

History of County Government in the United States

The origin of the American county is from the French word "conte," meaning the domain of a count. The American county is defined by Webster as "the largest territorial division for local government within a state of the U.S." Webster's definition is based on the Anglo-Saxon county, sometimes called a shire. The head of the shire in the British Isles was the Shire Reeve, the origin for today's county sheriff. Serving a dual function, the shire acted as the administrative arm of the national government as well as the citizen's local government.

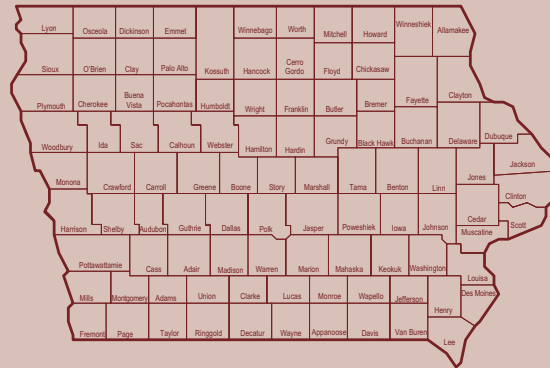
The county came to America with the first colonies in Virginia, Massachusetts, New York and Pennsylvania. In early American colonial times, the basic unit of local government in the New England colonies was the town. In the southern states the county developed without townships as subdivisions. As the nation expanded, new states tended to adopt either the New England approach or the southern plan.

Counties were established to carry out a variety of functions not performed by smaller towns. When our national government was formed, the Constitution did not provide for local governments, leaving the matter of local government to the states. Subsequently, early state constitutions generally conceptualized county government as an arm of the state. As the United States grew westward, county government developed as the basic unit of local government with responsibility for delivery of public services in large regions containing widely dispersed rural populations.

After World War I, population growth, suburban development, and the government reform movement strengthened the role of local governments. Those developments set the stage for post World War II urbanization. Changes in structure, greater autonomy from the states, rising revenues, and stronger political accountability ushered in a new era for county government. The counties began providing an ever widening range of services. These trends continue to be in place today.

County Government Today

Today, there are 99 counties in Iowa ranging in population from about 4,400 residents (Adams County) to approximately 380,000 residents (Polk County). All 99 counties operate under the board of supervisor form of government provided by state law and have supported home rule as provided for in the state constitution and legislation enacted in 1978.



Historically, the role of counties has been to serve as an administrative arm of the state - maintaining records, providing courts and law enforcement, building roads, assisting the mentally ill, immunizing children, assessing property and collecting taxes, and conducting elections. Counties still perform these functions, as well as others, through full-time elected officials including a board of county supervisors, a sheriff, recorder, treasurer, attorney, and auditor.

Information for this publication taken from "Evolution of County Government in Iowa" by State of Iowa Office for Planning and Programming; "New Directions for County Government" by Iowa Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations.

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The History of County Government



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History of County Government in Iowa

The first two Iowa counties, Dubuque and Des Moines (later changed to Des Moines) were created in 1834. These territorial divisions were made so people didn't have to travel to Des Moines to pay their taxes, file a lawsuit, or to report a crime. Dubuque and Des Moines counties were divided into townships and the "township-supervisor" form of government was established with three supervisors and 15 other officials, including six justices of the peace, selected by the Governor of Michigan to govern the county. This form of government faced many hindrances. There was a lack of cooperation, conferences of the supervisors were not held as frequently as needed due to road conditions and poor mail service, prompt action was usually impossible, and the system was criticized for being expensive.

Two years later, in 1836, Iowa became part of the Wisconsin Territory and the structure of its county government was sharply revised. The "county commissioner" system, which originated in Pennsylvania nearly a century before, was adopted. Under the new system, direct administrative power was removed from the township and vested in a commission. The county commission consisted of three members that were elected and authorized to conduct the county's business. By 1851, all county officials were elected. Some legislators felt the county commission system was cumbersome, slow-moving, and expensive. Others had little faith in the average citizen to govern.

In 1851, the Iowa Legislature abolished the county commissioner system and replaced it with a one man "county judge" system. In 1860, after numerous studies and much debate, the judge system was terminated in favor of the township-supervisor form, similar to the one first utilized when Iowa was part of the Michigan Territory. In 1870, the township-supervisor form of government was replaced with the "county board of supervisors" form of government. The board of supervisors was in effect a county commission, but the Legislature decided to call them supervisors in order to avoid printing new stationary and forms. Under the new plan, the number of supervisors were reduced to three, with provisions for five or seven, if desired. They were to be elected at large or from districts as each county might decide; and they were to supervise the townships rather than represent them. This basic form of government has survived until today.

The county board of supervisors form of government has gone through numerous changes since 1870, but mostly due to the addition of new functions and responsibilities. Huge changes have occurred in the American lifestyle, which have in turn affected roads and welfare in Iowa. The advent of motor vehicles at the turn of the century brought an immediate need for updating the road system and for counties to hire a county engineer. And the Depression proved that counties needed massive aid from the federal and state governments in order to properly care for the poor. The county has become the administrative unit for many social programs and new functions and responsibilities that have been added to government.

County Government Timeline

- 1834** First two Iowa counties created (Dubuque and Des Moines). Township supervisors system adopted (three supervisors and 15 other officials selected by the Governor of Michigan). Iowa part of the Michigan territory.
- 1836** County commission system adopted (three elected officials conduct county's business). Iowa part of the Wisconsin Territory. 21 counties in Iowa.
- 1846** Iowa becomes a state. 44 counties in Iowa.
- 1851** "Judge system" adopted (county judge vested with executive, administrative, legislative and judicial authority). Subject of controversy.
- 1857** Present constitution adopted. 99 counties in Iowa.
- 1860** Township supervisors system reestablished.
- 1870** Supervisor system adopted (3 or 5 supervisors elected at large or from districts in partisan elections) and still used today.
- 1897** General Assembly sets structure and duties of county government.
- 1929** All significant authority of township supervisors transferred to county supervisors.
- 1959** Counties allowed to combine some offices.
- 1966** Legislation passed allowing joint exercise of governmental power (including city-county agreements).
- 1978** County home rule amendment to the Constitution of the State of Iowa was approved by the voters and became law.