

## INFORMATION FROM & REFLECTIONS ON PERINTON'S EARLY TOWN MEETINGS (1813-65)

### *First of two columns*

As the Town of Perinton celebrates its 200<sup>th</sup> birthday, existing records of those first town meetings show how things have changed, and also how things have remained the same. We still have a supervisor and a clerk, assessors and highway commissioners, but several other early positions require some explanation. At that first Perinton town meeting in April, 1813, while Cyrus Packard was sworn as supervisor and Amasa Slocum as town clerk, and three assessors and three highway commissioners were named, other positions included pathmaster, fence viewer, constable, school commissioner, and overseer of the poor. Agenda items for vote and discussion open a window on the times as well.

The fence viewer, whose origin was in the early communities of New England, was responsible for inspecting each resident's allotted portion of the common fence and any individual plots to see that regulations were followed. He looked at the line between neighbors to decide who took care of which half, and attempted to divide the responsibility equally. The rule was that a line fence must be "hog tight and horse high." While Perinton did not have a "hog reeve" (whose traditional job it was to deal with stray and wandering livestock), it did vote at the first town meeting "that hogs shall be confined" and "that rams shall be confined by the first of September and kept up until the first of November [and] if any man's ram shall run within this time the owner shall forfeit Five Dollars." Obviously when everybody had livestock, fence maintenance was important. Not only were there rules about livestock, but a fine of five dollars was imposed if "any man let the noxious weed commonly called the Canada Thistle go to seed on his land or in the highway pertaining to his land...."

It appears that the jobs of pathmaster and overseer of highways (also positions that originated in New England) more or less overlapped. As the titles imply, their purpose was to see that the paths and roads were maintained. The number of pathmasters or overseers of necessity increased from eighteen in 1814 to over fifty by the 1840's, as the community grew in size. As for landowner responsibility, early in New England it was compulsory for every "person fitt for labor" to "mend said highwayes....", and Perinton was no different. Records show many instances of citizens working on the roads, and well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, ordinary citizens were the main source of workers for road construction.

Early town records include school funding and administration among town meeting issues. A month after the first regular town meeting, a special meeting was called to choose three school commissioners and three inspectors. At the same meeting, it was voted to "authorize our supervisor to raise fifty dollars if it does not exceed double our proportion of the money we are entitled to of the said school fund." Commissioners and inspectors were voted on each year until 1844 when a superintendent of common schools was selected. Money was collected for the support of the district schools (in addition to money provided by the state). After 1856, at least through 1865, there is no further mention of school positions or school funding in town meeting minutes.

Other town positions, finance issues, and sites for Perinton's early town meetings will follow in the next column.

*To be continued*



## TOWN OFFICIALS & EARLY TOWN MEETINGS (1813-65)

*second of two columns*

Since the first Perinton town meeting in 1813, a supervisor has been in charge and officials have discussed issues of land, safety, and money. In the early years, they also discussed the problem of the poor.

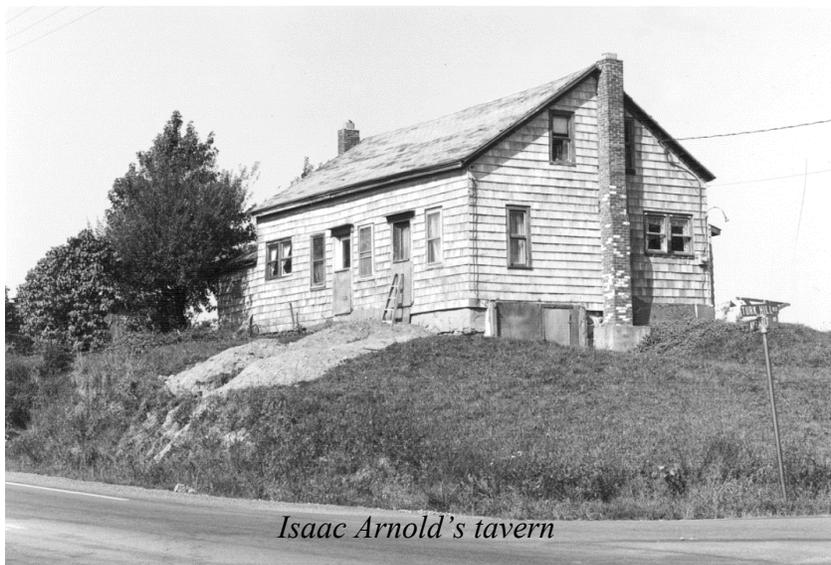
The job of the overseer of the poor, or poormaster, was, appropriately, to make provision for the care of the poor. In the first town meeting, it was voted “that there be One Hundred Dollars raised for the support of the poor.” This amount was regularly allocated and by the late 1830’s had doubled to two hundred dollars, and later to \$350. A number of entries note the distribution of food and clothing. In 1837, E. Slocum gave nine pounds of pork and twenty-one pounds of flour toward the support of the “widow Webb.” Martin Staples received two shirts and seven yards of “full cloth” for \$7.88. References are made to the “town paupers” and the provisions made for their care, usually at someone’s home. Solomon Aldrich was paid \$35.27 for “keeping Jabes Sanborn” seventeen weeks and four days. Lucy Beilsbee agreed to “keep Martha Russell for two Dollars per week and find opium at her own charge.” The overseer of the poor was directed to “settle with and pay [to] Jabez Taylor for keeping Nancy Stearns during her confinement if they think just....”

Yearly records include the appointment and approval of one to four constables, whose job it was to keep order, and a justice of the peace. Another early position is that of pound master. While details are not noted, it could be assumed that his job would be to corral stray animals. Funds were allocated for one or two pound areas in the town. Election inspectors were also regularly chosen

Sites for town meetings were many. They were held in Perinton Center at Isaac Arnold’s tavern, in John Peters’ house in Fairport village, in the Perinton Center schoolhouse, in the Free Will Baptist Church and the Congregational Church in Fairport, in Shaw’s Hall on West Avenue, and at a number of other locations between 1813 and 1865. A vote supporting a “town house” was passed in 1860, but a vote to allocate funds to build the structure was voted down the next year. The town would not have a designated “town hall” until 1912.

Since the beginning, many decisions were made about the collection and distribution of money. Virtually every year allocations were approved for the poor, and for roads and bridges. Little mention is made of the Civil War in town minutes, except in 1864 when it was voted to raise “that amount of money that is considered necessary for the relief of the families of soldiers now in the service of the country, to be at the discretion of the Military Town Board.” That same year money was also raised to assist in procuring volunteers for Perinton’s quota under the call of the President for 500,000 more troops. As wandering animals and livestock were ongoing problems, in addition to local pounds and a pound master, in 1843 it was resolved that “all boars over the age of two months which are allowed to run in the highway the owners thereof shall be liable to pay a fine of five dollars,” and by the 1850’s there is mention of a “dog tax.”

Over the years, some of the positions would change, as would titles, but the central jobs of town officials would remain the same: protecting citizens, collecting taxes, and maintaining the land and roads.



*Isaac Arnold's tavern*

