

REVELATIONS, SURPRISES AND TEDIUM IN THE TOWN MEETING RECORDS OF OLD DARTMOUTH

1664-1787 BACKGROUND

In the years before the old town of Dartmouth was divided into New Bedford, Westport, & Dartmouth; and before New Bedford was divided into Fairhaven & New Bedford; and before Fairhaven was divided into Acushnet & Fairhaven; the Town Meeting was a critical element of town governance. The Town Meeting Records were handwritten by the various recorders and town clerks holding that responsibility over those early years. The early evidences of the actions and deliberations of our town fathers have been stored in the archives of the towns derived from Old Dartmouth and are the source of much useful information concerning our history. However, the condition of these records, due to their age and physical condition and because of the varied handwriting and free-form spelling habits of the original scribes make them difficult, if not impossible, to handle and to read.

1888 – FIRST IMPROVEMENT

Over the years much work has been accomplished trying to remedy this situation. On April 12, 1888 the Board of Aldermen of the City of New Bedford created a special committee and charged them with the task described as follows:

“. . . to make an investigation and report the condition of the Public Records of the original Town of Dartmouth, Town of New Bedford, and City of New Bedford which may be of value to New Bedford, with recommendation as to what is necessary to place them in intelligent condition and a proper state of preservation with the probable cost of the same”

They reported back that having visited Dartmouth and examined the records they found them kept in a “large iron safe” and those of particular interest to New Bedford

“were, many of them in a very dilapidated condition, those of 1776 to 1779 inclusive appeared to be lost, and the committee found documents evidently in the handwriting of the late James B. Congden, Esq. Stating such to be the fact.”

They also reported on those records they found to be of interest to New Bedford and described them in a general way as follows:

“Two (2) large books bound in raw-hide of four hundred (400) pages each, more or less, containing records dating from 1682 to 1787 are of births and deaths and the other of Marriage Intentions and Marriages.

Two hundred (200) pages more or less, of loose(sic) leaves of records from 1679 to 1770.

Fifty (50) pages of layout of highways, driftways, and Town Landings, badly dilapidated.

Twenty-five (25) pages of Town Meeting Records from 1770 to 1787.

Twenty-five (25) pages of earmarks badly worn from 1700 to 1770.

One page of State Elections from 1782 to 1787.

(Further) The committee thus find nearly 1200 pages which it will be worthwhile to preserve.

They desire, in conclusion, to express their thanks to Mr. John H. Cornell for his courtesy and patience, he having devoted his whole afternoon to their service."

This report was submitted and signed by the Committee which was composed of: Stephen A. Brownell, Frederick A. Bradford, and Thomas D. Dexter. It was dated May 24, 1888. In June the New Bedford City Council, on recommendation of the committee, appropriated money to copy the designated records and put the project under the direction of the Mayor and the City Clerk "as the authorities in Dartmouth will want the Records safely kept during the progress of the work".

The copyist who did the work was Etta F. Martin and in so doing she also performed important services for genealogists, historians, and local history researchers. These included the most important one of deciphering the obtuse and varied handwriting and spelling of the various scribes and clerks who had written the original records for Old Dartmouth. Etta's handwriting was crisp and clear and therefore added value to the records by allowing a reader to easily comprehend the words recorded originally. Secondly, in her transcriptions of the records, badly mangled misspellings were corrected but she noted in the side columns the original misspelled words she had replaced. This allows readers and researchers to get the original flavor and precise transcription if that type of precision is required. By keeping faithfully to the original pagination of the record books the transcription allows a user, if desired, to go back to the original to compare it to her transcription. Some "purist" researchers really like this. Of supreme importance; she created indexes to several of the record sets which she transcribed. These indexes facilitate finding specific pieces of information by historians, researchers and genealogists.

From 1888 until 1969, these record transcriptions were only available at the New Bedford City Hall and could only be used if one traveled to New Bedford and worked in an anteroom of the City Clerk's Office. Not easy, even for local researchers!

1969-SECOND IMPROVEMENT

In 1969, The Genealogical Society of Salt Lake City, Utah, an organization affiliated with the Mormon Church, as part of a long term on-going program to film and preserve primary records in historically significant locations throughout the world, filmed these transcriptions at the New Bedford City Hall. They also filmed many other of the City records as well as records of some of the local towns. Some time after this they made reels of microfilm images of these pages available to libraries, and other research institutions, throughout the world for a modest fee. This meant that interested genealogists and local historians could access these transcriptions (and films of the original records) in any location which had the microfilm reel and a microfilm reader.

