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Town Meetings in Colonial Times

Subject of Paper by Miss Sarah L. Tyler Before the Norwich Round Table, Involving Much Research.

Before the Norwich Round Table where the topic this season is Connecticut, Miss Sarah L. Tyler at the last meeting read a very interesting paper on Town Meetings of Colonial Days. This involved much searching of records, and will be read with keen appreciation as given herewith: The first recognition by Massachusetts of the Connecticut colonies (Windsor, then named Dorchester; Hartford, then named Newtown, and Westfield, then named Watertown) was in June, 1635, when a meeting was appointed who was one of themselves. Three months later each plantation was given permission to elect its own constable, who was to be sworn in, however, by a magistrate of Massachusetts Bay. Three years later Saybrook, the fourth colony Connecticut, was settled, and about the same time New Haven, or Quinnyplack, in 1637, New London came next, in 1646, and Norwich in 1650. The colonial records begin with 1656, and there is every reason to believe that no town acts were recorded before 1639, and there are only four notes or memoranda during that period.

Golden Age of New England Town. In Connecticut, between 1633 and 1662 was the golden age of the New England town. Each town was a little state, having control of its own affairs and besting itself to the colonial government in much the same way that the states of the Union did towards the national government in the earlier half of the last century. The town meeting was a government of pure democracy, and the Connecticut retaining the present time most of the rights it had in the beginning. By an act passed at Massachusetts Bay, colonies were allowed to elect townsmen. Early in the year 1639 the people of Hartford came together and elected townsmen. The entry in the first formal town record in the colony, two weeks later appears the famous constitution. In less than a year after the adoption of the constitution the general court passed orders expressly reserving for the towns the right of choosing their own officers or passing local laws with penalties for assessing taxes and restraining for non-payments, or selling their lands, or recording titles, bonds, sales and mortgages of land within the town and of choosing a local court to try causes involving more than forty shillings.

The order for a town meeting was given by the townsmen to the constable, who gave a notice to the warmer and drummer. The warmer left a summons at every house. The drummer began to beat half an hour before the time of business, and if a constable and two townsmen and fifteen inhabitants appeared it was a legal meeting.

In New London, Feb. 25, 1647, it was agreed (as it had been by each of the other colonies) that any man being lawfully warned to appear at any general town meeting, that refused or did not come at the time appointed, or within half an hour of the appointed time, if he be at home, or have notice of the citation, that man shall pay to the constable two shillings and six pence for the use of the town, or if any person who votes after the company to come to vote, or before the meeting be ended, without the company leave, that party shall pay two shillings and six pence for the same order, and further it is agreed that if any fall in either of these two things before mentioned and refuses to pay the penalty when the constable demands it, the constable shall have power to distrain. At a town meeting, December 1670, was agreed and voted that the power and privilege of voting in town meeting, in ordering any town affairs, shall only belong to those who are purchasers of said lands.

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seen on a Sunday morning issuing from his orchard gate, moving with a slow majestic step to the meeting house, accompanied by his wife and followed by his children, four sons and four daughters, marshaled in order, and the woman of the family in the rear. Mr. John Davenport at a town meeting was chosen minister at New Haven. Mr. Hooker and Mr. Stone assisted at the installation, which tradition says took place in a mighty barn. In New London the town meeting organized the Rev. Mr. Ely as minister and "stayed" and to increase it each year. Saybrook has not church records of Mr. Fitch's ministry there, and the town records are also wanting before 1650.

Came to Norwich. Mr. Fitch came with the Norwich colony and after he had been from preaching several candidates were tried but Mr. Flint proved the most popular and it was agreed that he may abide with us half a year, more or less, that he may have further trial of us and we of him, and that he may stay as long as may be expedient for probation. Later he was offered 52 pounds per year by the town and his board, while he remained without a family. When he had the family he was to get 60 loads of wood a year and 70 pounds, that is 50 pounds in money and 20 in work or grain, as some possible meeting house were built and services held there.

