

Wadena County Information and History

Founded: June 11, 1858

Named for: An old trading post and common Ojibwe name

Meaning: "little round hill"

County Seat: City of Wadena

Parent counties: Cass, Todd

The county was organized by an act of the legislature approved Feb. 21st, 1873, and in 1874 the population was about 300. Wadena County is bounded on the east by Cass County; on the west by Becker and Otter Tail counties; on the north by Hubbard county; and on the south by Todd county. The county is 30 miles in length, north and south, and 18 miles in width east and west, containing 15 townships, or an area of 345,600 acres, composed of prairies and groves of timber, the prairies being rich alluvial soil capable of raising as good wheat or other cereal crops as any land in the United States. The amount of timber land in the county is estimated at 100,000 acres consisting of oak, elm, maple and tamarack in the southern portion and pine in the northern portions. The Crow Wing, Shell, Leaf, Wing, Red Eye, Partridge and Cat rivers, and Union Creek, and several other small streams afford an abundant supply of pure water.

The county took its name from the Wadena trading post of the old trail from Crow Wing to Otter Tail City and Pembina, situated on the west bluff of the Crow Wing River at its crossing in the present township of Thomastown. The former ferry and trading post were between the mouths of the Leaf and Partridge rivers. Hon. J. V. Brower, who visited the place in 1863 and again examined it in May, 1899, stated that in its most populous period, about the years 1855 to 1860, more than a hundred people lived at this trading post; but that in 1899, like Crow Wing and the original Otter Tail City, its buildings had disappeared, and only their cellar holes remained to mark the spot, the trail or road having been long previously abandoned. Soon after the building of the Northern Pacific railroad, the county seat was located on this railroad, in 1872, fifteen miles west of the original Wadena trading post, from which its name was transferred.

The name "Wadena" is an archaic Ojibway word, signifies "a little round hill". It probably had reference to the rounded outlines of the Crow Wing bluffs at the old Wadena ferry. It is also a somewhat frequent personal name among the Ojibway. One of this name, the eldest son of Bad Boy, the last Gull Lake chief, was living in 1899, an old man, on the White Earth reservation. Prof. N. H. Winchell defined his name as "Sloping Hill," with notation that he signed treaties in 1857 and 1889.

Wadena County is situated in central Minnesota and is located 90 minutes from St. Cloud, Minnesota, and Fargo, North Dakota. The northerly section of the County is beautiful with its trees and lakes whereas the eastern border is anchored by the Crow Wing River. A tornado in 2010 has given the area an opportunity to re-build and refresh its infrastructure. Approximately 14,119 residents call Wadena County home. The Wadena County area offers excellent transportation services as U.S. Highways 10 and 71 cross each other to provide easy access to anywhere you need to go. In 2025, MnDOT is partnering with the County to improve Highway 71 and expand Highway 10 to four lanes, two in each direction. The Friendly Rider Bus Service provides inexpensive transportation to its residents so they can get to medical appointments and

run errands. The service, which provides 60,000 rides/year across four counties, has developed a legacy of area donors to ensure the transit program continues long into the future. The area is also serviced by the Wadena Municipal Airport and the Staples Municipal Airport.

Current Cities and Towns

Aldrich, Menahga, Nimrod, Sebeka, Staples (part), Verndale, Wadena (part). The communities range in size from 35 residents to 4,311 residents.

The small **City of Aldrich**, with just 35 residents, sits along the Partridge River. As the “Oldest City in Wadena County,” this close-knit community has a multi-generational history that continues into present day. Farming continues to be an important part of this community with local farmers and Amish neighbors providing local foods using both standard and organic practices for potato, buckwheat, and other crops. While some of the original businesses have gone away, the community still thrives with new businesses. Community spirit shows at the well-attended potluck dinners held annually at the historic Community Center. Halloween is celebrated as a community wide event, and with the help of the local Lion’s Club, the community is growing. The snowmobile trail runs right along Highway 10 and provides easy access to the business district and inter-county trail system.

