

Town and Village Justice Structure in Washington County, NY

Executive Summary

This report provides a comprehensive analysis of the justice-court structures across Washington County's towns and villages. It documents countywide patterns that determine why municipalities typically have either one or two justices and highlights a single exception: **the Town of Dresden, which maintains two town justices despite having no village court, one of the smallest populations, and one of the lowest caseloads in the county.**

Across all Washington County municipalities, a consistent rule emerges:

- **Towns without a village court operate with one town justice.**
- **Towns with a village court have two total justices (one town justice and one village justice).**
- **No municipality other than Dresden maintains two town justices serving a single town court.**

Modern judicial administration, including Washington County's Centralized Arraignment Part (CAP Court), has eliminated the historical need for multiple justices in small towns. As a result, Dresden's two-justice model lacks legal, operational, and fiscal justification and represents the strongest consolidation candidate in the county.

Overview of This Report

This report includes:

- A countywide analysis of justice-court structure
- Historical explanation of why some towns once elected two justices
- Current judicial patterns and village-court impacts
- A clear countywide rule regarding when municipalities have two justices
- A population-based comparison identifying Dresden as the outlier
- A review of fiscal, operational, and administrative considerations
- Detailed recommendations for the Town Board
- An appendix summarizing justice structures for all towns and villages

This structure provides a clear narrative, progressing from historical context to modern administrative realities and concluding with specific findings and recommendations.

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Introduction

Justice courts handle:

- Traffic infractions
- Misdemeanors and violations
- Small claims and civil matters
- Landlord–tenant disputes
- Criminal intake and preliminary proceedings

Because justices are elected officials and require training, administrative support, and compliance oversight, the number of justices in each municipality directly affects operational demands and local spending. Understanding why certain towns have more than one justice is therefore essential to evaluating fiscal responsibility and administrative efficiency.

Historical Background: Why Towns Once Elected Two Justices

Historically, many New York towns elected **two justices** to ensure:

- Availability for arraignments at all hours
- Judicial redundancy for checks and balances
- Distribution of heavier caseloads in earlier decades
- Coverage before countywide centralized arraignment systems existed

As rural populations stabilized or declined and as village courts dissolved, the operational justification for multiple justices diminished. Most towns naturally transitioned to a single-justice model unless a village court provided a second judicial position.

Current Judicial Patterns in Washington County

Washington County’s justice-court structures fall into three categories:

A. Towns With Village Courts

Some towns contain an incorporated village that maintains a separate village court. In these cases, the total number of justices is higher, but **the second justice belongs to the village, not the town** (e.g., Whitehall, Greenwich, Cambridge).

B. Shared-Justice Arrangements

A few villages use the same judicial officer who presides over the town court (e.g., Fort Edward, Granville).

C. Town-Only Courts

Most towns—those without villages—operate a single justice court with **one justice**, reflecting low caseloads and modern efficiency expectations.

Special cases include the Village of Cambridge, which spans two towns yet operates a single village court.

Countywide Rule: When Municipalities Have One vs. Two Justices

A clear and consistent rule emerges across Washington County:

- **If a town has no village court → it has one justice.**
- **If a town has a village court → the town justice plus the village justice total two judicial officers.**
- **There are no exceptions—except Dresden.**

Dresden is the only town that:

- Has no village
- Has no village justice
- Yet maintains **two town justices serving the same single town court**

This structure is unique countywide.

Dresden as an Outlier

Town	Population	Total Justices	Notes
Dresden	505	2 (town-only)	Only two-justice town without a village
Putnam	555	1	Town-only court
Hampton	1,057	1	Town-only court
Jackson	1,716	1	Town-only court
Hebron	1,801	1	Town-only court
Hartford	1,963	1	Town-only court

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Town	Population	Total Justices	Notes
Easton	2,386	1	Town-only court

This table makes Dresden's structural anomaly immediately clear.

Why Dresden's Two-Justice Model Has No Operational Justification

Dresden's two-justice structure is not supported by:

- **Caseload** — comparable towns manage similar or greater caseloads with one justice
- **Geography** — no large distance or travel barrier exists
- **Village-court requirements** — Dresden has no village
- **Modern judicial administration** — redundancy is already provided by CAP Court
- **Peer comparison** — no similar town maintains two justices

The continuation of a two-justice model appears to be a historical holdover rather than a functional necessity.

Fiscal Impact

Each justice produces both direct and indirect costs, including:

- Salary or stipend
- Mandatory training and continuing education
- Clerk and administrative support
- Court-night staffing
- Reporting, compliance, and annual certification obligations

For a town with Dresden's population and caseload, the added cost of maintaining two justices represents an **avoidable and recurring taxpayer expense** with no measurable operational benefit.

Impact of Centralized Arraignment (CAP) Court

Washington County's CAP Court—located at the County Jail—handles virtually all:

- After-hours arraignments
- Weekend arraignments
- Felony arraignments

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This eliminates the single strongest historical reason for having two justices in small towns.

- Local justices are no longer required for daytime or after-hours arraignments
- Arrestees are transported directly to the jail, not to town courts
- A rotating countywide pool provides judicial redundancy
- Town justices with full-time jobs (such as both Dresden justices) are not expected to provide daytime availability

These operational changes fundamentally alter the staffing needs of small-town justice courts. Accordingly, Dresden's second justice provides **no operational value** in the modern arraignment system.

