

A historical sketch of the geographic and political origins of Edwardsville Township

by Donald L. Hastings Jr.

Township government was established in Providence, Rhode Island in 1636. Of the governments within America, this particular government is the oldest, providing continuous service. A hallmark of township government was the Annual Town Meeting held in April. Citizens gathered, discussed issues, proposed actions and voted to make decisions. This grassroots form of government had been closest to the people; and it might be regarded as having been among the most democratic. Township government *took hold* in New England colonies.

The southern colonies and commonwealths, particularly Virginia, were initially composed of select individuals who had received large grants of land from the crown. These landed aristocrats settled tenants, from which evolved a form of top-down local government controlled by large landholders. One source has called this type of government “baronial”.

The Federal geographic township

During the colonial period, the colonies acquired Native American claims to land through treaties and payments. From the final resolution of the Revolutionary war by treaty, the “united States” acquired the British crown lands lying west of the colonies and east of the Mississippi River, including the Northwest Territory (which contained present-day Illinois).

The federal government pursued a long program of eliminating others’ claims to lands by resolving claims from foreign governments, from the states and from Native Americans. Upon ratification of the Constitution, the ratifying state surrendered all claims to western lands. Also, west of the colonies, there were previous grants of land by former governments to individuals and additional claims were made for non-located rights to land; these grants and claims had to be federally resolved. The acts of acquiring lands and of eliminating or resolving claims created the Public Domain. Federal grants of lands from the Public Domain were used as payment to individuals, such as for service during war. Additionally, it was the government’s objective to raise significant revenue from the sale or lease of lands.

The federal Land Ordinance of 1785 provided a method for the Public Domain to be granted, leased or sold. By defining a rectangular survey system, the Domain could be physically surveyed into geographic townships, which were platted and legally described. A township was intended to be six miles square, composed of thirty-six sections, each being one-square-mile or 640 acres. However, in order to apply a square grid to a globe, the townships actually contain fractional sections. Finally, the sections were further divided. With these subdivisions of land and the supporting legal instruments, the Domain could be parceled into geographically determinable small plots, legally described and conveyed.

Present day Edwardsville Township originally was the federal “Township 4 North of the base line Range 8 West of the 3rd Principal Meridian”. The lines dividing this township were

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surveyed in 1808, the subdivision lines were surveyed later, in 1813 and 1814, and the township was platted in 1815. In the present county, this survey process was stopped and *held up* by Native American warfare before, during and after the War of 1812.

The county's changing political subdivisions

In 1802, the territory of Indiana (the county's territory) created the political township. The act provided for an annual April election for a township clerk and for other positions. In 1807, another act authorized a county's creation of townships. Townships could be of any size and did not have to conform to geographic ones. The "township of Goshen" may have been created on or after 1807 and before 1812; as initial settlement did not occur until 1800 and after. Given initial slow and sparse settlement, it is unclear as to which of the township positions, in actuality, may have been filled and functioned. In 1809, at the creation of the territory of Illinois, such legislation was reenacted, yet not implemented; and remained dormant until 1820.

In 1813, the county of Madison appointed "overseers of the poor", one for each of four townships, including Goshen. These appointments might be among the county's first township-level services. In 1820, state legislation made the federal geographic townships "body politic for school purposes"—this appears to be the first political role for the geographic townships. Per state law of 1826, the people were given what they had wanted, directly electing their justices of the peace and their constables, this having been withheld for nearly a decade. In 1827, pursuant to the act, the county divided into seven election districts. These new subdivisions may have replaced the former county townships. One was called "Edwardsville district", which might be the first time this name was used for county subdivision purposes. In 1849 and continuing through 1875, the county was divided into sixteen "precincts", one being "Edwardsville", the largest. In addition to the thirty-six sections of the base township, this precinct contained about another sixty sections, perhaps ninety-six sections altogether.

Township government

Over time, south to north, Illinois had been settled from different areas of the eastern part of the country. Individuals moving west tended to settle in similar latitudes and climate. Those from southern states and from along the Ohio river tended to settle in the south; and those from New England states tended to settle in the north. Those in the south were content to remain under local government dominated by large landholders. This was their former type of southern government and was similar to decision making by frontier-day local headmen. Those in the north wanted the "township with annual meeting" form of government, which they formerly had in the east. Generally, Illinois remained with the Virginia model.

The state of Illinois' first constitution stood for a remarkable period given all the growth and change which occurred during the constitution's period of legal force. People rose and lived beyond subsistence. Farming became a business. Animal and steam powered mechanization and hand tools of every description came into daily use. Public improvements including drainage, road and canal construction were implemented and functioning, and cities rose.

