

## **Town Meeting and Local Government Pre-Visit Materials**

### **Lesson 1: Introduction to Local Government in the 1830s and Today**

**Grade 8**

**Time: 45-60 minutes**

#### **Background**

This is the first lesson plan on the subject of local government and poor relief in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century. In this short introductory lesson, students will learn about the roles of citizens in government in the 1830s and compare those roles to today. This lesson will begin to prepare students for their in-person visit to Old Sturbridge Village.

In the 1830s, small New England communities like Sturbridge were self-governing bodies. Towns were responsible for taxing their residents and creating by-laws. The main concerns of a town government during this time were the care of the roads, schools, and poor relief, which will be the main focus of the lessons in this unit. The state and federal government were far-removed from most peoples' lives during the early 1800s. You could not email a representative or follow them on social media. Instead, local government had a strong impact on the everyday lives of New Englanders.

The basis of this local government was the town meeting: "Here they chose town officers and voted for representatives to the State and Federal governments. Here they determined what the needs of their community would be in the coming year, and decided how to pay for them, voting on their tax burden. Here they decided what rules and regulations would make life better in their town."<sup>1</sup>

#### **Lesson Overview**

During this lesson, we are going to learn more about the 19<sup>th</sup>-century town meeting and participate in one ourselves. The town meeting is still a staple of civic engagement in many New England towns.

Lessons 1 and 2 will develop students' background knowledge of 19<sup>th</sup>-century life and town government.

During their visit to Old Sturbridge Village, students will gather opinions from residents of the fictional town of Old Sturbridge to help them determine whether the town should continue with the current vendue system of poor relief or switch to the new method: the poor farm. After collecting opinions, students will convene in the Center Meetinghouse to debate the issues and come to a conclusion as to what is best for the community.

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<sup>1</sup> "Historical Background on Town Government in Early 19th-Century New England," Tom Kelleher

Following their visit to the Village, the final, post-visit lesson will explore how individuals can make a difference in their community today and encourage students to take action for social change.

### Lesson Objectives:

1. Students will be able to identify the four main types of government in Massachusetts cities and towns.
2. By comparing a 19<sup>th</sup>-century primary source with a contemporary document about local government, students will recognize the similarities and differences between roles in government today and in the past.
3. Students will learn about the role of the town meeting in New England communities.

### Essential questions:

- Why do we need town government? And what is a town meeting?
- Who works in town government?
- What are the responsibilities of citizens?
- How have these responsibilities changed over time?
- Who can be involved today, and who can make a difference?

### List of Materials and Resources

- A timer
- Worksheets or materials for each of the five learning stations (worksheets and images included at the end of this PDF)
  - Station 1 requires internet access
  - Station 4 requires two images (town farms of Litchfield and East Windsor, CT)
- Whiteboard, smartboard, or paper for discussion
- OSV Town Meeting map, found here:  
<https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/edit?mid=16KJgp4Vc18ZLcrivARcVvJnVB2FIV9j6&usp=sharing>
- **Optional:** *Forms of Local Government in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts*  
([https://www.mma.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/forms\\_of\\_local\\_government\\_0.pdf](https://www.mma.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/forms_of_local_government_0.pdf))
- **Optional:** *Citizen's Guide to Town Meetings*  
(<https://www.sec.state.ma.us/cis/cistwn/twnidx.htm>)

### Key Terms and Vocabulary

- **Town meeting:** A meeting of the voters of a town for the transaction of public business
- **Legislative body/branch:** The branch of government in charge of making laws.
- **Executive body/branch:** The branch of government responsible for carrying out and enforcing laws.
- **Mayor:** The elected head of a municipality.
- **Town Council:** The elected governing body of a town.
- **Town Manager:** An appointed official who directs the administration of a city or a town.

### Procedure

1. Set up learning stations as indicated below.
2. Print out worksheets for each station.

### Opening to Lesson (5 minutes)

There are 351 cities and towns in Massachusetts. Of these, 50 are cities and 301 are towns. What's the difference between a city and a town? The two are distinguished by the type of government they have.

**Cities** have a **small legislative body** such as a Council and an elected or appointed chief executive called a Mayor or Manager.

**Towns** generally have a **large legislative body**, either an Open Town Meeting or a Representative Town Meeting. They also usually have an executive body of elected Board of Selectmen as well as an appointed administrator called a Manager or Administrator.<sup>2</sup> Some smaller towns, like Greenfield and Amesbury, have mayors but still refer to themselves as towns rather than cities.

