

# Early Town Records of New England as Historical Sources

By DOUGLAS EDWARD LEACH\*

Vanderbilt University

THE early settlers of New England—Bradford, Winthrop, Williams, and the rest—brought with them from England a firmly established concept and tradition of local community government, in particular town and parish government.<sup>1</sup> Plymouth Plantation reluctantly, and Massachusetts Bay eagerly and with almost unseemly haste, reached out from the original points of settlement to found new towns as offshoots and satellites of Plymouth and Boston. Likewise in Connecticut a number of distinct communities were in existence soon after the original migration from the Bay Colony. In Rhode Island separate towns were established by different groups of contentious reformers and refugees, while along the ocean-scoured coast of Maine still other towns came into being. Thus by the second half of the seventeenth century New England was already dotted with a galaxy of distinct townships, some quite close together and others fairly remote and isolated. One thinks not only of Boston, Hartford, Plymouth, and Providence, but also of such pulsing communities as Medford, Weymouth, Bridgewater, Newport, Saybrook, and Northampton.

By the character of the country and by the deliberate planning of the settlers themselves the township in New England became the unit of government closest to the people and most immediately answerable to their needs. Almost without exception—certainly in the early days—these towns were inhabited by people who had come together to live as neighbors for some compelling reason, often religious. At the outset, then, the typical New England town

\* The author, a native of Rhode Island, received his doctorate from Harvard University in 1952. He was on the faculty of Bates College from 1950 to 1956, and in 1956 he transferred to Vanderbilt University where he is now an associate professor of history. He is the author of *Flinlock and Tomahawk: New England in King Philip's War* (New York, 1958). 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 Benjamin W. Labaree and Howard W. Crocker are also published in this issue.

<sup>1</sup> Wallace Notestein, *The English People on the Eve of Colonization, 1603-1630*, p. 240-243 (*New American Nation Series*, ed. by Henry Steele Commager and Richard B. Morris; New York, c. 1954).

had a strong sense of common interest and common purpose. It has been well observed that in the early New England town the political community, the economic community, and the religious community were virtually identical. These people, for the most part wielders of the hoe and followers of the plow, saw life in relatively simple terms. They wanted to serve God and to prosper—and to be let alone by outsiders. Each family bore the basic responsibility for its own well-being, subject of course to the general good of the community; and the general good of the community was what made town government and the town meeting essential.

From the very day on which a new township was founded the townsmen kept written records of their official transactions. The legal and other reasons for doing so were compelling, and English precedent was deeply ingrained. Just as in our day every newly founded club with some pretensions to lasting importance begins to keep a series of minutes, so the newly formed town would purchase one or more skin-bound volumes of blank pages and begin to keep its own official records. These would include records of grants and sales of land; records of births, marriages, and deaths; and records of questions raised and decisions reached at town meetings. As time passed, the first one or two volumes would become filled, additional ones would be obtained, and sometimes the earliest volume would be identified by marking it "Vol. A" or "Vol. I," with the subsequent volumes following in order.

How important are these town records as historical sources? The answer depends upon what kind of information is being sought. Naturally I can speak with greatest assurance when describing my own experience in exploring the records of some 75 New England towns as part of my study of King Philip's War. The opportunity of learning from someone else's hard experience will, I trust, make you indulgent with my focusing the spotlight on my own work.

Although some of the volumes of town records have been gathered into central repositories of one kind or another, most are still held in the offices of town and city clerks. This means that the researcher must travel extensively, perhaps even adventurously, if he wants to see them all. As an "impecunious party," being then a graduate student, I made the rounds in a battered old wooden-bodied station wagon that required frequent dosing with water on hot days and thick cheap oil in all weathers. In this dubious vehicle I had put a mattress so that I might avoid the expense of

staying at hotels, although I did treat myself occasionally to the luxury of a room in the local Y.M.C.A.

Custodians of the town records often appeared slightly astonished and a little bewildered when I appeared before them with my briefcase and cardboard file boxes and demanded to see "Vol. A, Town Votes, 1659-1713." Occasionally this was their first glimmering that such a thing existed anywhere in the world, let alone in their own cluttered precincts. The clerk, or I, or both of us, would then plunge into the interior of the safe and, if lucky, would emerge dirty but triumphant. All too often, however, the desired volume could not be found, although a useful nineteenth-century transcript laboriously made by some devoted local antiquarian might be available. I hasten to add, incidentally, that many town clerks were genuinely interested in the early history of their communities and displayed an intelligent awareness of the precious volumes in their custody.

