

HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Town meeting evolution

The following is an excerpt from a talk that former Moderator C. Peter R. Gossels delivered at a Wayland Historical Society program on Oct. 2. This is the first of two parts.

I am grateful to Joanne Davis for providing me with a copy of the first 94 pages of Sudbury's Town Book dating back to 1639, which cover the first 10 years of the town's political records. Unfortunately, the Town Book tells us little about Sudbury's earliest town meetings.

It is, in fact, not clear from the Town Book if there were

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any town meetings, as such, held during the first five years of the town, because the orders and grants of land were generally signed, variously, by Brian Pendleton, Peter Noyes, Walter Hayne and Edmund Rice, Edmund Brown and/or George Muning, who had represented the town when it purchased the first five square miles. These men signed their names in the Town Book without claiming a title, although they may have thought of themselves as "commissioners" who drew their authority from the General Court.

The first town meeting may have been held in or about April 1640, because the Town Book refers to the "inhabitants of the towns" as having ordered and agreed that certain lands be laid out. By 1641, the town orders are attributed to the "freemen of the town." In 1642, the Town Book refers to "the general consent of the townsmen."



Former Moderator C. Peter R. Gossels FILE PHOTO

On Feb. 17, 1642, Wayland hired John Rutter to construct a meeting house 30 feet long and 20 feet wide with six clearstory windows, two with four lights and four with three lights apiece. The frame was to be raised during the fourth week of May 1642, but for reasons untold, the frame was not actually raised until May 16, 1643, a year later.

Sudbury's first meeting house, located at the town's north cemetery just off Bow Road, was designed to serve as a place of assembly for the residents of Sudbury, for social gatherings, for town meetings and for worship services. It was not heated, forcing those at town meetings in later years to adjourn the proceedings to one of the local inns.

It is likely, I believe, that Sudbury's first formal town meeting was held sometime in 1643 after the residents were summoned to the new meeting house by drummers hired by the town. There were no newspapers or television stations in Sudbury after all. And votes were apparently counted as they are in Parliament today by dividing the house. Those supporting the main motion were asked to gather on one side of the room, while those who were contrary-minded were instructed to gather on the other side.

By April 25, 1644, it appears that Peter Noyes, Walter Hayne, Edmund Rice, Brian Pendleton, William Ward, John Goodnow and Edmund Goodnow were granted the authority to "dis-

pose of the Towns affairs for one year" as our selectmen are charged to this day. These men were also given the authority to dispose of upland as Edmund Brown, Brian Pendleton, Walter Hayne and George Muning had been authorized to do in 1639 in their capacity as commissioners, except that the authority of the 1644 body to dispose of such upland was limited to 6 acres.

The first reference in the Town Book to a vote of a general town meeting appears in the Nov. 30, 1646 entry and the first reference to "select men" appears in the Nov. 29, 1647 entry.

Birth of Wayland

A lot has occurred since then:

After several years of heated controversy among the settlers of Sudbury, a group of about 47 young people from Sudbury/Wayland led by John Ruddock and Edmund Rice obtained a new grant from the General Court to found the town now known as the city of Marlborough, because they had not been able to persuade Sudbury's selectmen to grant them the land they needed to support themselves.

In 1675, Metacomet, the son of Massasoit, known to the English as "King Philip," began a series of attacks on settler towns, including the bloody ambush in Sudbury that occurred in April 1676, until he and his Native American supporters were defeated later that year.

On July 2, 1776, one hundred years later, the American colonies declared their independence from England and her royal family. (Yes, it was on July 2 that the vote for independence was taken.)

Four years later, in April 1780, the inhabitants on the eastern side of the Muske-taquid River, now known as the Sudbury River, finally persuaded the General Court to allow them to organize a separate town,

which was named East Sudbury. Its new legislature, like that of other towns, was the town meeting.

Massachusetts abolished slavery in 1783, three years later, based on the opinion of the Supreme Judicial Court in *Commonwealth v. Jennison*, commonly known as the Quock Walker case.

In 1835, the Town Meeting of East Sudbury decided to change the name of the town to Wayland. No one knows how that name came to be chosen.

At some time in the 1800s, the General Court directed Massachusetts towns to elect their selectmen, their treasurer and other town officers by ballot rather than by vote of town meeting, presumably to give those who could not, or did not, attend town meeting a chance to vote for those officers without disclosing whom they had voted for.

In 1850, the town of Wayland established the first free public library in Massachusetts, the second in the U.S.

In 1861 to 1865, residents of Sudbury and Wayland served in the Civil War. They did so again between 1917 and 1918, the First World War.

On Aug. 26, 1920, the secretary of state of the U.S. proclaimed that the 19th Amendment to the Constitution of the United States had been ratified, declaring that "the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex."

Residents of Sudbury and Wayland served in the armed forces of the U.S. during the Second World War (1941-45) and later in the Korean War (1951-54).

After the end of the Second World War, Wayland welcomed an unprecedented surge of new residents and large new subdivisions, like Woodridge, were developed to accept these young people. From a pop-

ulation of 3,904 in 1945, Wayland grew to 13,282 in 1975. Four new schools were built to educate the children, including a high school campus that was discussed and admired across the country. Our population has barely increased since then.

Town meetings

When Nancy and I arrived in Wayland in the spring of 1961, 50 years ago, Wayland enjoyed its first town meeting in the gymnasium of the new high school, which had been featured on the cover of *Life* magazine. Town meetings were held in March then, when it was still cold, especially for those who went outside to smoke, a common activity at the time.

Roger Stokey was our moderator, Tom Linnehan chaired the Board of Selectmen, and Bob Morgan served as chairman of the Finance Committee.

Everyone, except for Leila Sears, the town clerk, faced the moderator at town meeting, which appropriated a total budget of \$2,234,918.84 to run the town, including \$10 for the moderator's salary.

Votes were counted by voice vote or by standing counted votes.

This year, by comparison, our operating budget totaled almost \$71 million and our capital budget was \$4.74 million, but there was no salary for the moderator. And, we no longer show cents as part of our line items, nor do we pay our taxes with corn and other such items as our ancestors did.

Town meetings in the 1960s and 1970s under Roger Stokey and his successor, David Leith, were conducted in a manner not so different from those during the last 30 years, with some important differences. The School Committee and the Finance Committee offered lengthy oral reports each year that often re-

quired 40 minutes to complete. Anyone wishing to speak had to be recognized by the moderator and wait for a high school student to bring him or her a microphone on a long cord. Speakers who agreed with each other often monopolized debate, because the moderator had to guess what a speaker might say before recognizing the speaker. The average time needed to dispose of an article was generally much greater than it is today, unless the moderator made a special effort to urge speakers to curtail their remarks. And the conduct of town meetings was entirely left to the discretion of the moderator because Wayland had adopted no rules to regulate how town meetings would be conducted, except for a few bylaws.