Title Historical Background on Town Government in Early 19th-Century New England

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A brief introduction to town government in early nineteenth-century New England.

From their earliest days of settlement, the six New England states have had a system of local government that is distinctively different from that of any other region of the United States. Every community is organized as a town (or a city) and there are few unorganized rural areas. In the early nineteenth century there were over a thousand New England towns. Each was a geographic area with between fifty and a few hundred families living within it, chartered by the state as a self-governing corporate body. (At that time only a handful of communities were organized as cities, with mayors, councils, and representative rather than direct government.) Towns had the power as well as the responsibility to tax their inhabitants and make by-laws to regulate and provide for their own collective needs. Towns primarily concerned themselves with building and maintaining roads, operating schools, and caring for the poor and disabled who could not care for themselves. At a time when travel and communication were slow and difficult, the federal government and even state governments were remote, far smaller in proportion to population than they are today, and their taxes relatively low. Local government far more directly affected people's everyday lives.

On the local level, New Englanders governed themselves through town meetings, a more or less limited version of direct democracy for adult males. Voting requirements varied somewhat from state to state, but generally the right to vote in town affairs became more accessible over the years. By the end of the eighteenth century in Massachusetts, for example, all male residents twenty-one years of age and older who had paid some taxes could attend and vote in town meetings. Here they chose town officers and voted for representatives to the State and Federal governments. Here they determined what the needs of their community would be in the coming year, and decided how to pay for them, voting on their tax burden. Here they decided what rules and regulations would make life better in their town.

Prior to each meeting, a warrant was publicly posted so that all citizens could know the issues to be discussed or decided. Towns were required to have at least one meeting early each spring, but often held others throughout the year as needs arose. One of the first items on the agenda was to choose a moderator to manage the meeting and then the other necessary town officers. These included a clerk to keep town records, including the minutes of the meeting; tax assessors and tax collectors; a treasurer to manage town funds; and constables to enforce the laws. Perhaps the most important posts were on a board of 3, 5, 7, or 9 selectmen chosen to manage town affairs on a day to day basis. Scores of other posts, from field drivers who rounded up stray livestock to sealers (inspectors) of weights and measures; highway surveyors who maintained the roads and school committeemen; and many, many more, including members of special committees; had to be filled. None of these jobs were anyone's full-time employment, and most were unpaid (although a few did receive compensation or could collect fees). With so many responsible positions in each community, a man stood a good chance of serving as a town officer or on a special committee at some point in his life. Government was thus not a remote abstraction, but a participatory reality composed of family, friends, and neighbors.

Towns had to provide certain basic services to residents, and some chose to do other things as well. The citizens had to decide how much these things would cost, and how to raise the taxes to pay for them. The three primary responsibilities (and expenses) of towns were building and maintaining roads within the community, caring for the poor, and providing public education. Other town functions included regulating livestock, protecting crops by offering a bounty on pests, and providing for and regulating the burial of the dead. Every year towns also dealt with idiosyncratic local matters, and considered the specific requests and proposals of individual citizens or groups of citizens. But how towns managed their responsibilities was beginning to change by the 1830s.

Most towns divided themselves into smaller districts for ease of administration. A surveyor of highways in each district planned and directed road construction and repair in his area. Many towns still allowed taxpayers to "work off" some or all of their highway taxes by turning out on pre-arranged days to help maintain the roads. By the 1830s, however, highway surveyors increasingly favored using tax money to hire laborers, considering it more efficient.

Since the 1600s most New England communities had provided tax-supported public education. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, towns had divided themselves into school districts so that a schoolhouse served each neighborhood. The town school committee licensed local teachers, chose approved textbooks to be purchased by parents, and set general standards. Each district then had a prudential committeeman who hired a teacher, kept the schoolhouse in repair, and generally managed his school district. Often economy was favored over instruction in the local schools, both in the quality of schoolhouses and the pay given to teachers, but they provided better and more consistent instruction for ordinary people than anywhere else in the United States or all but a few parts of Europe. By the 1830s, a movement for educational reform was taking hold, under the leadership of Horace Mann in Massachusetts and Henry Barnard in Connecticut, that would reshape district schooling.

Towns had to provide care for anyone who could not care for him or herself, and had no family to do so. Some poor individuals were helped through small grants of money or supplies, but most needed more care. Many communities annually auctioned off the care of poor or infirm individuals to the lowest bidder, paying citizens to take paupers into their homes. This system was called the "vendue." Objections to the vendue rose as the century progressed, and by the 1830s many towns instead cared for their indigent collectively on town-owned "poor farms" or in more urban "work houses." Contemporary thinking was that this method was more progressive, efficient, and humane.

Today most American communities, and many New England towns, are no longer governed directly by citizens acting in town meetings (although quite a few smaller towns still are). The early New England town meeting nevertheless continues to have a lasting influence on modern local governments and the public perception of what American democratic government means today.