

Summit Historical Minute Presented at the 11/4/15 Common Council Meeting by
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Summit becomes a City the 20th Century

Summit was incorporated as a city at a special charter election on April 11, 1899 by a vote of the township's electorate 804 to 163. This step followed approval of the NJ legislature (march of that yr.) to grant city status. Despite a 5 to 1 voting margin this was not easy to do.

Summit became a township in 1869. It was governed by a 3-man committee dominated by Democrats. The reason for the change to a city form of govt. was that the township was getting too large (1899 population was over 5,000) for three men to handle its affairs & the committee did not have sufficient powers. Republicans, led by one of Summits' best-known residents, Jonathan Bonnel, were pushing the city plan, and the Democrats dominating township govt. were generally opposed.

William Z. Larned was a key figure in these discussions, as he was in many other aspects of Summit's history (first pres. Of Summit bank). He chaired a committee in late 1898 to explore the best way to change the form of govt. He concluded that the change should be from a township to a city. Larned suggested: "When one has grown to a man's size, he can no longer wear child's clothes; and it is the same with a town when it has grown to the population of a city, its township clothing was outgrown."

In the weeks leading to the election there were vigorous debates, compromises, shifts in opinions & votes. Eventually there was strong support for the change.

The April election produced the first Mayor of the City of Summit, George H. Wilcox, a Republican, and the new seven-man Common Council comprising 5 Republicans and 2 Democrats. Three representatives were from each of two Wards, and one at-large. Charles Day was elected the Council President.

The new government wasted no time. A few days after the vote, the first Common Council adopted the first ordinance providing that the Mayor & Council would serve without pay, an ordinance that still stands today, which is rare in municipalities.

Other early actions included matters that are somewhat entertaining from today's perspective:

At its meeting in May 1899, appropriations for the ensuring year were approved and included \$1500 for fire; 500 for health; 4000 for police; 5000 general city expenses; 18,500 roads, lights & water; 1000 for poor totaling \$32, 200.

In June, council adopted an ordinance to "prevent vice & immorality, to possess public peace and good order in the City of Summit. In early 1900, an ordinance establishing the speed limit of 7 mph for autos in the city.