

The 1880 “Municipal Council – East Hants Municipal and District Officers” Poster

There are important milestones in the political history of East Hants. In 1781, Hants County was created. In 1861, the county was divided into two districts and in 1879, the Municipality of the District of East Hants was established by the County Incorporation Act.

On 13 January 1880, Edward Curry, the High Sheriff of Hants County, opened the ballot boxes at the Court House at the Gore. Soon thereafter, the twelve men who were to form the first Municipal Council of the new Municipality of the District of East Hants were declared elected. The councillors were administered the Oaths of Office and Allegiance, and they then selected Councillor Nelson Murphy of Maitland as the first Warden. James A. Scott was appointed Municipal Clerk and Daniel Blois as Treasurer. Councillors were to receive \$1.00 per ‘on-the-job’ day and \$0.10 per mile as compensation. By-laws were adopted as the Council settled into its responsibilities.¹

This event was in accord with new provincial legislation. The County Incorporation Act, 1879, altered local governance in Nova Scotia by replacing the appointed Courts of Sessions with elected municipal councils. The new municipal governments were charged with the management of roads, bridges, prisons, hospitals, poor relief, etc., and an enhanced role in education.²

It would be nice to conclude that this move on the part of the provincial authorities was an effort to democratize political life in Nova Scotia. That was not the case. On 17 September 1878, after years of Liberal governments, Simon H. Holmes and the confusingly named Liberal-Conservative party won the provincial election and took the reigns of power. When the Legislative Assembly was called into session in March 1879, the legislation was introduced. The new government had found, as new governments do, that the financial cupboard was bare, the provincial debt (\$400,000) unmanageable, and railway construction expensive. To save money and raise revenue, the government decided to download the expense of roads and bridges onto local governments.³

During the introduction of the legislation, government ministers stated that “a principal objective was to compel the counties to tax themselves directly to keep up the roads and bridges ... You will have to face the melancholy fact that additional taxation stares you in the face.”⁴ Peter Waite suggests that there “were other reasons why county incorporation was desirable. The counties of Nova Scotia [had been] administered by the ... sessions, an ancient institution composed of justices of the peace, and there was some incentive to deprive them of some of their power for they were mostly Liberal appointees.”⁵ The County Incorporation Act was declared on 14 April 1879, and the province's counties, districts, and towns were instructed to hold elections and inaugural meetings shortly after the Act passed.⁶ Despite regular alterations in the relationship between the provincial and municipal governments, this remains the basic structure of local governance.

The attached poster, over the signature of James A. Scott, Municipal Clerk, was one of the first acts of the new order. It informed East Hants residents about their local officials and reflects the continuity between District and Municipal governance in the offices deemed necessary to manage the public affairs of the area. It also reveals much about the rural economy and the lives of its citizens.

John N. Grant

Notes

1. Wallace, Mrs. Ernest, "The History of the Municipality of East Hants," *The Nova Scotia Historical Quarterly*, v. 8, n.1 (March, 1978), pp. 51-79.
The first council (p. 69) consisted of:
No. 11 Maitland – Nelson Murphy
No. 13 Shubenacadie — Joseph J. Blackburn
No. 10 Nine Mile River – James Thompson and Alexander G. MacPhee
No. 15 Gore – John Sim and George Mosher
No. 9 Noel – Thomas Hunter and James W. Ettinger
No. 14 Walton – David H. Morris
No. 7 Rawdon Church – John W. Bond
No. 8 South Rawdon and Uniacke – James Stevens
2. Beck, J. Murray, *The Government of Nova Scotia*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957), Chapter XIX, "Municipal Government," pp. 302-325. Also see Internet Search, including: County Incorporation Act, 1879, Nova Scotia and related thread.
3. Waite, Peter B., *The Man from Halifax: Sir John Thompson, Prime Minister*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), p. 84. Walsh, Paul, *Political Profiles: Premiers of Nova Scotia*, (Halifax: Nimbus, 1986), p. 74.
4. Beck, J. Murray, *Politics of Nova Scotia, Volume One, Nicholson – Fielding, 1710-1896*, (Tantallon, NS: Four East, 1985), p. 201.
5. Waite, Peter B., *The Man from Halifax: Sir John Thompson, Prime Minister*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), p. 86.
6. Beck, J. Murray, *The Government of Nova Scotia*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957), Chapter XIX, "Municipal Government," pp. 302-325.