

The way it was

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Our government is not a new one

By George A. Parkhurst

Shall we replace our selectmen-type of town government with some other form?

This question has come up recently as it has every few years in the past.

To re-examine how we are doing things from time to time is healthy. It shows a concern for the efficacy of our elected officials. Previous reassessments have come to the conclusion that we are doing all right as we are.

It has been remarked that we are operating in the 1980's with a 1780's government.

While this statement was correct, the speaker could have gone back 125 years more — the term selectmen first appearing in the records in 1655. They were called trustees in 1654 and 1656.

The first town meeting was held in 1654 (before the town was incorporated) at the home of William Fletcher, whose house was located just beyond the end of Crosby Lane.

The business included choosing those "to officiate in Ordering the Public affairs of the Place by the Consent of the Major part of the Town for this present year ensuing..."

Those chosen were Esdras Read, Edward Spaulding, William Fletcher, Isaac Learned, Simon Thompson, William Underwood and Thomas Adams. (This writer is a direct descendant of five of these seven men.)

The problem of a quorum was solved at the second town meeting which was held, presumably in the Meeting House, in March, 1655. (At that time, the year began on March 25th and March was called the "first month.")

"At a Public meeting of the Town month fist (sic) Day 24th 1655. William Fletcher is Chosen Constable; Isaac Learned is Chosen Sergeant of the band; Simon Tomson is Chosen Clerk of the band; (Band in this case refers to residents of the town, not to a musical aggregation.)

"It is ordered that the first Day of the first month (first Monday in March) shall be observed by all the householders of the town from year to year for the Chusing of all annual officers belonging to the Town as the select-men or Committee: Deputy for the Court: Constable: The three men to end all small causes under Forty shillings Surveyors for the high-way overseers of the fences and swine and to meet at the meeting-hous by nine a Clock in the morning and for the first hours nonappearance twelve pence and for a Whole Days Absence two shillings."

Some might suggest that we should again levy fines against those who do not show up, especially at Special Town Meetings, but where would we meet? There's no hall in Chelmsford that would hold all the registered voters.

From these early beginnings, there have been only two major changes: the number of selectmen has gone from five to three and back again several times and the increase in the number of registered voters following the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920, giving women the vote.

The selectmen, and other elected town officials, were chosen at the annual town meeting through 1920, but, beginning in 1921, elections were held in the separate precincts. This made it necessary to hold the general business meeting a week later.

Times have not changed all that much; have they?

George A. Parkhurst is a noted Chelmsford historian whose family has lived in town since 1654.