

# In the Beginning: Settlement of Ontario County and Geneva

When the American Revolution ended in 1783, Seneca Lake was New York State's western boundary. In 1788 Oliver Phelps and Nathaniel Gorham bought the rights to sell land west of Seneca Lake. Ontario County was created from Seneca's western shore to Lake Erie, with Canandaigua as the county seat. The county was divided into smaller counties until 1823 when boundaries were established as we know them today.

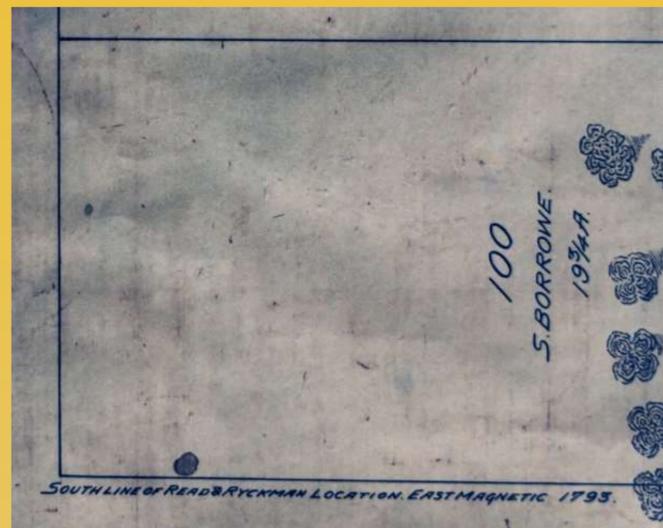
A small group of settlers lived on the northwest shore of Seneca Lake from 1788 to 1792. In that year Charles Williamson began plans for the village of Geneva which took effect in 1796.

*You can learn much more about early land development in our exhibit Geneva's Changing Landscapes in the next gallery.*



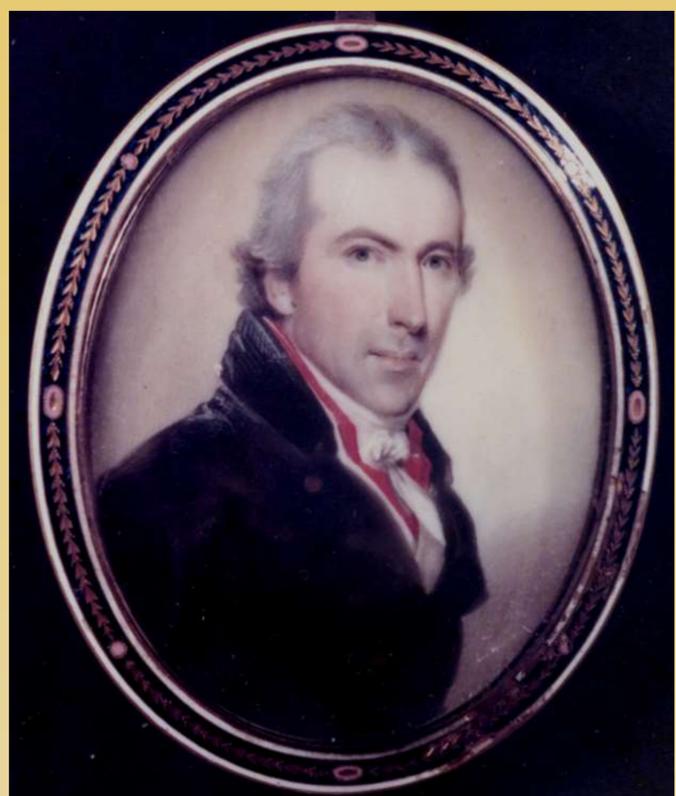
The Pre-Emption Line was Phelps' and Gorham's eastern property line and ran from Pennsylvania to Lake Ontario. Unfortunately, the 1788 survey was inaccurate, cheating the two men out of 86,000 acres. In 1792 a new line was surveyed but the New York Legislature did not approve it until 1796.

After several land sales, the Pulteney Associates from England were the first group to develop Ontario County. Land agent Charles Williamson planned Geneva's center on South Main Street overlooking the lake, including a hotel and post office. Work did not begin until 1796 when the state legislature officially declared Geneva belonged to the Pulteney Associates.