Known as the Gateway to the Pines, the **City of Menahga** is home to 1,353 residents. There are plenty of outdoor activities to enjoy like fishing on one of the many nearby lakes or hiking through the beautiful woods. In the heart of Menahga sits the beautiful Spirit Lake, complete with a pier and sugar sand beach. In town, there are several restaurants, cafes, and shops that provide a unique shopping and dining experience. Residents also enjoy the local events hosted throughout the year that bring people together for celebrations and festivals. Despite its size, Menahga is a great place to call home with its friendly people and relaxed rural lifestyle.

Nimrod is a city with a population of 80 residents. Nimrod’s city park is named Stigman’s Mound for Dick Stigman, a relief pitcher on the 1965 American League Championship-winning Minnesota Twins team who was born in Nimrod. The park is located astride the Crow Wing River, a tributary of the Mississippi River and is a key rest stop for the many canoe enthusiasts who voyage the scenic river. The city holds a town celebration known as Jubilee Days that swells the town’s population sometimes by the thousands over Labor Day weekend.

Located along the Red Eye River is the **City of Sebeka** with a population of 739. The City’s Red Eye River Celebration is the town’s summer celebration and occurs in June every year.

If you are looking for quality small-town life, the **City of Staples** offers just that. With just over 3,000 residents, the city is home to an active arts community and many large companies including Lakewood Health System, Central Lakes College, 3M’s Fabrication Services Plant, Sourcewell, and Stern Rubber Company. Outdoor enthusiasts will find river tubing, water sports, fishing, ATVing, and lakeside camping available. There is also opportunity to relax at music performances or gather with family in one of Staples’ many parks and gardens, play a round of golf at The Vintage, explore the train depot, visit Living Legacy Gardens, see a Lumberbats baseball game, or stroll down Minnesota’s longest fishing pier.

Called, the “most beautiful town between Brainerd and Fargo,” the **City of Verndale** was established quickly to serve the needs of settlers swarming to the area. Today Verndale’s strong farming tradition continues with England Prairie Living Museum south of town serving as a model for harnessing new varieties of crops and as a market for local produce. Verndale residents understand the importance of getting involved to help where it is needed; this is one of the greatest strengths it holds. Fundraisers are common in Verndale and these have helped to shape the community through challenges. Residents feel Verndale is a neat place to raise children as it is stated on their welcome sign. The town supports small businesses that serve to meet basic needs including a grocery/thrift store, hardware, clinic, hair salon, and newspaper, as well as horse sales, manufacturing, and banking services. One of the most unique events in Verndale is the Bulls and Barrels...and Broncs, a two-day, indoor rodeo held annually in February. It is Verndale Days that draws residents together. Once known as Sunbonnet/Straw Hat Days, the festival sparks several events to celebrate: a parade, fireworks, and the one-act plays put on by actors from the community college.

The **City of Wadena** is the economic hub for the County and is home to a very caring community of 4,311 residents. The City is bursting with vibrant culture, celebrated arts, progressive technology, and a bustling downtown featuring unique shops, a brewery, distillery, and other fun places to visit. In 2013, the Wadena movie theater The Cozy, was chosen as the top theater in Minnesota. Whether you are looking for diverse neighborhoods, affordable housing, or an abundance of recreational and leisure activities, you will find it in Wadena. The city is home to over 200 businesses including Homecrest Industries, Mason Brothers, Wensman Seed, and Russ Davis Wholesale.

