

What Would Kentucky Be Like Without Its Large Number of Counties

What would Kentucky be like without its large number of counties? Both citizens and their elected officials of the state have raised this question. Among the many things that Kentuckians did well, creating counties has to be in the top ten. After all, the commonwealth has 120 counties. Since the creation of McCreary County in 1912, the state has decided that 120 counties should be enough.

Kentucky holds the distinction of having the third highest number of counties in the United States. Only Texas and Georgia have more. This fact is made even more interesting when history tells us that Kentucky used to be one very large county. In 1772 Virginia created Fincastle County. This huge area included a great deal of modern Kentucky. In 1776, after Fincastle ceased to exist, its lands were divided into three counties, one of which was Kentucky.

By the beginning of the American Revolution political boundaries had suffered a number of strains. Although the Proclamation of 1763 had closed to settlement the lands that would later become Kentucky, thousands of land hungry settlers began to pour into what the American Indians referred to as the “great meadow.” Some Indians also warned that the settlers were coming to a “dark and bloody ground.” To those who wanted land, Kentucky was worth any risk. Despite Indian raids, and the difficulties involved in opening a vast wilderness to settlement, so many people had migrated to Kentucky by 1780 that the Virginia legislature decided to split Kentucky County into three counties.

In 1780 Kentucky County ceased to exist. Fayette, Jefferson, and Lincoln came into being. These three mega counties covered all of Kentucky except the “Purchase Area” in the extreme western part of the state. By June 1, 1792, Kentucky has achieved statehood. As the fifteenth state of the Union, the newly formed Commonwealth of Kentucky already had a substantial population. In 1790 the number of people living in Kentucky stood at 73,077. By 1800, the population had grown to 220,955. The demand for new counties had already begun.

The need for more counties had a pragmatic value in the early days of the commonwealth. People lived in isolated communities or on farms far removed from the county seats. With the huge counties of early settlement days, convenience to the seat of county government meant an arduous, and often dangerous journey that could take days. By splitting the counties into ever-smaller entities would alleviate these travel difficulties.

In 1792 Kentucky had nine counties. By 1800 that figure had jumped to forty-two. Although population statistics decreed when an area should have the right to petition for the creation of a new county, this requirement was often ignored. Citizens naturally wanted to be at least within a day’s ride of their county seat. However, some areas of larger counties did not have the people or the financial resources to become a separate county. This fact did not deter some Kentuckians. Counties sprang up like proverbial weeds.

Some divisions of larger counties made economic as well as political sense. Others did not. The legislature tried to slow the proliferation of Kentucky counties with a 1795 act requiring the parent county to give up a seat in the general assembly. This definitely did not make “back home” politicians happy. Other divisions of counties into new ones made no practical sense at all. In 1867 a wealthy landowner wanted the legislature to create a county out of his estate. The new county would have been taken from portions of Marshall and Trigg Counties. The petition made it through one house of the general assembly, before cooler heads and protests from some of the citizens of the two affected counties persuaded the other house to kill the measure. Kentucky came very close to having a Henrietta County.

Kentucky had one county that lasted for only 80 days. On February 9, 1904, Beckham County was formed from portions of Carter, Elliott, and Lewis Counties. Named for Governor J.C.W. Beckham, who had succeeded the controversial William Goebel after the latter’s assassination in 1900. The Kentucky Court of appeals ruled that a county could not be created if it left a parent county with less than 400 square miles. The Court also stated that the county line had to be at least ten miles from another county seat. On April 29, 1904, Beckham County ceased to exist. The county however, already had county officials and a state senator.

The power and influence of the counties remained supreme throughout the nineteenth, and well into the twentieth centuries. The “courthouse crowd” ruled Kentucky with an iron hand. Very little of political importance escaped these masters of local government. The county judge, school board superintendent, sheriff, and county court clerk, held sway over their “Little Kingdoms.” If a favor needed to be granted, the courthouse crowd came to the rescue. If a promising individual wanted to run for office he or she would have to have the inner circle’s seal of approval.

Some counties had powerful political dynasties that ruled for decades. Other counties were known for their ability to raise money for various local and statewide campaigns. All in all, local politics dominated Frankfort as much as any governor or general assembly ever could. However, by the late twentieth century the power of the political clique has lost some of its potency. Mass communication and better means of travel, lessened some of the isolation that had made the counties self-sufficient.

As the role of the county in everyday life changed, some citizens wondered whether or not the number of counties should be reduced. Their reasons were economic for the most part. A number of counties did not have large enough populations to support a tax base that in turn supported county government and services. Would it not be more efficient to combine some counties with their larger and wealthier neighbors, thus creating fiscally responsible governmental areas?

The response to the combination of counties proposition was overwhelmingly negative. No county wanted to give up their sovereignty to another county. The rivalry between the counties had grown far too great for such a proposal to be feasible. The counties are too firmly entrenched in the political makeup of the commonwealth to ever be eradicated.

Another option involved the creation of tax districts that permitted the counties to retain their identity and still benefit from a form of combination. This proposal would be the most likely possibility for many counties. One thing is however certain, Kentuckians love their counties and do not want to give any of them up. After all we are known by our county associations. In Kentucky a person is from a county, not from a city or town. Only in more urban areas such as Louisville and to a lesser extent, Lexington are residents known by their town rather than their county.

Kentuckians are rightfully proud of their counties. Look at our county histories and you are looking at the commonwealth's history. Kentuckians may give up many things, but they do not want to give up their counties. Kentucky's 120 counties are here to stay.