Today's Town Meetings decide three major things:

- Salaries for the elected officials.
- Whether to appropriate money to run the town.
- The town's local statutes, which are called by-laws

In the 19th century, town meetings had slightly different purposes. One of these was to decide how the community should care for its poor. We are going to be studying this over the next several lessons.

### Body of Lesson (50 minutes)

Today, we are going to rotate through five learning stations that will help us learn more about our town's government. This knowledge will set us up for the next few lessons, which will focus on how communities coped with one particular issue in the 19th century--the care of the poor--and how that differs from community and citizen responsibility today.

- Break class up into even groups. There are five stations that they will rotate through during this class period.

Learning Stations (5-10 minutes each)

- Make sure to set expectations with students ahead of time. These stations will be timed, and students will move on to the next station after a timer goes off. How they rotate between the stations is up to the educator.

#### Station 1: Researching My Town Government

- Provide students at this station with the Types of Town Government document.

- Students should read through the four basic types of town government, and then research the following questions online:
  - What type of government does your city or town operate under?
  - Who is your mayor, town manager, or the members of your select board?
  - What is one issue that your town government is grappling with today?

**Station 2:** Discussion: Why are town governments important?

- In their small group, students should address the following questions:
  - Why are town governments important?
  - What does it mean to be a citizen?
  - What are the responsibilities of citizens?

**Station 3:** Independent Writing: Poverty

- Provide students with the document Examining Contemporary Preconceived Notions of Poverty. They will read this independently or as a group.
- Using the station 3 worksheet, students will write independently about their own preconceived notions about poverty or those experiencing poverty. The worksheet includes the following questions:
  - What does it mean to be poor?
  - How do people become poor?
  - What are some assumptions people make about poverty?
  - Whose responsibility is it to take care of someone who is poor?
- They do not have to share their writing with the group, but they should keep what they have written for future lessons.

**Station 4:** Analyzing Historic Images

- Students at this station will look over two primary sources (images) together as a group and answer a few questions on the Station 4 worksheet.
- The primary sources are images of the Poor Farms from Litchfield and East Windsor, Connecticut.
- The worksheet provides a little background on what a Poor Farm is; this will be described in more detail in future lessons.
- Students will answer the following questions:
  - What do you notice first in these photographs?
  - What other details do you notice?
  - Who do you think the people in the photographs are?
  - What else would you like to know about these photographs?
  - How do you feel looking at these images?

**Station 5:** Discussion: Necessities

- Students at this station will discuss the following question:
  - What are the basic necessities of 21st-century life?

- Take notes and then rank these necessities in order of importance.

## **Discussion**

- Why do you think town meetings are important?
- Based on what you know now, who can be involved in town meetings today? If you had to make an assumption, who do you think was involved in town government in the 1830s?
- What are the responsibilities of citizens?

Before closing, open the OSV Town Meeting Map in Google. Place a pin on your town and share your town's form of governance.

- Link to map:  
<https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/edit?mid=16KJgp4Vc18ZLcrivARcVvJnVB2FIV9j6&usp=sharing>

## Station 1: Researching My Town's Government

Today, there are four basic types of town government in Massachusetts cities and towns:

1. **Mayor/council:** Voters directly elect a mayor and a council. The council has 7 to 15 members. The elected council is the legislative body of the town. Example of this government in Massachusetts: Boston, Springfield
2. **Town council/town manager:** The town council is elected by the voters, and the council picks a town manager. The council is the town's legislative body. Example of this government in Massachusetts: Cambridge, Worcester
3. **Open town meeting / selectmen and town manager:** The town meeting is the legislative body of the town. All voters in the community can debate and vote on all matters brought to the town meeting. The town meeting is the legislative branch of the town's government. The town's executive branch of government consists of an elected board of selectmen who appoint a manager. 263 towns in Massachusetts use this type of government. If a town has fewer than 6,000 residents, it must have an open town meeting. Example in Massachusetts: Sturbridge
4. **Restricted town meeting / Selectmen and town manager:** In a restricted town meeting, a small group of voters is selected to represent all voters at the town meeting. The restricted town meeting is the legislative body of the town and the executive branch is made of selectmen and a town manager. Fewer than 50 towns in Massachusetts use this type of governance. Example of this government in Massachusetts: Shrewsbury

Find the answers to the following questions.

1. What type of government does your city or town operate under?
2. Who is your mayor, town manager, or the members of your select board?
3. What is one issue that your town government is grappling with today? If you have time, write two things you know about this issue.

## **Station 2: Why are Town Governments Important?**

In your small group, discuss the following questions:

1. Why are town governments important?
2. What does it mean to be a citizen?
3. What are the responsibilities of citizens?

Take notes!