Current Townships

Aldrich, Blueberry, Bullard, Huntersville, Leaf River, Lyons, Meadow, North Germany, Orton, Red Eye, Rockwood, Shell River, Thomastown, Wadena, Wing River

Ghost Towns

Kindred or Shell City, Oylen, Ferris, Central, Huntersville, Leaf River, Blue Grass

Education

There are a number of public-school districts serving the students of Wadena County - Menahga Public Schools, Sebeka Public School, Staples-Motley School District, Verndale Public School, and Wadena-Deer Creek Public Schools (WDC). The Menahga Public School District consists of traditional schools under one roof along with an alternative learning center and early learning programming. The building is a Pre-K through grade 12 facility with classrooms, maker spaces, commons, gymnasiums, and two libraries. The facility now houses just under 1,000 students school-wide within the elementary and high school. Sebeka Public School serves grades PreK through grade 12. The students of the Sebeka School live in a four county area, and it enrolls over 500 students. The high school, preschool, and elementary school are all contained within the same building. Staples-Motley School District, a PreK through grade 12 district, serves around 1,000 students in their elementary and middle/high schools. WDC Schools serves the communities of Wadena, Deer Creek, and Bluffton and is comprised of an elementary school and a middle/high school. The district serves over 1,000 students in PreK through grade 12. Verndale Public School provides education to approximately 530 students from PreK through grade 12.

An alternative educational option is also available. Freshwater Education District Area Learning Center provides early childhood education classes (ECFE) for families and children ages birth to 5 years. Their Area Learning Center (ALC) serves as an alternative to traditional schools with targeted learning for students from kindergarten to adult. A couple of private educational options are also available in the County. Sacred Heart Area School is a Catholic school in Staples providing education to approximately 110 students in grades PreK through grade 6. Verndale Area Christian Academy is an elementary school offering classes for students in kindergarten through grade 6 in a Christian environment. Higher education opportunities are also available in the County. Minnesota State Community and Technical College (MState) is a member of the Minnesota State system is comprised of four campuses – Detroit Lakes, Fergus Falls, Moorhead, and Wadena. MState’s Wadena campus serves approximately 800 students in transfer, career, and technical programs that provide hands-on preparation for successful careers. The college is a great ally for the County in meeting the training needs of area industries. In addition, Central Lakes College has a main campus and a West Campus located in the City of Staples.

Healthcare

Astera Health, formerly known as Tri-County Health Care, is a private, not-for-profit healthcare corporation with seven locations including those in Sebeka, Verndale, and Wadena. Astera Health in Wadena is located on a beautiful new property just west of Wadena on Highway 10. The new \$72 million, 125,900 square-foot facility provides a wide range of specialties for the entire family including laboratory testing, foot care, geriatric care, emergency care, routine physicals, maternity care, x-rays and lab services, and medical care for any illness or injury. The hospital provides 24-hour emergency services and a number of top-notch care units including surgery suites, labor and delivery suites, a pediatric unit, x-ray and lab services, and respiratory, physical, and occupational therapy services. The Wadena location also offers a ReadyCare clinic for walk-in and same-day appointments as well as a Rehabilitation Clinic offering rehab services for a complete range of therapies. Astera Health – Sebeka Clinic and Astera Health – Verndale Clinic are both conveniently located in their respective downtowns and provide a wide range of specialties for your entire family. Astera Health and CentraCare have recently approved a partnership that will expand cancer services to the region including the addition of a cancer center at the new Astera Health main campus in Wadena. The 20,000-square-foot addition will be added to the west end of the new building. The project, which will include infusion, radiation oncology, and supportive care, is estimated to cost \$23.7 million and will be completed by spring of 2025. Lakewood Health System, headquartered in Staples, features a 25-bed Critical Access Hospital, five primary clinics, pharmacy and home medical equipment stores, a wide variety of senior housing and service options, and more.

