

2-Minute History of Williamson County

The Willie County Movement

On January 2, 1888, Sheriff John Olive noted in his diary that the Williamson County Commissioners' Court met for the purpose of voting on the proposed construction of a new county jail building.

The center of the controversy was the dissatisfaction of several influential individuals from southeastern Williamson County over the manner in which county tax dollars were being spent. While expenditure for county roads and bridges were, in their opinion, unfairly skewed in favor of the western side of the county, the construction of a new jail drove the dissenters to organize and pursue the formation of "Willie County."

Following eleven months of meetings held in rural school buildings and community meeting halls, the supporters of the Willie County movement held a Willie County Convention in the Taylor Opera House on December 14, 1888, to elect officers and draft an initial set of goals.

Chaired by J. T. Shrock of Bartlett, the executive committee met in Taylor one week later and drafted a seven-part resolution which spelled out, in meticulous detail, the boundaries of the new 709-square mile Willie County; laid out the new county's various precincts; called for the election of county officers and an election to select the new county seat; requested that the Williamson County tax rolls be purged of Willie County residents; and proposed the attachment of the new county to various judicial and legislative districts.

Most surprising of all was the committee's call for the annexation of land from Milam, Bell, Travis, and Bastrop counties for inclusion in the new Willie County.

In early January 1889 the Willie County bill was presented to the lower house of the Texas state legislature for consideration. According to the January 31 issue of the *Williamson County Sun*, several speeches, both pro and con, were made, including a powerful speech against the motion by the Honorable James H. Faubion of Leander. When the vote was finally called, the motion to pass the bill to the legislature was defeated thirty-one to fifty-five. J. E. Cooper, the *Sun's* editor, wrote,

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thus ends a matter which has been the occasion of much controversy, and some bad feeling, as both sides had zealous advocates who labored earnestly to carry their respective points. Now that a decision has been reached each party should bury the hatchet and accept the result in good faith. Men have a right to differ in view upon public measures, but they have not the authority under our form of government to rebel against the expressed will of the majority. This being the case the Sun hopes to see all differences speedily reconciled, and old Williamson soon enter upon a grand era of prosperity; so much so that Georgetown and Taylor will one day meet on half way ground, shake hands across the bloody chasm, and seal the bond of eternal friendship by building the street railway system, now contemplated for this city, from the western limits of Georgetown to the eastern suburbs of Taylor. Thus united there could be no excuse for separation.

But the controversy over the creation of Willie County was not laid to rest as Cooper had wished. On July 19, 1890, a special election was held in Williamson County to “cut off 92-square miles of Williamson County and attach the same to Lee County.” The proposition was defeated by a 102-vote margin—1,840 votes for and 1,942 votes against.

One year later, however, a Willie County Convention was again held in the Taylor Opera House to draft a letter asking several of Georgetown’s leading citizens to explain their opposition to the creation of the new county. As reported in the *Taylor Texan* on January 17, 1891, the executive committee passed a resolution whereby a committee of eight Willie County supporters would meet with a similar number of Georgetown residents “with a view of inducing them to withdraw their opposition to the creation of Willie.”

Included in the delegation were R. L. Penn, Dr. John Threadgill, Daniel Moody, Dr. A. V. Doak, and J. W. Parker. Penn’s brother, W. Y. Penn, was mayor of Georgetown; Daniel Moody was the father of young Dan Moody who, as the Williamson County Attorney in the 1920s, would defeat the KKK in a highly publicized court battle and eventually be elected Texas governor.

Instead of facing a small group of Georgetown civic leaders, the executive committee was confronted by a delegation of residents from almost all

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Williamson County communities, including Florence, Liberty Hill, Leander, Gabriel Mills, Hutto, Jonah, and Granger.

Following several hours of discussion in which the various representatives conveyed the opinions of their area citizens, the delegates passed a resolution stating that the citizens of Williamson County are unalterably opposed to any division of Williamson County in any manner whatever. Therefore, they would individually and collectively oppose any division of Williamson County by all lawful means believing a division of the county would be detrimental to the interest of a vast majority of the citizens of said county.

The delegates further resolved to call upon their representatives in the legislature, the Honorable George W. Glasscock and the Honorable Dan McCuningham, to use every legitimate effort to defeat any proposed division of the county.

Unlike two years earlier, the executive committee did not call for an election to select Willie County's new county seat; they had already chosen the city of Taylor, which seemed to polarize residents of eastern and western Williamson County even more. As pointed out by the *Williamson County Sun*;

They say nothing will satisfy them but a new county, or the removal of the county seat from Georgetown to Taylor. Taylor has changed her tactics somewhat this year in making her fight for Willie county. Two years ago the question of the county seat was not raised. This year she comes out boldly and demands Willie county and the county seat also. The Sun admires Taylor's grit, even if it does doubt her judgment and the righteousness of her claims.

Georgetown is not scared about the removal of the county seat. The taxpayers of this county are not so fond of paying taxes as to abandon good public buildings, near the geographical center of the county, and move the county seat to a place further from the center, when they know the removal would necessitate heavy expenditures to replace the public buildings, etc. Georgetown is not losing any sleep over that proposition.

The February 12 issue of the *Williamson County Sun* carried a brief notice, clipped from the *Bartlett Democrat*, that was an early indication of the death of the Willie County movement.

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The Willie county executive committee met at Taylor a few days ago and decided, owing to the fact that Bell, Milam and Williamson counties each have a representative in the senate who are pledged to use every means to defeat the movement, to defer further action for two years.

A reasonable inference from the foregoing is that the Willie county matter will be revived two years hence, and will be made an issue in the race for representation in each of the above named counties.

The hope of creating a new county with its seat in Taylor continued to be discussed for many years. However, the depression of the 1890s and the efforts to capitalize on Williamson County's changing agricultural economy drew the focus away from splitting the county and toward bringing it closer together for the good of its many citizens.

(Excerpt from *The Noble John Olive*© by Jim Dillard)