

“The Development of Congregational Polity and Early Governance in Watertown, Massachusetts”

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Anyone who wishes to understand early town government and town meetings in Massachusetts needs to know about the form of church government that the early Puritan settlers described as, “One, Immutable, and Prescribed in the Word of God.” (1) The authority for their chosen form of Ecclesiastical organization was the Bible, and the Puritans set forth in the Cambridge Platform of 1648 that “the parts of church-government are all of them exactly described” there. Here was a sharp division between Puritan and Anglican, for the Puritan could not find in the book of Acts or the letters of Paul any reason to justify a hierarchal system of bishops, or cardinals, or popes. The Puritan structure of organization has typically been described as congregational polity, because the congregations were intended to be a reflection of the primitive Christian churches which were small cells of independent believers. (2)

By 1648 nearly thirty years had passed since the first settlers had arrived in Plymouth. The Westminster Confession, a theological platform, had arrived in the colonies from England, and by and large, there was agreement among the Puritans in matters of faith. Fifty churches had been gathered in the four colonies - Plymouth, Massachusetts Bay, New Haven and Hartford. The Synod in Cambridge, which held its first session in 1646, was called by the General Court to formally structure the polity of the New England churches. Some of the English authorities had hoped to Presbyterianize the congregations, and while the theological agreement made it a fortuitous time to regularize church polity in the New World, the Puritans had no desire to capitulate to a system that did not, in their view, conform to texts from scripture. On the opening day of the third session of the synod, a snake crawled in front of the elders, and the minister from Braintree stomped on it and killed it. This was seen as a good sign; the synod would overthrow Satan. By their formulation of the platform, they were later remembered as “*Men of great Renown in the Nation, from whence the Laudian Persecution Exiled them.*” (3) The Archbishop was one embodiment of Satan to them, and any taint of his system was overthrown in their deliberations. The gathered elders rejected the term Independent, which was often used in England, because it seemed to cover too many loose sects and their assorted heresies. Instead, they chose the term Congregational, and then defined each church as a “company of saints by calling, united into one body by a holy covenant, for the public worship of God, and the mutual edification one of another, in the fellowship of the Lord Jesus.” (4)

The synod was called not only because the Puritans had theological unity, and could turn their attention to church order and discipline, but also because there had only recently been significant threats

to the Standing Order, most especially in the events of the Antinomian controversy surrounding Anne Hutchinson, but also from independently minded Baptists who argued against infant baptism, and in favor of voluntary support for the church rather than the state supported system the Puritans had instituted in Massachusetts. One of these controversial Baptists was Nathaniel Briscoe, an early settler in Watertown, who was fined for expressing these views, more for his “unchristian” manner than the views themselves. While the Cambridge Platform allowed for the autonomy of the local congregation in a new church order that had not been seen since the time of the earliest Christian churches, it also asserted that congregationalism “was not the autonomy of the local church, but the community of autonomous churches.” (5) Thus, the Platform called for a Communion of Churches in which they would offer “mutual care in taking thought for one another’s welfare.” This translated into “consultation,” “admonition,” “participation” and “recommendation,” so that the churches would be more united in their practices. (6) This attempt to assert some order was a response to the radical reluctance to be snared in a hierarchal fold, and this independence from authority was especially notable in Watertown.

Trying to establish a governmental order for the churches and the tension that existed between the autonomy of individual churches and this communal attempt at discipline and authority is also reflected in town government and its forms, and its relationship to larger civil authorities. In 1949 Henry Wilder Foote wrote, “The autonomous local church went hand in hand with the self-governing town meeting. Indeed , it was the same group of men, in the same meetinghouse, who sat first to deal with church matters and then the secular business of the town.” (7). If the church reflected autonomy, then so did town government with its same right to elect officers who ultimately had the authority to control their own affairs. Town government was a reflection of local church politics, both because of the forms of election, and also more practically because much of the business of the towns was determining such business as the call and dismissal of the minister, the salary arrangements, the required poll tax for the support of the church, and as we shall see in Watertown, the conflict over the location of the meetinghouse. While historians of a century ago often saw the town or church meetings as the Magna Carta of democracy in America, we recognize there are limitations to that thesis, especially since there were property requirements for voting, and it was limited to men.