### **Station 3: Examining Preconceived Notions of Poverty**

Take the next few minutes to quietly write about your own preconceived notions about poverty or those experiencing poverty. Answer the following questions. You don't need to share your answers with your group, but you should hold onto your worksheet for future lessons.

1. What does it mean to be poor?
2. How do people become poor?
3. What are some assumptions people make about poverty?
4. Whose responsibility is it to take care of someone who is poor?



## **Station 4: Analyzing Historic Images**

As a group, examine these two images of Poor Farms.

A Poor Farm was one form of poor relief common in the 19th century. They were also sometimes called Town Farms, Poor Houses, Almshouses, or Workhouses. The town purchased a farm property where the poor could live. It was overseen by a superintendent and the residents maintained the farm. We will learn more about poor farms in the next lesson.

After you look closely at the two images, answer the following questions:

1. What do you notice first in these photographs?
2. What other details do you notice?
3. Who do you think the people in the photographs are?
4. What else would you like to know about these photographs?
5. How do you feel looking at these images?









## Station 5: Necessities

The U.S. Census Bureau determines whether or not someone is in poverty based on estimates of if a person's income is enough to cover basic needs. A household that does not meet this minimum is considered to be in poverty. The poverty threshold varies depending on the size and composition of a household, as well as inflation. This measure helps to determine if an individual or family is eligible for Federal assistance.

Communities have always had members who struggle to meet basic needs. This could include paying for food or housing, being able to afford utility bills or transportation, or needing medical assistance. Even though the Federal government defines what poverty means from an economic perspective, individuals and families can still struggle to meet basic needs on a more substantial income. Some will struggle for just a short period; others will struggle for their whole lives.

This graph shows the poverty thresholds are for individuals and families in 2020, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Poverty Thresholds for 2020 by Size of Family and Number of Related Children Under 18 Years										
Size of family unit	Weighted average thresholds	Related children under 18 years								
		None	One	Two	Three	Four	Five	Six	Seven	Eight or more
One person (unrelated individual):	13,171									
Under age 65.....	13,465	13,465								
Aged 65 and older.....	12,413	12,413								
Two people:	16,733									
Householder under age 65.....	17,413	17,331	17,839							
Householder aged 65 and older.....	15,659	15,644	17,771							
Three people.....	20,591	20,244	20,832	20,852						
Four people.....	26,496	26,695	27,131	26,246	26,338					
Five people.....	31,417	32,193	32,661	31,661	30,887	30,414				
Six people.....	35,499	37,027	37,174	36,408	35,674	34,582	33,935			
Seven people.....	40,406	42,605	42,871	41,954	41,314	40,124	38,734	37,210		
Eight people.....	44,755	47,650	48,071	47,205	46,447	45,371	44,006	42,585	42,224	
Nine people or more.....	53,905	57,319	57,597	56,831	56,188	55,132	53,679	52,366	52,040	50,035

Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

As a group, discuss the following question:

**What are the basic necessities of 21st-century life?**

Take notes, and then rank these necessities in order of importance.

## **Town Meeting and Local Government Pre-Visit Materials**

### **Lesson 2: Poverty and Poor Relief in the Early 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

**Grade 8**

**Time: 90 minutes**

#### **Background**

This is the second lesson to help students understand local government and how they can have a voice in the democratic process. In this program, students will explore how society provides for the poor.

By modern standards, many rural 19<sup>th</sup>-century people were poor. Nineteenth-century people had a lot fewer possessions and luxuries. Farm work was seasonal. For those who made their living by farming, one instance of bad weather or a ruined crop could spell economic disaster for families. With rapid industrialization, more products were made in factories as opposed to small, rural shops, or by independent craftspeople.

According to Michael Katz:

Nonetheless, everywhere, a reorganization of economic life eroded a position of the independent journeymen artisans. For whatever their work setting almost all of them became wage laborers, employees rather than independent craftsmen owning their raw materials and tools and selling their products directly.<sup>1</sup>

At the time, many people experienced poverty at one time or another due to extenuating circumstances.

The early 1800s were a time of great social and technological change. Modern means of transportation and new industries and growing commerce created opportunities for many New Englanders. There was a sense now that one could change one's circumstance—by moving West or finding employment outside of a farm, for example. Because of this, many people began to believe that poverty was not an accepted social ill, but instead the fault of the poor.

In fact, technology, urbanization, and industrialization worked to contribute to the poverty issue as people left their farms or could no longer work for themselves.

Through an examination of primary sources from the period, including personal reminiscences and town reports, students will compare and contrast poor relief in early 19<sup>th</sup>-century rural New England to the contemporary handling of poverty. What were the options for those who needed relief in the 19<sup>th</sup> century? What were peoples' perceptions of the poor at the time? How did people become poor,

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<sup>1</sup> "In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America," Michael Katz, 226

and how did that differ from today? Was poor relief a local issue or a Federal one, and how does that compare to today?

