

Chapter Two -- Historical Sketch

Seneca County was formed by act of the New York State Legislature on March 24, 1804.

Prior to that year, what is today Seneca County had been part of various counties. When counties were established in New York State in 1683, the present-day Seneca County was part of the vast Albany County. A portion of Albany County became Tryon County on March 12, 1772. This county was named for William Tryon, colonial governor of New York. In 1784, following the peace treaty that ended the American Revolutionary War, the name of Tryon County was changed to Montgomery County in honor of the American general, Richard Montgomery. On February 16, 1791, portions of Montgomery County became Tioga, Otsego, and Herkimer Counties. Onondaga County was established from a portion of Herkimer County on March 5, 1794. The western portion of Onondaga County became Cayuga County on March 8, 1799. At that time, Cayuga County included the present Seneca and Tompkins Counties and part of Wayne County.

When Seneca County was created out of the western portion of Cayuga County on March 24, 1804, it stretched from south of what is today Ithaca north to Lake Ontario. It consisted of the towns of Hector, Junius, Ovid, Romulus, Ulysses and Washington. This area totaled 744 square miles or about one-half million acres.

Seneca County's boundaries and its component towns have changed since 1804. Washington town was renamed Fayette town on April 6, 1808. Southern portions of the town of Ovid became the town of Covert as part of Tompkins County on April 7, 1817. On April 13, 1819, the town of Covert was returned to Seneca County. On January 27, 1826, the western part of the town of Covert became the town of Lodi. Northern portions of Junius town became the towns of Galen and Wolcott in 1812 and the town of Wolcott became part of Cayuga County. Wolcott was re-annexed to Seneca County in 1817. The towns of Galen and Wolcott were taken away from Seneca County on April 11, 1823, when Wayne County was formed. On March 26, 1829, portions of the town of Junius became the towns of Seneca Falls, Tyre and Waterloo. The town of Varick was created from the then northern portion of Romulus on February 6, 1830.

The first meeting of the Seneca County Board of Supervisors in Annual Session was held in the town of Ovid, on October 2, 1804. The Supervisors were Lewis Birdsall (Junius), Israel Catlin (Fayette), John Sayre (Romulus), Silas Halsey (Ovid), John Livingston (Hector), and Archer Green (Ulysses).

In 1805 the building of the first county buildings started in Ovid. Ovid remained the sole county seat until 1818. A new court house was built on property donated by John Seeley. Prior to that time, some court sessions had been held in the barn of Andrew Dunlap. In 1818 a new courthouse was built in Waterloo which became the sole county seat. In 1822 a law passed by the New York State Legislature divided the county into two jury districts. In effect, Seneca County became a half-shire county government. County court sessions were held in both Ovid and Waterloo. The County Clerk's Office operated alternately in Ovid and Waterloo for three years in each place. In 1845, a new court house was built in

Ovid and the building became known locally as the Papa Bear, the largest of the three county government buildings making up the so-called Three Bears complex in Ovid.

The first woman to serve on the Seneca County Board of Supervisors was Mrs. Leona Rosbaugh. She was appointed to serve out the unexpired term of Mr. Charles H. Jennings, Supervisor of the Town of Lodi, who retired on September 24, 1959. Currently there are two females among the fourteen supervisors.

For over a century and a half, the Seneca County Board of Supervisors operated with each supervisor having one vote. Because of the United States Supreme Court ruling establishing the "one man-one vote" principle, the Seneca County Board of Supervisors moved to a form of weighted voting with the voting power of each member based on the population of his/her respective town. This form of voting took effect September 1, 1966, and was given final approval by the Courts in October 1967.

Pursuant to Local Law No. 1, adopted May 9, 1972, the number of members of the Seneca County Board of Supervisors was increased by the addition of four supervisors, two each from the towns of Seneca Falls and Waterloo, the two most populous towns of the county. The General Election of 1972 included the election of these additional supervisors and they first held office on January 1, 1973.

Currently, Seneca County is comprised of ten towns and is represented by fourteen elected members of the Board of Supervisors.

[This was prepared by Walter Gable, Seneca County Historian, for the Historical Sketch included as part of the printed Proceedings of the Seneca County Board of Supervisors for the year 2004. It is a significant revision of the version previously used.]