

"SHARON, MASSACHUSETTS: A HISTORY"

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SHARON TOWN GOVERNMENT

1976, SHARON AMERICAN REVOLUTION
BICENTENNIAL COMMITTEE

SHARON TOWN GOVERNMENT

By Wilfred H. Howe

CHAPTER 35

INTRODUCTION

The history of Town Government in Sharon portrays successful Democracy in Action. Sharon has enjoyed honest and effective local government well served by many officers, employees, and dedicated citizens.

It is obviously beyond the scope of this discussion to cover past and present detail. The Sharon Public Library has a considerable collection of material on Town History, from the earliest days to the present. Annual Town Reports and other documents are on file at the Library and the Town Hall. There is an excellent 52-page *Town Government Handbook* compiled by the League of Women Voters.

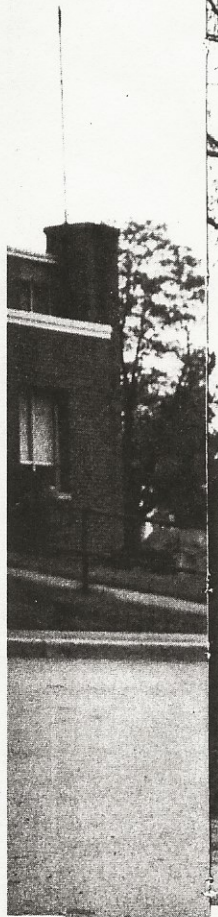
In the following pages, an attempt is made to present a broad overview, indicating how local government was established and how it has grown and has been modified to cope with the problems and the increasing complexity as the Town developed from a tiny settlement, through the stages of a small rural community, then a period with active small industry, to its present status as a very up-to-date and modern suburban "bedroom" town.

"Open town meeting" is a time honored feature of local government in many Massachusetts towns, including Sharon. Every registered voter is entitled to attend, to stand up and be heard, and to vote on every item on the agenda of the meeting. Town meeting vote is required on every town expenditure, on all town by-laws, and on many other town functions. The open town meeting is frequently cited as an outstanding example of successful "pure" democracy.

In outward form, the open town meeting is little changed since the early days. In this section on local government, there is considerable emphasis on tracing the development of this unique form of democratic government to meet the needs of the town as the town has grown and the character of the population has changed.

BACKGROUND

The Puritans who settled Boston came to the New World motivated to worship in accordance with their own religious beliefs. However, this did not mean freedom of religion as this is now understood. The Puritans set up their own "established" church with church and government closely linked. There



was little tolerance for any form of dissension. Every inhabitant belonged within one or another church parish; all the land was a part of some parish, and a corresponding township. This contrasts with the practice in many other states, where land area was divided into counties, and, as settlements developed, the settled areas were incorporated as townships, leaving considerable "county" areas not in any township. Services such as schools in these areas are the responsibility of the county. In Massachusetts, counties do not have these responsibilities, a significant factor in town-county relationships.

Town and parish were almost one and the same. Church membership was a prerequisite for voting and office holding. There were property-income requirements. Church attendance was mandatory, with fines for non-attendance. The expenses of the church, including the salary of the minister, were paid by the Town. The minister was in charge of the schooling, serving as both administrator and teacher. He was generally the best educated man in the community, and was much respected.

There was a large degree of "home rule" in each town, in both religious and temporal matters. This was an inevitable consequence of the difficulties of travel and the lack of communications. However, it was also a matter of policy as well as expedience, and was definitely part and parcel of the colonial government in this area.

There was of course a Royal Governor for the Colony, and trade and commerce outside the colony were closely regulated for the benefit of the mother country, but in most matters affecting day-to-day living, control was almost completely in the hands of the colonists and their local government. While the "General Court," subject to limitations from the Royal Government had full authority respecting the towns, this control was sparingly exercised with "home rule" and self reliance predominant in the towns and corresponding parishes, especially in outlying areas.

EARLY DEVELOPMENTS — PRIOR TO 1765

Sharon received its charter as a separate township in 1765. However, settlement began much earlier, with a couple dozen families in the area as early as 1660. A large area south and east of Boston, extending to the border of the Plymouth colony, was a grant to the Dorchester Proprietors. To provide for an expanding population, the Proprietors opened a considerable area as the "new grant" — the "second precinct" of Dorchester. An area including what are now Stoughton, Canton, Sharon and Foxboro was set off and incorporated as the Town of Stoughton in 1726.