In his study of Watertown’s first fifty years, *Divided We Stand*, Roger Thompson suggests that the early government of Watertown went through three stages during the period 1630-1680. The first stage, he says, was a short period where the church formed the main institution for collective action and decision making.” (8) It was during this time that Watertown asserted its proclivity for local control against the General Court. There was a proposed new capital in Newtown (later Cambridge) for which

all the towns were ordered to pay for the building of fortifications. George Phillips the first minister in Watertown, and his elder Richard Brown called a meeting for the community where they declared this demand was illegal. The large sign standing in my own church sanctuary today declares with some exaggeration that this was the first instance in America of an organized group declaring “no taxation without representation,” Like the English parish, the local church was the meetinghouse for all the town to gather to conduct business, and as Thompson says, this was the natural forum for protest, as well as conducting business. While the town eventually made “retraction” and “submission,” their action set a precedent for representative government in the state, and by 1634 each town was electing deputies to represent them in the General Court. (9)

While the church was seemingly the place the earliest political decision making in Watertown occurred we can also see in other aspects of the church’s development significant influences on the development of democratic governance. The Watertown Church had been founded on July 30, 1630. In answer to the question of what makes a collection of individuals into a church, the Cambridge Platform was quite clear. This “form is the visible covenant” (10) , or we might say the agreement of the people to live together in community and watch out for each other with respect to their behavior and moral duties towards one another. In other words, the basis for the church was founded upon relationships rather than creed, and so the Platform called for a “voluntary agreement,” or “consent” among the congregation placed in plain language that “puts us in mind of our mutual duty.” The Puritans believed in a covenant theology, and so that there was reciprocal relationship with God and each other, and like all of their beliefs it was founded upon the idea of covenant as described in the Hebrew Scriptures. (11) The Watertown covenant was signed by forty initial settlers (men only) who acknowledge their gratitude to God, for helping them escape “out of the pollutions of the world,” and consequently they “promise and enter into a sure covenant with the Lord our God . . . forsaking all evil ways . . . to do him faithful service . . . in all matters concerning our reformation . . . and in the carriage of ourselves among ourselves and toward one another . . . (this is in the Magnalia). Although George Phillips had been a signer of the document, *The Humble Request*, while aboard the *Arbella*, where he and others declared they had no intention of separating from the Church of England, he was according to Cotton Mather, “better acquainted with the True [congregational] Church Discipline than most of the ministers who came with him into the country.” In an article on Philips published more than seventy-five years ago, Henry Wilder Foote says Philips had a “noteworthy influence on the development both of civil government and of the congregational polity of the churches.” Philips had been serving a parish in Boxted in Essex that was reputedly a Puritan center. Within the first few years in the New World, there were significant instances of Philips supporting congregational independence. (12)

Richard Brown was the leading elder in the Watertown church, and brought with him to the New World a reputation for separatism, having been an officer of a separatist church in London. He had helped some of the congregational heretics escape church authorities on a barge he owned that ferried people across the Thames. An early controversy in Watertown reflects both the unwillingness of the congregation there to submit to a higher ecclesiastical authority, and its complete autonomy. First, Brown declared that the Church of Rome was a true church. This was a very radical, and seemingly tolerant thing for a Puritan to say, and even though he declared the church corrupt, to even suggest that Catholics had a legitimate faith was blasphemy to most Puritans. Second, when a delegation from Boston came to investigate this statement, the Watertown church declared that, while the outsiders could offer counsel, and “sit with them as members of a neighboring congregation,” they were not in any way going to render a decision on what Watertown must do. Then when the court of Assistants declared that Brown should be dismissed as an elder, the Church said the Court had no authority over the local church. While the church split over this issue, just as they had when Nathaniel Briscoe expressed his views against infant baptism, the congregation eventually agreed with the Court’s opinion, and dismissed Brown. While Brown may have been more irascible than Philips, the views he expressed sounded remarkably like his minister. After he died in 1644, Philips’ ideas were published in the pamphlet, *A Reply to a Confutation of some Ground for Infants Baptisme: as also, Concerning the Form of a Church*. Here Philips argues that all churches are true churches even though they are “corrupted with error and sinful practices,” until Christ “come himself, and unchurch them.” He believed that no church could be a “mother church unto others, but all are sister churches.” This could be construed to mean all churches are true, independent and autonomous, and more specifically, that no church exists above the locally assembled congregation who are the body of Christ. (13)