In Windsor Sept. 1, 1655, it was voted in town meeting that Captain Cook shall cause that reasonable warning shall be given to come to meeting on the Lord's day and also on the day before drum or trumpet on the top of the meeting house, and he should get 20 shillings for the ensuing year. Provision was made of two shillings of building, from the lantern to the ridge of the house, to walk conveniently to the door on the Lord's day and on the day before. The drum was to be beaten twice in the morning seasonably on the Lord's day and once after dinner. Also on the lecture days, twice.

In New London, 1651, the town agreed with the Rev. Mr. Ely that on the drum all Sabbath days, training days and town public meeting days for the sum of three pounds. He was also to see to the mending of the meeting house and the town rates and was chosen attorney. Feb. 25, 1661, Old German Consistory had been seen in this work was to order youth in the meeting house, sweep the meeting house and beat out dogs, for which he was to get 40 shillings for a year, and also to make all the graves. For a man or woman he was to have four shillings for cutting and setting the grave to be paid for by the survivors.

Depredations of Animals and Birds. How serious the depredations of wild animals, birds and serpents upon the young colonies had become is shown by the town records. In New London in March, 1648, it was agreed "if any person do kill any wolf or wof within the town of New London, that kills the wolf shall have of every family within the town six pence conditionally that he bring the head and skin to any two of the townsmen. Evidently wof was believed. At Windsor in 1650 a bounty of 10 shillings was to be paid by the town for every wof killed within the jurisdiction and five shillings was added for a wof killed within the town of the town of New London. In January, 1657, it was voted that all the male inhabitants of the town within half an hour of the setting of the sun shall kill one blackbird or give one shilling to the town treasurer and "whoever shall kill above his dozen shall have one shilling and give one shilling to the town treasurer and "whoever shall kill six blackbirds in March or April, it shall be counted to him as if he had killed one. In New Haven they paid more liberally for wolves and foxes killed, for it was agreed that everyone was to have 15 shillings for a wolf's head and every fox head two shillings sixpence, and "if any setting guns or traps, shall pay to kill any hogs or other cattle, the town shall bear the damage."

Schools and Schoolmasters. The schools and schoolmasters were also provided for in the town meeting. Windsor in 1647 in the town meeting provided about the school proposed to be kept by the Rev. Mr. Ely. His terms were 36 pounds a year. Some wished the children to pay five shillings a year for their school, others that they pay the whole expense—just like Norwich. History certainly does repeat itself. Two or three months later it was decided that the school should pay Mr. Cornish. The schools were kept at some private house or at the residence of the teacher. Later, in July, 1658, they agreed with Samuel Wolcott to keep a reading, writing, cyphering and grammar school for a full year to take time but such as were entered in spelling. In New Haven, 1641, this vote was passed: "For the better training of youth in this town that through God's blessing they may be fitted for public service hereafter, either in church or commonwealth, it is ordered that a free school be set up and an allowance of 20 pounds a year for the schoolmaster's care and wages. In Norwich a schoolmaster is mentioned before 1671, when in town meeting John Birch was engaged to keep nine months of the year for 25 pounds provision pay. The New England primer containing the Westminster catechism was the class book.

In New London Dec. 14, 1695, at a town meeting, it was "voted that the town grants and ye Lett to some of the List of Estates to be raised for the use of a free school that shall teach the children, read, write and cypher and ye Lett to some of the school shall be kept one-third of the year on the west side and one-third part of the year on the east side of the river. By reading is intended such children as are in their peaters. I do not know as you would call the schoolmaster a minister, but it certainly was a monopoly and no Sherman law to probe the matter. In New London the school was established in 1659, a town meeting was held to arrange with Mr. Winthrop to establish a mill to grind corn. A mill was of great importance. It was decided that the inhabitants should have charge of making the dam and the heavy work belonging to the mill. Six men were selected to perform the work and

(Continued on Page Eleven.)

Dr. F. W. HOLMS, Dentist Shannon Building, Annex, Room A Telephone 629.

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