

CHAPTER III

TOWN GOVERNMENT

"Government of the people, by the people, and for the people."

—ABRAHAM LINCOLN

When on that long ago September day in 1773 the pioneers set the wheels of town government in motion, they set them in perpetual motion. Contrary to the idea expressed in some quarters in New England today that the present form of town government is outmoded, it is the truest form of self government "by the people and for the people." A notable example of New England town government was given in the summer and fall of 1967. It was then proposed that Jaffrey join with neighboring towns in establishing a consolidated high school. Discussion was lively in casual and in more formal gatherings, and finally in a school district meeting which was largely attended. The pros and cons aired their views with full freedom. Then came the vote which registered an emphatic negative. This was done with full knowledge that if Jaffrey went it alone, or in conjunction with Rindge, it would cost money to provide a first-rate school. But, in good New England style, the vote of the majority was accepted by all and all joined in the effort to make Conant as good a high school as any in the state. Final evidence of this was clearly shown in the school district and town meetings of 1968. Then projects, carefully prepared, were unanimously accepted to make possible an expert assessment of what must be done, physically and academically, to attain this end and the needed funds provided. The situation was complicated from the start, but the vote of the majority in 1967 was accepted by all, and all joined in the effort to make our small high school an example of what could be done to provide young people with a first-rate twentieth-century education.

Jaffrey has not reached the point in growth or complexity to make a change in its form of government feasible or even desirable. There have been a few minor changes along the way as the exigencies of time and circumstances have demanded, but on the whole the traditional pattern remains, working admirably well. But, as one peruses the list of town officials in 1932, the closing year of the preceding History of Jaffrey, one becomes very much aware of the fleetness of time and the brevity of individual exist-

ence. Of the officers thirty-five years ago, only eight persons were living in 1968: Alice E. E. Lehtinen, selectman; Joseph D. Donahue, supervisor of the checklist and auditor; Lawrence W. Brown, supervisor of the checklist; Charles E. Chamberlain, water commissioner and Conant Indigent Fund trustee; Carl C. Spofford, Humiston Park Commissioner; Ralph E. Boynton, auditor; Roscoe A. Sawyer, fence viewer; and Marion G. Symonds, library trustee.

Long tenure of office in Jaffrey has been more significant during the last thirty-five years than formerly. Several of the previous records have been exceeded. As moderator, Jason C. Sawyer has already exceeded the second longest record of twenty-six years which was attained in 1885 by Charles H. Powers. He is eminently qualified for this exacting office because of his familiarity with parliamentary procedures, knowledge of the past and present town business, and his impartiality and tact in handling difficult problems. He has started his twenty-seventh year, which now gives him the second longest record as moderator. His tenure is exceeded only by that of Charles L. Rich who held the office for thirty-six years.

With twenty-seven years of service as selectman to his credit, Ralph E. Boynton has the longest service in this important office in the history of Jaffrey, exceeding the previous record of Peter E. Hogan by fourteen years. Two men, Lester F. Hammond and J. Oren Belletete, share second-place honors, each having served fifteen years. Other long incumbencies in this office were those of Seymour H. Austin and Fred L. Cournoyer, each with twelve years of service concluded in 1935 and 1937 respectively.

John G. Townsend, with great acceptability, held the office of town clerk for twenty-four years and came within one year of equalling the record made by his immediate predecessor, Frank P. Wellman, in 1911. But as town treasurer, with an incumbency of thirty-five years culminating in 1942, when he declined re-election, he exceeds the previous longest tenure of twenty-nine years of Dr. Adonijah Howe more than a century earlier.

In an office requiring day and night vigilance during the greater part of the year, Henry J. Belletete holds the record as highway agent. He began his career in 1936 as highway agent in the east end of the town and after 1940 for the entire town. He was not a candidate or re-election in 1962, thus ending a career of twenty-six years.

Expedience and efficiency in the days before motorized highway equipment demanded the employment of two highway agents in

Jaffrey, one to care for the roads in the east end of the town and the other in the west half. By 1940, with more motorized equipment in use, it became apparent that these two positions could be combined. Consequently, at the annual town meeting that year it was voted to elect one highway agent. The vote was 264 "for" and 193 "against" the change, and Henry J. Belletete was elected highway agent for the entire town.

