

# ‘Strangers’ Drew Suspicion At Aurora’s 1896 Election

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**V**oter fraud was avoided in Western New York’s earliest elections more than two centuries ago for one simple reason: No strangers showed up at the polls.

However, by the end of the 1800s, as the population and suspicion of outsiders crashing local elections grew, calls for a more formal voter registration process increased.

There were few issues at the first town election in Western New York in 1803, according to a person who was present at the event.

Amzi Wright of Attica later shared his memory of the first Election Day with the Buffalo Historical Society. Nearly all of Western New York was part of a single town, Batavia, when the first town meeting of the Holland Land Company settlement was held March 1, 1803, in Peter Vanderventer’s tavern near what is now Newstead.

(Geographically, present-day Aurora and East Aurora were part of this massive town, but no pioneer settlers were living here yet. However, Jabez Warren, a resident of the Wyoming County town of Middlebury, was elected an overseer of highways at this first meeting. About a year later, he moved to what is today the Town of Aurora and became its first pioneer-era settler.)

Most of the settlements in the Town of Batavia in 1803 were along what was known as the Buffalo Road (present-day Route 5). Vandervetter’s tavern was considered a central location.

In those days, the election for town officers was held not in November as it is today but during an annual town meeting in early March. Men traveled great distances over rugged roads to participate.

“There was a general turn-out of voters apparently stimulated by the rivalry between the eastern and western parts of the town,” the book *History of Buffalo and Erie County*, published in 1884, notes of the 1803 election.

The tavern was too small for the number of men who showed up, so the election was moved outside.



***In 1896, when the annual Aurora town meeting at the West End Firemen’s Hall included a heated debate over whether or not to allow the sale of alcohol in the town, the appearance of “strangers” led to accusations of voter fraud. The Firemen’s Hall, pictured around that time period, still stands in 2020. (From the archives of the Aurora Town Historian’s Office).***

The election commissioner did not hand out ballots. Instead, he used a method that became known as a “division of the house.”

He asked the two candidates to stand side by side in the middle of the road, facing south.

“Now,” he said, according to the account provided to the Buffalo Historical Society, “all of you that are in favor of Peter Vanderverter for supervisor of the Town of Batavia take your places in line on his right, and you that are in favor of Jotham Bemis take your places on his left.”

Appropriately, Bemis’ line went toward the east, and Vanderverter’s went toward Buffalo. Vanderverter eked out a victory with 74 votes to 70 for Bemis.

Although the system did not allow for ballot secrecy, and holding the election at a tavern owned by one of the candidates was hardly neutral, it did give the election commissioner the ability to verify each and every voter.

“A primitive method truly,” *History of Buffalo and Erie County* stated, “but there as poor chance for fraudulent voting.”

Knowing who was eligible to vote was easy, because the men from each side of the town counted up who was missing from their territories. “As in those times, everybody knew everybody else within 10 miles of him, this was not difficult,” *History of Buffalo and Erie County* noted.

It was determined that only four men were absent from the Batavia village side and five from the Buffalo side. That meant that of the 153 men eligible to vote (women could not vote at the time), 144 showed up on Election Day.

“Certainly a most creditable exhibition to attention to political duty,” H. Perry Smith noted in *History of Buffalo and Erie County*.

As settlement increased over the next two decades, towns in Western New York were reorganized several times. In 1804, our area became part of the Town of Willink, a strip that extended from Pennsylvania to Lake Ontario, with Transit Road as its western boundary. Further divisions continued until 1818, when the Town of Aurora’s boundaries essentially became what they are today. Even though the geographic boundaries of the town became smaller throughout the 1800s, the population continued to expand and the concept of “everyone knows everyone” disappeared.

That impacted confidence in the results of at least one town election.

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Voters were required to take an oath swearing to their eligibility, but some observers, including the editors of the *East Aurora Advertiser*, had little confidence in that method.

“Numerous voters were challenged,” the March 12, 1896 issue of the *Advertiser* noted of the 914 votes cast, which resulted in a victory for the pro-alcohol camp. “And while some swore in their vote, several had not the courage to do so. Some of those sworn in were not known by a single member of the board, nor by the leaders of either party in the room. The large number of new voters, many believed to be illegal, shows that there is need of a registration of voters for (the) town meeting as well as the general election.”

Were illegal votes actually cast or were the accusations just sour grapes on the part of those on the losing side? It’s hard to know for sure. However, over the next several years, reforms were put in place with a stated intent to prevent fraudulent voters. The town election was merged into the November general election beginning in 1903, followed by a more formal registration process.

However, critics of voter registration claimed—and continue to claim—that the process creates even more opportunity for fraud. Critics cited examples of voters showing up at the polls only to find that their names had been suspiciously removed. And a literacy requirement, praised by many when it was made part of the New York State registration process in 1921, kept legitimate, but “undesirable” voters, including many immigrants, away from the polls.

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*Robert Lowell Goller is the eighth Aurora town and East Aurora village historian since the office was created in 1919. The Historian’s Office is open for research Wednesdays and Thursdays from 1-4 p.m. Visit [www.townofaurora.com/departments/historian](http://www.townofaurora.com/departments/historian) for more information. The Town Historian’s Office can also be found on Facebook at “Aurora Town Historian” and on Instagram at “auroratownhistorian.”*