

Town Meeting 1654 - 1971

by George A. Parkhurst

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CHELMSFORD SENTINEL

When the voters of Chelmsford gathered at the high school Monday evening to act upon the articles in the annual town warrant, they were continuing a tradition that is older than the town itself.

History tells us that the first town meeting in Chelmsford was held at the home of William Fletcher on "22nd, ninth month, 1654." This was six months before the town was officially incorporated.

(The Fletcher residence is believed to have been the first frame house built in this town and was located a short distance beyond the present terminus of Crosby Lane. A granite monument marks the approximate site.)

The only reported business that was transacted concerned the remuneration offered to Rev. John Fiske, who had been invited to come here from Wenham with several members of his church.

"CHURCH AND TOWN"

The concern for Rev. Mr. Fiske, and what would appear to be church business, by the town meeting may seem odd today. However, it must be remembered that until 1771, when the First Baptist Society was organized in South Chelmsford, there was only one church in town, and it was not until 1831 that the actual separation of church and town took place. Previously all of the townspeople had been taxed for the support of the Meeting House and its minister. Church business was handled at town meeting.

The original church organization is now the First Parish Unitarian-Universalist Church whose meeting house, across the street from the Town Hall, stands on the site of the earliest church building.

FINES AND ABSENCE

At the second town meeting, March 24, 1655, it was voted that the first Monday in March was "to be observed...for the choosing of all annual officers belonging to the town." It was also voted that "the next meeting should be holden at the Meeting House at 9 o'clock in the morning -- That every householder for the first hour's absence should be fined twelve pence; and for a whole day's absence two shillings."

"WICKED PRACTICES"

Our ancestors took a dim view of idleness and disorderly conduct as indicated by the report of the March 6, 1775, town meeting, which included the following vote: "The Town chose a Committee consisting of the Selectmen and fifteen others to deal with idle and disorderly persons, and voted that the said Committee make enquiry and get the best information that may be of all Idle & Disorderly persons in sd. Town such as waste their time and substance at publick or private houses or any other places in sd. Town, at any unlawful gaming, excessive drinking, quarreling or frolicking, or such as may be known to be frequent at horse racing, or any that use profane cursing or swearing, sabbath-breaking, or any other unlawful or unbecoming behavior; that the said Committee take the earliest opportunity to discourse with such persons and use the utmost of their endeavours to convince them of their folly and danger, and if any persons are known to the said Committee to continue in any such wicked practices, to shun the company of such offenders as much as may be consistent with good reason and justice, leave dealing with them or to entertain any such persons in any of their houses by night or by day saving when in some honest and lawful employment.

"To manifest a dislike to their conduct, and bear testimony against their vicious practices, and look upon them as disturbers of the peace and good order amongst us, and that any of the Inhabitants of this Town that shall entertain any such persons in any of their houses unemployed when able to labour, such persons will procure to themselves the displeasure of this Town and shall be dealt with as offenders, and that the said Committee shall put out such idle and disorderly persons and see that they are employed in some lawful calling, or inflict such punishment on such offenders as the nature of their crimes may require...."

"NO MORE SUPERS"

The voters from time to time attempted to eliminate what they felt were unnecessary expenditures. In 1742 they voted that "the selectmen and such



GRANITE MONUMENT, located at the end of Crosby Lane, marks the site of Chelmsford's first town meeting, which took place at the home of William Fletcher on November 22, 1654 -- six months before the town was officially incorporated. (Photo by George Parkhurst)

other town officers as has been usual to have a super (sc) on the town's cost on the evenings of the Annual Town Meetings heretofore, be allowed no more supers for the future on the Town's cost."

MEETING PLACES

Until it was destroyed by fire in 1842, town meetings were held in the Meeting House. So, when the present (First Parish) church was erected, the town built the basement (now the church vestry) as a Town Hall. The use of this room for town meetings as well as for social functions continued until the present Town Hall was erected in 1879 on North Road.

Recently it became necessary to hold a special town meeting on the High School athletic field because there was no hall in town large enough to accommodate all who wished to attend. This was not the first time such a problem arose. History tells us that "the room was often so full that the men had to adjourn to the common in order to poll the house, the ayes standing on one side and the noes on the other."

Most towns have one Town Hall. Chelmsford is different. We have two. The North Town Hall was erected in 1852 and, for several years, meetings were held alternately in the North and Center villages.

In 1885 it was voted "that all future town meetings for Town Business should be held in the

Town Hall at the Centre of Town." This practice continued until just before World War II when the auditorium was added to the high school (now the McFarlin school on Billerica Road).

Although it was considerably larger than the upper floor of the Town Hall, some meetings with very controversial articles attracted so many voters that it was necessary for many to stand along either side of the room as well as at the rear of the hall, while others were seated on the stage behind the moderator.

When the present high school was constructed, the town meetings were transferred to these larger, though now inadequate, quarters.

THE 1884 BUDGET

In view of present expenses, it is difficult to believe reports of the town's budget 80-90 years ago. For example, the voters appropriated a total of \$14,900 in 1884. This included schools, \$5,500; support of the poor, \$2,100; repairs of highways, townways and bridges, \$3,500 and several smaller items.

"MOST AGREEABLE"

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the town meeting adjourned for an hour

or so at noon to partake of dinner served by a group of ladies of the town and later by the Village Improvement Association.

The newspaper report of the 1884 town meeting states: "One of the most agreeable incidents of the day was the discussion, at noon, of a bountiful and appetizing collation prepared by the ladies of the village and served by them in the library building. At least 100 sat down to the well filled tables and arose highly pleased with their experience.

"We hope that this feature of town meeting will be perpetuated. Someone has said the most direct 'road' to the masculine heart is through the stomach, and we assure our fair townswomen that if they continue to 'layout' this 'townway' as acceptably as on Monday they need not fear its rejection by the voters."

IT SERVES WELL

Town meetings may not be the perfect legislative bodies and some modifications may be needed to meet the demands of growing populations, but for 316 years this institution, unique to New England, has served the residents of Chelmsford well in the conduct of municipal affairs.

While newcomers to the area may find it to be an unusual way to handle the business of the Town, those of us who have lived all of our lives in New England take the annual town meeting in March as much for granted as the celebration of Thanksgiving in November and Christmas in December.

Town meeting is still one of the few times that the individual voter can have his say, directly, in matters that affect him and his family.