A passing line or two in a musty volume of town records may help to enlarge our understanding of major events in history, or may simply uncover some homely fact of everyday life in colonial times such as Wallingford's method of plugging up a leak in the mill dam with cartloads of manure.<sup>2</sup> The Warwick town meeting of April 20, 1674, ordered "That pomham [an Indian] be paid out of ye tresury of this towne what is justly dew by order of this towne for killing A woolfe if ther be money in ye tresurry," thereby revealing to posterity something about predatory wildlife, Indian relations, and even the financial embarrassment of a frontier town.<sup>3</sup> The Taunton Proprietors' records depict the sometimes difficult process of buying land from the Indians, in one case a tract owned by King Philip himself. After considerable maneuvering and expenditure of time on the part of Taunton men, the land was "through difficulty obteyned of Philip Sachim" in 1672.

During the dangerous period of the Indian uprising in 1675 and 1676 many frontier towns had to make drastic alterations in the normal pattern of economic life. A typical trend was toward communal agriculture, even communistic agriculture. In Billerica, for example, the constables were authorized to draft workers for the care of crops belonging to absent soldiers.<sup>4</sup> The men of Westfield ("considering the hand of God upon us in sturing or Leting Lus the heathen upon us So that now wee cannot cary on our

<sup>2</sup> Wallingford Town Records (transcript), vol. 1, p. 70-71.

<sup>3</sup> Warwick Records (transcript by Marshall Morgan), Town Book A-2, p. 123.

<sup>4</sup> Billerica Records (transcript), 1653-85, p. 187.

ocasons for a lively hood as formerly" and in order to "be in a way of geting food for our families") agreed to a plan of communal agriculture under the direction of an appointed committee.<sup>5</sup> Men were to be assigned their tasks in the field, and the harvest would be shared according to need.

Then, when the war was over, the towns began the job of reconverting to normalcy. The town records illuminate this process of transition also, as when Middletown voted to convert its watchhouse into a schoolhouse. Later the town laid plans to build a new schoolhouse near the watchhouse.<sup>6</sup> Even the very layout of a town might be affected by the war and its aftermath. Both for comeliness and for security a Suffield committee decided that the town should be settled "by dwelling pretty neere together."<sup>7</sup> Persons who before the Indian war had constructed homes in the outskirts were now encouraged to build in or near the village.

In some towns the records for the war years were missing altogether, due to war damage or other causes. Even when the sequence of entries was unbroken the war was mentioned, for the most part, only indirectly. Of course much valuable information could be gleaned from tax records and other more or less routine entries. Occasionally one found the town debating such matters as the erection of palisades or the equipping of soldiers, but of lengthy comment upon the great crisis of the times there was none. And naturally so, because the job of the town clerk was to record routine business. Besides, he assumed that everybody knew all about the Indian uprising anyway. So the researcher working in local records must be prepared to probe below the surface of bald and apparently routine entries.

Occasionally—and how bright and shining are those rare occasions—one does find a sharply drawn, brief depiction of some episode that except for this record would have been lost forever. Take this entry from the Providence town records by way of example:

Memorand that on the 25 of August 1676 (so called there came into this Towne One Chuff an Indian so calld in time of peace, because of his Sur-lines against the English He could Scarce come in being wounded Some few dayes before by Providence Men His wounds were corrupted & stanck & because he had bene a Ring leader all the War to most of the Mischiefs to our Howses & Cattell, & what English he could: The Inhabitants of the Towne cried out for Justice against him threatning themselves to kill him if

<sup>5</sup> Westfield Miscellaneous Records, 1675-94.

<sup>6</sup> Middletown Town Votes and Proprietors' Records, vol. 1 (1652-1735), p. 121, 131.

<sup>7</sup> Suffield Town Records, vol. 1, Sept. 25, 1677.

the Authoritie did not: For which Reason the Cap: Roger Williams Caused the Drum to be beat, the Toun Councell & Councell of War called, all cried for Justice & Execution, the Councell of War gave sentence & he was shot to Death, to the great satisfaction of the Towne.<sup>8</sup>

How much those few sentences tell us about the pitiful condition of the Indians in the closing days of the war and about the bitter vindictiveness of the settlers, against which even Roger Williams apparently did not care to struggle!

Great events such as wars, political upheavals, and religious revivals, colony-wide in scope, may not be systematically chronicled in the records of particular townships, and the researcher may have to scratch very hard to uncover significant material on such topics. But if the purpose of going into town records is rather to feel the pulse of a community year after year, in good times and bad, and to see what were the problems faced by that particular group and how they were dealt with, then town records may prove a rich source indeed. I am inclined to believe that these promising sources have sometimes been neglected by historians, perhaps because of the difficulties of access and use. Town clerks' offices are not the most comfortable places to perch for long hours, but the discomforts and inconveniences may well be compensated a hundredfold.

