

A Democratic Impulse?: Political Institutions in Early New England Towns

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Thirty-nine years after its initial publication, Kenneth Lockridge's *A New England Town* remains a staple in graduate level courses covering the colonial period. Exploring Dedham, Massachusetts from its inception in the first half of the seventeenth-century to the midpoint of the eighteenth-century, Lockridge has posited that during the first one hundred years of its existence great changes within Dedham's political community had taken place. In his depiction, the townsmen metamorphose from an almost slothful political entity during the seventeenth-century to dyed in the wool democrats in the eighteenth-century. For Lockridge, this change occurred because of the shifting socioeconomic, geographic, and political facets of a growing society in which a populace that once occupied a small, close-knit community became an enlarging and continually expanding community with disparate interests.

At its inception, Dedham's political culture centered upon the all-powerful town meeting and its townsmen. These townsmen, largely occupied by their agricultural pursuits, did not want to spend time at the town meeting, the political body that decided every issue by a majority vote. Encumbered by a myriad of issues demanding the townsmen's attention and vote, they created the position of selectmen to administer the town's will on a day-to-day basis. From this point forward, an elite cadre of comparatively wealthy selectmen elected by the townsmen ruled Dedham. These selectmen exercised all the power that the community of townsmen could exercise at their meetings, but on a day-to-day basis. The townsmen, as Lockridge accounts, could have exercised greater control over the selectmen, but because of the deferential nature of Puritan society's belief in the "natural inequality of men,"²⁶ allowed them to operate largely unimpeded. This deference to authority and political harmony died with the founding generation. With their deaths and subsequent issues of a growing population, shrinking land availability near town, and a myriad of conflicts based on sectionalism within the township, Dedham's residents increasingly turned upon one another. The result was political infighting leading to attempts at secession and equally vigorous attempts to maintain

²⁶ This view held that the more prosperous members of society were blessed by God and should serve as an example to be followed by those who were not. Kenneth Lockridge, *A New England Town* (New York: Norton, 1970), 10.

the town proper. This, for Lockridge, was evidence to the rise of an “active democratic behavior” within early eighteenth-century New England.²⁷

It is an impossibility to explore the primary sources from which Lockridge drew his conclusions. *A New England Town* is a social history based upon town records that still affords an opportunity for reinterpretation, though a guarded one. Contingent on Lockridge’s faithful representation of sources, it is possible to draw alternative conclusions from his evidence and propose a new model that not only explains the early political stability of New England towns, but also the fractious nature of politics during the eighteenth century. Imposing the model of Communal Authoritarianism, in which a community that is active in policing itself to ensure communal adherence to and progress towards commonly held values, beliefs, and ambitions, upon seventeenth-century, Dedham reveals that the townsmen are not as deferential as they appear. Creating the position of, and investing their power in, the selectmen, New England townsmen exercised ultimate control and oversight. They actively policed the selectmen’s actions and their repercussions, creating the peaceful political existence that Lockridge mistakenly attributed to political deference. At the inception of the eighteenth-century, population pressures began stressing their political system because of the relative ease at which they could be corrupted.

Dedham During the Seventeenth-Century

The Puritan settlers of New England sought to establish a stable society within the howling wilderness of the North American continent. Through the creation of covenants, town meetings, and selectmen, their investment paid immediate dividends. In comparison with early Virginian settlers, inhabitants of the early Puritan settlements enjoyed remarkable stable social and political lives. Lockridge has proposed the model of “Conservative Corporate Voluntarism” as an explanation of how this stability was achieved at the local level. Key to this local stability was the wise and judicious use of power by the towns’ selectmen operating within the construct of a covenant and a largely passive populace. The selectmen routinely settled disputes in such a manner both beneficial to the individuals involved and the community. The routine manner in which they settled disputes is irrefutable. However, the downplaying of the town meeting and of the agency of individual townsmen within Dedham’s political culture overshadows a more promising way of understanding just how and why towns such as Dedham achieved social and political stability. It is difficult to fathom that a community so devoted and fervent in their desire for stability, and a peaceful Christian existence, would be so passive.