Wadena County Government Organization

The Wadena County Board of Commissioners is the body charged with the ultimate management and control of all of the affairs of Wadena County including the County’s finances and resources. Various elected and appointed officials are responsible for managing their respective departments with the limits established by law and the County Board. The Board is comprised of five Commissioners who represent the five districts of the County. The County Administrator is appointed by the Board and works with them to set short- and long-term goals of the organization. The Wadena County Government Center is located in the heart of beautiful, downtown Wadena. Walking into the Government Center, one feels the warm and welcoming

environment. Staff is friendly and enjoys serving the residents. Twice a year, the County Board takes their work session to other communities within Wadena County to engage residents in discussions and planning work sessions. The County has enjoyed consistently low levy rates and high voter participation. The County put Covid dollars out into the community to lessen the impact of the annual levy on its residents. The Wadena County Government Center is the only location within the County that will provide the passport photo and application process. County residents appreciate the services the Highway Department provides. Wadena County has a total of 193 employees, 153 full-time and 40 part-time.

Historical townships and villages

Information of origins and meaning of geographic names is from Eugene Boss, county auditor from 1903, and Asher Murray, each of Wadena, Mr. Murray came to Minnesota in 1880, and has resided in Wadena, being the county judge of probate in 1889-1902.

ALDRICH township received the name of the railway village, given by officers of the Northern Pacific railroad company, in honor of Cyrus Aldrich, who was born in Smithfield, R. I, June 18, 1808, and died in Minneapolis, October 5, 1871. He came to this state in 1855, settling in Minneapolis, and engaged in real estate business; was a representative in Congress, 1859-63; a member of the state legislature, 1865; and postmaster of Minneapolis, 1867-71.

BLUEBERRY township has Blueberry River and lake, which are translated from their Ojibway name. The low blueberry, supplying abundant berries much prized as food by both red and white people, is common in northern Minnesota, extending somewhat farther south and west than our species of pine, spruce, and fir.

BULLARD township was named in honor of Clarence Eugene Bullard, who was born at Fort Madison, Iowa, in 1843; served in the Sixth Wisconsin regiment in the civil war, attaining the rank of first lieutenant; came to Minnesota in 1864; settled in Verndale in 1878; was clerk of the district court of this county, 1881-6; removed to Wadena, and during many years was the county attorney; died at his home in Wadena in April, 1916.

HUNTERSVILLE township was named for its being a "hunters' paradise."

LEAF RIVER township, crossed by the river of this name, and its railway village are a translation from the Ojibway name of the Leaf hills or "mountains" and the Leaf lakes and river, before noted in the chapter of Otter Tail County, it is written by Gilfillan as 'Gaskibugwudjiwe, Rustling Leaf mountain," the same name being also applied to the lakes and river.

LYONS township was named in honor of Harrison Lyons, of Verndale, who for many years was a member of the board of county commissioners.

MEADOW township was named for its relatively small tracts of prairie, natural grassland, enclosed in the general woodland.

MENAHGA, a railway village in Blueberry township, platted in 1891, very appropriately bears the Ojibway name of the blueberry, spelled 'Meenahga' by Longfellow in "The Song of Hiawatha."

METZ was a post office in North Germany township, now discontinued, bearing the name of the chief city of Lorraine, which on October 27, 1870, after a siege of two months, was surrendered to the Germans.

NIMROD, a post office and hamlet in Orton, is named for the grandson of Ham, called, in Genesis, "a mighty hunter before the Lord," who is reputed to have directed the construction of the Tower of Babel.

NORTH GERMANY township was named by its many German settlers.

ORTON township was named in honor of one of its pioneer farmers.

OYE and OYLEN were post offices, lately discontinued, in Lyons.

RED EYE township is traversed by Red Eye River, named in translation from the Ojibway, for its red-eye fish, a species that is also called "blue-spotted sunfish" or "green sunfish" (Cox, "Fishes of Minnesota," 1897, p. 67); but a later manual ("American Food and Game Fishes," by Jordan and Evermann, 1902) places this name, red eye, as a synonym for the rock bass. The two species are nearly allied, and the latter is stated by Cox to be "a very common and valuable food fish in all the lakes and streams of the state."

ROCKWOOD township is thought to have been named from its glacial drift boulders and hardwood timber.

