

ATLANTIC COUNTY GOVERNMENT HISTORY

Atlantic County was carved from Gloucester County in February 1837 with boundaries that have remained substantially the same to this date.

The County is bounded on the north by the Mullica River, on the South by the Great Egg Harbor Bay and the Tuckahoe River, on the West by Camden and Gloucester Counties and on the East by the Atlantic Ocean.

The County seat was established in Mays Landing in 1837, and a courthouse was constructed in 1838.

The first Board of Freeholders was established in Mays Landing in 1837, with representatives from four townships – Galloway, Egg Harbor, Hamilton and Weymouth. As more townships and municipalities came into being, the Board grew to its largest membership of 35 in 1966. In 1967, the State Legislature reduced the large board to a seven-person-at-large County Board. It remained at that size until 1975 when the new County Charter went into effect.

In 1974, Atlantic County voters passed a public referendum to change the County governmental form under the Optional County Charter Law to the Executive form. The Charter provides for a popularly elected Executive, responsible for the administration of County government, and for a nine-member Freeholder Board, responsible for legislation. The Executive is elected for a term of four years; the Freeholders are elected to staggered three-year terms. Five of the Freeholders represent equally populated districts; four are elected from the County-at-Large.

The original Atlantic County Administrative Code was adopted in May 1976 and established eight county departments. The Administrative Code was last modified in June 1997 and established seven county departments: *Administrative Services, Family & Community Development and Economic Assistance, Human Services,*

Law, Public Safety, Public Works and Regional Planning Economic Development. In addition, each of the Constitutional Officers has departmental responsibility. The Constitutional officers are the *Clerk*, the *Prosecutor*, the *Sheriff*, and the *Surrogate*.

Citizen involvement and input is provided through advisory boards. Members are appointed to these Boards by the County Executive, with the advice and consent of the Board of Freeholders.

The most prevalent form of local government currently in existence in Atlantic County is Mayor-Council. The Township Committee form, which calls for the Mayor to be appointed from among popularly elected members of the Committee, is found in six municipalities. Commission forms are found in three communities and the Township Manager form in one. The roots of local government in Atlantic County are longstanding. While community sizes and government forms vary, the commitment to citizen service, which is well-developed, is a matter of pride.

Atlantic County today covers 566.97 square miles incorporated into 23 municipalities, ranging in population from Egg Harbor Township (43,323) to Corbin City (492). The total population in the 2010 census is 274,549.

All 23 governing bodies are legally classified as municipalities, although they are properly titled boroughs, towns, townships and cities.

NEW JERSEY ORIGINATED THE TITLE “CHOSEN FREEHOLDER”

New Jersey alone of all the United States has the distinction of retaining the title of “FREEHOLDER” to denote the elected members of the County governing bodies. This descriptive name, which commemorates the origin of homerule, is used by only 21 of the nation’s 3,047 Counties. In other states, these County officials are known as Commissioners, Supervisors, Probate Judges, Police Jurors, Councilors and a variety of other names.

An old English term, a “Freeholder” originally denoted a person who owned an estate of land over which he had complete control. After the Norman Conquest of 1066 A.D., British Kings found it necessary under pressure to call together an assemblage of higher Clergy, Earls and Barons of the Nobility and later Knights of the Realm, to sit as advisors and to grant taxes for defense of the Kingdom. By the 13th Century, through battles against abuses of the royal power and the growing influence of Burghesses’ and Freeman, the British Parliament was enlarged to include these Freemen who owned their land free and clear, who were called “Freeholders.”

English history from this time onward is a story of the increasing power of the subject and his participation in the government. The Franklyn in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* is described as being born a Freeman and “Freeholder”. He sat with the Lord and Knights of his shire (County) in the Parliament of that day.

The name “Freeholder” was well known by the 17th Century, and the holder of the title had a definite place in society. Thus, when the first settlers came to the New World and settled what was to become “New Jersey” under the original proprietors, it is not to be wondered that we find the “Freeholder” prominently mentioned. In the first archives of East Jersey, signed and dated, we discover the origin of the name “Chosen Freeholder”. By crossing the sea, these stout hearted men had already added a popular or democratic refinement to the traditional English name for a Freeman, although they will live under the British Crown.

The Proprietors of New Jersey (Nova Cesarea) issued a proclamation on February 10, 1655 to and every adventurer and all as shall settle or plant there:

“So soon as Parishes, Divisions, Tribes or other distinctions are made then the inhabitants or Freeholders of the several distinctions aforesaid does by our writs and under tour seale shall annually meet on the first day of January and choose Freeholders for each respective Division, Tribe or Parish to be the Deputies or Representatives of the same, which body of Representatives or the major part of them shall with the Governor and Council aforesaid be the General Assembly of the said Province.”

(Signed) Lord John Berkeley
Sir George Carteret

This came into being less than a year after the Province of New Jersey was deeded to the two English noblemen by James Duke of York, the body of Chosen Freeholders to represent each subdivision of the Province, and later (1798) the Counties of New Jersey. Uniquely the original “Chosen Freeholders” were members of the State’s General Assembly, its first Legislature, even before they became the elected representatives of the County Boards of Chosen Freeholders. No other State in the Federal Union has so carefully preserved the ancient freedom of its representative government, in the historic title it still confers on its County governing officials.

It was here in America that the foundation was laid for the County’s role as a functional, geographic arm of the state government. When the English Colonists came to this land of New Jersey, they brought with them the precious concept of County government. Their descendants have refined and strengthened this constitutional idea, to make it an effective instrument of the will of the people for self-government.

Colonel John J. M. Dudley