Settlements developed along the roads, such as they were. There were two through roads in what is now Sharon. The Bay Road, now the eastern boundary of Sharon, was a direct route to Taunton, and thence by water to Narragansett Bay and beyond. The Post Road meandered from Boston through what are now Dedham, Norwood, Walpole, Sharon and Foxboro on to Providence. Some sections of the Post Road in Sharon are still in use — most is abandoned and overgrown. Billings Tavern, née Wainman's Ordinary, was on the Post Road at what is now South Main Street, northeast of the cranberry bog at the Foxboro town line.

The original settlement of what is now Sharon centered around the Billings Tavern. Ebenezer Billings, the proprietor, was a strong and effective leader

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in this tiny community. It is reported that he established honest, kindly relationships with the local Indians. While there was little that would be regarded as local self-government in the area, the friendly relationships with King Philip, the Indian leader, spared the community from devastation in 1675 and 1676 during "King Philip's War."

The center of what was originally incorporated as Stoughton developed around Cobb's Tavern, located where Sharon, Canton and Stoughton now adjoin. This was the location of the Church of the Stoughton parish. Attendance at this church by the people in the community around Billings Tavern was difficult. The trip over the full length of what is now North and South Main Street, the all day church service, with an hour or so of time out for a noon meal, and the trip back in late afternoon was just too much. In 1739, the residents of what is now Sharon petitioned the General Court to be set off as a separate parish and precinct. Stoughton opposed, and the petition was denied that year, but was allowed when the petition was again submitted the next year. The first meeting of the "second precinct" of the Town of Stoughton was held on July 18th, 1740. A moderator, clerk and assessors were elected. A church for the precinct was organized with a membership of 24. At a precinct meeting in August, 100 pounds was appropriated "for preaching." Initially, services were conducted in Billings Tavern. A young man, Philip Curtis, preached to the community on June 7th in 1741, and was "called" to the ministry of the second parish. After some negotiation, he agreed to come at a salary of 150 pounds a year "plus firewood." He commenced his ministry on September 30th, was ordained on January 13th of the following year, and served the town for 55 years. He was an outstanding individual. As minister, he was in charge of the schools, and served as administrator and teacher.

With a separate parish and a new minister, a "meeting house" was next. During the early 1700's, the town had grown along what are now North and South Main Streets, and between what is now the center, and Lake Massapoag. The people from the Billings Tavern area favored locating the Church in that area. However, the majority of the populace preferred a location near the center of the parish. The site finally chosen was at the present center, where the Unitarian-Universalist Church now stands. Building was started in 1743, and completed the following year. By 1747, there were 36 new members, in addition to the original 24.

During this period, the second parish shared in the local government as a part of the Town of Stoughton. It was responsible for its church, school, and poor, and for the roads within its boundaries. There was a single representative to the General Court from the entire Town. Town meetings for the town as a whole were held at the center near Cobb's Corner. Partly because of the inconvenience of attending the meetings at Cobb's Corner, and for other reasons, there was considerable pressure to become a separate township, and in 1765, the community received a charter from the General Court, becoming the Town of Stoughtonham. In 1775, an enabling act by the General Court gave the Town its own representative. Finally, in 1783, the name of the Town was changed to Sharon. The Town initially petitioned to take the name of Washington, but when it was discovered there was already a Town of Washington in the Berkshires, the Biblical name of Sharon (Isaiah 35:2 and 65:10) was selected.

EARLY DAYS OF THE TOWN OF SHARON — 1765 to 1835

The first Town Meeting of the Town of Stoughtonham was held July 8, 1765. Elected were a moderator, three selectmen who were also the assessors and the overseers of the poor, a clerk, a treasurer and a constable. In addition there were 10 surveyors, a fence viewer, a warden, a tythingman, a measurer of leather sealer, 2 field drivers, a deer reave and 6 hog reaves. We still have fence viewers, field drivers and a measurer of leather, but their duties are nominal. Notable by its absence is any school official — schools were the responsibility of the minister. The selectmen were responsible for the roads in addition to their other duties.

The Town meeting was of course basic. Meetings were frequent. In this early and simple society, with a small and stable population, Town Meeting was very effective. The franchise was limited to church membership, with also property-income qualifications. Those who were eligible to vote were responsible men, with a clear understanding of town problems.

