

NYSACC's 100th Anniversary is February 25, 2021

The New York State Association of County Clerks was founded on February 25, 1921 – 100 years ago – at a meeting in Rochester NY. Ironically for an association of record-keeping officials, there are no records of those earliest years. As an all-volunteer society with no permanent address and officers changing every year, very few written records have survived from the early days.*

From newspaper accounts, we know that this very first meeting of the New York State Association of County Clerks was held on February 25, 1921 in the Union Trust building in Rochester NY. The first report** appeared the following day in the Rochester Democrat and Chronicle, indicating that:

- *Monroe County Clerk James L. Hotchkiss was elected President of the new organization;*
- *Arthur C. Meade of Onondaga County was chosen First Vice President;*
- *J. Hunter Black of Livingston County was Second Vice President;*
- *Egbert G. Cross of Fulton was Third Vice President;*
- *and Ellen Yates of Chautauqua was Secretary-Treasurer (she was the first woman elected as a County Clerk in New York State.)*

Another newspaper article, printed on March 4, 1921, in the Dunkirk Evening Observer, added that the purposes of the new organization were:

- *“to promote and improve the service in the county clerks offices,*
- *to standardize fees,*
- *watch legislation affecting their offices,*
- *and encourage fellowship among the members.”*

County Clerk fees were a major concern of the County Clerks right from that first gathering, especially since most or all County Clerks in that era derived their personal income from some of these fees. That very first meeting voted to endorse legislation to increase marriage license fees and hunting license fees, and support the “Thayer bill” increasing other County Clerk fees.

Without the benefit of original documents concerning the formation of this organization in 1921, we can only speculate about the exact reasons for its formation at that time. But twenty years later, a written retrospective from the summer of 1941 stated:

“At that time many counties had special... acts providing for fees distinctly different from any other county. Every legislature was adding to the duties of the County Clerk and in many instances no provision was made for the extra service.”

This same 1941 retrospective informs us that every County Clerk in the state had been invited to the 1921 Rochester meeting, and that “thirteen clerks responded to the invitation.” In addition to the five officers mentioned earlier, the retrospective lists County Clerks Luther C. Warner (Albany), Clyde C. DeWitt (Columbia), William E. Kelly (Kings), Arthur C. Meade (Onondaga), Clarence E. Titus (Schuyler), and Benjamin F. Williams (Wyoming) as being present. Harry D. Benham of Cayuga County was also listed, even though he did not become a County Clerk until the following year. Also at the meeting were William J. Heffernan (Kings Deputy Clerk), Susan E. Richardson (Tioga Deputy Clerk) and H. Ward Timmerman (Steuben Deputy Clerk). Deputy Clerk Heffernan was named as Chair of the Executive Committee, according to a Brooklyn Standard Union article of March 3, 1921 (which also states that the 1921 meeting in Rochester “lasted two days.”)

Clearly, concerns over state legislation (and county clerk fees in particular) have been a NYSACC focus since that very beginning, and the presenting our case collectively to state representatives has always been a major part of NYSACC’s activities.

The immediate cause for the Association’s creation may well have been the dramatic growth of motor vehicle registrations processed by County Clerks in 1920, and the state laws (and fees) for these vehicle registrations. These new and fast growing “DMV” responsibilities may have led directly to that February 1921 meeting in Rochester. The New York Times reported on August 7, 1921, that over 882,000 auto registrations had been processed in the previous fiscal year - a 33% increase over the previous year! Furthermore, at least 25% of those vehicles had changed ownership during that year. And every single registration ran out on the same day: December 31.

The Rochester Democrat and Chronicle issue of January 10, 1922, under the prophetic headline “COUNTY CLERKS TO ASK HIGHER FEES,” announced that NYSACC President James Hotchkiss had called a NYSACC meeting to be held later that week in Albany because the ten cents retained by County Clerks for each auto registration was inadequate, and NYSACC would ask the State for a greater allowance.

There are no original records from that meeting either, but in a December 1924 article, the Rochester Democrat and Chronicle cited NYSACC President Hotchkiss’s success concerning the

Clerk share of vehicle registration fees, saying that in 1923, the State had increased the Clerk's share from 10 cents to 25 cents. (It wasn't until 1924 that the state contemplated licensing drivers as well as vehicles.)

The spectacular growth in auto licensing responsibilities, and the new revenue it brought, likely caused County Clerks to seek additional staff to handle the work – the beginning of a dedicated DMV function within the County Clerk's office, which therefore also reaches the 100-year milestone this year.

No newspaper stories about any further NYSACC meetings in 1921 or 1922 have been located. The Association appears to have held a summer meeting in late June 1923 in Lake Pleasant, beginning a tradition of "annual" summer meetings that continued even during World War II.

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* NYSACC's oldest surviving meeting record is longtime Secretary-Treasurer Ellen Yates Miller's handwritten minutes of the July 1934 annual meeting. This standard Record Book has her handwritten minutes of every meeting from that point on, and also contains many glued-in documents, scrapbook-style. The book ends abruptly with the Ms. Miller's own obituary from April 24, 1940. This book is stored at the Albany County Hall of Records. No minutes of meetings before July 1934 have survived.

** Newspapers in that era often reported on the attendance of local officials at such meetings, probably at the urging of the official. When a statewide meeting was held in a particular county, the local newspaper in that county often ran a story about the session – sometimes several stories over successive days.

ATTACHMENTS:

Rochester Democrat and Chronicle 2/26/1921 – "Chosen President of County Clerks' Body" (PDF)

Columbia Republican 3/1/1921 "The County Clerks Are In Convention" (PDF)

Buffalo Commercial 3/1/1921 "County Clerks Of State Form Organization" (PDF)

Brooklyn Standard Union 3/3/1921 "County Clerks Honor Heffernan With Post" (PDF)

Rochester Democrat and Chronicle 12/28/1924 (portion of longer Hotchkiss profile) (PDF)

SOURCES:

Newspapers.com (paid access to 640 million pages of old US newspapers)

Fultonhistory.com (free access to over 50 million pages of old newspapers in New York State)

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