

LOOKING BACK

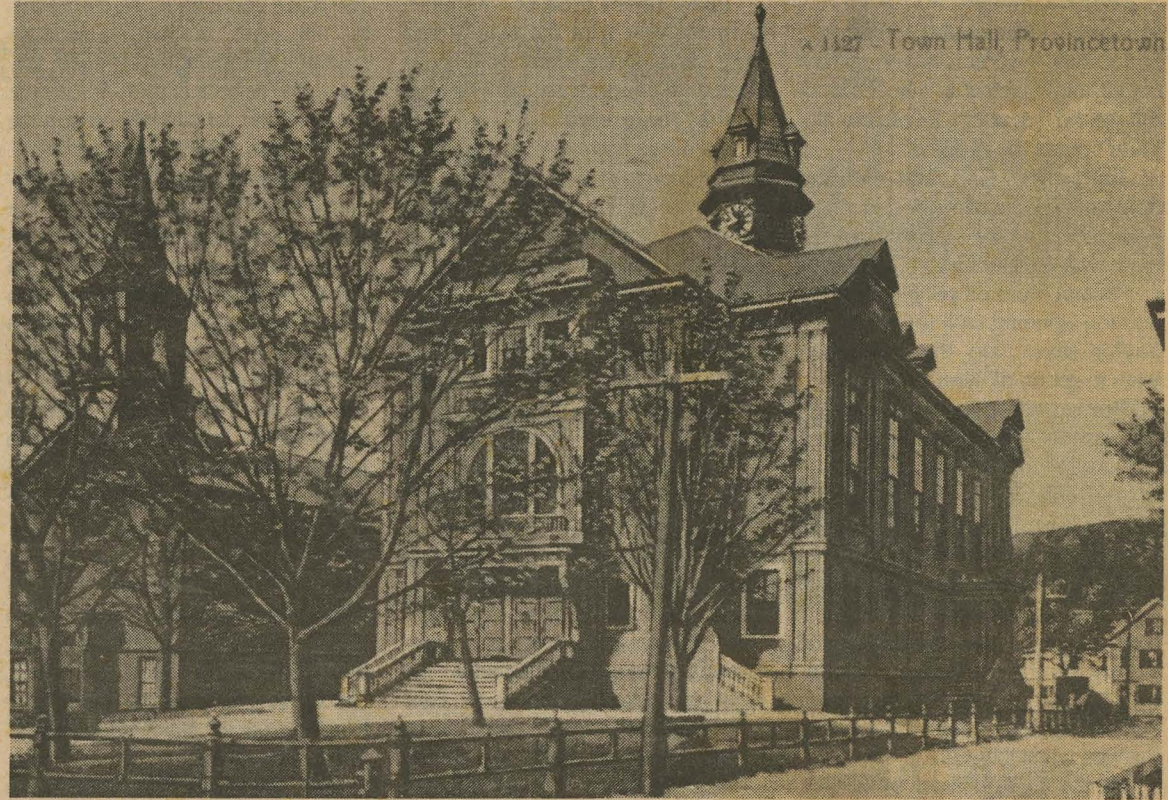
by Clive Driver

Town Meeting: 1897 and 1997

Although the form of Town Meeting has remained remarkably consistent over the years, the substance of it has not. A hundred years ago, and for a very long time, Town Meeting was held early in February. In 1897, it was convened on February 8 at nine o'clock in the morning. After a moderator had been chosen, a committee of 17, none of whom held a town office, was appointed by the moderator to consider all appropriations. After a few resolutions, including one to petition the Massachusetts legislature to help finance the schools, the meeting adjourned at 11, and the polls were then opened for voting until 3 p.m. When the votes were counted, 455 individuals had cast ballots. A few town positions have

since been eliminated, as, for example, fence viewers, pound keeper, field drivers, and surveyors of wood, bark, and lumber. Unlike today, jurors for the coming year were also chosen. Of special interest was the ballot question: "Shall licenses be granted for the sale of intoxicating liquors in this town?" The result was 265 voting no, and 97 voting yes. This ballot question came up any number of times in the nineteenth century, and was consistently voted down.

On February 23, Town Meeting was reconvened to consider the recommendations of the committee of 17. The proposed operating budget was \$25,937, as compared with an operating budget of \$11,630,854 to be considered in 1997. Comparisons of dollar



Town Hall, site of Town Meetings for the last 110 years.

amounts such as this are, however, virtually meaningless. We all know that a dollar is not now worth what it used to be. The largest expenditure in 1897, as it is today, was for support of the schools: \$11,200 in 1897, \$3,778,664 in 1997. Interestingly enough, a higher percentage of the total budget was spent on the schools then than now: 43 percent as compared with 32 percent. This can be partly attributed to the difference in the number of students in kindergarten through grade 12 — 780 in 1897, 357 in 1997.

The other major expenses in 1897 were \$600 for police; \$500 for street lights; \$4,500 for relief of

the poor; \$2,500 for street repairs, with an additional \$250 for watering down the unpaved streets in the summer; \$1,470 for the Fire Department. After discussion by the voters present, the budget was actually voted upon by the committee of 17, and approved unanimously. The Town Meeting action was, therefore, decided, not by the voters in total, but by the appointed committee. It is well nigh to impossible to imagine a Town Meeting in 1997 being constructed on these principles, although something like it happens in much larger communities where there is a representative Town Meeting, that

is, where a certain smaller number of individuals are chosen by the electorate to meet and make decisions for the whole community.

What is most striking about the Town Meetings of a century ago, is that very few additional decisions were made by warrant articles. In fact, there have been several years when there were no additional warrant articles, except the "usual and customary" ones. Yet, research into these matters by the historian or social scientist would seem to indicate that the town was, for the most part, just as well run in the past with a simpler framework in place, as it probably is at present.