Detail of the village of Geneva blueprint, copy of 1793 map.

Before the new Pre Emption Line was surveyed, New York State made large land grants in this area. Colonel Seth Reed and Peter Ryckman received a combined 18,000 acres along Seneca Lake. Although they soon lost title to the land, they planned a layout for Geneva that is familiar today.



# Change at the Top

In 1964 Geneva changed to a city council-manager form of governance. A professional city manager oversees daily operations and finances and reports to City Council. The mayor is elected by all voters and serves as the head of the council. There are six councilors elected from each ward of the city and two at-large members. The mayor chairs monthly council meetings with reports from the city manager and counsel from the city attorney.

PASSED April 8, 1872; three-fifths being present.  
*The people of the State of New York, represented in Senate and Assembly, do enact as follows:*  
**SECTION 1.** Section second of title first of the said chapter sixty five of the Laws of eighteen hundred and seventy one is hereby amended so as to read as follows:  
**§ 2.** The said village of Geneva is hereby divided into three districts or wards, viz: All that part of said village lying south of the middle line of Seneca street, and such line extended eastward until it intersects the east line of the corporation; the middle line of William street, and such line extended westward until it intersects the west line of the corporation, and the middle line of Main street joining said two last lines, shall be district number one. All that part of said village lying north of said district number one and west of the middle line of Genesee street, the middle line of Linden street and the middle line of Castle street joining said last two lines, shall be district number two; and all the remainder of said village shall be district number three. After five years, and not oftener than once in five years thereafter, the board of trustees of said village may alter the boundaries, but not the number of said districts, by a two-thirds vote. Such districts as

In 1872 the state legislature passed a law creating three wards for the election of village trustees. One ward lay south of Seneca Street, the second was the northwest part of the village, and the third was to the east of Genesee Street and north of downtown.



As Geneva grew, the 1897 city charter created six wards. Ward One includes South Main Street with some of the city's largest and oldest homes. Ward Six is a working class neighborhood.



In December 1963 this was the last session of Common Council under the old form of government. Left to right were: Dominick Passalacqua, James McCusker, Joseph Augustine, Viacita Fowler, Helen Maney, clerk Lucille Wright, attorney Harold Van Opdorp, Clyde Trice, Michael Simeone, Raymond Harrold, Dr. Robert Doran, H. Merrill Roenke, Jr., James Riley, and Henry T. Bolin, Jr. Mayor Donald Eades was not in the photograph.



On January 20, 1964 new city manager Orville Over (center) signed paperwork with city clerk Lucille Wright (left) and Mayor Donald Eades.

Geneva's residents come from diverse economic, cultural, and racial backgrounds. There are different viewpoints and concerns among the wards but councilors try to decide the best course for the city. Current councilors, either employed or retired, come from the fields of finance, public utilities, non-profit administration, and city government.



2016 City Council members are, left to right: Paul D'Amico (Second Ward), John Greco (Sixth Ward), Angelina Marino (First Ward), Jason Hagerman (Fifth Ward), Mark Gramling (At-Large), Mayor Ron Alcock, R. Ken Camera (Fourth Ward), Steve Valentino (Third Ward), and Gordon Eddington (At-Large). The city manager (not shown) is Matt Horn.

# Part of the Whole: How the Genevas Fit into County Government

Both Genevas are represented on the Ontario County Board of Supervisors. The county government is similar to the city model, with a professional administrator and an elected board. Of the 21 members, Geneva has the most representation. Three are elected from the city and one from the town. (Canandaigua has two, and each town gets one.)

Canandaigua and the western part of the county is closely aligned with Rochester and its affluence. Historically Geneva has been larger, more diverse, and more industrial. Although the city only has 12% of the county's population, it has 25% of the people living in poverty in the county.

**BOARD OF SUPERVISORS,  
ONTARIO COUNTY.  
ANNUAL MEETING, 1878.**

**N**OTICE is hereby given that the Annual Meeting of the Board of Supervisors of Ontario County, will be held at the COURT HOUSE, in the village of Canandaigua, in said county, on **TUESDAY, THE FIRST DAY OF OCTOBER, 1878,** at 12 o'clock, noon.

