

The Beginnings of Local Government in Connecticut *

All power initially rested with the English King. It was he who granted charters to men who proposed colonizing the New World. King James I granted the first charter for an English colony in 1606. This charter was for the vast territory lying between the 40th and 48th degree of latitude (roughly from Philadelphia to a point somewhat north of northern Maine). A second charter was granted by King Charles I, son of James, confirming the previous land granted, in 1629. When this charter, or deed, was re-written, its wording was very similar to its predecessor, but with one remarkable point of difference: it did not provide, as did the original, that the seat of government must remain in England. This omission led to the most important results in the building of New England.

In 1629 a small party of leading Puritans met at Cambridge, England and adopted the “Cambridge Agreement” to migrate to Massachusetts on condition that the charter and seat of government be transferred thither. To this the Massachusetts Bay Company agreed, and John Winthrop was chosen governor. Winthrop brought with him the charter, and this was the first step in a very important process – the process of fusing the company and the colonists into one body. The second step, which soon followed, was the admitting of the colonists, or “freemen” to membership in the company. By this the company ceased to be a private trading company conducted for commercial gain; it became a body politic, a self-governing community.

In the matter of local government, the old parish system of England, half ecclesiastical and half political, was reproduced in the town or township. But it soon lost its religious functions and became the political unit, with absolute control of local government.

The general government was at first conducted by the governor, deputy governor and the assistants. This caused discontent among the freemen, and when a tax was assessed for public works in 1631, the people protested that it was taxation without representation. The government agreed with the freemen, who then exercised their right to vote, and promptly elected a different governor; thus the democratic tendency in the English colonies existed almost from the beginning. But the freemen soon found it inconvenient for all to meet in General Court, and they established the representative system. After 1636 each town sent from one to three delegates, and these, with the governor and assistants, formed the General Court, which had legislative and judicial power. The freemen, however, continued to meet in Boston once a year to choose a governor and other officials; but as this practice became inconvenient, the proxy system was introduced, and this developed into the system of written ballots and sealed returns.

In 1641 the General Court adopted a code of laws known as the “Body of Liberties.” Prior to this they had been governed by the common law of England and the precepts of the Bible.

Connecticut and the other New England colonies were founded and built up by the same class of people that had settled Massachusetts, and they were driven by the same motives and ambitions. The history of one is therefore in substance the history of the others.

The Father of Connecticut was the Reverend Thomas Hooker. He had arrived at Boston in 1632 and became the Puritan pastor at Newtown, now Cambridge. Because of

disagreements between the governor and with church officials in Boston, Hooker, along with his entire congregation, migrated on foot to the Connecticut Valley, where they began the town of Hartford, and thus laid the foundation of a new commonwealth. Other congregations from Dorchester and Watertown soon followed and founded the towns of Windsor and Wethersfield. Within a year, 800 people had found their way into the valley.

The government was a provisional one under a commission from Massachusetts, that lasted for one year, when the three towns, with the scattered settlers around, bonded together and formed a little independent republic; and here occurred one of the great events of early American annuals – the production of the first written constitution in history that really created a government. This constitution, known as the Fundamental Orders, modeled a government after that of Massachusetts, the chief departure being that a governor could not serve two consecutive terms and especially that no religious test be required for citizenship.

After the War of Independence, changes had to be made as to the ultimate authority in government, and in 1784 the term “United States of America” began to appear in print. Norfolk, Connecticut, in April of that year sent a representative to apply to the Connecticut General Assembly for liberty to tax themselves for the purpose of making and mending highways in the town. This was granted, and thus a smooth transition occurred from the Colonial period to that of an independent nation.