

The County Seat Story

Seneca County has been one of a very few counties in New York State that has more than one county seat. The reasons for having two county seats and the controversy regarding having these two county seats helps us to understand much about the history of Seneca County.

Even before Seneca County was created in 1804, some court sessions were being held in a barn belonging to Andrew Dunlap at Ovid. This was largely because the Ovid area was the most populated portion of what is today Seneca County. At the time of its creation as a county in 1804, Seneca County stretched to Lake Ontario on the north and included parts of what are today Tompkins and Schuyler Counties on the south. The county was a strip of territory some sixty-three miles long and an average width of eleven miles. In area it was 744 square miles or about half a million acres. This was a large area at a time when there were no automobiles and no telephone and no electricity. It is necessary to remember these geographic and technological realities to understand the dynamics of where the county seat would be located.

Upon becoming a separate county, it became necessary for the county Board of Supervisors to designate an official county seat. Nathaniel Hinchman, who began a village called Plymouth on the shores of Seneca Lake where Sampson State Park now lies, dreamed of “the ideal spot” for the county seat there. Romulus Supervisor John Sayre advocated the establishment of the county seat at Plymouth. The other supervisors, however, split between Ovid and Waterloo. There were many long heated sessions in 1804 and 1805 as the supervisors endeavored to reach an agreement. Realizing that he couldn’t get Plymouth chosen as the seat, John Sayre sided with the pro-Ovid group. The capital of the County was located at Ovid Village—sometimes called Verona—upon Lot No. 3, near the north line of the town of Ovid. Realizing that the pro-Waterloo supporters would continue their efforts to secure Waterloo as the court-house site, the pro-Ovid group reportedly went to Albany. The result was a state law which basically made Ovid the county seat by declaring that “the county may not build a court house a greater distance from Ovid than two miles.”

In 1806 a court-house was built and a park laid out in front. Ovid at the time was the most populous town in the county, with the 1810 census listing 4535 persons out of a total county population of 16,609. This 1806 Ovid court-house structure was on the site of the present day so-called Mama Bear (the middle of the Three Bears complex) which was built in 1860.

Ovid might have been chosen as the county seat but the Waterloo supporters tried to make Ovid only a temporary site. When the southern portions of Seneca County were removed in 1817 (to become Tompkins County), Waterloo became about the north-south geographic center of Seneca county. A Mr. Elisha Williams in 1809 had purchased the 600 acre lot on which that part of Waterloo north of Seneca Lake outlet stands. On it he had built two saw-mills and several houses. The rapidly prospering villages of Waterloo and Seneca Falls were on the route of the new Seneca Turnpike from Syracuse to Geneva. Williams realized that there would be still greater potential personal economic gain to his property if Waterloo were to become the county seat. So, Williams successfully used his influence (perhaps not just coincidentally, Seneca County in 1817 was represented in the NYS Senate by the Honorable John Know of Waterloo), to move the County courts from Ovid to Waterloo, which thus became the shire town. Williams

felt this made great sense in that clearly Waterloo was going to continue to grow in size and wealth and that Waterloo was more the geographic center of the county. Several Waterloo businessmen—Reuben Swift, Daniel Mosher, Colonel Chamberlain, Quantus Knight and others—immediately set about the erection of large, fine taverns and the County began the erection of a new court-house and clerk's office upon the public square donated by Williams. All of these served as an economic check on Ovid and led to sectional tensions between Ovid and Waterloo.

The same 1817 state law that took Hector and Ulysses from Seneca County to form part of Tompkins County, and designated Waterloo as the county seat for Seneca County, also provided for plans for the new court house in Waterloo. John Know, Reuben Swift and John Watkins were named as a building committee to erect a court house and gaol (jail) for Seneca County on a site at Waterloo. Once \$4000 was raised in voluntary contributions, the county of supervisors would have to contribute a matching \$4000 for the project. On July 4, 1817, Elisha Williams and Reuben Swift deeded land situated on the public square for the court house site. The court house was completed in 1818 by John Sayre, John Lyon, and Luther r. LaBattelle. When the court house was finished, Waterloo became the sole county seat. The first court was held there on May 2, 1818, presided over by Justices John Sayre, John Burton and Benjamin Hendricks. This was the situation until March 29, 1822.

