

HISTORY OF THE COMMON COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF INDIANAPOLIS

Indianapolis was established as a town in 1821. It was at this time that a commission, appointed by the legislature, selected this location as a site for a seat of government of the State of Indiana.

The town of Indianapolis conducted its affairs pursuant to the general laws of the state until 1832. In this year the town was incorporated and was governed by a board of five trustees.

In 1838, pursuant to a special act of the legislature, Indianapolis was re-incorporated and placed in the hands of its first town council composed of a president and six members.

The common council continued in a large measure to control the affairs of Indianapolis as a town and as a city under various so-called charters or grants of the legislature until 1891.

Under a special act of the legislature of 1891 for the city of Indianapolis, a somewhat different form of government was established. While the council continued to exercise board control over the city's affairs, various executive departments of the city were provided, such as Public Works, Public Safety, Public Parks and Public Health, conducted by boards appointed by the Mayor. These boards were granted specific powers and duties concerning the city's business previously exercised by the council through committees, subject, however, in some cases, to approval of the council. The establishment of tax levies and the appropriation of funds is still controlled by the Common Council.

For some time prior to 1891 the City of Indianapolis was divided into 25 wards represented by 25 ward councilmen. Their term of office was two years and they were eligible for re-election. At this time there was also a separate body operating in conjunction with the council called the Board of Aldermen, composed of ten Aldermen, representing five Aldermanic districts, two being elected from each district.

Under the 1891 act the Board of Aldermen was abolished and a common council of 21 members was established. Fifteen members were elected to represent 15 wards and six members were elected to represent the city at large.

This form of council continued to exist in Indianapolis under the general cities and towns act of 1905. The act of 1905, while often referred to as the Indianapolis Charter, is very largely a re-enactment of the 1891 Indianapolis charter, modified to make the Indianapolis system applicable to all classes of cities of the state. The 1905 law increased the term of Mayor and Councilmen to four years and prohibited re-election.

In 1909 a novel councilmanic law for Indianapolis alone was passed by the legislature. This law limits the number of councilmen to nine. The law provides for the nomination of each party of six candidates, one from each of six councilmanic districts. In the election all of the voters of the city may vote for any nine candidates and the nine receiving the highest number of votes are elected. This law insures a minority representation in the Council of at least three members.

It is of interest to persons who have delved into the history of Indianapolis that the oldest City record in existence is an ordinance book of the Common Council of the Town of Indianapolis covering the years 1839 to 1857.

The building in which the Council held its meetings was destroyed by fire in 1851, together with nearly all the books and papers belonging to the Corporation. All the records of the Council previous to the year 1839 were destroyed. This record of 1839 is now in possession of the City Clerk.