

Old Chelsea Previous to 1857

Address by Mr. David Floyd

Before Men's Club, Chelsea

April 8, 1907



"The village or township is the only association which is so perfectly natural that, wherever a number of men are collected it seems to constitute itself."

The town exists in all nations whatsoever their laws and customs may be: it is man who makes monarchies and establishes republics, but the township seems to come directly from the hand of God."

"Town meetings are to liberty what primary schools are to science; they bring it within the people's reach, they teach how to use and how to enjoy it. A nation may establish a free government but without municipal institutions it cannot have the spirit of liberty."

So wrote De Tocqueville in his "Democracy in America" about one hundred years after the incorporation of the town of Chelsea.

We meet tonight to mark the passing of a half century since a section of the old town assumed a different form of government, and the part assigned me is to say something of the 225 years preceding the act of the General Court approved by Governor Henry J. Gardner, March 13, 1857--the first charter of the City of Chelsea.

In taking a hasty glance of the 107 years during which this territory was a part of the town of Boston, and at Chelsea's 118 years as a town, let us keep in mind the words of the wise French man already quoted, and also what our own Jefferson said a few years earlier when advocating a change of local government in Virginia:

"These wards called townships in New England are the vital principle of their government, and have proved themselves the wisest inventions ever devised by the wit of man for the



perfect exercise of self-government and for its preservation."

In referring to the early history of our territory it would be presumptuous to attempt any other general statements than those made by the distinguished gentleman, so long a resident of your city, whose history of Chelsea is soon to be published. In his chapters in the Memorial History of Boston Judge Mellen Chamberlain wrote:-

"Chelsea, Revere, and Winthrop, the present names of towns which were formerly parts of one town called Chelsea, at the earliest period of their known history were severally called Winnisimmet, Rumney Marsh, and Pullen Point; and for some years before they were set off and organized into a town, they were embraced in the general designation of Rumney Marsh, or number thirteen."

"During the period between the settlement of the bay and the incorporation of the town, the inhabitants of this district had no separate municipal existence, and therefore no municipal history. They were a part of the town of Boston, and its history was their history. But as a community dwelling remote from the Centre, accessible only by a circuitous land route, or by a difficult and tedious passage by water, they came to have a life of their own, differing in some respects from that of their fellow citizens who dwelt on the peninsula. This life however, was marked by no extraordinary events or vicissitudes of fortune."

The town of Boston in its earliest history consisted of the little peninsula which we now call "Old Boston," with the outlying districts of Muddy River (Brookline) and Rumney Marsh. The Town house stood where now stands the old State House at the head of State Street, and here the annual elections were held. The men of Rumney Marsh and Pullen Point who were entitled to vote attended some of these meetings, and occasionally votes were passed concerning their section of the town, such as the regulation concerning keeping of only three swine to twenty acres of land and imposing a fine of two shillings if the animals were found abroad without being sufficiently ringed, the swine to be impounded until the fine was paid. This in 1645.

March 15, 1669.

"Ordered, that the constables of Muddy River and Rumney



Marsh shall be chosen by liftings up of hands, and by the next yeare before the day of publique election the selectmen apoynt the inhabitants of Muddy River and Rumney Marsh to meete together and nominate constables and other officers proper for each place, and the present constables bring ~~in~~ their names to the next publique meeting on ye day of election, these to be put to vote."

This was the first instance of the outlying districts of the town having a chance to name any of the town officers. The constable in those days besides being the guardian of the peace, was also the tax collector for the district in which he resided.

In 1733 "Voted to choose a collector by hand vote" and Jacob Chamberlain was chosen. The assessors were the selectmen, all of whom lived at the Centre,--that is, Old Boston,-- but in 1698 the meeting voted that Rumney Marsh and Muddy River, each have liberty to chose an assessor to set with the selectmen for the making of their own rates, to make choice of their assessor, on the first Training Day and then confirmed by the Town. The first assessor for an outlying section under this vote must have been selected as a compliment for the favor granted by the great majority of the voters of Old Boston, his name being John Center.

The names of inhabitants of Rumney Marsh and Pullin Point are mentioned as having been chosen at Boston town meetings to the following offices, besides those already named: scavengers, surveyor of highways, tithing-man, fence-viewers, and hog-reeves.

In 1666, April 30, John Tuttle, William Harris, and Sam'l Davis were a committee to settle the highway to Pullen Point leading out of the neck of Rumney Marsh. In 1698-9 Jan. 30. Deane Winthrop, John Smith, William Ireland, John Tuttle, and James Bill, a committee appointed by the selectmen of Boston, made a report laying out a highway extending from a point near the present



Johnson Avenue and Somerset Street by a very crooked course to the North part of what is now Winthrop, thence past Cherry Island to the present Crescent Beach and thence through the town to the county road "that runs to the Ferry at Winnisimmet."

