

Fourth Centennial News Release

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March 10, 2014

Batavia officially became a city on January 1, 1915, after having been an incorporated village since 1823. The Transition involved a progression through several steps during 1914. During 2014, I will be recalling each of these events 100 years after their occurrence.

Last month, I reported on how the Village of Batavia Aldermen, the equivalent of today's City Council, had become unhappy with the work of a Charter Revision Commission appointed several years earlier. As a result, the Aldermen wrote a competing proposal and presented it to the community on February 4, 1914. Then the Aldermen announced that their proposal would be submitted to a straw vote in order to gauge community support. The ballot simply read, "Shall the charter as prepared by the Aldermen be sent to Albany?" When voters cast 488 "yes" votes versus 451 "no" votes, the Aldermen chose to see the results as a ringing endorsement of their proposal and sent it off to the State Senate and Assembly.

It was 100 years ago, March 10, 1914, that a joint committee from the Assembly and Senate met to hear the competing charter proposals. Edward Russell, Chair of the Charter Revision Commission, spoke to the gathering. He asserted that the straw vote on the Aldermen's proposal had not been taken in a proper or legal manner, that ballots were pre-marked and passed out on the street to any who might wish to go in and vote, that the total vote was a small proportion of the eligible voters, and that persons had voted who were not eligible to do so. Furthermore, Russell said, the Aldermen had used misrepresentation and deceit to persuade "liquor interests" to pay for lobbyists to speak against the proposal of the Charter Revision Commission.

At this point, Batavia's mayor, Louis Wiard, rose to speak against these charges. But before he could do so, Senator Thomas Cullen, who was chairing the hearing, expressed disbelief that a community like Batavia would conduct an irregular vote and gaveled the session to a close.

In two weeks, I'll let you know what happened when the Senators and Assemblymen eventually voted on the two charter proposals.