After several years, the Church, initiated a program to digitize the microfilm records and make them available on various subscription websites dedicated to genealogical and local history and family history research. Unfortunately, the 1888 transcriptions of the Dartmouth Town Meeting Records 1674-1787 were not included in that program of digitization. Hence, even if one paid for a subscription to Ancestry.com or other like websites the transcriptions of the Dartmouth Town Records done in 1888 by Etta Martin were not available. An interested researcher might find a library or other institution with the microfilm copy and a microfilm reader, crank through the film and awkwardly make copies of appropriate pages to take home and use in his or her work. Not a situation very conducive to casual or amateur historians!!

Being an avid and passionate fan of Old Dartmouth history and genealogy I had discovered the microfilm of the 1888 transcription at the NBFPL (New Bedford Free Public Library) and pored over that film for many many hours. Recently, as a member of the Dartmouth Historic Commission, the Dartmouth 350th Anniversary Committee, and the Dartmouth Historical & Arts Society I proposed the idea of providing both a printed copy and a digital file of these records for local genealogists, researchers, and historians of all the constituent towns of Old Dartmouth. (Acushnet, Dartmouth, Fairhaven, New Bedford, and Westport).

Initially, I was authorized by the DHC to seek out a way to do this, with any expense being my personal contribution to the project, which was perfectly acceptable to me. I began the work by writing a note to the trustees of the NBFPL seeking a donation of a copy of the microfilm which they have. This was politely refused with the suggestion that they would help me purchase a copy from the Mormon Church organization which handles sales of those items. The Trustees referred me to Janice Hodson, Curator of Art at the library. Janice guided me through the process of ordering the microfilm via the NBFPL purchasing system and after a wait of several weeks it arrived there, she called me, and I picked it up.

2014 – THIRD IMPROVEMENT

After searching the internet and talking with technically qualified friends I discovered a firm in Rhode Island which offered services for converting microfilm images to digital files of the images. Hence I transported the role of microfilm to AMS Imaging of Warwick, RI with an order to convert the film images to a file of digital images in the “jpeg” format for viewing on computers.

PROPOSED FOURTH IMPROVEMENT

I now have this collection of digital images and propose to facilitate researchers' access by undertaking to provide these important early records via the internet for computer users, and hard copy printed and bound replicas of the record books, for library users (and non-computer-literate genealogists, family researchers, and local historians). In addition, one set of the bound printed records (on acid-free paper) will be inserted into the 350th Dartmouth Anniversary Time Capsule.

It is this project for which I will be seeking CPC support. I will propose a sequence of work which needs to be accomplished to meet my goals and a budget associated with those tasks.

PREVIEW OF INTERESTING TYPICAL FINDINGS

From the earliest days of the town it was geographically subdivided into three sections roughly equivalent to the land West of the river called variously Coaxcet, Noquechoke, or Westport; that East of said river up to a point a few miles West of the river called Cushena or Acushnet; and the area East of that, up to the eastern boundary of the town. These three sections, in the beginning were called Coaxet or Coxet, Ponaganset, and Cushena. Later these names were changed to Acoaxet, Aponegansett, and Acushnet and, still later to Westport, Dartmouth, and New Bedford. Much later, of course, this old New Bedford was divided into New Bedford and Fairhaven and finally, in 1860 Old Fairhaven was divided into Fairhaven and Acushnet. From the beginning of the Old town of Dartmouth the Town Meeting Records clearly indicate a tendency to attend to the fact that representation was to be reasonably balanced between these three sections of the old town. Hence, one finds names associated with each one of the sections in most of the official functions filled by actions of the Town Meeting. For example, as early as 27May 1679 we find, "*Richard Sison (sic), Henry Tucker and Thomas Pope are chosen Surveyors . . .*" (DTMR:002) Sisson was from Coxet, Tucker from Ponaganset, and Pope from Cushena. Another example, on 30 May 1681 ". . .*that it shall be accounted as sufficient warning for Town Meetings for the constable to sett up their notice one att the house of William Spooner and one att the house of Richard Sison(sic) and **one at the mill** in each of which notice shall be represented the occasion of the meeting.*" (DTMR:003) Note that again, Coxet, Ponaganset, and Cushena are being attended to; 'at the mill' was at Smith Mills in Ponaganset, Richard Sisson was at the Head of the River in Coxet, and William Spooner was in Cushena. This pattern exists throughout the town meeting records and foretells the eventual division of the Old Town into the constituent towns of Westport, Dartmouth and New Bedford before the end of 1787. (Note that the acronym DTMR represents Dartmouth Town Meeting Records.)

