

# Minnesota County History

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County and other local government units in the United States take their basic form from similar units developed in the original 13 English colonies in this country. Naturally, the colonial form of local government was developed by the English colonist along lines similar to the local government institutions existing in England when colonization of the Americas took place. Therefore, a historical background of Minnesota counties must include a short discussion of the English local government form as it developed up to the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

## English Development

In the Anglo-Saxon period of English history ending with the Norman conquest (Battle of Hastings in 1066) there were units of local government known as shires and townships. The principal officer of the shire was known as the reeve, in some cases known as the shire-reeve which even in those early times was sometimes contracted to be the word "sheriff".

Not long after that time there were local government officials known as constables, justices of the peace and coroners. A shire court which was presided over by the sheriff was a form developed in very early times and it continued into the 1600's. The sheriff was usually an appointee of the Crown and carried out certain responsibilities of local government as directed by the Crown. You may recall from school days (or present television accounts) that the Tales of Robin Hood present the Sheriff of Nottingham Shire as the chief military officer of the shire with responsibility to keep the peace and as the collector of taxes.

## Colonial Development

It would be difficult to trace directly many of the elements of current local government in Minnesota back to the corresponding government in English history but some of the units of government, the titles of officials, their duties, and in some instances, particular functions of government can be identified. If these forms had continued without change, the sheriff in Minnesota could be the chief executive officer of the county. More directly, however, the institutions and units of local government and the officers holding positions in it during the early 1600's in England could be expected to appear in the English colonies of America because the colonists were familiar with the forms and as a consequence took them to this country. The New England colonies and states which developed from them were colonized with strong local communities and it could therefore be expected that the town unit of government would be quite strong. Most of these communities held an annual town meeting similar to the vestry meeting or an assembly of freeholders which had existed in England.

In 1643, Massachusetts Colony divided into 4 shires and a few years later provision was made for representatives from the towns to gather for purposes of government of the shires. This group was given a new power which allowed it to equalize taxes between

the smaller units, thus beginning the local representation on the county board which was later established in New York State as a Board of Supervisors. In 1654 the shires of Massachusetts Colony each elected a treasurer as its chief financial officer. Counties were established in 1666 in Connecticut and by a law passed in 1704, provision was made for a local officer to prosecute crimes. This officer was the forerunner of the prosecuting attorney who now exists in practically all states by one title or another. Rhode Island, in 1793, provided for counties whose sole purpose then, as now, was for judicial administration.

The Southern colonies of Virginia and Maryland began with a local unit of government which centered around the "plantation" or parish form and which set up the usual "area court," usually meeting four times a year or quarterly, as was the practice in England. The colony of Virginia was divided into eight shires in 1634. As additional shires or counties were organized, the county became the unit for representation in the Colonial Assembly. The usual officers were the sheriff (who was tax collector and treasurer), justice of the peace, land surveyor, and coroner appointed by the governor of the colony. The justices appointed a clerk of the court who acted as recorder of deeds. Maryland began with a local government form patterned after an English county but over a period of time developed a form similar to the local government of Virginia.

By the early 1600's, the English Crown permitted the election of a surveyor of highways. Although local roads were generally maintained by a labor tax which required the citizenry to work on the roads, provision was also made for the levying of a highway tax. Poor relief originally was identified as a church responsibility but with the dissolution of the monasteries the Crown passed a law known as the Poor Law of 1601 which established a system of parish taxation for the care of the poor. A series of acts followed generally called the Elizabeth Poor Laws which established relief and welfare as a government responsibility.

As the government of England separated from the Roman church, church officials lost some of their power in local government but church courts continued to have some identifiable duties. These included matters concerned with marriage and divorce, poor of wills, and the administration of estates and guardianships. The local court grew in importance and was given authority beyond judicial matters.

A number of laws were passed which regulated the duties and responsibilities of some local officials. Early English history records the smallest administrative unit of government as the town or township which was often the same size and area as the church parish. Its most important officer was the constable who was subject to a considerable extent to direction by the justice of the peace but who had certain duties and responsibilities in the keeping of the peace. By the 1600's there had developed what was known as a vestry meeting of a general assembly of the parish (township) with all of the inhabitants of the parish ordinarily permitted to attend.

After the English wrested control of New York from the Dutch and, almost from the beginning in the other middle Atlantic colonies of Pennsylvania, Delaware, and New Jersey, the English system of local government prevailed. New York State in the late 1600's divided into 10 counties and elected a county board consisting of a freeholder elected from each town to supervise the levying and assessment of local taxes. The original justices of the peace became primarily judicial officers as the supervisors took over more of the administration of the county. The New Jersey system developed much like that of New York and provision was made for the election of town assessors which in time developed into the Board of Chosen Freeholders.