During this lesson, we are going to learn more about the 19<sup>th</sup>-century town meeting and participate in one ourselves. The town meeting is still a staple of civic engagement in many New England towns.

Lessons 1 and 2 will develop students' background knowledge of 19<sup>th</sup>-century life and town government.

During their visit to Old Sturbridge Village, students will gather opinions from residents of the fictional town of Old Sturbridge to help them determine whether the town should continue with the current vendue system of poor relief or switch to the new method: the poor farm. After collecting opinions, students will convene in the Center Meetinghouse to debate the issues and come to a conclusion as to what is best for the community.

Following their visit to the Village, the final, post-visit lesson will explore how individuals can make a difference in their community today and encourage students to take action for social change.

### **Lesson Objectives**

1. Students will become familiar with the options early 19<sup>th</sup>-century New England towns had for taking care of the poor.
2. Students will be able to compare the 19<sup>th</sup>-century conception of poverty to contemporary views.
3. Students will be able to read primary source materials and relate vital points to their classmates.
4. Students will develop an empathy and understanding for the lives of those who lived in the past, as well as those whose lives differ from theirs today.

### **Essential Questions**

- What is poverty? How do 19<sup>th</sup>-century conceptions of poverty differ from modern-day ones?
- Who is responsible for caring for the poor today? Whose job was that in the 1800s?

### **List of Materials and Resources**

Primary sources include:

- Petitions for Poor Relief in the Town of Sturbridge, 1810
- Recollections: Horace Greeley's Boyhood
- Recollections: Joseph T. Buckingham
- Advice: How to Endure Poverty
- Report: Excerpt from the Town Returns to the Quincy Committee, 1821 (Beverly, MA)
  - These documents are all included in this PDF.

- OSV Town Meeting Map:  
<https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/edit?mid=16KJgp4Vc18ZLcrivARcVvJnVB2FIV9j6&usp=sharing>

## Key Terms and Vocabulary

- **Poverty:** The state of not having enough income or material possessions to meet one's basic needs.
- **Pauper:** A 19<sup>th</sup>-century term for a person destitute of means except such as are derived from charity; specifically : one who receives aid from funds designated for the poor
- **Impotent poor:** In 19<sup>th</sup>-century terms, poor people who are incapable of work, especially the elderly and the severely disabled. Also sometimes referred to as "the worthy poor."
- **Able-bodied poor:** In 19<sup>th</sup>-century terms, poor people who could labor to help support themselves. The able-bodied poor were considered at-fault for their condition, and that laziness or intemperance played a role in their poverty.
- **Intemperance:** Excessive indulgence, especially in "pure" alcohol (i.e. not alcohol that has been fermented, like beer or wine). By the late 1820s, American alcohol consumption equaled about four gallons per person, per year. During the 1830s and 40s, many temperance societies formed to press the cause of abstaining from liquor to reduce drunkenness and alcoholism.
- **Vendue:** The traditional system of poor relief in which the care for the poor was "let out," or auctioned off, to the lowest bidder.
- **Poor Farm:** The newer system of poor relief, where the town purchased a farm property where the poor could live. It was overseen by a superintendent and the residents maintained the farm.
- **Outdoor relief:** Also known as partial relief, this system meant that the town provided paupers with small amounts of money or food to help them for short periods of time. In this system, the poor remained in their own homes.

## Procedure

1. Print out copies of the primary source documents.
2. Divide the class into 5 small groups.
3. Prepare white board, smart board, or other surface for class discussion.

## Opening to the Lesson

- Remind students of the exercise they completed during the last class session relating to the nature of poverty and their preconceived notions of those experiencing poverty.
- The questions they considered were:
  - What does it mean to be poor?
  - What are some assumptions people make about poverty?
  - Whose responsibility is it to take care of someone who is poor?
  - What are basic necessities of 21<sup>st</sup>-century life?



Communities have always had members who struggle to meet basic needs. This could include paying for food or housing, being able to afford utility bills or transportation, or needing medical assistance. Even though the Federal government defines what poverty means from an economic perspective, individuals and families can still struggle to meet basic needs on a more substantial income. Some will struggle for just a short period; others will struggle for their whole lives.

During this lesson, we are going to learn more about what 19th-century people thought about poverty, and how the communities assisted those who needed it.

**Reminder:** Some students in the class may fall below the poverty line, receive social services, or be unhoused. Make sure that any ensuing discussion remains respectful and empathetic.