²⁷ Lockridge, 138.

The proposal here is to adopt a different model that reinvests the power into the people in a way that fits the evidence Lockridge presented.

This proposed model is what can be termed Communal Authoritarianism. Communal Authoritarianism can be defined as a community that is active in policing itself to ensure communal adherence to and progress towards commonly held values, beliefs, and ambitions. An easy way of envisioning this model is through a set of isosceles triangles in a position so that they form a figure similar to an X. The populace with its beliefs and values would be positioned at the base of one triangle and the selectmen at the junction between the two triangles. The investment of the populace's power is represented by a vertical line from the midpoint of the base of the triangle rising towards the juncture between the triangles. Once that power reaches the juncture (the selectmen) the power is then redistributed on the other side. If the two triangles match in size the community's needs and aspirations have been met. If, however, the other triangle's base is too large or too small, their needs and wants have not been met, resulting in a refusal to reinvest their power into the group, making individual or whole sale changes where necessary.

This model is predicated on a commonly held mindset among the community. Though there existed some stratification in the distribution of wealth, the community was based upon commonly held values and external pressures which bound them together. New England towns of this period were based on "covenants or mini-constitutions that directed who was allowed to live there and how they were supposed to conduct themselves."²⁸ In early Dedham, every male resident bound himself to a covenant that promised to "receive only such unto us as may be probably of one heart with us."²⁹ Through the exclusion of those who were "contrary minded," Dedham's villagers ensured a common ideological bond among its members. During a dispute the covenant required villagers to turn towards their neighbors for a resolution.³⁰ Villagers needed assurance that the neighbors shared a common mindset. The social contract was not the only factor contributing to group cohesion. The passage of the litmus test determining their moral fitness to join the community, the common experience of an Atlantic crossing, residence in an isolated town near wilderness, close proximity to Amerindians believed to be devil worshipers, and the shared experience of oppression in England collectively acted as a trial by fire in which the residents of Dedham drew their motivation and strength to remain in and at peace with the group. Dedham's first generation was devoted to their community and its utopian vision is evident in "the overwhelming majority of the settlers came to Dedham to stay.

²⁸ Steven Sarson, *British America, 1500-1800: Creating Colonies, Imagining an Empire* (Great Britain: Hodder Arnold, 2005), 128.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁰ Lockridge, 6, 5, 4.

They neither ranged restlessly west nor sought wealth in the developing metropolis of Boston.”³¹ Willingness to stay in one area was not a passive acceptance of their lot, but a coherent and intensive attempt to create that “city upon a hill.”

The town of Dedham was settled in 1635. In March of that year the General Court of the colony gave the assembly of townsmen in Dedham and elsewhere authorization “to make bylaws not repugnant to the laws of the colony and to ‘choose their own particular officers.’”³² Though Lockridge states that it was “shortly” after this that Dedham elected a board of selectmen, this ignores four years of rule by the town meeting. Over those four years they had not been able to expediently use those meetings to resolve their problems. It was not until May 1639 that the townsmen established the board of selectmen. This is what they meant by the “long experience that the general meeting of so many men in one [assembly to consider] [...] the common affairs thereof has wasted much time to no small damage.”³³ The men of Dedham had not been passive in the administration of their local government, or the course by which they sought to achieve their utopian vision. If they had been passive, then there would never have been the need for the selectmen. Furthermore, the fact that the executive powers were not wholly surrendered to these selectmen and that the town meeting acted as an oversight is indicative that the townsmen had a stake in Dedham’s future and felt the need to ensure that their vision was fulfilled.