Where else but in town records can we watch so closely the day-to-day functioning of local government as it deals with all the routine matters of community life? Here we find the titles of the various town officers, from selectmen down to hog reeves, and read the instructions given them by their fellow citizens in town meeting assembled.

It is ordered that thre men shall be apoynted to warne towne meetings each one in ther severall Circuits, he which warns from John Persons to M<sup>r</sup> Nelsons shall have 4 pence a tyme he which warnes the midle of the towne shall have 2 pence a tyme and he which warnes Bradford strete shall have 2 pence a tyme, and in Case any pson or famyly that is att home be vnwarned he that warnes in that quarter shall pay for every defecte herein six pence<sup>9</sup>

We find a variety of town regulations designed to protect the well-being of the community.

Wheras there have bene great danger of great damage by foule Chimnies it is therefore ordered that the second day after the publication heroft all thached Chimnies in the towne shall be swept and all thached houses shall

<sup>8</sup> *The Early Records of the Town of Providence*, 8:13 (Providence, 1895).

<sup>9</sup> *The Early Records of the Town of Rowley, Massachusetts, 1639-1672*, p. 57 (Rowley, 1894).

be swept that day fortnight and ol clapboard houses that day month and brick chimnies on the same day alsoe and this to continue till the first of may . . . .<sup>10</sup>

Town finances are often laid before us in these yellowed pages. We can learn how taxes were decided upon, apportioned, and collected, and for what purposes the money was disbursed. In short, the whole functioning machinery of New England town government—simple, direct, relatively democratic, eminently practical—is seen at work.

Anyone who has done research in town records will agree that the town clerks probably used more ink in recording the distribution and sale of land than on any other subject. After all, land was the one great distributable asset of every new township. This land usually was vested in the proprietors or original grantees by the General Court, and often the proprietors kept records of their own, distinct from the records of the town itself. Every piece of land surveyed and distributed to private persons had to be accounted for and subsequently the title had to be maintained.<sup>11</sup> Consequently the local records bulge with entries concerning original divisions of common land, further divisions and subdivisions, and the buying and selling of lots.

A historian interested in watching the growth and development of some particular colonial town can by careful study of the local land records show exactly how the available land was originally divided into home lots and outlying fields and how the remaining undivided land was later distributed. The history of a piece of land through the pages of town records may not be so exciting as the progress of scalping parties in an Indian war or the relations between a pious colonial governor and certain notorious pirates, but it does contribute greatly to our knowledge of how New Englanders settled on a tract of land and, once there, how they met the challenge of growth. This, of course, is an integral part of the story of westward expansion.

Certainly the social historian will find much to interest him in town records. The everyday life of the village, matters of rank and prestige, methods of agriculture, local customs and prejudices, problems of education and religion, and the constant battle against wrongdoing, all are reflected in these pages. Often such matters are clearly depicted with specific information, giving the social historian case after case for his files. But even when the facts are half hidden behind brief routine entries, much may be inferred by

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>11</sup> George Lee Haskins, *Law and Authority in Early Massachusetts*, p. 172 (New York, 1960).

the alert and well-informed student. Like an orange, these old records have to be squeezed a bit.

Consider how much we may learn about village life in seventeenth-century New England from just a few sample entries, chosen almost at random from the records of one New England town.<sup>12</sup>

It is ordered and agreed that all common Gates and perticuler mens fences joyning upon any Corne feild shall be manteined against Great Catle at all times and if they be not sufently made to turne Great Catle at any time when Catle may doe hurte upon Corne . . . .

Wheras their is hurt done yearly by Cattell eating and treading on mens Rye in the northeast field in winter time upon sudden thaughes and at breaking up of frosts at spring it is therrfore ordered that if any Cattle be found within the said fild after the Publishing hereof that it shall be lawfull for the Pinder to put them in the Pen and to be paid for poundage as for Cattle in other places as also the owners are hearby lyable to all damages done by any such Cattle on mens Corne

. . . it is ordered that all maner of swine which shall be found in any Corne or meadow wheresoever they shall be liable to pay double damage notwithstanding any order or Custome to the Contrary except they be sufficiently yoaked and ringged: which yoake shall be one foot and halfe upward and one foot and eight inches the Cross barre for every hogg of a yeare old and for others ether yunger or elder proportionably acording to the descretion of the overseers

att a leagall towne meeting held the 3 day of the 12 mo<sup>th</sup> 1656 it was agreed by the towne that all male childrin shall pay to the scole men when they are 4 years ould till they Come to be 8 years ould also it was agreed at the same meeting that wiliam bointon shud have five pound lent him out of the churches stock towards the building of an end to his hous upon this con-dion that if he keep the scolle seven years this five pound is to bee void but in case he leave the scol before seven years be out the said hous end is to be prised by two indiferant men and the one half of the pris of the said hous end soe prised shall the said wiliam bointon is to returne to the church againe

Leutenant Brockellbanke Henry Rily Thomas Wood and John Grant, Jachin Ranor and John Mighill, havinge ingaged for to make a pen for to catch wolves, had that priviledge granted that no boddy else should make any pen, any where upon the cow commons, duringe the space of three years, and were to have for every wolfe taken by there pen fifty shillings, payed by the towne.