### Introduction to 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Poor Relief (25 minutes)

- Introduce the concept of poverty and poor relief in the 1800s.

In the early 1800s, the perception and treatment of poverty were different than they are today. There were many reasons for poverty in the 1800s, which we will uncover today. Some of these reasons will sound familiar to modern ears; others will be very different. During this unit, we are going to examine one 19<sup>th</sup>-century issue, poor relief. Poor relief was the responsibility of the local government, and a community's citizens voted on how their town should tackle this issue.

- Go over the options for poor relief in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century with the class.

The four options for poor relief during the 1800s were the following:

1. Vendue, or *"Provision for the poor, by letting their care out to the lowest bidder, in families at large, within the town."*
  - a. With this option, the town paid for care of paupers in private homes. The process was referred to as the '**vendue**,' a public sale or auction when the town accepted bids for the care of the pauper. Vendue comes from the French word "vendre," which means to sell. This is the most traditional option: in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and earlier, it was common for those who needed assistance to move into the home of someone who could care for them.
  - b. Children of the poor were "bound out" to other families. This family was required to care for the child's material needs (clothing, food, shelter) until they reached adulthood, or age 18 for girls and 21 for boys.
2. *"Provision, by letting them to the lowest bidder, together; that is, all to one person."*
  - a. With this option, the town contracted with one individual to provide for all of the town's poor. This could mean that those in need lived with the contracted superintendent, or the superintendent found other families for the paupers to live with. Having one person responsible in this way simplified matters for the town's Overseers of the Poor.
3. Outdoor Relief, or *"Provision, by supplies, in money, or articles, at their own houses."*

- a. The town's Overseers of the Poor (who frequently were also the town's Selectmen, or board of administrators) might use public funds to give "outdoor" or "partial" relief in the form of a small grant of money or supplies, such as a barrel of flour, to a pauper or a poor family otherwise unable to get by. However, most who "went upon the town" required more care than this.
  - b. By far, most people on poor relief in the 1800s were elderly or had physical/intellectual disabilities, and voters knew this. Because of this fact, Outdoor Relief was not usually a viable option for the community.
4. Poor Farm, or "*Provision, by poor, or alms, houses.*"
- a. Using this option, the town supported the poor in a town-owned dwelling. This dwelling was under the management of a superintendent who provided supervision and made sure that the residents followed strict rules.
  - b. At the poor farms, the residents worked to sustain the farm property. If they were able to work, they had to remain "diligently employed." Poor farms were often referred to as 'indoor relief.' Various terms were used to describe the property. Some of them were poor house, poor farm, town farm, almshouse, or workhouse. Cities as well as small towns had poor houses.
  - c. Poor farms and poor houses became the dominant form of poor relief in the 1800s. According to historian David Rothman, by 1840, there were 180 poor houses in Massachusetts. In total, they were valued at \$926,000 and covered 17,000 acres of land.<sup>2</sup>

Eligible voters in the community convened at a town meeting to debate which option was best for their town. Again, caring for the poor was required by law during this time. There was a great deal of emphasis on this service as a community responsibility, as well as a Christian duty. Still, towns often sought the *least* expensive option for the care of the poor. People of color in these communities were also eligible for the same types of aid: many town records note the race of the person receiving poor relief. In these records, people of color are listed, as well as white residents.

*See the article "Historical Background on the Poor and Poor Relief in Early 19th-Century New England" for more information.*

- How do these compare to the systems to help those in need today? How do we provide support to those experiencing poverty in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Do a quick brainstorm as a class.
- Modern methods include:
  - Donating to charities
  - Food banks, soup kitchens
  - Government assistance (welfare, Medicaid from state and federal programs)
  - Volunteering
  - Calling or petitioning local government representatives
  - Raising awareness of issues

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<sup>2</sup> *The Discovery of the Asylum*, David Rothman, p. 183

During this unit, we are going to be learning more about each type of 19<sup>th</sup>-century relief, and then debating which one is the best for our fictional, 19<sup>th</sup>-century community.

### **Body of Lesson: Using Primary Sources (30 minutes)**

- Break the class into five small groups. Pass out one piece of primary source material to each group.
- Explain that each group will be reading a primary source from the early 1800s. These sources include autobiographical writings, town reports, and advice literature from the time period.
- As a group, consider the following:
  - What type of source is it? (report, autobiography, etc.)
  - When was it written?
  - Who wrote it? Why?
  - What is the author's feelings on poverty or those who are in poverty?
- Make notes about your discussion. After discussing your source as a group, you will present some of the pertinent points to the class.