The selectmen were under the watchful eye of the populace. As noted by Lockridge, many of the selectmen began their political careers in lower positions of government such as a fenceviewer or hogreeve. Only after each had “submitted himself to the town’s watchful eye” could he have gained or lost the “necessary respect” to become a selectman.³⁴ Once in this position, a selectman would find himself in day-to-day contact with his fellow citizens. In these daily encounters he would have to assign guilt or innocence to a party, negotiate the location of public roads, or a whole assortment of other issues. In fact, “It was a rare townsman who did not find himself either wanting or having to attend the selectmen at several of their meetings each year, and it was a rare selectman who did not find himself judging most [of] his fellow townsmen in the course of a year.”³⁵ It is in these disputes, such as John Gay’s request for town land to build a barn or the punishment of men who took wood from public lands, that illustrate the political agency of the community through the actions of the selectmen. The selectmen had to be fair in their response to these requests and illegal activities. They could neither deny out of hand a request or

³¹ Lockridge, 63.

³² *Ibid.*,38.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*,46.

³⁵ *Ibid.*,40.

overreact in cases in which punishment was necessary, and expect to maintain the peace. The selectmen shared a common ideology and goal with the people they served and therefore sought to act fairly within the perceived parameters of that goal. If they did not, they were deemed unrepresentative of the communal ideology and removed from their position as the bureaucrats for the aggregate dictator that was the Dedham population.

It comes as no surprise that the wealthier members of this society dominated the position of selectmen. While they may have been wise and judicious in their use of power, this can just as easily be attributed to the process described above as it can to Lockridge's unspoken acceptance of the Great Person Theory. The Great Person Theory is based on the belief that exceptional leaders possess extraordinary qualities and skills.³⁶ Recall that the town was based on an exclusionary principle, only those who passed a rigorous personal examination were allowed to stay and there were many similar experiences which created a common mindset. This is not to say that the inhabitants of the town were exactly alike and did not have differences of opinion, they all shared a common history and ideological background that informed the way they related to the community and treated their neighbors. That the wealthy were in the position of leadership more often can more likely be ascribed to the Situational Approach to Leadership from Social Psychology. This theory holds that external, situational factors can and do influence who will become the leader of a group.³⁷ The townsmen did not simply elect the wealthy because of divinely ordained reasons—that they were blessed, therefore, possessed superior morals—nor does it mean that the voters necessarily “liked to elect the most substantial of the mature townsmen,”³⁸ rather, because of their isolation, labor intensive occupation, and a whole host of other factors, the wealthier members of the community were the logical choice for leadership. Their slightly higher appointment rate allowed the less wealthy to focus upon everyday tasks with some assurance their desires and views were being upheld consistently throughout the community.

Despite the power the selectmen held in Puritan society, they were still accountable to the town meeting. Though the General Court of the colony regulated who could and could not vote, a clear majority of the male taxpayers in the town were eligible to vote in these meetings throughout this period.³⁹ As Lockridge argues, these men were just as powerful as the selectmen and more influential in the sense that they also functioned as an oversight committee. Every so often the town “would reaffirm the broad mandate of power given to the board” of selectmen and

³⁶ Steven J. Breckler, James M. Olson, and Elizabeth C. Wiggins, *Social Psychology Alive* (USA: Thomson, 2006), 594, 597.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 597.

³⁸ Lockridge, 43.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

through this reaffirmation “confirm the ultimate power of the meeting.”⁴⁰ They also had the power to vote a selectman, the whole board of selectmen, or the very position in and of itself out of political existence. Outside of an incident in 1660 when the whole town voted to “withdraw the power of the selectmen,” Lockridge portrays this meeting as passive, content with leaving the running of the town to the selectmen.⁴¹ One possible explanation for this supposed passivity can be found in the day-to-day interactions in which deals between the town, represented through the selectmen, and individual residents resolved personal disputes amicably for the needs of the town and the individuals involved. Personal quarrels, because of these interactions, were funneled away from the town meeting and did not become political disputes. Another explanation for Lockridge’s conclusion can be found in a close perusal of his math in relation to the 1666 tax list and the number of terms served by men of different rank. Assuming that wealthy selectmen could be considered “wealthy” during all their terms, for the 25 years between 1639 and 1666 the wealthy served a total of 14 years for an average of 3.5 terms for man. The middling and the poor served for a total of eleven years with an average of terms served for the middling sort around 5.8 terms.⁴² Of course, averages in government representation are by no means definitive. This pattern suggests a higher turnover rate than Lockridge asserts, with the board of selectmen being anchored by those few individuals who were steadfast and appealing to the community’s wants and desires. If this would hold up to higher historical scrutiny, the town meeting would have to be reclassified as an active and vengeful polity asserting its vision of society.

