



## Administrative History of the County of Elgin

Elgin's path to becoming an autonomous county was an evolutionary process. The first semblance of local government in what was to become Ontario began in 1788 when the territory of Upper Canada was divided into the Districts of Lunenburg, Mecklenburg, Nassau and Hesse. In 1792, these districts were renamed the Eastern, Midland, Home and Western Districts. What was to become Elgin County was in both the Home District and Western District. As the population increased, more districts were created. The London District came into being on January 1, 1800. It covered most of what are now Middlesex, Oxford, Norfolk, Elgin, Huron, Perth and Bruce Counties. In 1837 and 1838 various statutes created the Districts of Huron, Brock and Talbot, effectively reducing the London District to the townships comprising Middlesex and Elgin Counties.

Each of these districts comprised a series of local townships. Each township was required to have a town meeting once a year during which local officials were elected, including a reeve who presided over a local council. Surveying each township for settlement was one of the most immediate tasks in Upper Canada. Land in each township was divided into a system of lots and concessions, serving as the basis for land settlement. Each of the townships comprising what is now Elgin County were surveyed and named between 1797 and 1810.

In 1841, the *District Councils Act* established the first responsible (i.e. elected) council at the district level, although the Warden and all officials were still appointed by the Crown. (The term Warden is used to describe the Chief Executive of the Council. Many counties, including Elgin, still use this term today.) Responsible government began locally in 1842 with the first meetings of the London District Council, local representatives of which came from the Reeves of each township, including those now comprising Elgin County. Decisions on roads, bridges, buildings and tax rates were now being made more locally.

By 1846, citizens in the townships along the north shore of Lake Erie began to feel that even London was too far to go for court proceedings or to register a deed, and that too many of their tax dollars were being spent in London and its immediate vicinity. Major meetings were held in Yarmouth and Southwold Townships in that year to protest, and to suggest the creation of a new district. The *Division of Counties Act* proclaimed in 1850 eventually abolished the districts in favour of what are many of today's counties. This legislation, along with the

*Municipal Corporations Act* proclaimed in 1850 (commonly referred to as Baldwin's Municipal Act) and the *Territorial Divisions Alterations Act* proclaimed in 1852, all contained provisions for the establishment of new counties. The last named Act specifically defined the County of Elgin and its constituent municipalities, joining Elgin to the County of Middlesex as a "Junior County." Local officials immediately sought to establish a temporary court house and gaol (or jail as it is spelled today) in St. Thomas, seeking to achieve full county status in the process. Subsequently, a Proclamation was issued on February 28, 1852, giving Elgin "Provisional County" status with St. Thomas as the County Town.

This Proclamation also established local Reeves and Deputy Reeves as representatives of a Provisional Municipal Council for the County. The Provisional Council's first meeting took place in the Village of St. Thomas at noon on Thursday, April 15, 1852. This is the date used for the County's formal establishment, even though full county status (i.e. non-provisional) did not occur for another year and a half.

The first act of the new Council was to elect the County's first Warden. Since 1852, the Warden has been elected annually by members of County Council from among its membership. The first Warden of Elgin County was Elisha Ganson of Yarmouth Township. A Provisional Clerk and Provisional Treasurer were also appointed at that first meeting, respectively John McKay and William Coyne, both St. Thomas merchants.

Business then turned to determining the types of permanent buildings that would be needed for the new County, particularly with regards to a court house and gaol. Benjamin Drake donated the land for what is now the Elgin County Court House. Garner Ellwood of Westminster Township won the contract to erect this and other county buildings on the site based on plans used in Brant County. It is interesting to note that Mr. Ganson resigned as Warden over this issue on July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1852, being replaced by Levi J. Locker of Malahide. Construction of the court house began in the summer of 1852 and was completed in 1853. The building began use in 1854 and continues to serve in this capacity today despite a major fire on the evening of July 1<sup>st</sup>, 1898.

With the Court House and Gaol nearing completion, a further Proclamation was issued on September 30, 1853, formally dissolving in legislation what was already dissolved in practice, namely the union of the Counties of Elgin and Middlesex. The first session of "The Municipal Council of the County of Elgin" took place on November 8, 1853. John McKay resigned as Clerk at that time and was replaced by his brother William. William Coyne remained as Treasurer. Among the topics of discussion that day was the need for an east-west railway, the first of many such discussions on a topic that was to become critical to the County's growth.

The first Provisional Council and subsequent Municipal Council consisted of the

Reeves and Deputy Reeves of the following municipalities: Aldborough Township; Dunwich Township; Southwold Township; Yarmouth Township; Malahide Township; Bayham Township; South Dorchester Township; the Village of Vienna; and the Village of St. Thomas.

St. Thomas sent its last representative to County Council in 1861. Other municipalities joined the Council board in the following order: Aylmer 1871; Port Stanley 1875; Springfield 1878; Dutton 1891; West Lorne 1908; Rodney 1908; Port Burwell 1949; Belmont 1961. [1]

The structure of the County remained essentially the same until 1997 when County Council approved a plan to amalgamate local municipalities in response to province-wide efforts to restructure local government. The “made in Elgin” proposal was accepted by the provincial government and came into effect on January 1, 1998. The County of Elgin now comprises the following municipalities (brackets denote former constituent municipalities):

**Municipality of West Elgin** (Aldborough Township, Village of West Lorne, Village of Rodney);

**Municipality of Dutton / Dunwich** (Dunwich Township, Village of Dutton);  
**Township of Southwold**;

**Municipality of Central Elgin** (Yarmouth Township, Village of Port Stanley, Village of Belmont);

**Municipality of Malahide** (Malahide Township, South Dorchester Township, Village of Springfield);

**Municipality of Bayham** (Bayham Township, Village of Port Burwell, Village of Vienna);

**Town of Aylmer**

Since 1852, three locations have served as the meeting place for County Council and as headquarters for County staff. These are: the St. Thomas Town Hall from 1852 to 1854; the Elgin County Courthouse from 1854 to 1985 (although in two different buildings on the Courthouse grounds); and, since 1985, the Elgin County Administration Building on Sunset Drive in St. Thomas, the former Nurses Residence for the Ontario Psychiatric Hospital.

[1] These dates are not those of incorporation of the various municipalities, but rather when they sent their first representative to County Council.