All persons having bills or accounts against the County of Ontario are required by law to deposit the same, duly verified, with the COUNTY CLERK of said county, on or before the **THIRD** day of said annual meeting, and in default thereof, such bills or accounts will not be audited by said Board at their annual meeting aforesaid.

All OFFICERS OR TRUSTEES, required by law to make annual reports to the Board must make the same within **SIX DAYS** from the first day of said meeting; and willful neglect or refusal so to make such report, is a *misdemeanor*.

Dated Canandaigua, Aug. 27, 1878.  
**HIRAM METCALF,**  
Supervisors' Clerk.

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Before telephones and the Internet, newspaper legal notices were the main means of letting the public know about government meetings.



The City of Geneva Supervisors are Dominick T. Vedora (First District, middle row, fourth from right), Charles Evangelista (Second District, front row, third from left), and Gregory Bendzlowicz (Third District, back row, third from right). The Town of Geneva Supervisor is Mark Venuti (back row, second from left).

GENEVA DAILY TIMES, DECEMBER 12, 1898.

## ANOTHER SLAP AT GENEVA BY ONTARIO COUNTY SOLONS.

Sheriff George A. Peel Arraigned -- Grand Jury to Investigate.

The Investigation of Which This Finding Is the Result Cost the County the Neat Sum of \$500 -- Geneva's Big Tax.

In 1898 the county sheriff, and Geneva resident, George A. Peel was accused of unnecessarily filling the county jail with prisoners so he could claim reimbursement for expenses.

## NO USE FOR THIS CITY.

So Say the County Supervisors.

Is It a Political Slap?—The City Frozen Out by Canandaigua.

In 1899 the County Supervisors (led by Canandaigua, according to the Geneva Daily Times) voted to allow Geneva to leave Ontario County and join Seneca County if it wished. The resolution stated that Geneva's cost to the county exceeded the income and it would be best for everyone if Geneva left.

COURT HOUSE, CAN

# Geneva v. Geneva: Challenges of Getting Along

To visitors, the City and Town of Geneva seem very similar. City streets give way to more open spaces and farm fields. To residents, the dividing line is sharper at tax time. Fifty-seven percent of the city's property is tax-exempt due to non-profits such as churches, schools and colleges, the hospital, and the Geneva Historical Society. The city tax rate is almost \$18 per \$1,000 assessed value. The town has no property tax, although owners do pay school and county taxes. This issue creates tension and competition between the two municipalities when recruiting new residents and businesses.



Geneva is a walkable city in many respects. There is a wealth of historic buildings for new businesses and a growing number of nice apartments for downtown living. With nearby food, drinks, and entertainment, city living is the choice for many new residents. Courtesy of Live From Linden



Lower taxes are a strong incentive to buy a home in the town, particularly if owners prefer to build a new house. The southern portion of the town has waterfront property which has shifted from seasonal cottages to larger, year-round homes.



Most wineries, like White Springs Winery, prefer to be on Route 14 which has the most tourist traffic. In 2014 Lake Drum Brewing, a licensed New York State Farm Brewery, opened on East Castle Street in the heart of downtown.

# Village to City



The village of Geneva existed and prospered as part of the Town of Seneca until 1812. The village was incorporated that year, being governed by a Board of Trustees who selected a president, treasurer, clerk, tax collector, and fire wardens.

In 1898 Geneva became a chartered city with a strong mayor – Common Council form of government. Becoming a city in New York State was not based on size or population. The village had only to prove it wanted to incorporate as a city.

**THE CITY CHARTER.**  
CONTINUED FROM FIRST PAGE.

Geo. F. Dittmars: I am in favor of the City Charter because the rate of taxation is absolutely limited, because the departments are under the management of commissioners appointed by the mayor and these commissioners not being dependent upon votes for their positions, will not have any ax to grind nor any strings tied to them, because the government of the town of Geneva and the city of Geneva will be entirely separated. The city will save from six to eight thousand dollars a year thereby, because the offices of the Clerk, and Treasurer, Assessor and City Judge will not only result in a saving, but will be the source of added income and hundreds of other reasons to numerous to mention.

The New York State Legislature created a proposed city charter that was put to public vote on February 1, 1897. Leaders felt the 1812 village charter no longer met the needs of a growing community. Roads needed paving, water and sewer systems were being improved, and there were more administrative duties.