Dedham and other New England Towns in the Eighteenth-Century

By the last decades of the seventeenth-century, the utopian ambitions of New England towns were beginning to wear away. Victims of population growth and its subsequent dispersal, the deaths of their founders, and the Great Awakening of the early half of the next century eroded the towns’ singular communal ambition and created factions vying for political power. For Lockridge, these factions were the humble beginnings of “an active democratic behavior” where residents would come to “accept the vocal and sometimes violent conflicts that give rise to that kind of democracy.”⁴³ Yet, as with the early exploration of Lockridge’s seventeenth-century Dedham, there is an alternative explanation for their behavior based on the central thesis posed earlier—Communal Authoritarianism. Though the utopian ambition of this model imposed by their founders was lost, its political institutions of the town meeting and selectmen as well as the political relationship between the two survived

⁴⁰Ibid., 46.

⁴¹Ibid., 48.

⁴² These statistics are derived from information presented by Lockridge on pages 42-44.

⁴³ Lockridge, 138.

well into the eighteenth-century. Factions existed within Dedham and other towns such as Concord, but they were not operating under some before-its-time democratic impulse. Rather, they were operating within the political framework and constraints of Communal Authoritarianism.

As they had during the seventeenth-century, eighteenth-century New England townsmen centered their social and political lives on their town. Most, if not all, towns still politically communicated with the outside world solely through their delegate to the General Court. This delegate was expected to follow his own discretion in representing a town's interests *unless* instructed otherwise by the town meeting.⁴⁴ With limited political contact the townsmen still held the ultimate power within their isolated community. If they did not make people sign the covenant, they still actively "warned out" those who were undesirable. Conversely, if a newcomer to town was deemed to be a hardworking, productive individual they would be allowed to stay, provided they could afford to setup shop or buy land. In effect, while no longer necessarily tied to one another by affections of love in the sight of God or a common migration experience, many communities still exercised their right to exclusive residency. This was important because, the town's political power still lay with the enfranchised townsmen who either by their own rule or through their appointed bureaucrats—the selectmen—"claimed authority over anything that happened within [...] [the town's] borders" from moral transgressions of members of the town to the building of roads, levying of taxes, and religious and property disputes.⁴⁵

With the growth in population, the resolutions to disputes that were acceptable to both the town and the individual that had characterized these communities in the seventeenth-century became nigh impossible in the eighteenth-century. At their inception, towns such as Dedham, Andover, and Concord had formed a central village around the meetinghouse. From this village, farmers would journey to work their fields that lay just beyond the limits of the village. As the community granted subsequent land holdings to its men, the distance a farmer had to travel to his lands grew. In the early days, problems such as these were resolved by land swaps negotiated between the town's selectmen and the individual farmer. As more and more land came to be distributed, landholding townsmen found themselves increasingly hemmed into the village and isolated from their landholdings. Many of these men, or their sons who were coming of age and stood to inherit land from their fathers, took it upon themselves, for the sake of convenience, to leave the village and plant their roots closer to their landholdings. As more and more men

⁴⁴ Robert Gross, *Minutemen and Their World* (USA: Hill and Wang, 2001), 34.

