

A VISION DIVIDED

by
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HIGHLY IMPORTANT ! GREAT INDIGNATION MEETING AT PAINESVILLE

Under these headlines the battle for the creation of Lake County finally exploded on the front page of the Painesville *Telegraph* on March 10, 1840. The article itself called "men of all [political] parties ... to consider whether any and what further measures are necessary to be taken to promote the passage of the bill for the erection of the new county of Lake." Its placement on page one signified editor L.L. Rice's belief that the success or failure of a measure which he, and probably many of his customers, supported wholeheartedly was imminent.¹

Rice was right. The bill, which had been defeated once and then revived for reconsideration, passed the Ohio General Assembly just ten days later and the new County of Lake was established by consolidating Willoughby Township of Cuyahoga County with the seven northernmost townships of Geauga County.² This must have been gratifying to the Painesville citizens who had petitioned for the creation of a new county in October 1839, as well as to Rice who had dutifully reported the progress of that application in his regularly published notes on the proceedings of the Ohio Legislature.³

In its next issue, Rice resumed the *Telegraph's* usual pattern of reporting the news with front-page headlines focused on state and national politics and international events such as the royal wedding of Britain's Albert and Victoria.⁴ Lake Countians continued on as before, the excitement of the new county's creation fading into memory under the pressures of everyday life. But boundaries had been created and, although they were invisible on the physical landscape, they represented a choice made by the people of a community -- a choice based on their hopes for the community in which their families would live in succeeding generations. Their visions of what they hoped that community would someday be led them to separate or to allow separation politically from the counties to which they had belonged for several decades and band together in a new county community called Lake.⁵

Of course, forming a new community was certainly not a unique experience for the people of Geauga and Lake counties in 1840. Many had made that personal choice numerous times over the past decades as they emigrated from New England hometowns into New York settlements before pioneering in Connecticut's Western Reserve.⁶ Even forming a new county was not unique for these Ohioans, although unlike migration it was rarely done by personal choice. As migration steadily increased the population, the creation of counties and townships in the Western Reserve proceeded rather rapidly for purposes of more effective local government. Between 1803 when Ohio became a state and the 1840 erection of Lake County, approximately 69 of Ohio's 88 states were created, 11 having been originally established prior to statehood. County creation was complete by 1851. Although boundary redefinition continued into 1888, much of it resulted from surveying errors and the need to reduce large counties to a more manageable size.⁷

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As each new county was created, a principal seat of justice was named in accordance with the Acts of the State of Ohio which read "that for each new county established during the present or any future session of the legislature, 3 commissioners shall be appointed by a resolution of both branches of the legislature, whose duty it shall be to examine and determine what part of said county so established, is the most eligible for holding the several courts within the county" Commissioners were required to be non-residents of the county but at least one year residents of the state and were not allowed to hold real property within the county. Within 60 days they were to host a public meeting for site selection which was based upon "the most proper place [for] the seat of justice, as near the center of the county as possible, paying regard to the situation, extent of population and quality of the land, together with the general convenience and interest of the inhabitants." ⁸

It was these requirements which bound the Trumbull County Commissioners who had been charged with selecting the seat of justice for Geauga County in 1808. Citizens of various fledgling villages lobbied for the honor, their sentiments echoed by Henry Champion who confided to business associate Abraham Skinner, "I hope and believe the court house will be fixed on my square." ⁹ Champion realized that the designation of his village as the county seat would ensure both population and commercial growth but, to his acute disappointment, nearby New Market was designated temporarily until a more centrally located spot was chosen and named Chardon. ¹⁰

The selection of Chardon was a logical one, not only because of its central location, but if local legend is correct, because wealthy Bostonian Peter Chardon Brooks furnished the land for the village park to the County of Geauga on the condition that the village be named "Chardon" and be designated the county seat. An 1813 agreement between Simon Perkins of Trumbull County and Edward Paine, Jr., of Geauga County hints this may be true by recording that in 1809 Perkins had purchased land in what became Chardon Township "with a view to the establishment of a seat of justice etc. and a bargain having been made with the Director of the County for that purpose." ¹¹ However, Henry Champion continued to adamantly argue for removal of the county seat to Champion where he offered to erect a building for use as a courtroom, school, and church. These arguments prevailed until 1811 when the seat was once again removed to Chardon. ¹²