Policy Implications

Dresden's current structure represents:

- An **inefficiency**, and
- The strongest case in the county for judicial consolidation or formal review.

Closing Summary

Dresden is the only town in Washington County with **two town justices serving a single town court** despite:

- No village
- One of the smallest populations
- Low caseloads
- Full coverage provided by CAP Court

No statutory, historical, operational, or fiscal justification supports retaining this structure.

Accordingly, Dresden presents the strongest consolidation case in the county.

Recommendations for Board Consideration

1. **Request formal guidance from the New York State Office of Court Administration (OCA)** regarding appropriate justice staffing for small rural towns.

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2. **Conduct a documented operational evaluation** of whether Dresden's second justice provides measurable public benefit.
3. **Consider consolidation to a single-justice model** unless clear evidence supports retaining the second position.
4. **Make this report publicly available** and solicit community input to ensure transparency.

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Honoring the Service of Dresden's Justices

The position of Town Justice has played an important and respected role in the history of the Town of Dresden. For generations, our justices have ensured that the principles of fairness, accessibility, and accountability were upheld locally, often at times when rural communities relied heavily on immediate, hometown judicial availability. Their work has been an important part of maintaining order and supporting residents through periods of change.

As the Town reviews its justice court structure, it is important to recognize that **any adjustment to the number of justices is not simply an administrative action**, but a meaningful transition in a role that has long served this community. While modern judicial practices—particularly the countywide Centralized Arraignment Part (CAP Court)—have changed how and where arraignments occur, the contributions of Dresden's justices over the years remain deeply valued.

If the Town ultimately moves toward the countywide standard of a single town justice, this change should be made **with respect for the individuals who have held this office and for the community traditions connected to it**. One appropriate way to honor this long-standing service would be:

- **Installing a plaque in the Town Hall recognizing those who have served as Town Justice in Dresden, commemorating the history of the two-justice system and its role in supporting the community for many decades.**

This gesture preserves the legacy of the office, acknowledges the dedication of past and present justices, and ensures that even as the Town adapts to modern judicial needs, it continues to honor the service that helped shape Dresden's governance and identity.

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Appendix: Town and Village Justice Structure Tables

This appendix provides a concise reference to all town and village justice structures in Washington County. It should be read in conjunction with the narrative findings and recommendations in the main report.

Section 1 — Town Courts of Washington County

Town	Contains Village?	Village Name(s)	Court Shared?	Justice(s)	Total Justice s	Population
Argyle	Yes	Village of Argyle	Shared Town/Village Court	Hon. Stacy Davis	1	3,649
Cambridge	Yes	Village of Cambridge	Separate (Town & Village Courts)	Town: Hon. Dan Pearlman; Village: Hon. Carl Flint	2	1,883
Dresden	No	—	N/A	Hon. Jared Eggleston; Hon. Darin Eggleston	2	505
Easton	No	—	N/A	Hon. Scott Strobe	1	2,386
Fort Ann	Yes	Village of Fort Ann	Village uses Town Court	Hon. Dane Clark	1	5,528
Fort Edward	Yes	Village of Fort Edward	Separate Courts (same justice)	Hon. Joseph Malvuccio	1	5,979
Granville	Yes	Village of Granville	Separate Courts (same justice)	Hon. Roger Forando	1	6,215
Greenwich	Yes	Village of Greenwich	Separate Town & Village Courts	Town: Hon. Rachel Clothier; Village: Hon. Carl Flint	2	4,862
Hampton	No	—	N/A	Hon. Darlene Sady	1	1,057

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Hartford	No	—	N/A	Hon. Sharon Schofield	1	1,963
Hebron	No	—	N/A	Hon. James Curran	1	1,801
Jackson	No	—	N/A	Hon. Heather McLenithan	1	1,716
Kingsbury	Yes	Village of Hudson Falls	Village cases handled in Town Court	Hon. Anthony White	1	12,921
Putnam	No	—	N/A	Hon. Alice Forbes	1	555
Salem	Yes	(Former Village of Salem)	Shared Town/Village Structure	Hon. Scott Thetford	1	2,612
White Creek	No	—	N/A	Hon. Scott Lucey	1	3,265
Whitehall	Yes	Village of Whitehall	Separate Town & Village Courts	Town: Hon. Susan Johnson; Village: Hon. Thomas Nichols	2	4,004

Section 2 — Village Courts of Washington County

Village	Parent Town(s)	Justice	Court Structure
Argyle (Village)	Town of Argyle	Hon. Stacy Davis	Shared Town/Village Court
Cambridge (Village)	Town of Cambridge & Town of White Creek	Hon. Carl Flint	One Village Court spanning two towns
Fort Ann (Village)	Town of Fort Ann	Hon. Dane Clark	Uses Town Court
Fort Edward (Village)	Town of Fort Edward	Hon. Joseph Malvuccio	Village Court (same justice serves Town Court)
Granville (Village)	Town of Granville	Hon. Roger Forando	Village Court
Greenwich (Village)	Town of Greenwich	Hon. Carl Flint	Village Court
Hudson Falls (Village)	Town of Kingsbury	Not listed by county	Village Court

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Whitehall (Village)	Town of Whitehall	Hon. Thomas Nichols	Village Court
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