Records show that money was the major problem. Town Meetings discussed money for the minister, for schools, for the surveys of Town boundaries, for preservation of fishing rights, and for the poor. The town was frequently in arrears on the salary for the minister and for the teachers. Many of the citizens "worked out" their taxes on the roads. Money problems were exacerbated by wild currency inflation, starting with the Revolutionary War and continuing until years later to complete devaluation of paper money.

From the beginning, there was predominant revolutionary enthusiasm. Spirits ran high in the early days of the Revolutionary War, but was difficult to maintain as the war dragged on, with hardships and defeats. Early in 1775, Town Meeting voted to raise, train and equip a group of "minute men," to serve under the direction of the Massachusetts Committee of Correspondence. Twenty-eight men and 2 officers were enlisted. The Town paid for training and equipment. Later 25 men were hired for the "U.S. Army," with a bounty paid by the Town of 17 pounds for three years' service, later increased to 13 pounds, 6 shillings per year.

Times were hard. There was no effective central government during and for some time after the war. The strong "home rule" tradition stood the Town in good stead. There was much hardship — paper money was becoming worthless, and "hard" money was very scarce. But in those early days, hardship was accepted; the homogeneous, pioneer stock was accustomed to "make do"; the people and their Town managed to cope with problems as they came along.

The population of Sharon stayed at about 1000 from 1765 to 1835. What is now Foxboro was originally a part of Stoughton and became a part of Stoughtonham when this became a separate Town in 1765. In 1778, Foxboro was set off and itself became an independent Town. A number of other changes in the boundaries between Sharon and surrounding towns since that time have produced "artificial" changes in stated population, not the result of births and deaths, nor of people moving in or out.

Church-State and corresponding Town-Parish controversy in the early 1800's added problems. Philip Curtis, a pillar of strength and unity, resigned in 1797 and passed on a year later. He was succeeded by Jonathan Whitaker, an able, well-educated, even brilliant man. He proved to be a divisive force in the

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community at a critical time, and was finally dismissed in 1816. Meanwhile the Christian Society, which later became the First Congregational Church in Sharon, had left the fold. The Baptist congregation was active, and by 1835, there were three churches, including Baptist, in the center, as well as three stores and a one-room school. In 1822, the General Court formally dissolved the bonds between the towns and the church parishes. Schools were taken over by the Town. In our increasingly ecumenical culture, it is difficult to comprehend the importance, the distress and bitterness caused by this religious controversy.

The separation of Church and State was the principal change in town government during this period. Membership in the established church or any other religious body was no longer a requirement for voting and holding office, with a considerable broadening in the franchise. However, the character of the Town and its government remained about the same. Sharon was very much a small town, with a stable, rural population, and a strong home rule. It was still a day's journey from Boston. The Town Meeting was a strong working operation. Meetings were frequent, being called whenever a major problem affecting the Town occurred. The general store at the center was a political as well as a social center. The voters had a full understanding of how the government really worked, and knew personally the men involved. With the broadening of the franchise, there was close approach to a real, working "pure democracy".

GROWTH IN SHARON — 1835 to 1900

Population of Sharon doubled from 1000 in 1835 to 2000 in 1900. The Boston and Providence Railroad started operation in 1835, bringing Sharon much closer to Boston and Providence, and a little later, to New York and the whole outside world. With goods transport no longer limited to ox carts over miserable roads, small industry flourished. Water power was developed, with dams and ponds on the streams. The coming of industry brought other changes as well as the increase of the population. Mill workers, many of whom were brought in from outside the town, tended to be different from Sharon's rural population.

Town government adapted to the needs and wants of this different and larger population. The form of government remained about the same with additions to cope with the growing functions of Town Government. There were Water Commissioners and a water department for the public water system. There were Trustees of the Public Library. A Highway Surveyor took over construction and maintenance of the roads from the Selectmen; there was a Tree Warden, and so on. All these offices came along quite naturally as the needs arose. The earlier offices continued, with the selectmen continuing to serve as assessors and as overseers of the poor.