⁴⁵ Gross, 90, 10.

began to settle these regions, the seeds of discord were being sewn one settler at a time.⁴⁶

Eventually, these seeds would sprout and blossom into highly divisive political issues. As Robert Gross notes, “With town government affecting so much of daily life, no New England community could escape political conflict. A road urgently needed by a man at the outskirts was often a wasteful expense to an inhabitant near the center, while one churchgoer’s learned preacher was another’s prideful sinner on the way to hell.” Problems such as these, and larger issues such as secession tied directly to them, were rampant throughout eighteenth-century New England towns.⁴⁷ During the early period of these town’s existence, when the founders as well as their ideologies were still alive, most townsmen continued to live in or in close enough proximity to the village that everyone was likely to see the need for a road or to support a single preacher. During the eighteenth-century in towns such as Dedham and Concord, the population of townsmen and thereby the controlling power remained concentrated in the original village. The townsmen were largely able to elect men with whom they had daily contact and shared their local concerns. However, the numbers of those living in the periphery continued to grow. These “outliers” began to “wonder whether their interests were fully considered” when these selectmen met or when the town meeting gathered and repeatedly denied their petitions over a myriad of issues deemed by the village dwelling townsmen as against the interests of the town.⁴⁸ In Dedham and Concord, these residents of the periphery who were outnumbered and seemingly politically disfranchised and neglected sought to gain control of their political lives. They did so by appropriating and abusing the political system under which their ideologically united ancestors had lived.

To demonstrate this trend, it is paramount to explore specific examples within New England society. As early as 1704, signs of the larger conflict between the village and periphery were surfacing in Dedham. After building a coalition of townsmen in the outlying areas and townsmen living in the village, and after three highly contentious votes over the month of March, the board of selectmen that had been dominated by men from the village was replaced by a board in which men from the periphery dominated by a four to one margin. These new selectmen from the periphery kept their political intentions quiet during the election. Once they assumed their positions and they attempted to win political concessions for the outlying section of town they were soundly defeated by the townsmen on repeated occasions. Some amount of political trickery must have occurred because why would a majority of townsmen vote in a slew of candidates over the

⁴⁶ Lockridge, 94.

⁴⁷ Gross, 11.

⁴⁸ Lockridge. 103-107.

objections of the incumbent board if they knew they were going to oppose their policies in the first place? They must have been tricked. Once they realized this deception the townsmen sprung into action and checked their selectmen's power. Over the next couple of years the peripheral influence "gradually lost control of the board of selectmen" and the village was once again in control.⁴⁹

Twenty-three years later an alliance of men of the outlying areas around Dedham again sought to "control the mechanisms of town government and this time [meant] to force the town to grant independence to several of the outlying sections."⁵⁰ Men of the outlying areas had realized the basic weakness of the founders' political system. The position of selectmen had arisen in the early years of colonial settlement when it became clear that townsmen could not effectively administrate their own town or deal with day-to-day issues in an efficient manner. The selectmen were invested with the town meeting's powers to resolve these disputes. The community at this time was a relatively small group of people where everyone was attending the same social functions and, likely, expressing the same general desires for the betterment of the town. In this small community, the selectmen and their actions were on display for everyone to see and were responsible to the town meeting. Only those townsmen that attended the town meeting could vote or exercise the townsmen's oversight of the selectmen. If the townsmen were the aggregate dictators and the selectmen their bureaucrats, the peripheral men realized that they could seize control of the town meeting by stuffing it with men sympathetic to their cause thereby forcing the town into acquiescing to their demands and into electing a sympathetic board of selectmen. In 1727, this tactic succeeded in winning a board of selectmen full of peripherally inclined men. With that accomplished these men then moved the meeting towards recognizing the petitions of independence for the outlying areas of town. Men from the village, realizing the tactic that had brought this about and appropriating it for their own means, exited the meeting and quickly rounded up "lazy yeomen" who had not attended the meeting "to restore their majority" and defeat the petitions.⁵¹ Though the board of selectmen lay in league with the peripheral area, the awakened body of townsmen from the village successfully thwarted petitions for independence during subsequent meetings. In March of 1728, when the election of selectmen was once again up for consideration by the townsmen, the faction in support of secession rushed through a resolution that "amounted to a declaration that, contrary to province law, a man with any taxable property at all could vote in the meeting."⁵² Being that the men in the outlying areas were far less likely to meet the provincial requirements for the vote, this

⁴⁹ Ibid., 107.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 106.

