



## A Brief History of Fingerprinting in the U.S.

As we all know (those of us who actually paid attention to the history lectures in our early fingerprint classes), the first published account of the use of fingerprints as a practical means of identification was the letter written by Dr. Henry Faulds to the British magazine *Nature*, printed in the October 28, 1880, edition. William Herschel had been using fingerprints as a means of identification in India since 1858 and had written to England suggesting expansion of his program, but no public mention had been made.

After Faulds' letter, however, individuals around the world took note. One such individual was Gilbert Thompson of the United States Geological Survey. Thompson was sent on an expedition to New Mexico with a crew of surveyors and explorers in 1882. Apparently, a number of his crew were not trustworthy, and drafts began showing up for payment bearing Thompson's forged signature. To protect against these forgeries, Thompson began using his thumbprint on the drafts, with his signature on top of his thumbprint. This marks the first official use of fingerprints in



Sir Edward Richard Henry

the United States.

Meanwhile, in New York City, a problem was growing in regards to



Sir Francis Galton  
1823 – 1911

the civil service hiring process and in 1900, a scandal erupted when several individuals were implicated in a scheme of hiring educated (but unethical) persons to take the civil service exams. Dr. Henry P. DeForest solved the problem by fingerprinting applicants when they took the examinations. The first set of fingerprints taken were from one James Johnson on December 19, 1902. This was the first use of fingerprints by a government agency in the U.S.

In the summer of 1902, Charles K. Baker of the New York State Prison Department, accompanied by Dr. R. B. Lamb of the State Hospital, went to England to study the fingerprint system in use there. They returned and shared their new-found knowledge with James H. Park, furnishing him with copies of *Finger Prints* by Sir Francis Galton and *Classification and Uses of Finger Prints* by Sir E. R. Henry. Parke studied these books and inaugurated

the use of fingerprints in the New York State Prison Department in March of 1903. This was the first use of fingerprints for criminal identification in the United States.

Of course, John Kenneth Ferrier of Scotland Yard taught fingerprints to nine Americans and Canadians at the World's Fair in St. Louis in 1904, after which the science of fingerprints was rapidly adopted by law enforcement agencies throughout the United States.

The first criminal conviction based on fingerprint evidence was the case of Thomas Jennings. Jennings was charged with the murder of Charles Hiller, committed while perpetrating a burglary. This case in 1911 marks the first judicial ruling in the U.S. on the admissibility of a fingerprint identification.

The International Association for Identification was formed in 1915. At the time, it consisted primarily of Bertillon clerks, but as fingerprints were rapidly replacing anthropological measurements, the main focus of the IAI quickly changed. The IAI thus played a pivotal role in the rapid spread and acceptance of fingerprints in the U.S.

The first authoritative textbook on fingerprints in the United States was *The Finger Print Instructor* by Frederick Kuhne, published in 1916. The institute of applied Science also opened its doors and began widespread training in 1916.

The final step in bringing fingerprints to national prominence was the formation of the FBI Fingerprint Section under A. J. Renoe in 1924. ■

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