### **Discussion (20 minutes)**

- Have each group present to the class about their primary source. They should include details such as who wrote it, what type of source material it is, and the author's views on the issue of poverty.
- After each group shares about their primary source, ask the following:
  - What were some of the reasons 19<sup>th</sup>-century people cited for poverty?
    - In addition to what we have seen in the primary sources today, other reasons for relief at the time include illness, injury, advanced age, and being "non-compos," or not of sound mind.
  - How did the authors of these sources believe that you could get out of poverty?
  - What methods of poor relief did you recognize in the source, if any? If you were to choose today, which method of 19<sup>th</sup>-century poor relief do you think is best?
  - How has the treatment of the poor changed from the 19<sup>th</sup> century? How has it stayed the same?
    - Extension: how are those with substance abuse issues treated today? Intellectual and physical disabilities?
  - How have our obligations as members of a community changed? Are we more engaged with our community today, or less than they were in the 1830s?
- Take notes on the board or on a flip chart.
- Make sure that students keep their reflections on poverty from the beginning of the lesson. You will be returning to it at the end of the fifth lesson.
- Before closing, open the OSV Town Meeting Map in Google. If applicable, place a pin on the location of your town's former Poor Farm. Many towns still have roads with names like "Poor Farm Road," "Town Farm Road," etc. Does yours?

- Link to map:  
<https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/edit?mid=16KJgp4Vc18ZLcrivARcVvJnVB2FIV9j6&usp=sharing>

## **Resources**

### **Primary sources for lesson**

- Petitions for Poor Relief in the Town of Sturbridge, 1810
- Recollections: Horace Greeley's Boyhood
- Recollections: Joseph T. Buckingham
- Advice: How to Endure Poverty
- Report: Excerpt from the Town Returns to the Quincy Committee, 1821

### **Background readings for teachers**

- "Historical Background on the Poor and Poor Relief in Early 19th-Century New England," Tom Kelleher
- Quincy Report--Extended
- "A Poorhouse in Each New England State," New England Historical Society  
(<https://www.newenglandhistoricalsociety.com/poorhouse-each-new-england-state/>)

## Primary Source: Petitions for Poor Relief in the Town of Sturbridge, Town Records, 1810

*One of the principal duties of the selectmen, the elected officials who governed New England towns on a day-to-day basis, was to provide care for the town's poor. They frequently received letters which were formal requests for assistance or reimbursement for supplies and care already given to poor individuals.*

### **A selection of letters to the Sturbridge Town Selectmen requesting poor relief and reimbursement.**

Sturbridge March 29, 1810

To the Selectmen of Sturbridge,—Gentlemen.

I take the Liberty of making some observations with regard to my situation and that of my children, Which I wish you as fathers of the town to take into consideration. As my children are very young at present, I know it may be difficult to obtain places for them, and have therefore thought whether if the Selectmen would provide a room for me and them, for the present, they and I might not produce as little expense to the town as in any other way, if I applied myself to their support, all I was able, with the addition of what it would cost to put said children out. All which is submitted for consideration.

Peggy Pike

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Sturbridge March the 30th 1816

To the Selectmen of the town of Sturbridge  
Gentlemen

The Complaint of Joseph Benson Humbly Sheweth and informs that by Reason of Bodily Infirmary for many years past and not being Able to procure the means of my Subsistance I am become poor & unable to provide for my Self and Wife I therefore pray s[ai]d town to make provision for us Both in futer [future] who am In Duty bound Ever pray

Joseph Benson, X His Mark  
The Selectmen

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Sturbridge Nov 5th 1827

Messrs Select Men of Sturbridge

Whereas my aged Mother being left alone last spring and nobody appearing to take care of her, it appeared like duty to take her to my house for the present hoping that some way might be agreed on for her support but no assistance being offer'd me I am now I think by duty led to cast her upon your care the which I do; and shall from the above date expect a reward thro your hands from that source from whence her maintainance must eventually come.

Messrs. S[elect] Men of Sturbridge I am yours &c Servant Walter Lyon

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Gentlemen Selectmen or Overseers of the Poor for the town of Sturbridge,

This is to give you notice that a boy by the name of John Buxton is at my house in needy circumstances, I wish you Gentlemen to remove him or provide for his support immediately.

