

Lesson Plans: Town Meeting

Title Glossary of New England Town Officers

Type Papers and Articles: Historical Notes

*Every New England town had a large number of officials or "town officers" who were elected to their positions every year. This glossary, based on Issac Goodwin's book, **Town Officer: or, Laws of Massachusetts Relative to the Duties of Municipal Officers**, published in 1825, lists many positions and the tasks performed.*

A Glossary of Town Officers based on Issac Goodwin's book, *Town Officer: or, Laws of Massachusetts Relative to the Duties of Municipal Officers*, published in 1825.

Assessors —estimate the value of each person's property, both real and personal, and assess or compute his taxes.

Auctioneers —licensed by the town to make public sale of goods, chattels, or land to be sold at vendue or outcry.

Collector of Taxes —see Tax Collector.

Constables —chief law enforcement officers of the town; maintain public order, collect taxes when no one else is elected to do so, distribute the town meeting warrants and carry out the orders of the Selectmen and the courts.

Deer Reeves —enforce the state law prohibiting killing moose or deer between December 21 and August 11.

Engine Men —maintain and operate fire engines [pumpers] used in putting out fires.

Fence Viewers —see that legal fences are built and maintained; may also mediate disputes over fences at boundaries. Legal fences were very important in an agricultural community where loose animals could cause a great deal of damage to crops. The law required each man to surround his fields by strong fences at least four feet high, and the fence viewer was responsible to check the legality of these fences. If an animal broke through a legal fence, the animal's owner was responsible for any damages; if the fence was illegal, the owner of the field could not claim compensation for lost crops.

Field Drivers —take animals that are stray or loose to the pound. Loose animals could cause a great deal of damage in an agricultural community.

Fire Wards —direct engine men and fire fighters in efforts to put out fires.

Health Committee —charged with removing filth from public property, and with having owners of private property do the same; also supervised inoculations of residents against smallpox.

Hog-Reeves —Enforce the state law forbidding swine from running loose by rounding up stray swine (pigs can do more damage to crops than any other domestic animal) and bringing them to the town pound. Towns could decide not to enforce this law by a vote in town meeting, and many did, leaving hog reeves with nothing to do. Thus it became traditional, as a running joke on the status of matrimony, for men to be elected as hog reeves during their first year of marriage.

Measurers of Wood and Bark —inspect and measure firewood and bark brought into the town for sale to insure correct quantity and grade.

Moderator —acts as chairman and regulates the conduct of Town Meetings, ensuring fair proceedings. By law, the first order of business at any town meeting is the election of a moderator, therefore, it is not necessary to list choosing a moderator as the first article on the warrant, even though it often is listed. For more information, see the primary source document "Instructions to the Moderator."

Overseers of the Poor —arrange for care for the poor of the town and wandering paupers; bind out poor children

as apprentices or servants, boys until age of 21, and girls until the age of 18 or when married. In many towns, the Selectmen also served as the Overseers of the Poor.

Overseer of Work Houses or Pauper Houses —inspects and governs the operations of work houses for the poor. Workhouses were established by some large towns and cities to provide employment for the poor and indigent. Residents of Workhouses were required to do whatever work they could in order to contribute toward their support. State statutes specified the operating procedures of work houses.

Pound Keepers —impound or keep stray and loose animals in the town pounds. Notify the owner and assess fines for damages and expenses of catching and caring for the animals.

School Committee —interviews and certifies teachers; visits the schools to ensure proper discipline and instruction; recommends textbooks.

Sealers of Leather —inspect all leather made in the town to see that it was properly tanned. If approved they would mark it with an official seal.

Sealers of Weights and Measures —inspect all scales for accurate measurements. As a sign that the scales were in compliance they would mark the scale or measure with an official seal.

Selectmen —chief administrative officers of the town. Call town meetings; license hospitals, innkeepers, liquor sellers, entertainment shows; regulate travel during an epidemic, regulate the location of unpleasing trades such as tanning, killing animals for meat, distilling liquors; make out the list of men chosen for jury duty; appoint guardians for those judged lunatics; generally maintain the government between town meetings. In many Massachusetts towns, the Selectmen were also the Overseers of the Poor. Towns were required to elect three, five, seven or nine selectmen.

Surveyors of Highways —supervise the laying out and construction of new roads and the maintenance of old ones. Most towns were divided geographically into Highway Districts, with a supervising Surveyor of Highways for each district.

Surveyors of Lumber —inspect and measure planks, boards and timber put up for sale to ensure that it is properly measured and labeled.

Tax Collector —collects all taxes assessed by the assessors. The job of Tax Collector was an unpopular one. If the Tax Collector failed to collect all the taxes assessed, he was responsible for making up the difference. Because of the risk, few people wanted the position. As an incentive to take the office, towns offered a salary, making the Tax Collector the only town officer who was regularly paid. Because the monies collected were so important to the town, the Tax Collector was also required to “procure sureties” or post a bond. Similar to insurance, this made sure that the town would be compensated if the tax collector did not perform his job properly.

Town Clerk —responsible for keeping records of births, deaths, and marriages; keeps all town records and the minutes of all town meetings.

Town Officers —refers to all the elected officials of a town. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts required that each town meet every year in March or April and elect a Town Clerk, three, five, seven or nine Selectmen, Overseers of the Poor (the Selectmen could fill this role, if the town did not elect Overseers of the Poor), three or more Assessors, two or more Fence Viewers, Surveyors of Highways, Surveyors of Lumber, Wardens, a Treasurer, two or more Hog Reeves, Tythingmen, Sealers of Leather, Measurers of Wood, Clerks of the Market, Constables, “and other usual town officers.” It is interesting to note that some towns did not elect all of the officers named in the law, and elected other officers either from tradition or necessity, which were not specified.

Town Treasurer —is responsible for handling the town’s money. Receives tax payments from the Tax Collector as well as other payments, pays the town’s bills or orders, makes an annual financial report.

Tythingmen —are responsible for the general morals of the community, more specifically for the observance of the Sabbath. Inspect all Inns and Public Houses licensed to sell liquor and report all disorders; report on idle or disorderly persons, profane swearers or cursers and Sabbath breakers. Also stop unnecessary travel on The Lord’s Day. In most towns, Tythingmen were much less active in the 1830s than they had been around 1800.

Source

Descriptions are based on Isaac Goodwin, *Town Officer: or, Laws of Massachusetts Relative to the Duties of Municipal Officers* (Worcester: Dorr and Howland, 1825).

Copyright: *Old Sturbridge Inc.*