

HOW THE TOWN GOT ITS MEETING

by Deborah Stone

*Inhabitants, Freeholders and legall Voters be Warned to be held
at the dwelling house of Elijah Frink Innholder in Said Lempster*

If you had been a bald eagle, soaring high above the Connecticut River Valley early in the morning on the nineteenth day of March in 1774, you might have noticed a muscular horse trotting over the muddy road from Lempster to Charlestown. If you had been that eagle, you would have seen that the horse carried a man, but you would not have seen that the man carried a letter in the pocket of his jacket.

The letter had been penned the day before, probably by Mr. Allen Willey, who was soon to be chosen as Lempster's first Town Clerk, and who had a fine hand indeed. It was signed by eleven men, all landholders and duly qualified voters of Lempster. Above their signatures, they asked Benjamin Giles, Esquire, Justice of the Peace, and the nearest civil officer in Cheshire County, to "warn a meeting" of the "Inhabitants, Freeholders, and legall Voters of Said Lempster" to be held "at the dwelling house of Elijah Frink, Innholder in Said Lempster on Friday the 29th day of April at one O'clock in the afternoon."

For several years, these men had been living with their wives and children on wilderness farms, raising rough wooden houses, clearing lands, and making do with impromptu self-government and Sabbath worship at each other's homes. They were ready to form a more orderly community and to partake of the structures of democratic self-rule that settlers all over New England were evolving for themselves. Thus did Elijah Bingham, Allen Willey, Elijah Frink, William Markham, William Cary, Jabez Beckwith, John Perkins, William Story, Timothy Nichols, Major Linkham, and Silas Bingham request the Justice of the Peace to call them to meeting, in order "1st, to first Choose a Moderator, 2d to Choose a Town Clerk, Treasurer, Selectmen and other Town Officers."

Esquire Giles responded favorably and quickly. On March 22, he penned a letter to the men of Lempster, warning a meeting exactly at the time and place they had requested. He, being a little wiser than they in matters of government, added one more item to their

agenda: "3rd To appoint how Town Meeting may be called and warned for the future." Better they shouldn't have to send a man on horseback all the way to Charlestown every time they want to call a town meeting, Giles no doubt thought.

We know all this because Mr. Allen Willey copied the letter to Giles and Giles' reply onto the first page of a notebook. When the legal voters met on April 29th, Mr. Willey was chosen Town Clerk, right after Deacon Elijah Bingham was chosen Moderator, and Willey entered the records of that first town meeting as well. I recently found the notebook in the Lempster Historical Society archives. I should say "rediscovered," for it was never lost.

The notebook holds town meeting records up through March of 1786. It tells how Lempster helped found the new nation at the same time as it was constituting itself as a town. How the citizens were drawn into war. How they sent delegates to Concord to represent their views on the state constitution and the Articles of Confederation. But that's a story for another Owl. What did they do at that first town meeting in 1774? Back to the notebook, page 2.

First, they chose a moderator, which would be the first item of business at every meeting for a long time to come. Choosing a moderator was perhaps the most important decision, for the moderator had to soften harsh disputes and handle hot tempers. Not for nothing was he called "Moderator." He was leader for the day, and on his talents would depend whether the meeting produced collective wisdom or crowd folly. So moderators weren't elected for a whole year as we do today; instead, the people chose a moderator for each meeting so that they might select someone with sufficient neutrality on the issues of the moment.

Next, they chose their Selectmen. In 1774, they chose three men who also happened to be among the largest landholders: Deacon Elijah Bingham, the self-same moderator; Mr. Elijah Frink, in whose home they

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were probably sipping rum at that very moment; and Mr. William Cary, who contributed 17 children to the town's population. Next, they chose their Constable—an office not mentioned in their original request, but always one of the first to be appointed in a new town, for the constable was, among other things, the tax collector. The not-very-pleasant job of squeezing taxes out of men whose fields were nine parts stone went to Jabez Beckwith. Last, they picked two Tithingmen—not as you might think, tax collectors, but men who's job was to keep people in line at town meeting and every day. For their law-and-order men, they selected Mr. John Perkins and Mr. (now Selectman) William Cary.

