

Tenth Centennial News Release

Larry D. Barnes, Batavia City Historian

Release Date: December 8, 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 have been recalling each of these events 100 years after their occurrence.

In June of 1914, Batavians had gone to the polls to vote on a charter that would change Batavia from a village to a city with a government consisting of a mayor elected at large and a common council whose members were individually elected from six wards. By this time, a competing proposal that would have provided for five councilmen elected at large, a city manager chosen by the councilmen, and the elimination of wards and partisan affiliation had been eliminated from consideration. The referendum on the charter produced 795 "yea" votes and 212 "nays."

At this point, the State Assembly, State Senate, New York State governor, and Batavia voters had all given their approval to a charter making Batavia a city on January 1, 1915. All that remained was to elect a new government.

Under the old village charter, elections took place in March. The new city charter provided for elections in December. So, 100 years ago today, on December 8, 1914, Batavians went to the polls for the fourth time in the year. The contenders included Democrats led by incumbent mayor Louis C. Case who had been elected to office in March. Their opponents were Republicans led by Dr. Harvey J. Burkhardt who sought the mayor's position. The Republicans won with Burkhardt defeating Case by a margin of 485 votes.

It was a seemingly odd outcome in that Case was a supporter of the new charter and Burkhardt had opposed it. In fact, an ad run during the election campaign had asked, "Wouldn't it be better to elect as the first [city] mayor a man at least friendly to [the new charter]?" Apparently voters thought otherwise.

Another odd aspect of this election was the voting which occurred on two proposals that were included on the ballots. One, granting pay to the ward councilmen, passed. However, a second, granting pay to the mayor, failed. An examination of the job descriptions clearly

indicated a very heavy workload for the mayor, but not so much for the councilmen. The inconsistency of the vote on these proposals is very puzzling.

None-the-less, as some say, it was what it was, and on January 1, 1915, Batavia would become the 54th city in the state with Dr. Harvey J. Burkhart, a dentist, at the helm.