Pennsylvania developed counties which began much like the early system in New York and New Jersey. In the more sparsely settled areas changes were made which resulted in a board of 3 elected commissioners in each county who became the chief administrative authority, similar to the board of supervisors in New York State. Pennsylvania elected its first sheriff in 1705 and created a new county office, "recorder of deeds," first appointed by the governor in 1715.

The southern colonial development saw the county court becoming increasingly important as the administrative arm of the county government. The colonists who pushed westward into what became the Northwest

NO INFORMATION FOR YOUR KNOW

Territory brought their existing systems with them along with new innovations which formed the basis for county government in our present middle western states. The territorial governor appointed the first county officials. The first county existing in the Northwest Territory had a sheriff, coroner, treasurer, recorder of deeds, a probate judge, and justices. A county court was formed by 1800 county boards of three appointed commissioners that had been created to levy and assess taxes and to audit claims. Townships did exist but merely as a land measurement which was the result of a national government survey which set out rectangular areas of land six miles by six miles. Unlike the New England pattern, townships were not often used as a primary unit of local government in the Northwest Territory. Ohio was the first state organized out of the Northwest Territory. Shortly after its creation as a state, provision was made for elected boards of county commissioners with fiscal and administrative powers similar to the former county court. Sheriffs, coroners, and justices of the peace were elected offices.

## Minnesota County Development

That part of present day Minnesota lying between the Mississippi and the St. Croix Rivers was in the original Northwest Territory and part of the Wisconsin Territory. The settlement which is now Stillwater was once part of St. Croix County, Wisconsin. When Minnesota became a territory in 1849 its territorial governor, Alexander Ramsey, proclaimed that the same laws as those existing in Wisconsin would govern the new Minnesota Territory. This, combined with the fact that much of the migration to Minnesota came through Wisconsin, caused the development of both strong county and town forms of government as had been the case in Wisconsin, New York and Michigan. The first Minnesota counties were Benton, Isanti, Ramsey, Wabasha, and Washington established on October 27, 1849. Three other counties, Mankato, Pembina and Wadena were created by Laws 1849 but there is no historical evidence to indicate that they were ever organized - or abolished. Fifty-seven of the present 87 counties were established during the territorial period which ended in 1857. Lake of the Woods County was the last one established in Minnesota. It was created by popular vote from territory that had been part of Beltrami County.