Having chosen their leaders, the men then turned to the task Benjamin Giles assigned them: how to set their own self-government in motion. They *"Voted that Town Meetings be warned for the future by the Constable posting up to publick View a Copy of the Warrant at Least fourteen Days before Said Meeting at the house of Mr. William Markham in Lempster aforesaid."* Why Mr. Markham's? Maybe he lived in a central location, or maybe these few legal voters who had grabbed all the offices for themselves wanted to spread the glory a little. The following year the town directed the constable (who was now Samuel Nichols) to post the warning *"at the place of our Meeting on the Sabbath Days."* Everybody knew whose house that was, so there was no need to name it in the minutes. In 1776, the Town voted these same instructions once more, but then in 1779, again named the house where notices should be posted—*"at the House of Mr. Thomas Scovel."*

Fortunately, though, we do know where most meetings took place, because the minutes always say. In 1774 and 1775, they met at Elijah Frink's. In 1776, they met at Benjamin Abell's, and then for a few year's at Thomas Scovel's. A meeting in November of 1778 was called *"at the house where they now meet on the Sabbath"* (wherever that was), but the first thing they did was vote *"that this Meeting be adjourned to Mr. Benjamin Abell in Said Town for One half Hours. Meeting being opened at Mr. Benjamin Abell aforesaid,"* they continued on with the business at hand. We can surmise that Mr. Abell was too sick or injured to attend, so the men moved the meeting to him. A highly moveable affair, town meeting was. Perhaps all this moving about to different homes was a prelude to the disputes over where *"to fix a spot for a Meeting House"* that began in 1790. (That, too, is another story for another day.)

As the little town grew, the inhabitants found it took more jobs to keep itself running. In 1775, they added Fenceviewers to the elections. You remember Robert Frost's poem about good fences making good neighbors? Well, Fenceviewers would settle disputes about just whose responsibility it was to build and mend those stone walls that divided pastures but that somehow had a mind of their own and loved to collapse when no one was looking. In 1777, they as Deacon Elijah Bingham as Treasurer, notwithstanding that he also held the posts of Moderator and Selectman. In 1778, they began electing Surveyors of the Highways to lay out the roads and keep them in repair. Then they *"Voted that the Surveyors shall allow six Dollars per Day for every good and Faithfull Days work Done the highways."* In 1779, they chose a Sealer of Measures, a "Deer Beef," and a Leather Sealer along with the usual offices.

More weighty than beef and leather, however, were the matters of war and religion. In 1777, Lempster voted to raise *"40 pounds to pay our Continental Soldiers."* At one of five town meetings in 1778 (a very busy year), they raised another 40 pounds *"to pay Wm Cary for his hiring Mathew Gee to List into the Continental Army for this town."* Call Gee the draft board.

In 1779, the voters added worship to their public concerns. They chose a committee to hire a minister, then directed the committee *"to join with Ackworth Committee and hire the Same Minister that Ackworth hires, to Meet at the House of Mr. Elisha Beckwith on the Sabbath Days for publick Worship."* They even elected three *"choristers"* to lead them in singing the Lord's praise. One of the three, Deacon Elijah's Bingham's son James, was reportedly the best bass viol player in New England. He would eventually head the committee to build the Meeting House where Lempster's town meetings would take place from 1794 until 1993, when they were removed to the Goshen-Lempster School.

The notebook begun by Allen Willey in 1774 makes me feel like an eagle, soaring so high I can see more than two centuries away. When I think about the gifts these men left—not only the democracy they made, but the beautiful, lovingly inscribed record of their doings—I can only pray that we will do as well for the people who come after us, and that I, as a writer, may live up to Mr. Willey and the other town scribes. And when an eagle flies over the Connecticut River Valley in the year 2,230 or so, I hope she'll spot a town where the people still treasure their history—and make it in their well-tended Meeting House.✍

Minutes of Lempster's First Town Meeting on April 29, 1774

Cheshire County ss Lempster April 29th 1774 at a Town Meeting Legally
warned of the Freeholders and Inhabitants of the aforesaid Township Legally
Voters. Present Benjamin Gyles Justice of Peace in the aforesaid County
Deacon Elijah Bingham Chosen Moderator - -

Allen Willey Chosen Town Clerk - -

Mr. William Cary

Mr. Elijah Bingham } is Chosen Select Men

Mr. Elijah Trunk

Mr. Jabez Beckwith Chosen Constable

Mr. John Perkins } Chosen Tithingmen

Mr. William Cary

the above persons being Chosen their several Officers have been qualified
according to Law - -

Voted that Town Meetings be warned for the future by the Constable posting
up to publick View a Copy of the Warrant at Least fourteen Days before said Meeting
at the house of Mr. William Markham in Lempster aforesaid

Attest Allen Willey The above Votes ordered for Record

Town Clerk

Elijah Bingham } Moderator