

New England Town Meeting

By BENJAMIN W. LABAREE*

Harvard University

“NEW England town meeting.” These words evoke the image of sober-faced Yankees filing silently into town hall to discuss the issues of the day. The phrase “town meeting” is at least subconsciously accompanied by the concept “grass-roots democracy” in the minds of most of us. We also think of town meeting as giving to the villages of New England a large measure of local autonomy. For some of us town meeting seems somehow to stand as a guarantee of traditional American freedoms. My purpose here is to examine, albeit briefly, just how democratic, how independent, how dedicated to freedom was New England town meeting in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In order to answer these questions we must first take a close look at the New England town itself, for town meeting can be no more democratic, independent, or free than the town of which it is but a part.

It was no accident that New England was settled by cohesive groups of colonists, for it was largely in groups that the Puritans decided to uproot themselves from the Old World to come to the New. The Crown had granted land to the Massachusetts Bay Company for distribution, and the Company’s General Court soon established a wise procedure for settling this vast territory, lying between points three miles north of the Merrimack River and three miles south of the Charles. Any *bona fide* group of settlers, with about 20 or 30 family heads who were all good members of the church, could apply to the General Court for a grant of land. The Court would upon approval of the group’s qualifications and plans grant to its members a tract perhaps as large as six miles square, though rarely symmetrical because of geographical conditions, almost always contiguous with a previously settled town. The adult male members of this group became the owners, or “proprietors,” of the land.

*The author is an assistant professor of history at Harvard University. His *Patriots and Partisans; the Merchants of Newburyport, 1764-1815*, will be published this year by the university press. This paper was read on Oct. 7, 1960, at the 24th annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, in Boston, as one of three papers of the session on town records over which Stephen T. Riley presided. Papers read at that session by Douglas Edward Leach and Howard W. Crocker are also published in this issue.

The first "town meetings" often took place long before the town itself was settled, for the proprietors had to arrange the division of land. In the case of Hanover, N. H., for instance, the proprietors met for five years in Mansfield, Conn., before the first meeting of inhabitants was held in Hanover itself in 1767. At these early sessions the proprietors distributed, according to a carefully established plan, the land granted to them. Around a central village green were laid out the house lots, usually four or five acres in size, along with plots reserved for church, parish house, and school. The farmland surrounding the village center was then divided into fields, and the fields into strips. The remaining lands were kept in reserve for future use. Each proprietor then drew by lottery a house lot and the strips in each field that were to be his. In this fashion everyone had a little of the good lands and a little of the bad. But some members of the group—the minister, magistrates if present, militia officers, and those whose wealth or families were larger than usual—might be permitted to draw twice or three times. Frequent exchange of adjacent strips among the proprietors soon altered equitable distribution for the sake of convenience.

The original proprietors were free to admit new settlers to the town on an equal basis with themselves if they satisfied rigid standards of acceptability. Most towns, however, closed their lands to further expansion after some 60 or 80 families had settled. This meant that all subsequent comers had either to purchase lands from individual owners without obtaining proprietorial rights or, as in the case of some village artisans, settle without even becoming landowners. As each established town stopped accepting new proprietors, however, a new group applied to the General Court for a township grant, and so the settlement of New England moved slowly westward toward the Hudson and up the river valleys into New Hampshire.

The New England town developed from this system of land distribution into a compact community, centering on a village green, a meeting house, and a school. These institutions, and particularly the church, gave the town a nucleus strong enough to withstand for a surprisingly long time the centrifugal forces that constantly threatened its dissolution. Even after small villages sprang up in remote corners of the original township, the settlers there made the long trek into town for religious services. Not until these people were able to support their own minister could they consider subdividing into a new town. Such divisions became

common in the eighteenth century, often spiced by an ideological split or simply by a battle over the location of a new meeting house.

Next in importance to the church in bringing cohesiveness to the community was the institution of town meeting. We have already seen that the earliest so-called "town meetings" were really sessions of the proprietors to divide the lands and admit new residents. This was because all the original family heads were proprietors. For the same reason these early town meetings were also gatherings of church members. In fact the most significant business of these first meetings, aside from distributing land, was to find a minister, if the group did not already have one, and to make an appropriate offer for his settlement and salary. From the beginning, then, the two most important functions of town meeting were economic and religious.

Within a few years after the settlement of a town, however, the nature of its town meeting began to change. So many nonproprietary landholders had settled that soon town meeting no longer was composed solely of the original proprietors or their heirs. In fact in many towns the proprietors were quickly outnumbered and found themselves waging a defensive battle to maintain control of the common and undivided lands. Understandably, if not legally, later arrivals resented the fact that they had no say in the management of their town's commons.

More slowly but just as inevitably town meeting soon ceased as well to be a gathering of the town's church members. For as the settlement grew in size, new groups of worshippers formed their own congregations. Outlying settlements had good reason for establishing their own parishes, and ideological divisions brought their share of schism and regeneration. By the mideighteenth century Protestant churches of other denominations began to compete with the orthodoxy, and soon Presbyterian, Anglican, and Baptist groups took their place alongside the "First Church, Congregational."