Cromwell Bullard

Sturbridge July 16th 1828

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To the Selectmen of Sturbridge—

Gent. In consequence of long & distressing sickness in my family I find myself under the necessity of calling on the town of Sturbridge for some assistance. You will please therefore to furnish me such reliefs, as you may deem proper under my present distressing circumstances—

William Prichard

Jany 5 1830

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To the Overseers of the Poor for the town of Sturbridge, Gentlemen,

This is to notify you that Lydia Hobbs is at my house, unable to work and without the means of support. She has not been able to work much for several years, the year past she has been wholly on expense, but now her property is nearly or quite all gone, which makes it necessary for her to have support from the town. Therefore you will please to attend to the matter quickly, as I shall expect pay from the town after this week for the time she stays with me. But as I do not want her under any consideration, nor cannot have her at my house at any rate I wish to have her taken away

immediately.

Respectfully,

Josiah Hobbs 2d

Sturbridge Dec. 26th 1839

### Source

Town Records of Sturbridge, Massachusetts, Poor Relief, Old Sturbridge Village Research Library. Edited by Old Sturbridge Village.

## Primary Source: Excerpt from the Town Returns to the Quincy Committee, 1821

*In 1820, the Massachusetts General Court (State Legislature) appointed a special committee, headed by Josiah Quincy, a well-known politician and reformer to investigate the methods used for the relief of paupers in Massachusetts towns, to study the problems of the poor relief system, and to recommend revisions of the laws on poor relief. The Quincy Committee sent out a survey or questionnaire to all the towns in the state, asking them to describe their poor relief systems and describe the problems they encountered. 162 towns responded. The Committee's final report was published in 1821. Appended to the report were excerpts from 32 of the 162 town responses, referred to as returns. As a group the published returns strongly favored the establishment of poor farms and poorhouses. Here is a response to the survey from the town of Beverly, Massachusetts.*

### BEVERLY

It may be confidently stated that the chief sources of pauperism in this country, are idle-ness<sup>i</sup>, improvidence<sup>ii</sup> and intemperance<sup>iii</sup>. If any laws can be devised to lessen the operation of those causes, pauperism will be lessened nearly in the same proportion.

The manner in which both public and private charity is often administered, affords encouragement to each of those vices. The idle will beg in preference to working; relief is extended to them without suitable discrimination. They are not left to feel that just consequences of their idleness. The industrious poor are discouraged by observing that bounty bestowed upon the idle, which they can only obtain by the sweat of their brow . . .

Intemperance is the most fruitful source of pauperism: More than half the adult persons who have been admitted to our Work House, for sixteen years, have been addicted to the excessive use of ardent spirits. As an amendment to the existing laws upon this subject, it is suggested that drunkenness should be made punishable either by fine and imprisonment, by a summary process before a Justice of the Peace, or by commitment to the Work House by the Overseers of the Poor; that the use of ardent spirits<sup>iv</sup> in Work Houses, or by Paupers, who are supported or relieved by their towns, should be prohibited; that retailers of spirituous liquors be prohibited, under a penalty to be recovered in a summary way, from selling any spirituous liquors to any person who is supported or relieved by any town as a Pauper; that Overseers of the Poor be prohibited from affording any relief to any person as a Pauper, who is habitually intemperate in the use of ardent spirits, unless such person shall be confined in some Work House or House of Correction; that the number of retailers of spirituous liquors, should be restricted in a certain proportion to the number of inhabitants in each town, and that the duty on licenses to retailers, be increased.

### Source

Josiah Quincy, *Massachusetts, General Court, Committee on Pauper Laws* [Boston, Printed by Russell and Gardner, 1821], 13-16, 18-20, 22-23, 26-27, 31-32, 34-35. Edited by Old Sturbridge Village.

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<sup>i</sup> Idle-ness: laziness

<sup>ii</sup> Improvidence: not foreseeing or providing for the future

<sup>iii</sup> Intemperance: excessive drinking

<sup>iv</sup> Ardent spirits: strong, distilled liquors

## Primary Source: Recollection by Joseph T. Buckingham

*From 1824-1848, Joseph T. Buckingham was the editor of a prominent Boston daily newspaper, the Boston Courier. As an elderly gentleman, in 1852, Buckingham remembered his early years of hardship in Connecticut.*

My father's name was Nehemiah Tinker. He was born at Mansfield, Connecticut in 1740, of parents not in very affluent circumstances, it may be presumed, for he, and a younger brother, were apprenticed to a shoemaker. Before he was twenty-one years old, he set up the business of shoemaking, on his own account, in the adjoining town of Windham. I have it from undoubted testimony, that he was an excellent shoemaker -- that he carried on a "large business" -- and acquired a "handsome property."

During the American Revolutionary War my father relinquished the business of shoemaking, and kept a tavern, -- one of the only two public houses in the town... He received his pay in bills of the "Continental Currency"<sup>i</sup> and kept them in his desk till a hundred dollars would not purchase a dinner for his family. He died on the 17th of March, 1783, at the age of forty-three, leaving a widow and ten children, -- several thousand dollars of paper-money, that would hardly pay for his winding-sheet<sup>ii</sup> and coffin, -- and a considerable amount of debt... .