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A convention in 1842 yielded the constitution of 1848, Illinois' second. With respect to local government, this constitution gave voters a choice. For each county, voters could choose a court system of government or a government which rose from township government. In keeping with the original population's southern roots, the voters of the county of Madison chose the court system. This system was composed of a county judge who handled probate matters and two associate judges who handled the administrative—all elected by the people. This system replaced the prior three commissioners who too were elected, a system of local government provided in 1819.

Illinois' second constitution had been *backward looking*. It had been adopted at a time of financial crisis and was developed to force economical government. Respective of its backward nature, no constitution in the 1840s could have anticipated the breadth and depth of the coming radical change, which was continuously thrust on Illinois society. The birth and domination of railroads completely transformed all aspects of rural and urban America, including the birth and death of towns and industries. The Mexican War only served to catalyze new developments in technology creating more horrific implements of warfare. The rise and dominance of a new more liberal political party, the Republicans, stimulated divisions. The Civil War challenged all union, including family, social and political.

The citizens were very dissatisfied with the second constitution and in 1860 and 1861 there were calls for a new one. There were many things the citizens wanted. For government, the citizens wanted the opportunity to directly elect by popular vote more of the formerly appointed county officials. A convention was held in 1862. A constitution was developed by the Democrats and was rejected by the people. Following the Civil War, with state and national Republicans firmly in power, the citizens voted for another convention that was held December 1869. From this convention, the people adopted the constitution of 1870, Illinois' third.

The third constitution abolished the county court system and replaced it with a three-commissioner system. In the county of Madison, this system was first installed for 1874-1876. These were elected positions. Yet, this system of representation may not have provided citizens with the numbers of elected positions desired and adequate decision making over their local affairs. By this time, seventy counties in Illinois had adopted township government.

In 1875 the voters of the county of Madison adopted the township system of county government. Within the state, the county had *held out*. This adoption was among the state's third wave of township adoptions and the county was among the last in Illinois to adopt the system. This change required the county's division into political townships. Here, the existing federal geographical townships were adopted. The geographic townships became county political townships and each was named. The original federal "Township 4 North of the base line Range 8 West of the 3rd Principal Meridian" was also the "town of Edwardsville". The voters of the twenty-three townships were each to elect a Supervisor. For the township's governance, it appears that these Supervisors were to support the Annual Town Meeting, and perhaps, implement the local decisions of the citizens. Additionally, these twenty-three Supervisors were to compose a Board of Supervisors, which also included appointed Assistant Supervisors. This Board was to elect a Chairman and was to govern the county.

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The first Edwardsville Township Supervisor

John A. Prickett (1822-1897), was born a twin, as he followed the birth of his brother, Thomas J. They were the sons of Abraham and Martha Harris Prickett. It is worth noting that the father was one of the first trustees of the town of Edwardsville.

A native of Edwardsville, our subject was educated in the subscription school; and in Alton, he apprenticed and earned a trade as a saddler (actually, the saddlery and harness trade).

Prickett served in and was severely wounded in the U.S. - Mexican War (1846-1848). In 1846, he was induced by Governor Ford and friends to assist in raising a company of volunteers, he was elected First Lieutenant and he initially enlisted for one year. A bullet shattered his left shoulder in the battle of Buena Vista and he returned home a year ahead of his regiment.

Perhaps due to his injury and its potential limitations, he turned to administrative and clerical duties and began a 14-year career in county service. In 1847, he was elected Recorder of Deeds for the county of Madison, serving for two years. In 1849, he was elected County Clerk, serving for twelve years. Originally, Prickett's personal politics had been that of a Whig (a party formed in opposition to Andrew Jackson's Democrats), and in 1855, he switched to Democrat (the southern party of Stephen Douglas in opposition to northern Republicans).

In 1847, Prickett married Elizabeth M. Barnsback and five children from the union achieved adulthood. He was a member of the prevalent social organizations of the day. An avid reader, his personal library contained over 1,000 volumes.

During the Civil War (1861-1865), he was a strong supporter of the Union cause.

In 1864, he purchased a steam flouring mill in Edwardsville. He operated the mill for about a decade, until it was destroyed by fire. In 1869, he started his own bank, ultimately doing business under the name of "John A. Prickett and Son".

In addition to business, Prickett had taken an active part in education. For many years he was a member of the school board.

In 1872, Edwardsville was incorporated as a city. Prickett was elected the city's first mayor. This was in keeping with his father being one of the original town's first Trustees.

In 1875, the county of Madison adopted township government. Prickett was elected the first Supervisor for the township of Edwardsville, serving two years. As a member of the county's Board of Supervisors, Prickett was elected the Board's first Chairman, and here too, he served two years. In 1877, his Board leadership was credited with "refunding" a very large county debt on agreeable terms and under a long term plan the county could financially maintain.

Edwardsville Township's first Supervisor achieved a long life of service and accomplishment.