—Let's see: According to official figures in 1880 Geneva had a population of 5,878; in 1890 we had a population of 7,557, and now it may show up to 8,000. This has been a steady, healthy, substantial growth under a village charter and economical government. And the growth has not stopped. Large plots are being cut up into smaller lots, until thirty or forty feet is enough for a house. Is it not wise to let well enough alone?

As always, money was at the heart of the charter debate. Those in favor (left) promoted the savings under a new system, as well as controls on tax rates. Those opposed (right) feared that the power of a strong mayor and public works board would lead to higher taxes.

And how about our electric light system?  
Under the present charter no village is allowed to own its electric light system unless they pay the enormous price demanded by the "electric light trust." Who put a sneak bill through the legislature to that effect. Now if we could secure our own electric light system, we would get our lights for about one half what we pay now and no doubt better service.  
In closing I would ask all good and fair minded citizens of Geneva who are in favor of good streets and public improvements to take a thought before casting a vote against the proposed city charter which I sincerely believe will be a benefit to us all.  
THOMAS W. HAWKINS.

The city charter passed and went into effect on January 1, 1898.

**TRUSTEE MOORE SPEAKS.**  
Geneva, Jan. 21.—The proposed city charter which is to be voted on at the coming charter election is the cause of a great deal of unfavorable comment. Trustee D. E. Moore is opposed to it and denounces it in the strongest terms. When asked what his objections were, he stated that it was the additional expense which would be necessitated and the giving to the Mayor the sole appointing power were the most objectionable features. The creation of a Commission of five of public works, as provided in the proposed charter vested practically with unlimited power, he considered enough to condemn the charter, as the Commission could bond the city to any amount for improvements, order streets paved, etc. Mr. Moore stated he should oppose any such measure likely to increase taxation.

**AFFAIRS OF THE NEW CITY TAKE SHAPE.**

<b>Common Council Busy for Two Hours.</b>	<b>The New Mayor Commits an Alleged Blunder.</b>	<b>Clash Between Mayor and Commissioners.</b>
<b>POLICEMEN WANTED</b>	<b>Appoints a Sealer of Weights and Measures,</b>	<b>ABOUT TO RESIGN</b>
<b>Aldermen Opposed to Enlarging the Force.</b>	<b>No Such Office Provided for in the City Charter — Aldermen Surprised at the President's Ignorance of the Executive — He sees Blaine and Nicholas Talk.</b>	<b>Fire Board Said to Have Contemplated It.</b>
<b>BUT TEN DAYS A CITY</b>	<b>Mayor Hereafter created a small session in the council chamber last evening. The executive was not present in person, nor did he submit a message; but he submitted an appointment that caused a brief but spirited discussion, in the course of which his honor was strongly advised to "read up" the city charter.</b>	<b>DEY APPOINTED CHIEF</b>
<b>No Need to Double the Number of Policemen as Yet, Says President Blaine — Judge Wyckoff Asks for Additional Rooms — Other Business.</b>	<b>The appointment which proved a small-sized bomb shell in the aldermanic procession, was that of "city sealer" of weights and measures. "As no provision is made in the city charter for such an official, some of the aldermen, and at least one or two of the aldermen, wondered whether the mayor had concluded to assume executive as well as appointive power.</b>	<b>Second Regular Meeting Held Last Evening — Internal Disorder in the Board of Charities — Republicans Dissatisfied — Health Board Meets and Elects Officers.</b>
<b>The second regular meeting of the common council was held in the municipal building last evening, with President Blaine in the chair. All the aldermen were present. The meeting was called to order at 8 o'clock. Clerk Cole read the minutes of the last meeting, which were accepted.</b>		<b>Evidently there is a lack of harmony between the mayor and, at least one of the boards he has caused to be appointed. The fire commissioners are said to have rebelled against the alleged mandate of the executive, and to have positively refused, after due deliberation, to hold themselves sub-</b>



The first weeks of 1898 were chaotic as the press and public watched the city government carefully for signs of overreach. Headlines were dramatic but needed adjustments were being made. Formed in 1882 with four officers, the police department was expanded to seven plus the chief.