⁵¹ Ibid., 111-112.

⁵² Ibid., 113.

resolution was designed to enfranchise men from the peripheral regions and ensure the reelection of selectmen sympathetic to secession. These men were duly elected, but the moderator, apparently sensing what had happened, “expressed his doubts or even tried to adjourn the meeting” and a confrontation ensued that resulted in a brawl.⁵³ The next day the town meeting reassembled and finished electing selectmen sympathetic to secession, but defeated the resolutions that would have allowed secession to come to fruition. In the next year, the town reestablished its control of the selectmen and the fractious debate seemed to be on a course of continual discord.⁵⁴ The General Court, however, stepped in. By 1748, after twenty plus years of continued political discord, the General Court did not recognize the independence of any outlying areas but instead created four precincts within the town of Dedham. With the status of precinct, each area could elect and support its own minister. In the end, the political discord within this community was apparently ended by the assignment of a selectmen’s post to each of the precincts and special interest groups. As Lockridge notes, “Neither side’s definition of community had won and neither would ever win. The battle had ended in a cease-fire, an armistice, a truce.”⁵⁵

Particularly with the secession of outlying areas, such occurrences were not limited to Dedham. Similar events with similar outcomes occurred throughout New England up to the American Revolution. In the case of Concord, the debates revolved around religious strife caused by the reverberations of the Great Awakening, the building of roads, the positioning of the school house, and secession of outlying areas. Here, as in Dedham, the delegation of “controversial issues to selectmen proved to be no solution to strife. Indeed, the policymaking failures of the town meeting simply intensified an ongoing struggle among sections to dominate the selectmen.” And, like Dedham, “the outcome of annual elections turned principally on which quarter of town could jam more inhabitants into the town hall.”⁵⁶ Both like and unlike Dedham, who eventually succumbed to political compromise imposed from the General Court, Concord townsmen cut the number of selectmen down to three—one for each faction of the debates. The townsmen, however, continued to debate the issues in the town meeting.⁵⁷ Though Lockridge’s account ends in the 1740s and never states whether townsmen still contested political power in the town meeting, it can be assumed that like the case of Concord, they still met and debated the issues of their day.

In all of the cases discussed above, factions within the town sought to gain a political advantage by taking control of a political system that had

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁵⁶ Gross, 16-17.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

been formed under the auspices of a unifying ideology in small communities with watchful neighbors. Communal Authoritarianism did not exist in the eighteenth-century. The communal ideology and ambition had gone. However, the political structure, born in the exigencies of the town's infancy, where the townsmen invested their power into the selectmen but exercised political oversight of their actions persisted. Understanding that the town meeting represented an empty political shell devoid of any unifying ideology outside of section, townsmen actively sought to use the meeting itself, where only votes counted, to gain the advantage for one side or the other. To do so, factions within New England towns used the political existence of their ancestor's model to impose their will upon everyone else by stuffing the town meeting with sympathetic townsmen. It was a non-democratic, non-republican political maneuver made by factions that understood the political system under which they were operating. This resulted in a deadlocked political system that could not resolve itself. A majority of townsmen could deny the independence of a secessionist section while the selectmen could be of that secessionist mindset. This polarization is evidence of the continued political structures that had resided in these towns during the seventeenth-century in which townsmen did not defer to selectmen's judgment lightly, but actively monitored their every move in day-to-day interactions and at the town meeting in a very small community. What had changed in the eighteenth-century, however, was that there were geographically defined self interests that pulled the bonds of unity apart.

