



A publication from the Association of Minnesota Counties.

What is a “county”?

You may not know it, but your county plays a big role in your everyday life!

You already know that you live in a city or town, but you may not realize that your hometown is also located within something called a “county.”

You may know about the federal (United States) government. The President of the United States is the head of this branch of government, located in Washington, D.C.. And you may have heard about state (Minnesota) government. The governor is the head of this branch of government, located in St. Paul. Counties are considered local governments, just like your city or town.

We have all types of counties in Minnesota—87 of them to choose from! Some are large, some are small. Some have many people living there, some have very few residents. Some have large cities, some have a lot of farms. They are all different, but they are all counties.

If you have ever been on a trip in Minnesota, you may have noticed signs that said you were leaving one county and entering another. Or perhaps you know your home county from watching storm warnings on TV, because the weather service uses counties to identify where a storm is heading. Chances are that you may have heard the term “courthouse” or have visited a county library.

You may not know it now, but if you read on you’ll learn more about what counties do and how your county plays a big role for your whole life!



WHAT DO COUNTIES DO?

Counties work very hard for each of our lives every day!

From the day you are born your relationship with the county begins.

The county, beginning with your birth certificate, keeps your personal record for your entire life. As you grow, your relationship with your county continues through major life events like getting your drivers' license, marriage license, or buying land to build a home.

In between these major events, your need for county services continues daily. The county disposes of your waste, maintains your roads and parks, provides public health care, manages the jails and provides many other services.

County services help many people in your community.

Counties do a lot of things every day that help all kinds of people, the environment and other things that make your county a better place to live.

At the **Sheriff's Department**, the county sheriff and deputies work like the police department in your town. If you ever have an emergency and have to call 911, you'll be calling the county sheriff's department.

The **Social Services Department** helps needy citizens in the county. This department can help unemployed people find jobs by providing training and counseling. The social services department also makes sure that the disabled and elderly get the care they need and it even helps in handling the adoption of children.

The county **Health Department** oversees things like childhood vaccinations (those shots you have to get before you start school!). It also tests your local water supply to make sure it's safe to drink. If you ever need to get a copy of your birth certificate, you will probably have to go to the health department in the county where you were born to get it.

The **Solid Waste Management Office** is where the county takes care of trash and recycling.

When you are old enough to drive, you will probably go to the county **License Bureau** to get your drivers' license. This is the same place that you go to get a passport if you are going on vacation to another country.

You may visit the county **library** to check out books or to do research for a school project.

Counties do so much! How do they pay for it all?

Running counties and providing all its services requires a lot of money. Most of the funds counties need come from taxes, and some of them come from the state.

Counties collect two different kinds of taxes: **property taxes** on things like houses, land and cars and **sales taxes**, which you have probably already paid if you've ever purchased anything at a store (when a candy bar costs 75 cents and you have to pay 80 cents at the counter, that extra five cents is sales tax).

Some county funds also come from fees that citizens pay for specific services, like buying a marriage license or a permit to build an addition on your house.

Most county services are provided because higher levels of government require that county government provide them. These services that counties are required to provide are called **mandates**.

Who is in charge of the county?

You may know that the "mayor" is in charge of your city or town, and, instead of one person being in charge, counties have a group of people who govern the county called the county board of commissioners. Each county has at least five commissioners and some have as many as seven. All are elected when citizens of the county, just like the President is chosen when people vote. Each commissioner is elected to the position for four years.

The commissioners work closely with the people in charge of specific county services, like the county library and the health department. These people are sometimes called department heads. Most of these department heads are hired by the commissioners or the county manager, but the sheriff and the recorder are elected by voters, just like the commissioners.

Citizens are very important to helping counties do what they do.

Counties are very important units of government, providing new services to citizens each year. Because counties are local governments, it's very important that citizens have a voice in what counties do. This can be achieved by voting in elections and attending county board meetings.

How did your county get its name?

Some of the Minnesota county names may seem very strange to you. Minnesota counties are named for many different things. Some are named after United States Presidents, Minnesota politicians, and many have Native American names. Find your county on the list below and learn how it got its name!

