

A Brief History of Georgia Counties

by Ed Jackson

Nationwide, there are just over 3,000 counties in the fifty states. The number and size of counties varies considerably from state to state. Georgia has 159 counties, second only to Texas, which has 254.

Every part of Georgia -- even the barrier islands in the Atlantic Ocean-- falls within a county. This means that no matter where you live in Georgia, you reside in a county.

In the United States, counties serve as the principal political subdivision of a state. Each state has divided itself into specific political areas known as counties (or as "parishes" in Louisiana and "boroughs" in Alaska). In each county, local officials act as an arm of state government, performing many state-related functions, such as conducting elections and issuing marriage licenses. In addition to serving as important subdivisions of the state, counties have a second role. In Georgia, they are the largest general-purpose form of local government. This means that apart from helping state government, counties can provide a variety of local services to their citizens. In this role, some large urban counties resemble cities in the types of local government services they provide.

How did counties originate? In 7th-century England, Saxon kings began marking off their kingdoms into areas called "shires," the Saxon word for "share." In time, the king began naming an official in each shire to administer the king's policies locally. That official was known as the "shire-reeve" -- or "sheriff" as he soon came to be known.

At about this time in France, the ruling duke of Normandy began awarding his key supporters with areas of land to administer. The supporters were given the title "count," and in time the district each administered was called a "county." When William, Duke of Normandy, conquered England in 1066, he brought his practice of awarding his counts with land. In England counties replaced the old system of shires. By the early 1200s, all of England had been divided into counties. The first American colony to establish colonies was Virginia in 1634. Soon other colonies began creating colonies.

When James Oglethorpe founded the colony of Georgia in 1733, he brought no instructions from the Trustees for dividing the new colony into counties. In reality, there was uncertainty as to the precise boundaries of Georgia. Also, beyond defense and distributing land grants, there were few governmental functions to be performed in Georgia's early history.

The first attempt to form counties in Georgia came in 1741. The Trustees decided to divide Georgia into two colonies -- one named Savannah and one named Frederica. Each county would be headed by a president. War with Spain, however, kept Georgia occupied with more pressing matters, and the idea of counties died for the time being.

After Georgia became a royal colony, its new legislative assembly made the Church of England the official church of Georgia, and divided the colony into eight parishes. As in England, parishes served as church districts for support of the clergy and other religious expenses. Unlike England, however, Georgia's parishes served as governmental districts for conducting elections, collecting taxes, caring for the poor, keeping roads passable, and recording vital statistics.

In 1765, Georgia's colonial assembly divided the land south of the Altamaha River into four additional parishes, given the colony a total of 12 parishes. Following the Treaty of Augusta in 1773, a large area of Creek and Cherokee lands to the north of Augusta was ceded to Georgia. This land was not designated as a parish, rather becoming known as "Ceded

Lands."

After the outbreak of war with Great Britain, Georgia's revolutionary government adopted a new state constitution. The new constitution refashioned the twelve parishes and the area known as "Ceded Lands" into eight counties. With the exception of Liberty County, each new county was named for a prominent English supporter of the rights of the American colonies.

After the Revolution, thousands of settlers from other states moved to Georgia looking for cheap land. This led to pressure on the Creek and Cherokee Indians to give up more and more of their land. After each Indian land cession, Georgia's legislature would divided the territory into counties. The land was then surveyed and divided into districts and lots.

By 1800, Georgia consisted of 24 counties. An explosion in the number soon followed, with 53 new counties creating during the following 27 years. In Dec. 1831, Georgia claimed authority over all Cherokee and Creek lands in Georgia. In Dec. 1832, the legislature designated all Cherokee lands within the state as "Cherokee County." This was a huge area that never really functioned as a county, so In in Dec. 1832 the legislature created ten counties out of Cherokee County -- including a much smaller county by the same name. Georgia now had a total of 89 counties.

A new era in the history of Georgia counties followed. As no Indian territory remained in Georgia, the only way to create a new county was by dividing an existing one. Organizing a new county simply required passing an act in the General Assembly. It was an easy process, and during the decade of the 1850s, 39 new counties were created by the legislature.

By 1875, the number of counties had grown to 137, with no end in sight. To stop this explosion, a new state constitution in 1877 prohibited the legislature from creating any more counties in Georgia. for 16 years, the number of counties was frozen at 137. But state lawmakers were pressured for more. In 1904, they proposed amending Georgia's constitution to allow 145 counties. Voters approved the change, and the following year, 8 new counties were added by the legislature. But even this new limitation didn't work. Two years later, the constitution was amended to add Ben Hill County. In less than two decades, 15 other new counties were added by constitutional amendment.

Why were new counties so popular in Georgia? There were many reasons. Until the 1960s, Georgia was basically a rural state, with the majority of people living in the countryside or in small rural communities. Even today, much of the state remains rural in character.

For rural residents, counties performed many important functions. For instance, it was with the county you recorded the sale or purchase of land. It was the county sheriff who provided protection. The county also determined the taxes on any property you owned.

Although the source of statement has never documented, reportedly there was a rule of thumb in Georgia that every citizen should be within a one-day round trip by horse or wagon from the seat of county government. In reality, however, other factors more commonly were behind the push to create new counties. Personal disputes and political controversies frequently led to the division of an existing county. For instance, until 1871, Watkinsville served as the seat of government for Clarke County. However, that year Athens supporters persuaded the General Assembly to designate Athens as county seat. Expectedly, residents of western Clarke County were unhappy about the change. The dispute ended four years later when the legislature created Oconee County out of the western half of Clarke County.

Sometimes, the boundaries of early counties had been laid off without regard to natural features, such as rivers and mountain ridges. Later, these natural features were used to form smaller counties with more logical borders. Another important reason for the large number of counties is that

with each new county came jobs and political power. New counties also meant numerous elected and appointed offices to fill, including a sheriff, judge, tax collector, court clerk, and a board of county commissioners. Also, until 1965, each Georgia county -- no matter how small -- was entitled to at least one representative in the General Assembly. Thus, with each new county came a new state legislator.

The era of creating new counties finally ended in 1924, when Peach County was formed from portions of Houston and Macon counties. Georgia now had a total of 161 counties. Eight years later, the number of counties dropped by two. As a cost-saving measure during the Depression, Milton and Campbell counties consolidated with Fulton County in 1932. Since then, the number of Georgia counties has remained at 159.

Since 1945, Georgia's constitution had set a maximum limit of 159 counties ([see provision](#)). However, counties or parts of counties may merge with neighboring counties, providing the action first is approved by the General Assembly and then by the voters of the affected counties. Also, county residents can vote to consolidate their county government with the government of all cities within that county, as has been done in Muscogee, Clarke, and Richmond counties.

Until 1852, each Georgia county was governed by the county's inferior court, which consisted of five justices. The inferior court had jurisdiction in minor judicial cases, as well as some administrative authority (e.g., provide for building public buildings, levy taxes, and overseeing maintenance of county roads). In 1852, the office of county ordinary was created and given authority over the inferior court's judicial functions. In 1868, the inferior court was abolished. In some cases, responsibility for administering the county was transferred to the ordinary, but in 1869 the legislature created the first "board of commissioners of roads and revenues" with general governing authority over the county. In 1968, the title was changed to simply "board of commissioners," although a few Georgia counties continue to be governed by a single person known as "sole commissioner." Whether a county is governed by a single commissioner or board is determined by local act for each county by the General Assembly.

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