

Seneca County in 1824

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On January 22, 1824, the Ohio General Assembly enacted legislation that created Seneca County, which took effect on April 1 of that year. Elections for township officers were held the Monday following. At the time, only 4 townships—Thompson, Seneca, Eden, and Clinton—existed, Eden being the most populated. A county sheriff and a county coroner were also elected on that Monday. The first court case in the county took place on April 12.

So, what if we had a time machine that could transport us back 200 years? If we were standing where we are right now, what would we have seen on April 1, 1824? Honestly, we would find ourselves at the edge of a dense virgin forest comprised of oak, hickory, poplar, and black-walnut trees, with the forest canopy towering 60 or more feet above us. Being near the eastern edge of the Black Swamp, the ground under our feet would be spongy and damp and the air thick with humidity, an ideal breeding ground for mosquitoes. As a result, in 1824 malaria was a major concern for residents.

As we look eastward through the trees, we can make out a primitive road bordering the river, roughly following Frost Parkway today. Originally it was part of the Scioto-Sandusky Trail created by the Shawnee Indians that connected their hunting grounds in Kentucky with Lake Erie. During the War of 1812, General William Henry Harrison had the trail cleared and widened to accommodate his army and their roughly 100 ox-drawn wagons as they moved north to confront the British and their Indian allies in 1813. (The road came to be known by various names thereafter, including Harrison's Trail and the Old Army Road.) At the time, most of northwestern Ohio, including what is today Seneca County, was reserved for the various indigenous tribes residing there by the terms of the 1795 Treaty of Greenville. While most Indians living here (Wyandots, Senecas, and Delawares) had pledged their

loyalty to the United States, Harrison nonetheless ordered several forts to be constructed periodically along the road between Upper Sandusky and Lower Sandusky (Fremont). They served as supply depots, as well as fall back positions should his campaign against the British fail. If we stepped out of the forest onto the road and looked to our left in 1824, we would have seen the remnants of one of these military installations...Fort Ball.

Fort Ball was constructed in the summer of 1813, initially by a cavalry unit under the command of Colonel James Ball (for whom the fort was named) and later completed by an infantry unit when Colonel Ball's force was moved north to Fort Seneca (Old Fort today). Fort Seneca was likewise a supply depot, but it also served as General Harrison's command post during the subsequent Battle of Fort Stephenson (Fremont today) in early August and remained so until his army moved north into Canada following Perry's victory on Lake Erie in September.

Neither fort came under attack during the war. Once the fighting ended, both forts were simply abandoned. But their usefulness did not end there. Fort Ball, and we can assume Fort Seneca, provided temporary shelter for both early travelers on the Old Army Road and the first settlers in the region. We know that President James Monroe traveled from Lower Sandusky to Delaware, Ohio, in late August of 1817 and passed by, and possibly spent the night, at the abandoned fort. Erastus Bowe, the county's first "official" non-native resident, arrived only months later. He planned to stay and had arranged to have a temporary structure built for him within the confines of the fort. A short time later, he constructed a separate building that served as a tavern (called the Pan Yan), a stagecoach stop, and eventually a post office. Others lived in the fort's blockhouses. (One of them, David Risdon, resurveyed the Old Army Road in 1821 and the early settlements of Risdon and Rome that eventually joined together to form the city of Fostoria.) Local historian Consul Butterfield wrote that the remains of the fort were still visible at the time he published his history of Seneca County in 1848.

Erastus Bowe's arrival in November of 1817 came only weeks after a treaty with regional tribes granted Indian lands, originally guaranteed by the Treaty of Greenville, to the United

States government for sale to white settlers. In return, the various tribes were given reservations along the Sandusky River. The Senecas received 40,000 acres in parts of what became Pleasant, Adams, Scipio, and Clinton townships. In 1824 that reservation was home to roughly 500 members of the Seneca tribe. (Most of them were removed to the Trans-Mississippi west beginning in 1831, opening county land to further white settlement)

The few settlers around the Pan Yan tavern lived in the village of Oakley, which was platted in 1819 on land granted by a treaty to Robert Armstrong. His nephew Jesse Spencer resurveyed Oakley in 1823, which then became known as Fort Ball.

In 1821, Josiah Hedges acquired the land across the river from Oakley. By the following year, 6 families had constructed “homes” there. He named the village Tiffin after his friend and the first governor of Ohio, Edward Tiffin. But, as one historian characterized it, the “early years were not promising.” The main road between Lower Sandusky (Fremont) and Columbus was across the river in Oakley and no bridge existed; only a dugout, which served as a ferry boat, connected the two villages. (It cost each passenger 2 cents for a trip across the river.) The post office being in Fort Ball was likewise inconvenient. Moreover, the presence of the post office there led most to believe that Oakley/Fort Ball would naturally become the county seat. That’s why it was so surprising when Tiffin, not Fort Ball, was named the county seat in 1824. (Hedges clearly had influence in the state capital!) That same year the village of Melmore was surveyed.

Josiah Hedges had the first bridge connecting the two villages built 1833, but Tiffin and Fort Ball were not combined under one government until 1850. The area east of the river (especially near Honey Creek and Rock Creek) proved more suitable for development than the lands to the west, which were more heavily forested. In fact, the county’s first grist mill began operation near present-day Melmore in 1821. Still, in 1824 the process of clearing the land for farming and settlement throughout the new county was only beginning.

If a local newspaper had existed at the time, the “Big” news story of 1824 would probably have been “The Brush Dam Case.” In 1823, Jesse Spencer had dammed up part of the Sandusky River to divert water for his sawmill. Josiah Hedges was displeased with

Spencer's efforts and took it upon himself to dismantle and remove the dam to his side of the river for his own use. On September 22, 1824, Spencer filed suit against Hedges for damages. In the first jury trial in Seneca County, the court awarded damages to Spencer for his losses in April of 1825. The whole thing must have been quite an ordeal for Spencer because he sold his holdings in Fort Ball to Hedges a short time later and left the county.

So, 1824 marked only the starting point for Seneca County. Keep in mind that just 7 years earlier it was technically Indian territory. And even in 1824, most of the land inland from the Sandusky River and its larger tributaries remained pretty much unchanged since the end of the last glacial period. This would be dramatically altered over the course of the 19th century as agricultural and industrial revolutions transformed the county, helping to make Ohio an important component in the rise of the United States as an economic world power by 1900.