The removal of the northern portions of Seneca County (Wolcott and Galen) in 1823 meant that Waterloo—which had, in effect, become the county shire—was now near one end of Seneca County. Ovid area residents argued that it was now proper to move the county seat back to Ovid. Waterloo residents, however, refused to give up the advantage that Waterloo had as being the county seat. The solution was to maintain two county seats, one in Waterloo and a second in the more centralized Ovid. Chapter 137 of a March 29, 1822 state law provided for court to be held alternately at Ovid and Waterloo. Fayette and the towns north would constitute the northern jury district, and Varick and the towns south of it would constitute the southern jury district.

Although Ovid won back some of its former influence, it remained isolated from the major transportation routes. Completion of the Erie Canal in 1825 to the north reaffirmed Ovid's remote position and it could never again compete with the Waterloo-Seneca Falls area in population or economic development.

The controversy of two different county seats continued for many years. The completion of the Baby Bear in Ovid in 1845 as a new county clerk's office led to the Clerk's alternating his office between Ovid and Waterloo. Imagine the difficulties of transporting official county records back and forth between these two locations! Chapter 65 of an 1865 law gave the power to the county judge to vary the alternating between Ovid and Waterloo. Following a lengthy well-researched report from county attorney Hawley, the Board of Supervisors in 1895 voted 7 to 3 to table a motion to abolish the two jury districts approach. Later, however, the Board of Supervisors abolished the double shire system, effective January 1, 1921. This decision was short-lived, however. On August 28, 1922 the Board of Supervisors voted to return to the two or double shire system, effective January 1, 1923.

The controversy of the two jury system was also of concern. On December 21, 1921, the Board of Supervisors adopted a resolution to abandon the court house in Ovid, abolish the two jury system and hold all trials in Waterloo. Attorney John M. Sutton found this action of the board of supervisors successful and the laws of 1822 were upheld. In response to an issue raised in a trial proceeding in Ovid, Judge Jerome B. Wolff on March 9, 1964 ruled that laws providing for the two jury system and the two court houses are still effective. He also ruled that the county cannot return to the one jury system by any action brought solely by the board of supervisors. Court sessions, however, have not been held at the Ovid Court House since a state order that no more court proceedings be held there. This order was largely due to the lack of handicapped access, etc.

In 1972 a manpower study suggested the county could save \$4,500 by closing the Ovid court house. The study said "...in the days when county residents relied on horse and buggy" the two court house approach was perhaps necessary. To continue its operation today, however, would only serve to "provide a nostalgic tie with days long past." The study advised a flat closing of the Ovid Three Bears, saving them only as historic monuments.

Currently very little of Seneca County government functions actually take place at the Ovid court house (the Papa Bear of the Three Bears complex.) Currently it houses anti-terrorism, backup systems for the 911 system. The County Board of Supervisors in recent years has met there at least once during the summer. The Mama Bear is a satellite office for the Sheriff's Department. The Caywood Camp of the (Civil War) Sons of Union Veterans has been using the Baby Bear, which lacks utilities, as a storage facility for historic artifacts and a meeting place. The Friends of the Three Bears organization is trying to secure a nonprofit site management system for the development of the entire complex.. The Friends organization is also, as a partner with Seneca County, trying to secure funding for necessary stabilization of the Three Bears and to renovate them for tourism use, historical and cultural performances and professional offices. These new uses for the Three Bears will help revitalize the Ovid area economy.

Modern transportation and communications technology may well have eliminated the "geographic" need for two operating county seats. Waterloo has functioned as county seat for many years. It is there that the county office building is located. It is there that court sessions are held. That does not mean, however, that southern county residents don't envy the economic gain the more northern part of the county gains from being nearer to the county seat. Nor does it negate the longer travel time it takes southern county residents to get to the county court sessions and county offices. It doesn't appear likely, however, that in the near future Waterloo will cease to be, in effect, "the" county seat.

[Note: This is another in the series of monthly articles on the history of Seneca County published as part of the celebration of Seneca County's bicentennial year in 2004. They are written by Walter Gable, Seneca County Historian.]