

Early Moultonborough History - The First Town Meeting

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The First Town Meeting

Among the documents preserved at the State Library that are important to our town history are records of the early town meetings. Evidently they were transcribed at some point and placed on microfilm, although some of the original early documents are available at the State Archives. Since we have just experienced the 226th town meeting since the first one for which records are available, (225th since incorporation), it seemed appropriate to look back to see how things were done "in the beginning."

Although the town was not incorporated until November 27, 1777, the first "town meeting" recorded at the State Library was warned on March 10, 1777, and Ebenezer Meloon, Jacob Brown, and David Folsom signed as selectmen, so apparently the practices of town government were in place, even though we had not yet been officially incorporated. The meeting was held on March 31, and at that time Major Bradbury Richardson was elected as moderator, Jonathan Moulton became the town clerk, Capt. Nathaniel Ambrose, Major Richardson, and Lt. James Brown became selectmen, and Adam Brown, constable. Amos Whipple and Nathan Lee were the town assessors. Votes were cast for county treasurer and county assessors, our county at that time being Strafford County. Carroll County was not established until 1840, and was named for Charles Carroll of Carrollton, the last living signer of the Declaration of Independence, who died in that year. Lt. John Adams and Jonathan Moulton were elected to audit the selectmen's accounts. Col Joseph Senter and Major Richardson were appointed to lay out highways. The meetings were said to be held in the "meeting house", although the records of later meetings include great detail about the construction of the meeting house near the Shaw Cemetery on Route 109 (which is said to have blown down in a windstorm in 1819), so it is not clear if there was an earlier meeting spot, possibly the Country Store.

Eighteen articles were acted upon, but the only appropriation made by the voters was to spend "Thirty pounds lawful money" on the Highway the present year. Residents were allowed to work on the roads until the value of their taxes had been worked out, and pay was reckoned at three shillings per day. There were twenty shillings to the pound, so that would seem to be sufficient for 200 man/days worth of road construction work. The meeting adjourned after just one hour of deliberation.

Bradbury Richardson and Jacob Brown were elected fence viewers, and an article was passed, "Voted that Hogs in this town should be confined and not suffered to run at large", a problem that continued to be the subject of legislation for years to come. At subsequent town meetings, once the wool industry became established, rams were also forbidden to "run at large" during the autumn months.

Price Fixing

The town met again on May 15 to vote for a committee to set prices of "sundry articles", in accordance with a bill enacted by the General Court, meeting at Exeter, then the state capital. A committee of Major Richardson, Capt. Nathaniel Ambrose, Lt. James Brown and Messrs. Ebenezer Meloon, Jacob Brown, and Jonathan Penniman, chair, met the following week and established fixed prices for certain vital

commodities, such as Indian corn, rye, potatoes, butter, salt pork, peas, men's neat leather shoes, sole leather, green hides, flax, sheep's wool, yarn stockings, fabrics of flannel, tow, cotton, and cotton/linen blend, hay, and wages for farming labour. This gives us a valuable insight into the items that were most necessary for life in the frontier town that was Moultonboro over 200 years ago.

The cost of farm "labour" varied according to the time of year, from the middle of April until the last of August. Pay was three shillings per day; two shillings and sixpence spring and fall, and one shilling sixpence from the end of October until March 15 of the following year. Potatoes were the cheapest food item at a shilling a bushel at harvest time, and one and six in the spring. While rye was 4/6 per bushel and Indian corn was four shillings for a bushel weighing sixty pounds. Salt pork and butter were both nine pence per pound.

Clothing, also one of life's necessities, hopefully was also affordable on the existing wage scale. Cotton cloth, or cotton/linen blend, of the best quality and a yard wide, was the most costly fabric at three shillings and eight pence per yard. Flannel was priced at 3/6, and tow cloth was least expensive at 2/8. Feet were expensive to take care of, with the best quality shoes costing eight shillings, and yarn stockings six shillings.

For the farm animals, good hay was priced at one pound ten shillings per ton in the field, or forty shillings in the barn.

A chattel mortgage of a later date were recorded in the blank pages at the end of this first book of town records, and it shows that a feather bed, a yoke of yearling steers, a cow, and the hay to keep them on were pledged against a debt of \$34.00, to be reclaimed in two years. The last page is devoted to the marks for sheep and neat stock belonging to the various farmers, such as "a crop in the right ear and a slit in the left", which defined the sheep belonging to Hezekiah Smith if they were found wandering.