PUBLIC SERVICE WAS TREATED AS SERIOUS BUSINESS

As brief and concise as the individual records of each town meeting were, they made it very clear that public service was a very serious responsibility of those with roles to play, even as basic town meeting members. A good example of this is indicated in one of the earliest

records: 22 July 1674 *“it is ordered that all such persons as doe neglect to appear att the town meeting shall forfeit to the town 1 shilling and six pence apiece and for coming to the meeting too late three pence an hour.”* (DTMR:001) Note that this comes from a time before the Indian War known as “King Philip's War”. I wonder how much money was collected as a result of this ruling. Academics might call this “voluntary taxation”, if you choose to miss the meeting or be late you choose to pay the tax!!

THERE WERE DANGEROUS BEASTS IN TOWN AND DISCRIMINATION STARTED EARLY

It is obvious from two early records of the town meeting that dangerous wild beasts were a threat to the colonists and also that a definite discrimination policy was established at a very early date. Witness these records: 12 November 1684,

*“The town have ordered that the Indians shall have liberty to hunt provided that they do kill three wolves or three bears: or pay ten shillings yearly to each village the Indians that do belong to Quishnet are to pay ten shillings to John Spooner and the Indians belonging to Ponaganset are to pay ten shillings to **Return Badcock** and the Indians of Cokset are to pay ten shillings to Jeames Sisson the aforesaid money is to be received for the Town 's use and delivered to the Town at their demand.”* (DTMR:005)

and 1685, 29 May -

“that whereas it doth appear that Indian Robben living at Saconet did kill a wolf some time this last year within the township of Dartmouth that he shall have six shillings paid unto him out of the Town's rate by the Constable at some convenient time after the making of this years rate and that any Indian or Indians that shall kill any wolves or bears hereafter within this Township and bring the heads of said wolf or bear to the Constable shall have six shillings paid unto him or them for each wolf or bear so killed. Also ordered that the English shall have ten shillings for the killing of a wolf or bear within this Township to be paid out of the town rate by the Constable.” (DTMR:006)

I wonder if any of the Native Americans took advantage of the differential payments and offered to sell an English colonist any dead animal head for a price greater than six shillings but less than ten? That would make what moderns call a “win-win” transaction!

TEDIUM AND THE MUNDANE WERE NOT ABSENT

As one might expect there was much of the dry business of operating a town then just as there is at the present day. Appointments to responsible positions were pretty routine then as now even if some of the colonial functions and offices involved different responsibilities. Witness these selected example records:

1680, 24 May *“ . . .also John Smith Peleg Sherman **William Wood** George Sison(sic) Arthur Hathaway and Thomas Taber are chosen to view the fences belonging to this township and to judge whether they be sufficient or not.”*(DTMR:002)

1683, 1 June “Also Richard Sisson John Smith and Thomas Taber are chosen to survey the road that lies through the town that so it may be brought to record and they are to have each of them two shillings and six pence a day to be paid out of the rate.” (DTMR:004)

1686, 26 July - “It is ordered that there shall be a meeting house built this year for the Towns use the dimensions thereof to be as followeth: 24 foot long: 16 foot wide: 9 foot stud and to be covered with long shingles and to be inclosed with planks and clapboards and to have an underfloor laid and to be benched round and have a table to it suitable to the length of sd house. Also for two light windows. Also the Town have chosen Seth Pope and Thomas Taber to agree with a workman to build sd house and it is ordered that the workman shall be paid in the same space of the County Rate to be raised by rating all the ratable inhabitants and gathered by the Constable and paid to the workman. Also the Town have agreed with John Russel(sic) Senior to make a pound and a pair of stocks forth with for the Towns use and that he shall have four and twenty shillings paid to him by the Constable for the same.”(DTMR:008)

1686, 30 August – “**John Smith** Joseph Tripp and Jonathan Delino(sic) are chosen raters to make a rate of five pounds and three shillings and four pence for Bristole(sic) prison.” (DTMR:009)