This early struggle to locate the Geauga county seat served as a prelude to the wrangling that continued between northern and southern Geaugans over the next few decades. Viewing the geographical entirety of Geauga County, the location of the seat of justice on a Chardon Township hilltop seemed ideally in accordance with the requirements set forth by the Ohio legislature. By 1820, however, Painesville had clearly become a population center of the Western Reserve as well as of the county. The 7 Geauga County townships which today comprise most of Lake County accounted for almost half the entire population of the total 23 Geauga townships, a ratio which continued into the 1830s. By the 1840 census, the 8 townships of Lake County contained 13,719 inhabitants to 16,297 inhabitants of the 16 townships of Geauga County. ¹³ As suggestions for moving the county seat to Painesville based on population, commercial, and industrial growth were adamantly opposed, leading citizens of the northern townships began to explore the possible division of Geauga. This culminated in an appeal by 57 citizens in the Oct. 22, 1839 edition of the Painesville *Telegraph* which read "A meeting of the citizens of Painesville Township, in favor of the erection of a new County, will be held at the Town House in said Painesville on Saturday the 2d day of November next, for the purpose of concerting measures necessary to accomplish that object." ¹⁴

It was this type of county division which was unusual. Certainly in frontier Ohio, the larger counties were divided as population increased as a matter of course for the purpose of more effective local government. And wrangling over the location of the county seat was a fairly normal pasttime. But for citizens and politicians alike to use the location of their county seat to promote the creation of a new county was highly unusual. And yet, that is exactly what occurred in the creation of Lake County.

The meeting announcement was accompanied by a notice of application to the Ohio General Assembly for the erection of a new county to embrace the townships of Kirtland, Concord, LeRoy, north Thompson, Madison, Perry, Painesville, Mentor, Willoughby (then part of Cuyahoga County), and "that portion of the State of Ohio, lying north of the five last mentioned Townships." The inclusion of Lake Erie to the International Boundary was crucial in meeting state requirements for a minimum county acreage of 400 square miles by which the proposed Lake County fell short by 159 square miles. ¹⁵

In an address before the Lake County Historical Society given at the Parmly House in Painesville in March 1939, historian Frederick C. Waite reported that when Geaugans met in Chardon in December of 1839 to discuss the "Lake County" application, they passed a resolution in which "they said that they were just as anxious to have Painesville get out of Geauga County as Painesville was desirous of getting out but that the Geauga people were unwilling that Painesville should take any other townships with it." ¹⁶

On a personal, day to day level, we can only guess at the arguments that may have raged between neighbors as they debated the advantages and disadvantages of removing the county seat from Chardon to Painesville and of dismembering Geauga County to create the county of Lake. But we can follow the bitter contest between the leading political personalities of Geauga County as they chose sides to encourage or discourage the bill. Reports of legislative proceedings printed in the *Telegraph* record the struggle. On January 21, 1840, the paper reported that "in the House, on the 13th Mr. [John] Morse presented a petition from the citizens of Cuyahoga and Geauga Counties, for the new county of Lake. Mr. [Seabury] Ford [presented a petition] from the citizens of Geauga, remonstrating against the same." On February 4, Editor L.L. Rice stated in print that there was no further news of the new county. "We notice in the proceedings of the legislature frequent mention of petitions presented by Messrs. [Benjamin] Bissell and Morse, and remonstrated by Mr. Ford. They are referred, of course, to the appropriate committee." ¹⁷ One week later, Rice informed his subscribers that the bill had lost by a vote of 33 to 29 but "it is thought by some that it will be re-considered and pass the House." ¹⁸

Items in the February 18 edition of the *Telegraph* also hinted at the personal politics involved in Lake County's creation.

It is said that one leading object with some members in creating this new county is to destroy Mr. Ford's influence. He opposes the bill and the leaders have found it necessary to take some measures to destroy him. His influence has been too much for them; it was thought a good opportunity as he is warmly opposed to this county, to turn in and make an effort to create it, and by appealing to party they will probably effect the passage of the bill, but not the destruction of Mr. Ford's influence, if that is their object. ¹⁹

If Rice's conjectures were false, he printed no arguments against them in his newspaper although he continued to report the progress of the bill as several amendments were suggested and rejected. One, however, was accepted: that "no tax shall be levied for erecting public buildings." With that stipulation the bill passed the Ohio House with a vote 38 to 30. ²⁰ Its passage by the Ohio Senate was considered certain, according to Rice, who in the March 3 edition suggested "the friends of the measure [have] every confidence of its success. Our next paper will probably be published in the county of Lake." ²¹

The matter was not quite so simple, however, and a week later a meeting was called to discuss ways to further promote the passage of the bill. ²² But the difficulties must have been minor for on March 20, 1840, Lake County was established and the elections set for April 6. ²³ The *Telegraph* admonished "Whigs of Lake County -- the manner in which you discharge your duty at the first County Election under the same banner will affect the cause of Harrison and Reform." ²⁴ The presidential election of Whig candidate William Henry Harrison versus Democrat Martin Van Buren had never been far from the minds of area politicians and had usually appeared on the front page of the *Telegraph*, overshadowing the news of the creation of Lake County. The Whig victory in the Lake County elections seemed a positive omen for the upcoming presidential election and was linked to the national campaign by headlines and articles boasting

LAKE COUNTY ELECTION.
SPLENDID WHIG VICTORY !
1000 MAJORITY !
Every township for Harrison.