It is ordered that noe Inhabitant or owner of any house or land in the Towne shall bring in any Tenant to Dwell thering without the consent of the towne under The penaltie of 19 shillings the moneth every month they continue in the towne or bounds of the towne without consent

<sup>12</sup> *Early Records of the Town of Rowley*, p. 55, 74, 88, 95, 109, 148.



It is like wise ordered That noe man shall sell any house or land more or less unto any stranger before he offer the same to the select Men at an Indef-erant vallue upon paine of ninteene shillings the moneth for every percill of land soe disposed of contrary to this order

Lo, the poor farmer in those days! Roving hogs, if not yoked, squeezed between his fence rails to eat his corn; intruding cattle threatened his winter rye; and wolves destroyed his cows. Education for his sons was compulsory but not free. And he lived in what today we should call a "restricted community." No one could dwell there, either as tenant or owner, without permission of the authorities. Communities in those days screened out the indigent, the irresponsible, and the unorthodox.

From these brief entries in a town record book we get quite a bit of information about one town's daily life and everyday problems. If we were willing to spend the time necessary to read carefully the full record for the entire first century of the town's existence, our view would be wonderfully broadened and deepened. Were we to do the same thing for a goodly number of other communities scattered from Maine to Connecticut, we would be in a position to speak with some confidence about New England towns in colonial times.

Town records after the eighteenth century are another matter. Obviously they became more voluminous and complex as communities grew and were confronted with more diverse problems. Improvement in legibility is overbalanced by increasing quantity, and this is true of all governmental records. But fortunately that is a problem for others. I am thankful to be working in the colonial period of our history.

May I conclude with a brief postscript on the condition and custody of New England town records. First of all I must say frankly that my contact with the records themselves in their own habitat occurred some years ago. It may be that conditions have changed greatly since then, but I doubt it. I feel quite confident that my observations of a previous day are still, in the main, valid.

The condition of the original records varies greatly. Some volumes are still firmly bound and easily readable; others are tattered, faded, and crumbling. Many communities, I was happy to notice, have gone to the expense of having their precious early records safeguarded by lamination, but other towns still rely solely upon the custodian's warning to each researcher, "Treat 'em gently!" Time is taking its toll.

I was always glad whenever I found a good transcript available for use with the original records. Many of these transcripts were



made in the nineteenth century, and they vary widely in quality. Some omit whole entries, besides committing the lesser sins of altering spelling and punctuation. The only really good transcript, at least for the purposes of the serious scholar, is an exact copy of the original in clear handwriting or typescript. In any case, the careful researcher must frequently compare the transcript with the original, whenever possible, to make sure he is not being led astray by the inaccuracies of a zealous but untrained antiquarian. When used with due caution, however, transcripts can save many hours of close work with the difficult and faded handwriting of an earlier day. Transcribing the early records would be an excellent local project for many communities, the main problem being to find transcribers with the necessary ability and devotion. As is well known, the Works Progress Administration did some good work in this field in the 1930's.

Many towns are even so fortunate as to own published versions of their early records. As in the case of transcripts, when they are good they are very, very good, but when they are bad they are horrid. Everything depends upon the skill and determination of the editor. From the point of view of research, it would be wonderful if all early town records could be brought out in print, with adequate indexes, but the costs are often prohibitive.

Finally, I should like to say a few words about the custody of the original records without, I hope, treading on too many toes. Usually, as I have indicated, the venerable volumes are still held in the office of the town clerk. Many such offices are now reasonably well equipped with fireproof vaults, and there the records are reasonably safe, although all kinds of persons do gain admission to the vaults for all kinds of purposes. Too often, however, town records are still stored rather haphazardly in places difficult of access and not absolutely proof against fire. I even found one set of colonial records in a farmhouse kitchen. Would it not be possible to persuade the towns to transfer custody of their colonial records to some central authority, which would house them properly and make them readily available to all legitimate researchers? As an alternative, State governments might undertake an extensive program of microfilming. This would not only increase the usefulness of town records by making it unnecessary for the eager but financially embarrassed graduate student to travel and sleep in a nondescript vehicle but would also assure their preservation for future generations. These town records of colonial New England are truly valuable historical sources, and should be so treated.