With calls for the services of the fence viewer diminishing, none has been appointed to this office since 1940. To Hiram E. Cutter and Ernest T. McCoy belongs the distinction of being the last fence viewers in Jaffrey. This was once an important office when questions of maintenance and division of fences between abutting land-owners were referred to them for judicious arbitration. With cattle herds dwindling, no one seems to care today if the stonewalls and fences separating farmsteads come tumbling down. Mending walls is a lost art.

The office of public weigher was also discontinued in 1940, and in 1966 that of sexton was dropped. The functions of the latter are now performed by the trustees and superintendent of the cemeteries. If some of the older offices no longer essential have been discontinued, new ones have been created to meet the needs of the times. These are included in a list of town officers for 1967. (See Chapter I.)

In 1954 the town voted to make the office of chief of police an appointive one to insure that the incumbent would always be duly qualified for this important law-enforcing position. Chief of Police Hubert F. O'Neil, who had held the office since March, 1924, was well past the retirement age of most people and it was felt that a younger man was needed. Police duties in Jaffrey have never been onerous. Its citizens have always been peace- and law-abiding, but in a fast moving world one can never tell what eventualities might arise, instigated by external forces. However, Mr. O'Neil was retained in office until May, 1954, when Lucien Vigneault of Nashua, New Hampshire, was appointed to the post which he held until his death, September 1, 1965. Arthur H. Rivard, a member of the police force for several years, was appointed to succeed Chief Vigneault. As police chief, Mr. O'Neil's service of more than thirty years is the longest in Jaffrey.

Today the town offices, in a new building on the site of the former livery stable and Granite State Hotel, are open to the public daily except holidays and weekends. Formerly they were open only

when the officials met for the purpose of transacting town business, and many a question and grievance were carried to them at their regular places of employment. Today the town clerk, town treasurer, departmental bookkeepers, and tax collector maintain regular office hours for the accommodation of the public. The increased town business, incidental to the growth of the town, has necessitated these changes.



TOWN OFFICE BUILDING

The selectmen are still the town fathers, a supreme triumvirate in town affairs, charged, among other duties, with the making of annual assessments and inventories and executing the will of the voters. The tax collector makes his annual collection of the wherewithal that makes the wheels turn smoothly, and which is committed to the safe-keeping of the town treasurer. The town clerk records for posterity the annals of the town and statistics of the living and the dead, issues building permits and the automobile permits which are a prerequisite for the registration of these vehicles, things not required for highway travel in the days of Topsy and Old Dobbin.

The following lists of town officers are continued from Volume I:

MODERATORS

George H. Duncan, 1930-1940

Jason C. Sawyer, 1941-

TOWN CLERKS

John G. Townsend, 1911-1935	Albert J. Morin, 1956-1958*
Walter H. Gentsch, 1935-1942	Aug., 1961-
George H. Duncan, 1942-1956	Raymond J. Desmarais, 1958-Aug., 1961

TOWN TREASURERS

John G. Townsend, 1907-1942	Barbara M. Kiniry,
Eugene F. Boynton, 1942-1953	Aug., 1958 - Dec., 1958
Albert J. Morin, 1953-Aug., 1958	Apr., 1960-1961
1961-	Jason C. Sawyer, Dec., 1958-Apr., 1960

SELECTMEN

Seymour H. Austin, 1923-1935	Homer J. Belletete, 1943-1949
Fred L. Cournoyer, 1925-1937	J. Oren Belletete, 1949-1964
Ralph E. Boynton, 1933-1960	Charles Howard, 1950
David H. Harling, 1935-1938	Lester F. Hammond, 1950-1966
Ovila J. Belletete, 1938-1943	Arthur J. Faford, 1960-1963
Alfred S. Despres, 1938-1941	Alfred J. Christian, 1963-
Jason C. Sawyer, 1941-1950	James P. Smith, 1964-
	William W. Torrey, 1966-

*Resigned and moved to Arizona but later returned to Jaffrey.