FIRST COUNTY RALLY.

The whole regular Whig Ticket elected by from 994 to 1004 Majority !!!
The result is a most gratifying and glorious victory -- unexpected
in the strength of the Whigs, and glorious in its every aspect and
bearing. The Whigs of Lake County have done themselves great
credit, by their prompt rally, and their successful resistance of
the attempts to divide and distract them. ²⁵

On this tide of enthusiasm, citizens of the new county collected \$5,000.00 for the construction of a courthouse even before a formal committee was appointed. ²⁶
Completed in 1852, that building still stands today on the western edge of the Painesville Square. ²⁷ Although it no longer serves as a courthouse but as the Painesville City Hall, its presence still represents the choices made by the people of Geauga and Lake counties concerning the future of the community in which their families would live.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Painesville *Telegraph*, 10 March 1840, p. 1. Lake County Historical Society.
- 2 Randolph C. Downes, "Evolution of Ohio County Boundaries," Ohio Archaeological and Historical Quarterly 36 (July 1927): 425.
- 3 Painesville *Telegraph*, 22 October 1839 through 10 March 1840, pp. 2-3. Lake County Historical Society.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 26 March 1840, p. 1. Lake County Historical Society.
- 5 Bari Oyler Stith, Lake County, Ohio: 150 Years of Tradition, Northridge, California: Windsor Publications, 1988, pp. 6 and 7.
- 6 See Harlan Hatcher's Western Reserve, 1949; Ken Lottich's New England Transplanted; Stewart Holbrook's Yankee Exodus, 1950; George Knepper's "Early Migration to the Western Reserve," Western Reserve Magazine, 1977; Harry Lupold's The Latch String is Out, 1974; and the Pioneer and General History of Geauga County, 1878.
- 7 These figures were compiled from Randolph C. Downes, "Evolution of Ohio County Boundaries," Ohio Archaeological and Historical Quarterly 36 (July 1927).
- 8 Chapter X, Sections 1 and 3, Acts of the State of Ohio, 1st Session, 1803, vol. 1, pp. 22-23, available on microfilm under Laws of Ohio, Roll 1, Film 249. Ohio Historical Society.
- 9 Henry Champion, Hartford, Connecticut, to Cat. Abraham Skinner, Painesville, Ohio, 22 August 1806. Fairport Harbor Historical Society.
- 10 Harry Lupold, The Latch String is Out, A Pioneer History of Lake County, Ohio, Mentor, Ohio: Lakeland Community College Press, 1974, p. 43; Jane G. Griffin, ed., Here is Lake County, Ohio, Cleveland: Howard Allen, Publisher, 1964, p. 37; and Stith, pp. 31-32.
- 9 *Ibid.*; and Simon Perkins and Edward Paine, Jr., agreement, 15 May 1813. Lake County Historical Society.
- 12 Griffin, p. 37.
- 13 Griffin, appendix; and E. H. Gilkey, The Ohio Hundred Year Book, Columbus, F. J. Heer, State Printer, 1901, p. 629.
- 14 Painesville *Telegraph*, 22 October 1839, p. 3. Lake County Historical Society.
- 15 *Ibid.* Lake County Historical Society.
- 16 Frederick C. Waite, "Place Names in Lake County and Vicinity," address given before the Lake County Historical Society at Parmly House, Painesville, Ohio, 6 March 1939. Printed in the Willoughby *News Herald*, March 14, 21, 28, & April 4 & 11, 1939. Willoughby Historical Society.
- 17 Painesville *Telegraph*, 21 January 1840 and 4 February 1840. Lake County Historical Society.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 11 February 1840. Lake County Historical Society.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 18 February 1840. Lake County Historical Society.
- 20 Gilkey, pp. 415-416.
- 21 Painesville *Telegraph*, 3 March 1840. Lake County Historical Society.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 10 March 1840. Lake County Historical Society.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 2 April 1840. Lake County Historical Society.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 2 April 1840. Lake County Historical Society.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 2 April 1840. Lake County Historical Society.
- 26 Griffin, p. 39.
- 27 Lupold, p. 115.