Mother of All Counties

Wayne County was officially organized on Dec. 11, 1818, and is named after General "Mad" Anthony Wayne who served in the American Revolutionary War.

Wayne County was created in December 1818 by the last Missouri Territorial Legislature from portions of Cape Girardeau and Lawrence counties. Wayne County thus actually predates statehood. In March 1819, Congress established the Territory of Arkansas, and most of Lawrence County became Lawrence County, Arkansas Territory. The small strip that had been excluded was added to Wayne County by the Missouri State Constitution of 1820. The Osage Strip on the Kansas border was added in 1825. Between 1825 and 1831, Wayne County was actually larger than the states of Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Delaware combined. All or part of 32 present Missouri counties once belonged to Wayne County. Despite its size, the Census of 1820 revealed that Wayne County had a total population of just 1,239 white inhabitants and 204 African American slaves.

When Wayne County was formed in 1818, the territorial legislature appointed five commissioners to govern it. They chose a small settlement called Cedar Cabin on the St. Francis River to be the county seat. Renamed Greenville, it had grown to about 1,000 by the turn of the 20th century. By 1940, however, the population had declined to 572. In 1941, the remaining inhabitants were forced to relocate because of the construction of Lake Wappapello. This new town's population had fallen to 270 in 1950, but has now increased to about 450.

The Wayne County Courthouse was destroyed by a fire in 1854. In 1866, the records in new courthouse were stolen, and in 1892 the courthouse again burned down. Thus few county records survive from that time.

Courtesy: Missouri Historical Society