SEBEKA, a railway village in Red Eye and Rockwood townships, beside the Red Eye River, founded in 1891, was named, like Menahga, by Col. William Crooks, chief engineer of the Manitoba (now Great Northern) railway. Like Menahga, this is a name of Ojibway derivation, for 'sibi' or 'zibi', a river, meaning "the village or town beside the river."

SHELL CITY is a hamlet in SHELL RIVER township, each of these names being from the mussel or clam shells of this river and of Shell Lake, at its source in Becker. The Ojibway call the lake by a different name, meaning "the lake lying near the mountain." that is, near a portage crossing the water divide between the Crow Wing and Otter Tail rivers. Thence they also give that name to the Shell River.

THOMASTOWN, the most southeastern township of this county, was named in honor of Thomas Scott, a pioneer homesteader, who was a lumberman and farmer; but he moved in about 1875 to the state of Washington.

VERNDALE, a railway village in the west part of Aldrich, was named in honor of Vernie Smith, a granddaughter of Lucas W. Smith, one of its pioneers. He was born in Caledonia County, Vt.,

September 15, 1816; settled on a homestead claim near the site of this village, which he named; built the first house here, and engaged in mercantile business.

WADENA township, and its railway village, the county seat, first settled in the fall of 1871, incorporated February 14, 1881, are named, like this county, from the old trading post.

In WING RIVER township the stream of this name, flowing from Otter Tail and Todd counties, joins the Leaf River, its name probably was translated from the Ojibway, like the Crow Wing River.

STREAMS AND LAKES.

On the map of Long's expedition, in 1823, the Crow Wing River is named "R. de Corbeau," meaning River of the Raven, the Leaf River is called its "West Fork," and the other streams of this county are unnamed, being indeed mostly without delineation. Nicollet's map, published in 1843, names the Crow Wing, Leaf, Red Eye, and Shell rivers; and the Partridge River bears its equivalent French name, "Riv. aux Perdrix." An early state map of 1860 adds Union creek and Wing and Partridge rivers.

Blueberry river and lake, and Leaf, Red Eye, Shell, and Wing rivers, from which townships are named, have been noticed in the preceding pages; and the French and English names of Partridge River are translations of its Ojibway name. The origin of the name of Union creek remains to be learned.

The Twin lakes, on the course of the Shell River, are crossed by the north line of this county.

Kettle creek is a tributary of Blueberry River.

Stocking lake, named from its shape, outflows by Stocking creek to the Shell River.

Spirit lake, without outlet, adjoins Menahga.

Jim Cook Lake was named for an early farmer, who cut logs there.

Finn lake has several adjacent settlers from Finland.

In Meadow township, Yaeger lake was named for an early German or Swiss homesteader beside it; Mud Lake lies close west, and Rice Lake close south, the latter being named for its wild rice.

Cat river, flowing to the Crow Wing, was named for wildcats encountered by the pioneer settlers. This species, also called the lynx, was formerly frequent throughout Minnesota.

This county has two Hay creeks, once a tributary of Red Eye River, the other of Leaf River, each being named for their small tracts of natural hay meadows.

Lovejoy lake, in section 16, Thomastown, was named for Charles O. Lovejoy, a homesteader beside it; Hayden creek, also named for a pioneer, flows through the southeast corner of this township; and Simon Lake is in its section 12.

From its east side, the Crow Wing River received Big and Little Swamp creeks, Beaver creek, and Farnham brook, the last being named in honor of Sumner W. Farnham, a Minneapolis lumberman. He was born in Calais, Maine, April 2, 1820; came to Minnesota in 1848, and engaged in logging and lumber manufacturing; opened the first bank at St. Anthony Falls in 1854; was a member of the territorial legislature in 1852 and 1856; died in Minneapolis, April 2, 1900. A lake crossed by the east line of Bullard, about a mile east from the mouth of Farnham brook, is also named for him; and Sand Lake is in section 1 of this township