Vestiges of the old order remained long after the end of the colonial period. Town meeting did authorize the collection of taxes for the support of the ministry and did appoint fence-viewers, surveyors, and special committees for the settlement of land disputes. But by 1750 it was a rare New England community in which town meeting was synonymous with a gathering of church members or proprietors.

Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the colonial legislatures periodically defined the qualifications for voting in town affairs. In New England the most common requirement

was that the prospective voter be a resident of the town, possessed of a certain amount of real or personal estate. What that amount was varied from colony to colony and from time to time, especially because of the great fluctuation of currency values during the colonial period. In Massachusetts, for example, one needed to be "rateable at twenty pounds estate," that is, possessed of property assessed at £20. In the case of real estate its assessed value was arbitrarily defined as the amount it would bring if rented for six years. In a rural town certainly most of the male adults possessed enough property to meet this qualification. Those who failed were often younger men or artisans still apprenticed to master craftsmen.

But as the New England town grew in size and in complexity, the percentage of inhabitants qualified to vote in town affairs apparently dropped. A study I have made of the town of Newburyport, Mass., reveals some interesting statistics concerning the town's electorate. "A List of Voters Agreeable to the Tax of 1773" shows precisely who possessed the right to vote in that year. Using deeds, wills, newspaper advertisements, birth and marriage records, and several other sources, I have been able to reconstruct the town's population with what I hope is a reasonable degree of accuracy. I have concluded that no fewer than 699 adult males were living in Newburyport in 1773.

Again relying on such records as I could lay my hands on, I divided up the town's adult male population as completely as possible into six occupational groups: the merchants and professional men (including shipmasters) comprising about 25 percent; shopkeepers and innholders, 4 percent; domestic artisans, 25 percent; maritime artisans, 20 percent; laborers, 11 percent; and unknowns, 15 percent. Breaking the population down into voters and non-voters showed how the property qualification worked in the town of Newburyport. While nearly 80 percent of all merchants, shipmasters, professional men, shopkeepers, and innholders could vote, less than 60 percent of the artisans could meet the requirements. For the laborers and unknowns, the qualifying percentage was only a little over 40. For the town as a whole just under 60 percent of the adult males could satisfy the property qualification for voting in 1773.

Though easily qualifying as voters, the merchants, shipmasters, and their professional allies, along with the shopkeepers too, constituted only a little more than a third of town meeting. If the upper class controlled local affairs, it was not the result of the property qualification. But with few exceptions this merchant

group dominated the political activities of the town just as surely as though its members were the only qualified voters. In the critical decade between 1764 and 1773 a total of 46 selectmen were chosen, including reelections. Thirty-three times town meeting turned to a merchant or professional man to fill one of these important offices. Two-thirds of the 26 different men chosen were of the uppermost class. The town's representative in General Court during the period was consistently a merchant or lawyer, and other influential posts—as assessors, wardens, and members of the innumerable special committees—were also invariably controlled by the merchant group.

To some extent this political domination can be explained by the upper class' greater interest in public affairs. The merchants probably attended town meeting more regularly than other voters and may well have constituted a majority of the smaller meetings, no quorum apparently being necessary to conduct business. Rarely did more than half the electorate take part in most meetings. For the merchants—often neighbors with one another on the better streets in town, interrelated by marriage, and members of exclusive social groups like the Masonic lodge—public responsibility was difficult to abdicate. Certainly a “stake-in-society” attitude played some role in sustaining their interest in town affairs.

The artisans and laborers, on the other hand, made a more unwieldy political action group. Comparative ignorance of the important issues of the day and the difficulty of identifying with their significance probably led to considerable apathy at the polls. With little time off from the workbench and without independent wealth, only a few artisans and other workers could have filled political office even if elected.

But I think that the most important factor working against the establishment of a democratic town meeting lay in the social and economic inequalities found in the community itself. In Newburyport, as in other maritime centers, the merchants, shipmasters, and professional men were long used to command. Not only the active shipmasters, but also many of the merchants who had but recently retired to more sedentary careers, spoke with a quarterdeck authority few citizens dared challenge in this maritime community. Since many of the artisans and laborers had shipped before the mast in their youth, and others continued to do so, it is little wonder that they obediently listened when the same voices commanded their attention in town meeting.

Society in many of the agricultural towns of the interior, while admittedly more democratic than in the eastern seaports, was far

from the egalitarian ideal suggested by later observers. We have already noted the beginnings of differences among the original proprietors and their descendants and among those property holders whose forebears had arrived too late for admissions to proprietorship. Even among the proprietors themselves those who had the good fortune to draw two or three times in the original division of land enjoyed an important headstart in the acquisition of a landed estate of significant proportions. All but the smallest villages had their innkeepers, physicians, ministers of course, and local squires. Although these gentlemen were not nearly so numerous as their seaport counterparts, they enjoyed a nearly equal status. To these men the farming communities customarily turned for leadership, showing them somewhat the same deference accorded the merchants of the seaports. When it came time for the town of Dudley, for instance, to decide which of its citizens should be granted the right to build pews in the meeting house, town meeting agreed that those men whose names stood highest on the tax list should receive the honor.