The School Committee had already been set up, when schools were transferred from the Church to the Town. There is a separate section in this volume on Sharon Schools. However, as a matter of interest in Town Government, from an early date women voted for and served on the School Committee, although not for other Town offices. It appears that this franchise was not widely exercised. The Town Report for the year 1900, when the Town population was 2000, shows 110 women registered to vote and 36 actually voting for School Committee in that year.

nished 146 men, 8 over quota; 18 died in service. The town provided \$12.00 per month for each man in the service. A committee was established and empowered to grant additional funds to needy service families. However, in contrast to the Revolutionary War, there was a strong federal government; although conditions were simply awful by any modern standards, personal hardships in this area were significantly less in the Civil War than during the Revolution.

During this period, the procedure of contracting the care of the poor to the lowest bidder was supplanted by a Town Almshouse (poor farm). This was a quite extensive farm. Most of the food for the inmates was raised on the premises, with inmates providing labor within the limits of their capabilities. Surplus produce, including milk, chickens and eggs, potatoes, and other farm products were sold, to a considerable extent to the Sharon Sanatorium. (The final action in this Almshouse operation came in 1919, with a Town meeting vote to sell the property). Before, during, and long after this period, the selectmen continued to be the overseers of the poor.

Gradually town government became more formal. Town Meeting became an annual affair, authorizing annual budgets, and conducting routine business. There were occasional "special" meetings as needs arose. The Warrant for the town meeting for the year 1900 shows 23 articles. There was the usual blanket article for appropriations for Town operations. There was an article regarding wage rate for labor on the highways; another article proposed authorization to purchase land for a dumping ground; there were the usual routine articles. All pretty much cut and dried. However, in 1900, there were only 385 registered male voters eligible to vote in Town Meeting. A good many of these had been born and brought up in Sharon. There was still a high degree of personal communication both ways between the majority of voters and the government of the town.

This development of formal procedures was in part the result of increase in regulation of local affairs by the State legislature. Laws covering all kinds of Town operations were passed; boards and commissions were established which promulgated rules and regulations. This was a significant trend, particularly toward the end of the nineteenth century. It is still increasing. Many of the regulations are desirable, and often necessary for the protection and safety of the citizens. A number provide for standard practices, for dealing with all kinds of situations. They are, generally, well intended. However, particularly in recent times, there has been considerable criticism of the bureaucracy inevitably involved in centralization of control. Rules, once established, are difficult to erase, even though outmoded. In many instances, judgements made locally with a knowledge of local situations are superior to more or less arbitrary rules intended to cover a whole gamut of conditions. Regardless of the pros and cons, the very effective "home rule" practised in the Towns in Massachusetts in earlier days has been wiped out to a very considerable extent. And one of the results is a much more formal, less flexible Town Government.

SHARON TOWN GOVERNMENT IN THE 20TH CENTURY

By the turn of the Century, promotion of Sharon as the healthiest town in Massachusetts was well under way. Sharon was assuming its present character

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as a suburban residential community. There was excellent rail service to Boston, and a street railway with connections all over the area. Population growth, already increasing, has continued right up to the present, more than doubling in the past 25 years. Small industry in town has almost completely disappeared. The recent revival of industrial development has been entirely out on Route 1, along the boundary of Walpole. Relatively few of the employees live in Sharon.

Sharon Town Government has lost most of its personal flavor, in the sense of loss of personal contact between most of the citizens and the Town officers and employees. This is of course inevitable with a Town population of over 13,000. It is augmented by the increasingly transient character of the population. Many of the new people in Town come from Boston or other large cities, with a background of impersonal, political city government. Nowadays people come and go at a rapid pace. Even though Sharon is predominantly a town of single residences, owned by their occupants, it has been estimated that on the average, families stay in one place less than ten years. Except for the people who become involved in Town Government in one way or another, most people do not really understand the working of their Town Government.

The Town Government has adapted well to the growth and change in character of the population, and the increasing demands and complexity. Sharon, as a very inviting suburban community, increasingly attracts able and successful business and professional men and their families. Sharon has been most fortunate in the people who are able and willing to contribute their skills and abilities on the various Town committees.

For convenience and brevity in what follows, the word committees will be used in a generic sense to cover all the boards, commissions, authorities, trustees and the like in the Town.

Committees have always been basic in Town Government. When Sharon received its charter in 1765, the first Town Meeting elected a Board of Selectmen, who also served as assessors and overseers of the poor, and, in addition were responsible for the roads and other Town functions. When the Town took over the schools from the Church, a School Committee was elected. Other Committees were established as need arose. By 1900, there were ten.

