



County of Lancaster  
Pennsylvania

## History

In "The Value of Constitutions", Thomas Jefferson wrote, "There is no honorable law enforcement authority in Anglo-American law, so ancient as that of the County Sheriff whose role as a peace officer goes back at least to the time of Alfred the Great". Around the year 500 A.D. Germanic Tribes from England called Anglo Saxons began an invasion of Celtic England. This led to the consolidation of, late in the 9th century, Anglo-Saxon England, and a unified kingdom under Alfred the Great. Around 700 A.D. government developed out of these Anglo-Saxon tribes, by forming of self-government in groups of ten. The groups called *tuns* formed the source for the word "town". These tuns formed additional groups of ten, or one hundred families, and elected their own chief called a "*gerefa*". This term was later shortened to the word "*reeve*". The groups of Hundreds then merged and became "*shires*", the forerunner to the modern day county. England then consisted of sixteen ancient counties, which still carry their name, such as Lancashire and Yorkshire. The head of such shire was called a "*reeve*". Sheriff was derived. By the year 1000 the sheriff was the chief law enforcement Officer of each county. After the Normans beat the Saxons in 1066 the counties were under one rule of the king, and the sheriff was his person for law enforcement and tax collecting. The Magna Carta mentions sheriff 7 times.

In Pennsylvania the Office of Sheriff is created under *Article 9 section 4* of our *Constitution*. Statutorily, the Sheriff is primarily controlled by *Article 12 of the County Code* (16 P.S. 1201-1216). Section 1216 requires sheriffs to perform all those duties authorized by Statute. However, since the Legislature may only abolish common law by expressly removing it in a statute, the sheriff retains all authority given him at common law. The sheriff is further directed by the Pa. Rules of Civil Procedure. Our Supreme Court has been defining the broad powers of the sheriff over the years. A good review of the Sheriff's common law power of arrest is found in *Com. vs, Leets*, 537 Pa. 89, 641 A2d. 299 (1994). There the Court upheld the common law power of the sheriff to include the enforcement of the Vehicle Code, but directed training. In short, the Sheriff is the Highest Law Enforcement Officer of his county. He is elected every four years, and he serves both civil and criminal process. His deputies must be certified through a nineteen week training school of 760 hours. The importance of the Office of the Sheriff in the Unified Judicial System as well as the Criminal Justice System is immeasurable.