In 1734 the selectmen of Boston held a meeting at the district of Rumney Marsh and after viewing the highways which were "very narrow in some places it was thereupon agreed that they should be two rods wide."

Early in 1640 a motion was made by such as have farms at Rumney Marsh "that our brother Oliver may be sent to instruct their servants, and to be a help to them, because they cannot many times come hither, nor sometimes to Lynn, and sometimes nowhere at all." The young man sent out was John Oliver, a graduate of Harvard College, 1643, and he died of a malignant fever in 1646. Winthrop in his journal says:

"It swept away some precious ones amongst us, especially one Mr. John Oliver, a gracious young man, not fully thirty years of age, an expert soldier, an excellent surveyor of land and one who for the sweetness of his disposition and usefulness, through a public spirit, was generally beloved and greatly lamented. For some years past he has given up himself to be a minister of the gospel and was become very hopeful that way (being a good scholar and of able gifts otherwise) and had, exercised publicly for two years."

As early as 1665 some of the residents of Rumney Marsh had relations with the Boston church, and the following certificate is interesting as showing the method of admitting freemen into the colony.

"These do testify unto the honored Gen. Court yt. Mr. John Tuttle, William Hasie, and Benjamin Muzzie of Boston-Rumney Marsh, are upon good testimony of others and my owne knowledge or experience both orthodox in the Christian Religion, and of unblamable conversation, as I do believe, and doe humbly commend them therefore unto the acceptance of the society and companie of our freemen according as they express their desire thereunto, and aimes at the Common Good therein.

John Wilson, Senior.



Mr. John Tuttle, William Haise, and Benjamin Muzzie are raiteable according to the law made for admittance of free-men.

Hezekiah Usher."  
2 May 1665.

Writing of a later period, Judge Chamberlain says:

" But the time was at hand when the people began to move in respect to a house of public worship. In 1706, at the March meeting of the town, Elisha Cooke, Elisha Hutchinson, Samuel Sewall, Penn Townsend and Elder Joseph Bredham, or Bredon, were appointed a committee to cinsider, and make report to the next town meeting, what they should think proper to lay before the town relating to the petitions of sundry of the inhabitants of Rumney Marsh about the building of a meeting house there. The subject was postponed from year to year, until Aug. 29, 1709, when it was "voted a grant of one hundred pounds, to be raised and laid out in building a meeting house at Rumney Marsh; and the committee of 1706, with the substitution of the name of Edward Bromfield for that of Joseph Bredham, were empowered to direct both as to the place and manner of erecting said meeting house. Judge Sewall went to the raising July 10, 1710. His diary says:

"I drove a pin, gave a 5s bill, had a very good treat at Mr. Cheevers; went home by Winnisimmet July 16-extremely hot weather. Mr. Cook, Bromfield and I goe to Rumney Marsh to finish the meeting house. Stowers is to make the window, got home well. Laus Deo. Several died of the heat at Salem."

The Unitarian Church still standing in Revere is supposed to be this "meeting house". It now faces the west instead of the north as the first. It formerly had a gallery for colored men, and another for colored women.

A church was organized in 1715, at which Rev. Cotton Mather was moderator.

There is no evidence that before the year 1701 the Town of Boston made any provision for teaching the youth of Rumney Marsh, although the children in this district were probably allowed to attend the schools at Boston proper. At a town meeting March 11, 1704, after voting to establish a school in the North end of Boston,



"The inhabitants of Rumney Marsh standing by, and seeing the town in so good a frame, also put in their request that a free school might be granted them to teach to read, write, and cypher,. It being put to vote to know their mind, it was voted in the affirmative, with the proviso that did it appear to the selectmen that there was a reasonable number of children to come to the school, then the selectmen should agree with a schoolmaster to teach the children to read, write, and cypher, for which service he should be paid out of the town treasury."

Nothing came of this vote for eight years when the citizens reminded the selectmen of it, whereupon the board voted Jan. 24, 1709,

"That in case Mr. Thomas Cheever do undertake and attend the keeping such school at his house four days in a week weekly for the space of one year ensuing and render an account with the selectmen once a quarter of the number of children or scholars belonging unto the said district which shall duly attend the said school, he shall be paid out of the town treasury after the rate of twenty pounds per annum for this service."

This arrangement with some changes of teachers and compensation was continued until the incorporation of the town of Chelsea. A return of scholars made by Cheever under date of Feb. 19, 1714 shows that twenty-five pupils attended the school at that time. Thomas Cheever was the pastor of the church then just erected.

The people of Winthrop have pointed with pride to their unbroken no-license majority; the town of Revere has just celebrated fifteen dry years, but not years of famine, and Chelsea is doing much better in this line than formerly. What is the record when we all belonged to Boston? The colony records under date of Nov. 13, 1644 say:

"Goodman Smyth of Winnisimmet hath liberty to sell wine, and to keep a house of common entertainment."