As the town has grown, and government has become more complex, new committees have proliferated. *The Town Government Handbook*, compiled by the League of Women Voters, has a list of 18 permanent (standing) committees. And there are a lot more. Some, not on the list, are mentioned in the Handbook. There are the "ad hoc" committees set up with specific tasks, and dismissed when the task is completed. There are still others, including those set up since the Handbook was compiled.

In the early days, when the Town was small and the government was simple, Town policies were worked out in the Town Meeting. This function has now passed almost entirely to the system of Town committees. Under present conditions, attempts to develop policy on the Town Meeting floor almost inevitably result in confusion and frustration. In the present set up, the Warrant Committee works with those concerned, especially with the concerned Town Committees, and as required by statute, presents a recommendation on every article which can come before the Town Meeting. The motions on the articles, as presented by the Warrant committee to the meeting represent well thought out and carefully prepared proposals.

Unless convinced of the validity of these motions as presented, the Town Meeting can vote them down, or can vote to amend. Town Meeting can express its desires, loud and clear, and is heard by everyone involved in Town Government. But experience in Sharon and in other towns shows that real trouble is likely if the Warrant Committee does not get the supporting vote from the Meeting on any significant proportion of its recommendations.

Town committee functions permeate the entire structure of Town Government. Some groups, like the Board of Selectmen and the School Committee operate through full-time executives (the Executive Secretary and the Superintendent of Schools) who operate within the authority delegated to them. Other committees, for instance, the Nominating Committee for the Warrant Committee, operate entirely on their own. The Planning Board makes extensive use of outside consultants for some of the more technical phases of its work. Committee procedures vary, but without exception, results depend on the competence, dedication and plain hard work of their members. With the exception of the Assessors, and the nominal salaries of the Selectmen, none of the Town Committee Members are paid for their services. Sharon has been most fortunate in the calibre and dedication of the members of Town Committees who have contributed so importantly to the Town.

The close cooperation between the Committee system and the full-time elected officers is a major factor in the effectiveness of Sharon Town Government. All part- and full-time Town employees, with the exception of the Town Clerk and the Town Treasurer-Tax Collector, are appointed, in many instances under State rules prescribing appointment procedures. Financial procedures are subject to State Audit. The Town has been fortunate in the choice of its employees. They form a very competent, cooperative group who have served the Town well. The system of voluntary committees and full-time employees has worked well, individually and collectively.

Reverting to the subject of the traditional "open" Town Meeting, there is no question of the effectiveness of this truly democratic procedure when Sharon was a small, stable, rural community. For Sharon in 1976, with over 13,000 population, and for the larger town projected for the years to come, there is a question as to its practicality. Many towns the size of Sharon have turned to "representative town meeting" with a limited number of elected "Town Meeting Members". The really large towns in the state have all turned to this representative form as a matter of necessity.

As recently as the 1940's when Sharon was about half its present size, town meetings were pretty routine. Business was usually completed in a single session, with adjournment before 10:00 o'clock not unusual. There were exceptions, as when a meeting was held in a circus tent rented by the town to accommodate the crowd which voted for the (then) High School (South Main Street between Station and Chestnut Streets). This building provided an auditorium which accommodated the town meetings for many years, until the present High School auditorium was completed. In a few instances there was an overflow, with the excess seated in the gymnasium. This was very slow and cumbersome, and, fortunately infrequent.

Nowadays, Town Meetings tend to drag out, with a great many people wishing to be heard, running to two and three sessions, each lasting till after eleven. Many people feel frustrated; many are simply bored. They attend only when a major issue is at stake, and leave as soon as the issue is decided. Par-

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ticularly when a third session is required, there are seldom three hundred people present at the final adjournment. This is hardly a valid representation of the body of registered voters as a whole.

The apparent lack of specific accomplishment does not necessarily mean that these meetings are ineffective. As was mentioned earlier, the townspeople express their feelings loud and clear, and are heard by everyone in the Town Government. There is nothing like open Town Meeting in its opportunity for the citizens of the Town to communicate with their Town Government. It is just unfortunate that Town Meeting is now so limited as a channel for communication from the town officials to the people. Taken as a whole, it does perform a useful function. It is an important tradition, and a popular institution with a number of people. Unless and until it becomes unmanageable, it will almost certainly continue in Sharon.



The Old Town Hall

Boyden Collection