

The Establishment of Seneca County on March 24, 1804

Somehow many sources use the date of March 29—rather than the correct date of March 24—in the year 1804 as the date for the establishment of Seneca County.

For several years following the end of the American Revolution, the western portions of an existing county were made a new county by action of the New York State Legislature and Governor. As this process applied specifically to present-day Seneca County, Seneca County was part of Montgomery County and then became part of the newly-created Herkimer County on February 16, 1791. On March 5, 1794, basically the western portion of Herkimer County became Onondaga County. On March 8, 1799, the western portion of Onondaga County became Cayuga County. The western boundary of Cayuga County was the Pre-Emption Line, which had been established by a survey in 1788 and then revised in a resurvey in 1792.

Soon after the creation of Cayuga County, there were several factors contributing to a desire to create a new county. One such factor was the rivalry between Cayuga village and Aurora to be the county seat for Cayuga County. Aurora was the official site for the transaction of Cayuga County business. The completion of the first Cayuga Lake Bridge in 1800, however, made it much easier for Cayuga County residents living west of Cayuga Lake—including what is today Seneca County—to get to Cayuga village—the eastern terminus of the Bridge—than to Aurora. The village of Aurora could only be reached by small boats propelled by oarsmen or by small sailing vessels or by crossing the Cayuga Bridge and proceeding overland the distance between Cayuga village and Aurora.

When serious discussion about the formation of a new county began in 1802, several projects were discussed. One plan was to divide Cayuga County into two parts north and south. Presumably in this proposal the northern part, consisting of taking the boundary between the Military Tract townships of Ovid and Romulus in the area between Cayuga and Seneca Lakes and projecting that line eastward, would remain Cayuga County. The area south of this east-west dividing boundary would become a new county. A second plan was to separate off the western portion of Cayuga County to create a new county extending from Lake Ontario southward. A third plan was to take the eastern portion of Ontario County and a part of Cayuga County to create a new county. Each of these proposals was being promoted by “local statesmen” who wanted their local community to become the probable site for the county seat in the newly-established county. In the first plan mentioned, Cayuga village, for example might well have become the new county seat for the northern portion of Cayuga County. In the third plan, Geneva may well have become the county seat.

The question of dividing Cayuga County was brought before the New York State Legislature in 1803. On March 16, 1803, Senator Lemuel Chipman, who represented Ontario County, introduced a bill. The bill was read twice and committed to the committee of the whole, but no further action was taken by the legislature that year.

In 1804, more petitions for the various plans to create a new county were sent to the New York State Legislature. Dr. Silas Halsey, a resident of present-day Lodi in Seneca County, was now back serving in the New York State Assembly. He had served previously in the Assembly in 1797, 1798, and 1800 to 1801. In 1803 he was one of three Cayuga County representatives serving in the Assembly, with the other two living east of Cayuga Lake. These many years of service in the Assembly had made him very knowledgeable of the issue of creating new counties, as well as enabling him to form many important acquaintances in Albany.

On February 3, 1804, a petition from citizens of the town of Hector was presented to the Assembly. This petition called for the creation of a new county for the territory between Cayuga and Seneca Lakes. This petition was referred to a special committee of 5, of which Dr. Halsey was named chairman.

On February 27, 1804, Dr. Halsey introduced “an act to divide the county of Cayuga and for other purposes.” The bill was read twice and referred to the committee of the whole. On March 7, 1804, the bill was favorably considered. On March 9th, the bill was referred to a selection committee of which Dr. Halsey was chairman to “report complete.” Halsey’s committee reported back the bill with amendments, which were accepted. On March 10th, this bill passed the Assembly. The Senate passed the Assembly bill without amendment on March 21st. **The Governor signed the bill on March 24, 1804, becoming a law on that day.** The name “Seneca” was given to the new county.

The new Seneca County embraced a territory described as follows: The south boundary, beginning at the head of Seneca Lake, at the southwest corner of the town of Hector—thence running east on the south line of the towns of Hector and Ulysses, to the southeast corner of the last named town (the whole of the town of Ulysses and Hector being included in Seneca county—and the south boundary of Ulysses extending about 4.5 miles south of Ithaca.) The east boundary, being constituted by the town of Dryden and the center of Cayuga lake, and its outlet, to the west line of the town of Brutus, and thence north in the west line of Brutus and Cato, and farther on north to Lake Ontario—the north boundary extending along Ontario lake to the county of Ontario, thence south along the Ontario county or new Pre-emption line to Seneca lake. The west boundary, which has been the subject of considerable comment and controversy, had been already defined in the boundaries of Cayuga county, established by the Revised laws of 1801, (and continued as to Seneca county in the Revised Laws of 1813)—as bounded westerly by the line called the new Pre-emption line, from Lake Ontario to Seneca lake and thence along the west shore of said lake to the southwest corner of the township of Hector.

After the counties of Tompkins and Wayne had been erected, in part from Seneca county, the Revised Statutes passed in 1827, describe the county boundaries as they now exist, as follows: All that part of the State bounded on the north by the county of Wayne, on the east by the county of Cayuga, on the south by the county of Tompkins (and now in part belong to Schuyler county) and on the west by the west shore of the Seneca lake, and form the north end of said lake by the pre-emption line, as established by law.

[This article was written by Seneca County Historian Walter Gable on April 9, 2010. The information comes from an article titled “Seneca County,” by the Honorable Diedrich Willers. It is found in the 1904 Volume of *Historical Papers Read Before the Seneca Falls Historical Society*, pp 3-17, which can be accessed at the Seneca Falls Historical Society.]