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## WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Aitkin: Scottish-born fur trader William Alexander Aitkin	Kandyohi: Dakota Indian name meaning "where the buffalo fish come"	Pope: General John Pope; explorer and soldier who assisted Generals Sibley and Sully in the 1863-64 campaign against the Sioux Indians
Anoka: Sioux or Dakota word meaning "on both sides"	Kittson: Norman Wolfred Kittson; leading pioneer, fur trader, and mayor of St. Paul	Ramsey: Alexander Ramsey; Minnesota's first Territorial Governor (1849-1853) and the second mayor of St. Paul (1855)
Becker: George Loomis Becker, former St. Paul mayor, state senator, brigadier general and St. Paul and Pacific Railroad land commissioner	Koochiching: Cree Indian name of uncertain meaning given by Ojibways to Rainy River and the falls and rapids	Red Lake: Red Lake River, named by the Ojibway for the river's red sand and reddish water
Beltrami: Giamcomo Beltrami; discoverer of the Bloody (Red Lake) River and the Mississippi River	Lac Qui Parle: French, meaning "lake which talks"	Redwood: Named after a river believed to be named for a slender bush whose red bark the Dakota mixed with tobacco for smoking
Benton: Missouri Senator Thomas Hart Benton; enactor of homestead land laws	Lake: Named after Lake Superior	Renville: Joseph Renville who led the Sioux warriors for the British against the US in the War of 1812
Big Stone: Big Stone Lake	Lake of the Woods: Named after the lake that forms the county's northern border	Rice: Henry Mower Rice who aided in negotiating Indian treaties and became one of the first two Minnesota Senators
Blue Earth: Named for the bluish-green earth in the region	Le Sueur: French-Canadian Pierre Charles Le Sueur; trader and explorer	Rock: Named for a large rocky outcrop or plateau, know as "The Mound"
Brown: Joseph Renshaw Brown; drummer boy, soldier, Indian trader, lumberman, pioneer, speculator, sounder, legislator, politician, editor and inventor	Lincoln: Abraham Lincoln	Roseau: Roseau Lake and Roseau River
Carlton: Rueben B. Carlton; early settler and member of the first senate (1858)	Lyon: General Nathaniel Lyon; killed in the Battle of Wilson's Creek, Missouri	St. Louis: St. Louis River which was given its name by French explorer Verendrye
Carver: Jonathan Carver; explorer and writer of the northland, traveled with the Sioux on the Minnesota River	Mahnomen: Ojibway word for wild rice	Scott: General Winfield Scott who served in the War of 1812 and was American troop commander in the Mexican War (1846-1848)
Cass: Statesman Lewis Cass	Marshall: William Rainey Marshall; pioneer merchant, banker, soldier, and governor (1866-1870)	Sherburne: Moses Sherburne; a Territorial Supreme Court Justice from 1853-1857, he helped to compile Minnesota's statutes
Chippewa: Chippewa River	Martin: Henry Martin, who came from Connecticut in 1856 and purchased thousands of acres in this and other counties	Sibley: Henry Hastings Sibley; fur trader, pioneer, and first governor of Minnesota (1858-1860)
Chisago: Named after the largest lake in the county	McLeod: Martin McLeod; a pioneer fur trader who became president of the Territorial Legislature Council in 1853	Stearns: Charles Thomas Stearns; distinguished pioneer resident of St. Cloud
Clay: Statesman Henry Clay	Meeker: Bradley B. Meeker; territorial legislator, Minnesota Supreme Court Justice and charter member of the Minnesota Historical Society	Steele: Franklin Steele; a prominent Minneapolis pioneer and charter member of the Minnesota Historical Society and member of the University of Minnesota Board of Regents
Clearwater: Clearwater River and Lake	Mille Lacs: Named after the lake the French called "Thousand Lakes"	Stevens: Isaac Ingalls Stevens; a statesman who requested this county be named for him seven years after a clerical error denied him that honor in 1855 for Stearns County
Cook: Major Michael Cook; brave Civil War soldier	Morrison: William and Allen Morrison; pioneer fur traders who explored the Mississippi headwaters	Swift: Henry Adoniram Swift, Minnesota's governor in 1863; John Blair Smith Todd; commander of Fort Ripley from 1849-1856
Cottonwood: Cottonwood River	Mower: John El. Mower; pioneer lumberman who served both the Territorial (1854-55) and State Legislatures (1874-75)	Traverse: Lake Traverse
Crow Wing: Named for an island shaped like a raven's wing at the junction of the Crow Wing and Mississippi Rivers	Murray: William Pitt Murray; Territorial Legislator and president of its council, also a state representative and senator	Wabasha: Named for a three-generation line of great Sioux chiefs named Wabasha
Dakota: Named after the Dakota Tribe of Indians	Nicollet: Joseph Nicolas Nicollet; a French-born geographer and explorer who mapped the Itasca Lake basin in 1836	Wadena: Wadena Trading Post, built on the old Crow Wing-to-Pembina Trail
Dodge: Henry and August Caesar Dodge; father and son politicians of the time	Nobles: William H. Nobles; a wagon maker and road builder who served in the Minnesota Territorial Legislature in 1854 and 1856	Waseca: Dakota or Sioux word translated as "rich," "fertile" and "plentiful"
Douglas: Stephen Arnold Douglas; know as "little giant," adversary of Abe Lincoln	Norman: Named after the early Norwegian (Norsemen or Norman) settlers	Washington: George Washington
Faribault: Jean Baptiste Faribault; trader among the Sioux	Olmsted: David Olmsted; first mayor of St. Paul who was also an editor and a publisher	Watsonwan: Watsonwan River, a Dakota name believed to signify "where fish-bait abounds"
Fillmore: Millard Fillmore; US President (1850-1853)	Otter Tail: Ottertail Lake and River, named by the Ojibway for its long, ancient sandbar shaped like an otter's tail	Wilkin: Colonel Alexander Wilkin, an attorney, state marshall and soldier who was killed in 1864 during the Battle of Tupelo, Mississippi
Freeborn: William Freeborn; second mayor of Red Wing	Pennington: Edmund Pennington; a railroad man who become president of the Minneapolis, St. Paul and Sault Ste. Marie Railway	Winona: Named after a Dakota woman of distinction, Winona, who was a cousin of the last of the three chiefs named Wabasha
Goodhue: James Madison Goodhue; Minnesota's first printer and editor	Pine: Named for the great forests of white and Norway pine which once flourished in the county	Wright: Silas Wright, New York lawyer and politician
Grant: Ulysses Simpson Grant; Civil War general and US President (1869-1877)	Pipestone: Named for the red pipestone, or catlinite, which was venerated and quarried by Indians	Yellow Medicine: Yellow Medicine River, the Dakota or Sioux Pajutzae ("yellow-plant root diggings")
Hennepin: Father Louis Hennepin; missionary, explorer and author	Polk: James Knox Polk; US President (1845-1849)	
Houston: Sam Houston; general and political leader		
Hubbard: Lucius Frederick Hubbard; editor, soldier, businessman, and first governor 1882-1887		
Isanti: Tribal name of the area		
Itasca: Lake Itasca		
Jackson: Henry Jackson; first merchant, postmaster, and justice-of-the-peace in St. Paul		
Kanabec: Named after the Snake River, Kanabec is Ojibway for "snake"		