Toward A New Narrative

Communal Authoritarianism within early New England ultimately relied upon consent from the populace of any given town. The communal spirit of early Dedham was held together by shared experiences and the belief and hope that it was possible to create a more perfect society based upon pure devotion to God and group piety. Dedham was exclusive in that no one could become a member unless they passed a rigorous test of their character. If they were deemed to be "one heart with us" they were admitted. Through the selection process, the town created a group cohesive in their outlook on the proper role of society and individuals within that society in achieving their ultimate utopian community. Though they attempted to administer their own affairs as a group, it became difficult because of unknown doctrinal arguments or personal property disputes. In order to facilitate the implementation of their master plan for their town, they invested all the power of the general town meeting into a group of selectmen to administer day-to-day and very specific problems. The effect of this concentration of power was returned to the populace on a day-to-day basis. The townsmen expressed whether they felt that these selectmen ruled justly or unjustly, or in accordance with their general desire for a utopian community, at the next town meeting. If their truly was an absence of political discord it does not necessarily mean that the townsmen

were passive. It could also mean that the selectmen were fulfilling their obligations to the community amicably. After all, they were Puritans who lived in fear of a vengeful God. When there was discord, and the selectmen removed, it can safely be assumed that the selectmen had not fulfilled their obligations or had exercised some perceived abuse of power. Otherwise, year after year the townsmen reinvested their power into the seven selectmen to administer in day-to-day affairs. The townsmen's needs and wants were regularly reconciled with the greater utopian vision of the community. Thus, their needs and wants, such as land and the issue of the placement of public roads did not assume the size of a large, destructive political fight. Through the years in which the founders lived, this model of Communal Authoritarianism worked like a well-oiled political and social machine, keeping the peace until the next generation rose to power.

With changing attitudes towards religion, land pressures, and other socioeconomic pressures the utopian ambition was lost in the eighteenth-century. What was not lost, however, was the political structure laid out by their forefathers. As the expansion of the town proceeded, interests between geographically defined sections with disparate, antagonistic interests arose. Each side, knowing the nature of the political structure bequeathed to them, sought to exploit it for their factional gain. Perceptive that only those who were in attendance at the town hall would be considered the electorate, the factions sought to pack the meetings with as many sympathetic townsmen as possible. The result was political deadlock and far short of democracy.

The date in which Communal Authoritarianism ceased to operate remains slightly ambiguous. In towns like Concord, that largely maintained their political autonomy and integrity from outside influence, the taxation from Britain following the Seven Years War and, more importantly, the revocation of their right to assemble in town meetings without permission from British officials stirred them from their self-contained political shell and hastened the creation of a polity that was increasingly aware that their livelihood, both politically and economically, was tied to the outside world. During the economic crisis that accompanied the War for Independence, they would become fully aware how much their livelihood depended upon the outside world. With the British defeat, the political system in which Communal Authoritarianism had existed within was gone. The townsmen, now largely aware and concerned with their new connections to the outside world, and with the knowledge from Communal Authoritarianism of just what mob rule by people with unlike interests could do to their lives, were among the first to step towards a modern form of democracy. Thus, just as Communal Authoritarianism had been born in extreme political circumstances, it died in extreme political circumstances.

Despite any reservations, the birth of a republic in the 1780s does not necessarily mean that all of the inhabitants of that new republic had been undergoing an evolution preparing them for this new political

existence. The people of New England towns, like most people, had clung to their past more readily than they had embraced an unknown future. In the end, this interpretation is hampered by the fact that it has relied largely on Lockridge's evidence. Not only is it hampered by his evidence, but it is also hampered by the way in which Lockridge represents his evidence. One can glean an alternative explanation from his work suggests that the experience of Dedham and other New England towns is not an open and shut case for "Conservative Corporate Voluntarism" or some before its time democratic impulse. Instead, it is a topic that is in need for new investigations by a new generation of historians.