Aitkin: Scottish-born fur trader William Alexander Aitkin
Anoka: Sioux or Dakota word meaning "on both sides"
Becker: George Loomis Becker, former St. Paul mayor, state senator, brigadier general and St. Paul and Pacific Railroad land commissioner
Beltrami: Giamcomo Beltrami; discoverer of the Bloody (Red Lake) River and the Mississippi River
Benton: Missouri Senator Thomas Hart Benton; enactor of homestead land laws
Big Stone: Big Stone Lake
Blue Earth: Named for the bluish-green earth in the region
Brown: Joseph Renshaw Brown; drummer boy, soldier, Indian trader, lumberman, pioneer, speculator, sounder, legislator, politician, editor and inventor
Carlton: Rueben B. Carlton; early settler and member of the first senate (1858)
Carver: Jonathan Carver; explorer and writer of the northland, traveled with the Sioux on the Minnesota River
Cass: Statesman Lewis Cass
Chippewa: Chippewa River
Chisago: Named after the largest lake in the county
Clay: Statesman Henry Clay
Clearwater: Clearwater River and Lake
Cook: Major Michael Cook; brave Civil War soldier
Cottonwood: Cottonwood River
Crow Wing: Named for an island shaped like a raven's wing at the junction of the Crow Wing and Mississippi Rivers
Dakota: Named after the Dakota Tribe of Indians
Dodge: Henry and August Caesar Dodge; father and son politicians of the time
Douglas: Stephen Arnold Douglas; know as "little giant," adversary of Abe Lincoln
Faribault: Jean Baptiste Faribault; trader among the Sioux
Fillmore: Millard Fillmore; US President (1850-1853)
Freeborn: William Freeborn; second mayor of Red Wing
Goodhue: James Madison Goodhue; Minnesota's first printer and editor
Grant: Ulysses Simpson Grant; Civil War general and US President (1869-1877)
Hennepin: Father Louis Hennepin; missionary, explorer and author
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"
Kandiyohi: Dakota Indian name meaning "where the buffalo fish come"
Kittson: Norman Wolfred Kittson; leading pioneer, fur trader, and mayor of St. Paul
Koochiching: Cree Indian name of uncertain meaning given by Ojibways to Rainy River and the falls and rapids
Lac qui Parle: French, meaning "lake who speaks"
Lake: Named after Lake Superior
Lake of the Woods: Named after the lake that forms the county's northern border
Le Sueur: French-Canadian Pierre Charles Le Sueur; trader and explorer
Lincoln: Abraham Lincoln
Lyon: General Nathaniel Lyon; killed in the Battle of Wilson's Creek, Missouri
Mahnomen: Ojibway word for wild rice
Marshall: William Rainey Marshall; pioneer merchant, banker, soldier, and governor (1866-1870)
Martin: Henry Martin, who came from Connecticut in 1856 and purchased thousands of acres in this and other counties
McLeod: Martin McLeod; a pioneer fur trader who became president of the Territorial Legislature Council in 1853
Meeker: Bradley B. Meeker; territorial legislator, Minnesota Supreme Court Justice and charter member of the Minnesota Historical Society
Mille Lacs: Named after the lake the French called "Thousand Lakes"
Morrison: William and Allen Morrison; pioneer fur traders who explored the Mississippi headwaters
Mower: John El. Mower; pioneer lumberman who served both the Territorial (1854-55) and State Legislatures (1874-75)
Murray: William Pitt Murray; Territorial Legislator and president of its council, also a state representative and senator
Nicollet: Joseph Nicolas Nicollet; a French-born geographer and explorer who mapped the Itasca Lake basin in 1836
Nobles: William H. Nobles; a wagon maker and road builder who served in the Minnesota Territorial Legislature in 1854 and 1856