He continued 36 years in the business at the same stand. In 1647 the General Court directed that the county Court should attend to the business of granting licenses. We also find evi-



dence that the dram drinking of the old days was not the harmless thing that is sometimes claimed for it by those who say the liquors then were purer and the consequences of the drink habit were not so disastrous as in these days. In the year 1676 James Bill, John Grover, Elias Mavrick and William Ireland are appointed special surveyors under order of the General Court "to inspect their part of the town to prevent excessive drinking, and disorder in private houses."

In 1735 began the agitation for a separation from Boston, a petition being presented at the town meeting. This was referred to a committee of five who reported adversely. Three years later 24 men again asked the town meeting:

"That you would sett off number thirteen (in which we dwell) as a separtate township and allow us out of the public revenue what you in your wisdom shall think meet."

Again the matter was referred to a committee of five and again the report was against the petitioners. It is interesting to note that Sam Adams was a member of each of these committees, and that he signed a report which stated that the committee was of the opinion that in the matter of the support of the minister "with respect to the school, the due apportioning the taxes, and their highways, the town may give relief in a more reasonable manner than by voting off a district township." A petition was then presented to the General Court, Boston held another meeting, which selected another committee which presented a strong remonstrance against the petition. The General Court, however, granted the request, and the act of incorporation was signed by Governor Jonathan Belcher in January 1739. The first town meeting was held in the part of the town now Revere, March 5th. The selectmen elected were John Brintnall, Thomas Pratt,



John Floyd, Samuel Floyd, Nathan Cheever.

Town Clerk-Nathaniel Oliver, Town Treasurer-Samuel Tuttle. March 20th a second meeting was held when several of the officers previously elected were excused and others chosen. Mr. Elisha Tuttle paid a fine rather than accept the office of surveyor of highways. At the third meeting, held in May it was,

"Voted, to raise ten pounds to be laid out at the discretion of the selectmen in educating the children living in those branches of the town called the Rocks and Pulling Point."

The territory describrd in the act of incorporation consisted of over 6000 square acres. And with the exception of the annexation of the Panhandle to Saugus in 1841, no change was made in the boundaries of Chelsea for 107 years. New names were given to the three sections viz: the Cinter, the Ferry, and Chelsea Point or Pulling Point to the section formerly called only by the latter name.

The entire population in 1876 was 489. In 1800 there were but 449 inhabitants and in 1830 there were 771. The Centre contained the most people, Pullin Point ranked next, and the "Ferry" in the year last named consisted principally of the Williams, Cary, Shurtleff, and Carter farms with inhabitants numbering 30.

Judge Chamberlain says the measure separating Rumney Marsh from Boston was not a wise one. "There numbers were few and their property and estates were insufficient as they soon found, for the respectable maintenance of a separate town government."

During the old Chelsea period occurred the Revolutionary war and Chelsea did her part in that struggle. Mr. Samuel Watts, and Deacon John Sale, respectively represented the town in the second and third Provincial Congress of Massachusetts at the be-



gining of the struggle.

The Lexington alarm of April 19, 1775 found Captain Samuel Sprague and a company of men, (most if not all of whom lived at the Centre,) marching toward Lexington. The State archives contain "A rool of the men that kept guard at Pullen Point in Chelsea by order of Captain Sam'l Sprague from April 19, 1775, till discharged by their officers." This service lasted 30 days and a part of it was probably performed at Point Shirley and along the Southerly shore of what is now Winthrop.

The battle of Chelsea occurred May 27, 1775--a "Forgotten Battle" until Judges Chamberlain and Bosson, and others including the important work in erecting a memorial, performed by Old Suffolk Chapter, "rescued from oblivion the recollections of the battle so important in its effects" now known of all men in this vicinity.

Important events in this period were the building of a bridge from Charlestown to Chelsea in 1802-3 and the construction of the turnpike through Chelsea and Lynn to Salem. The purchase of the Williams farm and the ferry in 1831, by the Winnisimmet Company, together with the later acquirement of Dr. Shurtleff's by the same Corporation, resulted in great activity in the sale of land and in building operations. In 1845 the first action was taken towards a division of the town.

Winnisimmet or "The Ferry" had in 15 years acquired a population of 4,500 people, and had ceased to be a farming community. The town meetings to accommodate five-sixths of the voters were held here in Winnisimmet hall and in the Baptist Vestry instead of at the Centre. Money had to be spent for sewers,



The division was made on a percentage of 19 cents and 2 mills for North Chelsea, and 80 cents and 8 mills for Chelsea. The entire property of the town was valued at \$11,332.02. Each town took its share of both debt and property. The division was a good thing for both sections and in six years Winthrop was set off from North Chelsea and thus the three villages became three fully incorporated towns.

So great was the development of Chelsea that in eleven years after she was left to go alone her wise men thought it best to change their form of government and so in 1857 came to pass the event which we recall this evening.