These inequalities in social and economic status were important when projected into the realities of town meeting. In the first place most voting was done by voice or by show of hands. If the moderator, invariably a member of the elite, could not determine the town's decision, he usually asked those in favor and against to go to opposite sides of the house. Most officers were elected by a show of hands, though written ballots were commonly used for the choice of selectmen and town representatives. But as late as 1793 Salem's William Bentley noted in his diary that "The selectmen were chosen for the first time within my knowledge by Ballot." His concluding remark, that "not one of the former number was rechosen" may tell us much about the significance of secret voting! Given the choice, most people would prefer to be counted in private, particularly on controversial issues pitting employer against employee, landlord against tenant, or even neighbor against neighbor. When Newburyport adopted by voice vote a resolution denouncing the declaration of war in June 1812, only three dissents were recorded in town meeting. And yet less than 5 months later 165 citizens voted by secret ballot for the retention of Madison in the White House.

Political democracy depends on more than a broadly held franchise. Life in colonial New England was something less than democratic, and without a high degree of social and economic equality true political democracy does not easily flourish. Not until the midnineteenth century, when the last vestiges of property

qualifications had been removed, and when the leveling breezes of Jacksonian democracy had at last been felt in New England's interior, did the habit of deference toward one's betters disappear from the scene. Today, as anyone who has served in exasperation on a local school or planning committee will testify, respect for wise and intelligent leadership has too frequently given way to a cantankerous obstructionism.

How much real power did town meeting enjoy? One thing is sure: the towns were created by the colonial legislature and derived all their powers from that source. Only in Connecticut might it be argued that the colonial government was a confederation of towns, and even there the general assembly gained the upper hand before the end of the seventeenth century. Most of the functions of town meeting were in keeping with instructions handed down from the legislature. Towns were required, for instance, to provide inhabitants with adequate means of protection, to survey lands, to build highways where possible, to provide schools, and to support the poor. Although taxes were collected by the town's own officials, the amount of State tax was of course determined by the General Court. Despite having a free hand in these "prudential affairs," town meeting was more an instrument of the colonial government than a sovereign assembly in its own right.

The relationship between colony and town was often one of casual indifference during much of the colonial period. The town of Dudley, for instance, though founded in 1732, saw no reason to undertake the expense of sending a representative to General Court until 1756. The delegate must have disliked what he saw, for after sticking it out another year, he withdrew from the scene, and Dudley again went unrepresented until late 1774. Most towns, however, had a better record than that, especially during times of crisis, when a broad basis for action was particularly important.

Each of the two levels of government depended on the other in different ways. Towns did not hesitate to plead special causes to the legislature by means of resolutions sent direct to the assembly or by instructions to their representatives. At no time were these lines of communication used more decisively than during the growing crisis with Great Britain. A wealth of political philosophy and action is found in the town meeting instructions to delegates that they stand firm in the face of Parliamentary oppression. It was a two-way street, and when the General Court needed to know the drift of public opinion on a particular issue it simply inquired of the towns. In May 1776, for instance, the voters in each Massachusetts town were asked whether they thought the time had come

for the Continental Congress to declare the colonies free and independent. The General Court even submitted the Articles of Confederation to the individual towns for approval in 1778. This tradition of giving advice through resolutions and instructions is one of the most significant powers of town meeting.

Town meeting as a New England institution had great value. Perhaps no better way has yet been devised for the airing of public grievances and the settling of divisive local issues. Until well into the nineteenth century participation in town meeting by the ablest of the inhabitants was a matter of course. In the hurly-burly of his other commitments John Adams found time in 1775 to serve as selectman in Braintree and as chairman of several committees drawing up resolutions of action concerning the Continental Association and other critical matters. For less exalted members of town meeting there were other myriad offices which needed to be filled. Any interested freeholder could gain experience in local government with little difficulty. As a training ground for future statesmen New England town meeting was certainly significant.

By the opening of the nineteenth century the power of the Puritan church had begun to wane in New England. In similar fashion the monopolistic grip of the town proprietors on undivided reserves had long since lost its significance in the face of the opening of western lands. But town meeting remained to give continued cohesiveness to the community and its inhabitants. Though discarded in favor of municipal government in the growing cities, *town meeting continues today a common institution in New England*. Ironically, the greatest threat to its success probably now comes from too much democracy rather than too little. Perhaps the good citizens of Braintree worried about the same problem in 1788 when they voted "that it shall be considered as a disorder & treated as such for any person who shall git on the seats with their Feet in any part of the meeting House."

Reprography

"Reprography" is a new word and still unknown in many languages. It is a collective term for the processes of facsimile reproduction of documents of all kinds, known separately as photo-copies, micro-copies, blue prints, electro-copies, thermo-copies etc.

— Invitation to the 1st International Congress on Reprography, to be held in Cologne in 1963.