Norman: Named after the early Norwegian (Norsemen or Norman) settlers
Olmsted: David Olmsted; first mayor of St. Paul who was also an editor and a publisher
Otter Tail: Ottertail Lake and River, named by the Ojibway for its long, ancient sandbar shaped like an otter's tail
Pennington: Edmund Pennington; a railroad man who become president of the Minneapolis, St. Paul and Sault Ste. Marie Railway
Pine: Named for the great forests of white and Norway pine which once flourished in the county
Pipestone: Named for the red pipestone, or catlinite, which was venerated and quarried by Indians
Polk: James Knox Polk; US President (1845-1849)
Pope: General John Pope; explorer and soldier who assisted Generals Sibley and Sully in the 1863-64 campaign against the Sioux Indians
Ramsey: Alexander Ramsey; Minnesota's first Territorial Governor (1849-1853) and the second mayor of St. Paul (1855)
Red Lake: Red Lake River, named by the Ojibway for the river's red sand and reddish water
Redwood: Named after a river believed to be named for a slender bush whose red bark the Dakota mixed with tobacco for smoking
Renville: Joseph Renville who led the Sioux warriors for the British against the US in the War of 1812
Rice: Henry Mower Rice who aided in negotiating Indian treaties and became one of the first two Minnesota Senators
Rock: Named for a large rocky outcrop or plateau, know as "The Mound"
Roseau: Roseau Lake and Roseau River
St. Louis: St. Louis River which was given its name by French explorer Verendrye
Scott: General Winfield Scott who served in the War of 1812 and was American troop commander in the Mexican War (1846-1848)
Sherburne: Moses Sherburne; a Territorial Supreme Court Justice from 1853-1857, he helped to compile Minnesota's statutes
Sibley: Henry Hastings Sibley; fur trader, pioneer, and first governor of Minnesota (1858-1860)
Stearns: Charles Thomas Stearns; distinguished pioneer resident of St. Cloud
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
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
Swift: Henry Adoniram Swift, Minnesota's governor in 1863
Todd: John Blair Smith Todd; commander of Fort Ripley from 1849-1856
Traverse: Lake Traverse
Wabasha: Named for a three-generation line of great Sioux chiefs named Wabasha
Wadena: Wadena Trading Post, built on the old Crow Wing-to-Pembina Trail
Waseca: Dakota or Sioux word translated as "rich," "fertile" and "plentiful"
Washington: George Washington
Watonwan: Watonwan River, a Dakota name believed to signify "where fish-bait abounds"
Wilkin: Colonel Alexander Wilkin, an attorney, state marshal and soldier who was killed in 1864 during the Battle of Tupelo, Mississippi
Winona: Named after a Dakota woman of distinction, Winona, who was a cousin of the last of the three chiefs named Wabasha
Wright: Silas Wright, New York lawyer and politician
Yellow Medicine: Yellow Medicine River, the Dakota or Sioux Pajutzæe ("yellow-plant root diggings")



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Find the Minnesota County Names

All 87 Minnesota County names are hidden in the puzzle below.
You can find them written across, up, down, backward, forward, and diagonally.

N A M R O N D O D G E K P E W N W A S E C A F I K
O L M S T E D F R O S E A U N H E K C O R R R M Z
E L E E T S R E W O M B M N I R L M P S E S O A L
Y E L L O W M E D I C I N E D O U S O E A T F R L
D O O W N O T T O C Z W C T P I D B B N T T E T A
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R R E A K O T C H P C J N F O O R O R E C A N E S
A E E S S K T T A L O O S W Q N C T H E H J M B R
V D C N M I R G E R S P E L K S A S B I G S R S A
E W L I V A H A N I V H E A N I P E N N E H V A M
R O A N E I R C R I T E N C L H O U S T O N N L U
S O Y E S W L R M F N A R Q E N O T S E P I P G R
E D U I A D O L O E B N H U N O T L R A C W U U R
K L U T A M U E E E E O E I I E S N E V E T S O A
B O E K N R K N C S R K X P P L N M C L E O D D Y
L R O W I A E O H R I E E A N I C O L L E T N J E
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I I F A M N N W S A G N A W W N C N E K A L I R L
O L I T N A S I M S B E N T O N S S W I F T A E P

AITKIN
ANOKA
BECKER
BELTRAMI
BENTON
BIG STONE
BLUE EARTH
BROWN
CARLTON
CARVER
CASS
CHIPPEWA
CHISAGO
CLAY
CLEARWATER
COOK
COTTONWOOD
CROW WING

DAKOTA
DODGE
DOUGLAS
FARIBAULT
FILLMORE
FREEBORN
GOODHUE
GRANT
HENNEPIN
HOUSTON
HUBBARD
ISANTI
ITASCA
JACKSON
KANABEC
KANDIYOHI
KITTSOON
KOOCHICHING

LAC QUI PARLE
LAKE
LAKE OF THE WOODS
LE SUEUR
LINCOLN
LOUIS
LYON
MAHNOMEN
MARSHALL
MARTIN
MCLEOD
MEEKER
MILLELACS
MORRISON
MOWER
MURRAY
NICOLLET
NOBLES

NORMAN
OLMSTED
OTTER TAIL
PENNINGTON
PINE
PIPESTONE
POLK
POPE
RAMSEY
REDLAKE
REDWOOD
RENVILLE
RICE
ROCK
ROSEAU
SCOTT
SHERBURNE
SIBLEY

STEARNS
STEELE
STEVENS
SWIFT
TODD
TRAVERSE
WABASHA
WADENA
WASECA
WASHINGTON
WATONWAN
WILKIN
WINONA
WRIGHT
YELLOW MEDICINE