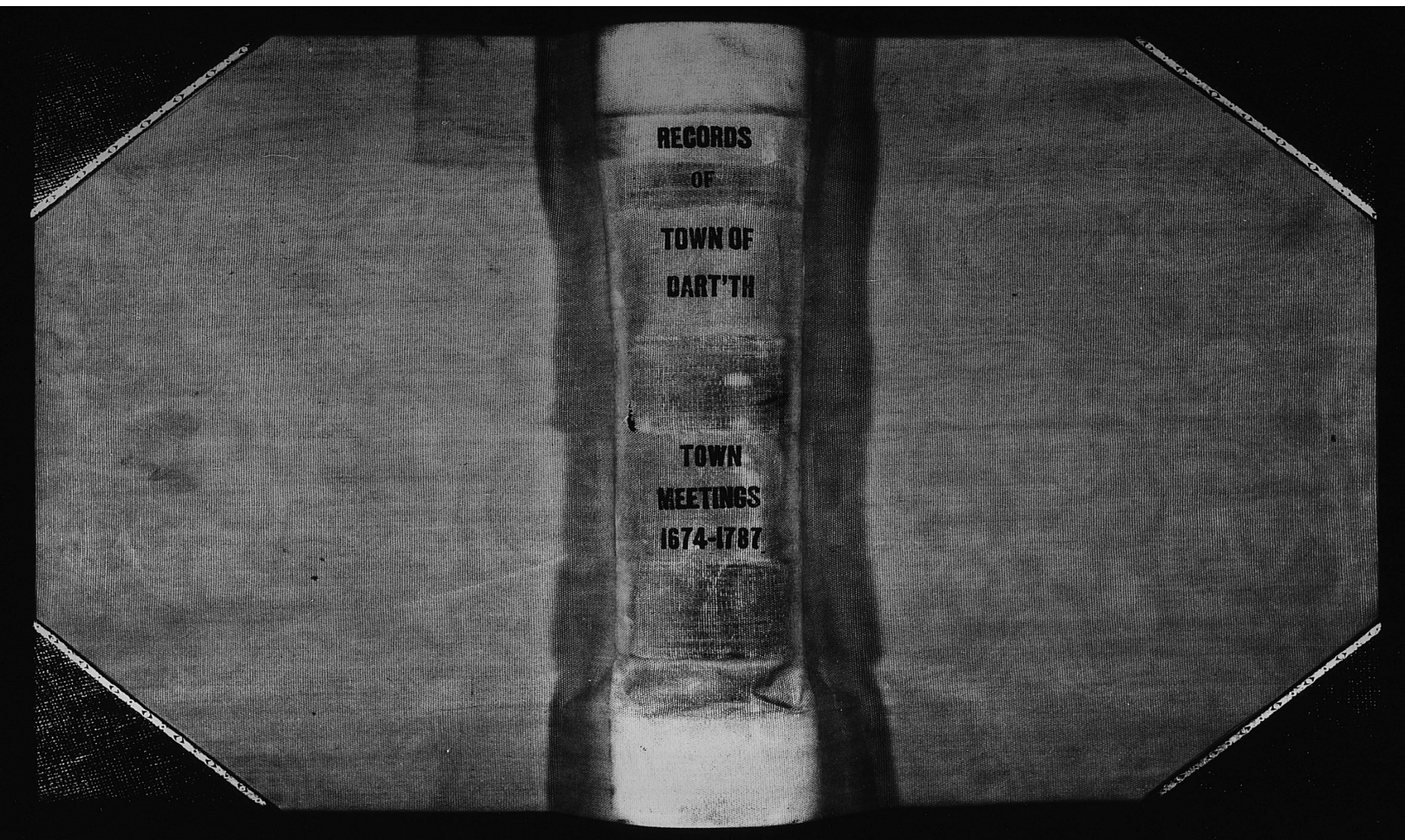
JOIN US TO LEARN MORE ABOUT HOW OUR TOWNS FUNCTIONED IN THE OLD DAYS

Come and learn how Town Meetings operated in the earliest days of the contemporary towns of Acushnet, Dartmouth, Fairhaven, Westport and the City of New Bedford. Recognize that there once was a 'Town' of New Bedford (1787-1847), that Fairhaven was split from the 1787 Town of New Bedford in 1812 and at that time included contemporary Acushnet, called then 'North Fairhaven', and that 'Dartmouth-2 consisted of present day Dartmouth and Westport from 22 February 1787 until 2 July 1787, (slightly less than five months), and that likewise 'Old Fairhaven' existed from 1812 until Acushnet was split off in 1860. Each of these governmental agencies has had the experience of being managed by a citizens Town Meeting.

Come and learn more about the surprizes and revelations we find in these captivating old records which for so long have not been easily available for interested Town Meeting Members, Government officials, local historians, or genealogists.

The lecture will be presented by Robert E. Harding, Ph.D. Member of the Dartmouth Historic Commission, The Dartmouth 350th Anniversary Committee and President of the Dartmouth Historical & Arts Society (which is sponsoring the lecture) at either the Dartmouth Grange Hall or the Dartmouth Historical & Arts Society's Russells Mills Schoolhouse at 7pm on Monday evening, October 20, 2014.

PHOTOS



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