Incorporation

The town was incorporated by the General Court (state legislature) on November 27, 1777, and at a meeting on December 8, Jonathan Moulton was elected as our first representative, with Col. Joseph Badger and Ebenezer Thompson as Councilors, for the ensuing year. Bradbury Richardson was appointed moderator by the General Court, to call the first "official" town meeting, and a meeting was held in January to elect officers to serve until the usual town meeting time, which in those days was the last Tuesday in March.

The first annual town meeting following incorporation was held on March 31, 1778, and moderator, town clerk, selectmen, treasurer, constable, tithingmen, surveyors of highways and of lumber, and assessors were elected. Perhaps inflation in the Revolutionary economy was responsible for the increase in highway expenses to 90 pounds, and in wages for road work to 9 shillings.

Hogs were still "running at large", and Benjamin Brown, Reuben Rowe, Elias Smith and William Atkins were elected as Hog Constables. Another office which we now no longer have need of was that of Fence Viewers, which were first elected in 1779. Tithingmen were to collect the taxes mandated for the support of the church and the minister of the gospel. Cornelius Cook was also elected to the office of "Collector of Rags", presumably for use in the manufacture of paper. Article 16 allowed the account of Joseph Richardson for "bringing the ministers over the pond" to a meeting to be paid, so evidently at

this time travel by boat was still preferable to overland travel on the roads. Bradbury Richardson was also paid his account for expenses in traveling to the capital at Exeter to get the town incorporated.

Legislative Affairs

Other decisions taken at the early town meetings included granting a bounty of 20 pounds to any soldiers from town that would enlist in the Continental Army, and also procuring beef for the Army. A quota of five soldiers was requested from the town. A petition was received from Stephen Atkinson, a soldier who in 1781 had already served four years, and had not been granted any bounty, that he should receive an equivalent bounty to those “who have been backward and are but now engaging in their Country’s Cause”. A bounty of thirty pounds was duly granted.

In 1782 it was voted to ban the use of ox sleds of less than four feet ten inches in width to pass through the town, the fine being one silver dollar, half to the complainer and half to the town, with inspectors appointed. A road “to the neck” was voted to be laid out in 1788, but a penny tax on the nonresident property owners was later defeated. Pews were laid out in the meetinghouse, and a tax of one dollar per person was voted to pay for glazing the windows. A boat was built, presumably for the use of travelers who wished to cross over to the Neck without going all the way around by land. “Ferry Shores” is said to be near the spot where this ferryboat plied the waters. It was apparently substantial enough to carry horses and carriages, as the selectmen were able to set rates for these travelers.

The first mention of schools is in 1787, when it was voted to keep a school for the present year, but in 1789 the vote went the other way. However, by 1790 each district was taxed, and each was to build their own school house. Roads were “laid out” and worked on to Sandwich, “Senter” Harbor, and Tuftonboro, as well as various places within the town. The returns of early roads are very difficult to understand, since the landmarks tend to be marked trees, fences, and other objects no longer in place, as well as parcels of land that have changed hands many, many times since the roads were first arranged. The original layout of the town was on a grid system of lots and ranges, and when roads were built there were exchanges of land between the town, which owned the ranges, and the residents who occupied the lots.

Arrangements were made for the meetinghouse in great detail, the burying ground and training field were fenced off, a person was chosen to sweep the meetinghouse and keep the key. A sealer of weights and measures was chosen. A pound was constructed to contain stray farm animals, built from white oak and pine lumber, which explains why our pound is no longer in existence, when pound enclosures built of stone are still standing. Getting the 30 cords of wood that were owed to Rev. Shaw annually was also a warrant article.

Town meetings were warned and held throughout the year as necessary to deal with the affairs of the town, such as choosing presidential electors, grand and petit jurors and representatives in Congress. Courts were “holden” at Gilmanton, so being chosen as a juror was a major commitment of time and effort. In 1796, George Freese, proprietor of the town store, was given “free approbation for retailer of spirituous liquors in the town of Moultonborough”, and shortly thereafter Nathaniel Shannon and Samuel Burnham was also licensed to sell liquor, and Jonathan Wiggins to sell wine.

This, when properly organized and evaluated, is the type of material that would form the basis of our town history, since written records, though they may be incomplete, are the major clues that remain to tell us how people lived in our town over two centuries ago.