After the funeral, his

remains were taken to Hamilton, New York and interred at

Woodlawn Cemetery on the family burial plot. Sam was buried alongside his mother, Ella Taylor and his sister, Minnie. Records indicate that he may have been married for a brief period but had no children.

Sam Taylor's sacrifice was not in vain. In many ways, his death heralded the birth of our professionalism. It opened people's eyes to the fact that we were law enforcement officers in a dangerous profession. Shortly after his death, our numbers were increased from 110 to 131. NYS Game Protectors were given uniforms for the first time in 1916. The look had an immediate effect, both on how the public perceived us and how we perceived ourselves. Also in 1916, Game Protectors were issued revolvers for the first time and were trained in their use. This was the birth of our formalized training. It's hard to believe that all this took place before the New York State Troopers even existed, but it did. When you really think about it, Game Protector Taylor was instrumental in making us what we are today and for that we owe him a great debt.

For 100 years, Sam Taylor's gravesite was marked by a small stone carved with only his name and the years noting his birth and death. Then, on April 9, 2014, another sunny, cool spring day, much like the day Sam left us, the modern day New York State Environ-

mental Conservation Police held a memorial service at his gravesite. This was a well-attended event, complete with the Environmental Conservation Police Honor Guard and Pipe and Drum Band both in full attendance. The New York State Conservation Officer's Association purchased a strikingly beautiful white marble stone and plaque, which was placed next to his headstone. It reads in part, "He was the first of us to fall in the line of duty. We will forever mourn the loss of our beloved Game Protector." In May, his name was finally placed upon the State of New York Police Officers Memorial Wall located in the state capitol of Albany.

The graveside ceremony was an inspirational event for all of us. Environmental Conservation Officers stood side by side with retirees who were around long enough to have once been called game protectors. The pipers played a stirring rendition of Amazing Grace and the volleys of the gun salute filled the air. Afterwards a lone bugler blew taps as I looked into the sky and witnessed a flyby of a northbound pair of Canada geese. I couldn't help but think that Samuel S. Taylor is finally receiving his well deserved recognition and his just due. Rest in peace Game Protector Taylor...the tradition carries on. ¹

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