The problem in Watertown was the tension between independence and local control moving toward democracy and freedom versus a kind of narrow isolationism that could result in no relationships with outsiders who might provide counsel, help or support. To say, no one can tell us what to do,” may mean, as Philips said, “every church is competent to act alone,” but it may also mean you have no larger relationships to provide perspective on the effectiveness of what you are doing. And so when Newtown (Cambridge) ordained and installed its new minister in 1636, all the neighboring congregations sent “sent elders and messengers” except Watertown. In turn, when John Knowles was invited to join Philips in the ministry in Watertown, no representatives from other churches were invited. This was in 1640, and may indeed have been one of the many reasons for the calling of the Cambridge Synod by the General Court, which hoped to negate such independence and isolationism.

Yet George Philips was an early proponent of a elective system that was affirmed in the Cambridge Platform. During the summer of 1630, Phillips had argued that it was the congregation's right to call a minister out from among the people, and elect him, and ordain him to ministerial status. Philips wrote, "The true calling of a minister "is not the Bishops Ordination", but the calling of a man when "they implicitly chuse him." Philips had formulated a theory of "pure congregationalism," and was the first in the colony to adopt it. (14) This was in contrast to John Wilson in Boston who claimed that ordination of the clergy was dependent upon an Anglican bishop. In fact, most aspects of church life were placed under the authority of the local congregation in the final version of the Platform. With respect to the election of church officers, the Platform declared that "A church, being free, cannot become subject to any but by a free, election . . . " and if the church had the "power to choose their officers and ministers" . . . "they have power also to depose them." In other words they can elect who they want, but can also vote them out if they are not satisfied with performance. This set the pattern for other types of elections in the communities, where even those town officers who were elected time and again, were sometimes voted out. This process of calling a minister was typically followed by ordination, and here too, this was "merely putting of a man into his place and office in the church whereunto he had right before by election." The final aspect of this local control of polity was the admission of members into the church. These qualifications were dependent upon these freely elected officers, who were "charged with the keeping of the doors of the church." They would judge who would be fit to enter the covenant that governed all their relationships. (15) While the church assembly may have effectively functioned as a town meeting for Watertown during its earliest years, it also set a pattern for future town meetings. Freely elected officers governed a community united by compact, trying to reach agreement on decisions necessary for the effective functioning of the community. Yet while the moderator directed the meetings from the pulpit, and the people voiced their opinions from the pews, the results were not always harmonious, especially in Watertown.

Earlier I said that Roger Thompson defines three periods of governance during the town's first fifty years. After the earliest control by the church, the town settled into governing itself with an ever expanding group of selectman, but by the mid 1640's many of this initial core group disappeared from leaderships roles. While some died, the majority seem to have moved away. Thompson says many of them were not originally from East Anglia, while the majority of Watertown's initial residents were, and the outsiders never married into the core families. Many of the early leaders had wealth and status, and perhaps this reflects a desire, at least initially, to follow English traditions of governance, where the elite of society govern the lower classes. Yet many of these leaders were from other places in England, and thus were considered "from away" to many of the Watertown residents. Thompson says the third phase

of early governance in the 1640's and thereafter switched to the election of these "familiar" people who were not strangers in the early years of settlement. One outsider was Thomas Mayhew who came to Watertown in 1635 from nearby Medford, a settler there four years before, A merchant from Tisbury in Wiltshire, a mere 30 miles from Southampton on Salisbury Plain. He was not one of the East Anglians who settled in Watertown, but it did not seem to matter, for he was an agent for a London investor, Matthew Craddock, and earned the respectful title of Mister. He built Watertown's first mill, but, his days of success were short lived. Within a decade, his family departed for a new start on Martha's Vineyard, as the mills could not provide enough sustenance, and his property was foreclosed. (16)

