

Unsuccessful Efforts to Change the Boundary between Seneca and Ontario Counties

Prior to the American Revolution, all of western New York was Tryon County, named in honor of William Tryon, the British colonial governor of New York. Following the war, the county name was changed to Montgomery County, to honor the American general Richard Montgomery.

As more and more European Americans moved into western New York, new counties were established. By 1800 there were several thousand people in what is now Seneca County and the formation of a new county was first discussed in 1802. Several ideas were introduced. One was the division of Cayuga County (which had been created in 1799 from the western part of Onondaga County) east and west by a line starting at Seneca Lake, running east on a line between Romulus and Ovid, crossing Cayuga Lake and the townships of Scipio and Sempronius to Onondaga County. The territory north of this line would remain as Cayuga County with the county seat at Cayuga. The area south of the line would extend to Ulysses and the county seat would be at Ithaca. No name was suggested for this area. The second proposition was basically the same as the one adopted by the NYS Legislature in March 1804 in the formation of Seneca County. Seneca County at that time stretched from Lake Ontario to south of Ithaca.

About the same time another proposition was made by William Powell and others in Ontario County (which had been created in 1789). According to Powell's proposal, part of Ontario County and a part of what was then Cayuga County would be formed into a new county. Businessmen and town officials in Geneva had been upset that Canandaigua—and not Geneva—had been made the county seat for Ontario County. These businessmen saw Powell's proposal as a way to create a new county with Geneva as its county seat.

On April 3, 1827, application was made to the state legislature for erection of a new county which would include Phelps and Seneca towns from Ontario County, and Junius and Fayette towns from Seneca County. In 1817, Ulysses, Covert and Hector had gone into the formation of Tompkins County. Covert was returned to Seneca County two years later. In 1829, another application was made. This time the request was for the towns of Phelps and Seneca in Ontario County and the five north towns of Seneca County (Tyre, Junius, Seneca Falls, Waterloo and Fayette). Little matter that the towns had just been formed from the major town of Junius. Court houses would then be established at Geneva and Waterloo.

On November 30, 1830, application was made to the legislature to divide Seneca County by a line east and west from Cayuga and Seneca Lakes, three miles north of the south line of Fayette. The south portion was to be called Seneca County, the north portion with the towns of Seneca and Phelps in Ontario County to be organized into a new county—not named.

On December 30, 1846, yet another application was made to the state legislature for a new county. The selection remained the same: Fayette, Seneca Falls, Tyre, Waterloo and Junius towns in Seneca County; Phelps and Seneca towns in Ontario County. This time a name for the new county was proposed—Canadesage.

Discussion on annexation continued through the years, especially in the Geneva area. In 1869, with Geneva Judge Charles J. F. Folger in the State Senate, Geneva officials proposed to take two towns of Seneca County and give the town of Lodi to Schuyler County. Geneva would then divide Ontario County and have a court house in Geneva. Seneca County would continue to have its courthouse in Ovid. The Seneca County Board of Supervisors voted to oppose this plan.

The effort to change the shape of the pie continued into the 20th century. There was no attempt to change the county line, but according to Waterloo town records, on December 1, 1899, the board of supervisors of Ontario County passed a resolution nine to six, granting Geneva the privilege to annex itself to Seneca County. Later the board rescinded the resolution.

On January 4, 1901, the Common Council of the City of Geneva proposed to introduce an act to annex the Border City area to the city. When this was presented to the NYS Legislature, property owners and residents of the Border City area protested against the annexation. The Board of Supervisors of Seneca County passed a resolution noting it would be a great detriment

to the people of the district because of increased taxation for which they would receive no benefit and it would also affect the rest of the town of Waterloo.

While all these attempts to unite the Geneva area portions of Ontario County with the northern portions of Seneca County never succeeded, they do help to demonstrate how strongly communities have felt about wanting to be the county seat. One can only begin to speculate on the potential uproar that would be created in Waterloo if there were a renewed effort to change the boundaries of eastern Ontario county and northern Seneca County so as to make Geneva the logical new county seat.