Much of the division in Watertown occurred because there was an expanding population and a fixed land supply, unlike other towns where lands were not so completely allocated, with plans made for newcomers and common lands. Here we had a land grab. The settlers who moved west to what are now Weston and Walham argued that meetinghouses should be built at more convenient locations. They resolved that only separation could resolve their conflicts. The townsmen declared, "'tis the only method for settling or producing a lasting peace and accord. For while there is mutual dependence of one part on the other the contest is like to be continued, each will be striving for victory and improving advantages against other, which contest will cease if distinct precincts be allotted." (17) Conflict was institutionalized here, for not only were separate towns created in the West because all the land was granted, and peaceful solutions could not be found for meetinghouse locations, but also additional land grants were made as well, reducing the town to its four square miles of today. Newton used Watertown's reputation as a place of conflict to argue with the General Court that Watertown's decline was attributable to "the wars and animosities among themselves." (18) Early Watertown exhibited a tension in its political life, that is seemingly borrowed from its church life. They were firm believers in the importance of local independence from a controlling hierarchy, and they derived their power from the "people's free choice." Yet in that context of independent, free choice the people tended to settle conflicts by separation, and by the exclusion of outsiders. Parochial attitudes about being part of a larger communion of churches, for instance, was an assertion of local authority, but it not only prevented the people from having outside counsel, it also inhibited them from developing into an influential place. One can only hope that the citizens who have inherited this legacy would strive for balance between independence, or "free, uninfluenced choice" and community where there is sharing of scarce resources and finding solutions that benefit the many instead of preferential treatment for the few, and also seeks to learn from outsiders. It seems clear that many of Watertown's early settlers followed the old East Anglian maxim, to "do different."

Notes

1. Peter Hughes, editor. *The Cambridge Platform* (Boston, 2008) , p. 15.
2. Conrad Wright. *Walking Together: Polity and Participation in Unitarian Universalist Churches*. (Boston, 1989), p. 5.
3. John Higginson and William Hubbard, as quoted in Henry Wilder Foote, “The Significance and Influence of the Cambridge Platform of 1648,” in *The Cambridge Platform of 1648*, Henry Wilder Foote, editor. (Boston, 1949), p. 41.
- 4 Hughes, Cambridge, p. 17
- 5 Wright, *Walking*., p. 21
6. Hughes, Cambridge, p. 47-50.
7. Foote, Significance, p. 47.
8. Roger Thompson, *Divided We Stand: Watertown, 1630-1680*. (Amherst, Massachusetts, 2001), p. 40.
9. Ibid, p. 41-42.
10. Hughes, Cambridge, p. 20-21.
11. Wright, *Walking*, p.7-8.
12. Thompson, p. 65; Henry Wilder Foote, “George Phillips, First Minister of Watertown,” in *Massachusetts Historical Society Proceedings*, Vol. 63 (1931), p. 193, 196-201, 205.
13. Thompson, p. 65; Foote on Phillips, p. 211-212.
14. Foote on Phillips, p. 223.
15. Hughes, Cambridge, p. 29, 31, 38.
16. Maud deLeigh Hodges, *Crossroads on the Charles: A History of Watertown, Massachusetts*. (Watertown, Massachusetts, 1980), p. 21-23.
17. Michael Zuckerman, *Peaceable Kingdoms: New England Towns in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1972), p. 139.
18. Ibid., p. 149.

Sources

Foote, Henry Wilder, "The Significance and Influence of the Cambridge Platform of 1648," in *The Cambridge Platform of 1648*, Henry Wilder Foote, editor. Boston: Beacon Press and Pilgrim Press, 1949.

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