I was born on the twenty-first day of December, 1779, and was the tenth in numerical order in a family of eight sons and two daughters... My mother, with eight children, continued to occupy the tavern; but the income afforded slender means for the support and education of so numerous a family.

The death of my father, under the circumstances I have related, was, of course, but the prelude to further domestic calamity. My mother was naturally of delicate constitution<sup>iii</sup>, and had been broken down by frequent and severe attacks of rheumatic fever<sup>iv</sup>. She continued, however, to keep the tavern for some months -- perhaps a year. At length, the establishment was abandoned, and the family necessarily dispersed... . The furniture of the tavern was sold to pay off debts... Here amidst occasional sickness, and constant destitution and sorrow, she supported her two remaining children, by the labor of her hands, chiefly needle-work.

But the depth of her destitution and distress she had not yet reached. There were still some demands against her late husband's estate pressing for payment. How long she continued with us in this house, I cannot tell, but I think I could not have been more than four years and a half old, when another portion of her scanty stock of furniture was taken from her by an officer of the law. With one bed, a case of drawers, two or three chairs, and a few cooking utensils, she left the rooms she had occupied and took refuge in the adjoining building, which my father had erected some twenty years before for a workshop. She held me and my sister by the hand, while a constable sold, at the door, the only andirons, shovel and tongs, chairs, beds, table which she had reserved when she left the tavern.

At this time we had no dependence for subsistence but the labor of my mother. She was often sick and unable to work. When in a condition to labor, she was employed in sewing for a neighbor who was a tailor, or in "binding and closing"<sup>v</sup> women's shoes, which were then made principally of cloth, for another neighbor. This was a business in which she was expert, having done much of it when her husband carried on the manufacture. I was sometimes employed in sticking card-teeth<sup>vi</sup>, for a manufacturer of cards. But, with all these poor resources, we must have suffered with cold and hunger but for the charity of a few friends.

Necessity at length compelled my mother to ask assistance of the selectmen of the town; and, but for the aide obtained from them and the charity of friends, both she and her two children might have perished in the winter of 1785-86. I was without stockings or shoes through that winter, and otherwise but thinly clad. A load of wood had been dropped and cut up at the door by order of the selectmen, and I went out, barefooted, in the snow to pick up



the chips. This and other similar exposure produced chilblains<sup>vii</sup>, that were most grievously painful, and probably planted in my physical system the seeds, which later years ripened into rheumatism. The staple of our subsistence, for the greater part of the winter, was bread and molasses. Thus we lived till the summer, when a relative at Worthington, Massachusetts adopted my sister as one of his family, and a place was provided for me by the selectmen. I was put into the family of a respectable farmer, three miles from the principal village, and, by their authority, bound by indenture to live with him, till I should become sixteen years old.

Thus relieved from an oppressive weight of labor and solicitude<sup>viii</sup>, my mother was offered an asylum<sup>ix</sup> in the house and family of a Mr. Lathrop, -- an offer that was gladly accepted. Her bed, and the few other almost worthless articles of furniture that she possessed, were removed to a room in his house, which was appropriated especially to her use. Here she remained several years, earning something by needle-work, but charged nothing for food or houseroom beyond what assistance she might be able to render<sup>x</sup> to the family.

The place provided for me was the family of one of the most respectable farmers of the town. His name was John Welsh...To this good old man I was, as I have said, bound by the selectmen...This family consisted of Mr. Welsh and his wife, both of whom were over sixty years of age; two daughters, past thirty; and a son about twenty-five. I was immediately instructed in the performance of such labors as were suitable to my age and strength, but was never taxed beyond that capacity. During the whole term that I lived with them, from the age of six and a half to sixteen, I felt not the loss of parents.

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<sup>i</sup> Continental Currency: Money issued by the Continental Congress in 1775. It lost value during the Revolutionary War and was worth only 1/40 of its face value by 1780.

<sup>ii</sup> Winding sheet: The sheet a corpse is wrapped in for burial.

<sup>iii</sup> Delicate constitution: Someone with a delicate constitution is weak and struggles with physical health, lack of energy, etc.

<sup>iv</sup> Rheumatic fever: A complication of strep throat or Scarlet Fever

<sup>v</sup> "Binding and closing" women's shoes: Shoes at the time were made by hand, and women sometimes made extra income at home by sewing the upper part of the shoe.

<sup>vi</sup> Sticking card-teeth:

<sup>vii</sup> Chilblains: Inflammation of blood vessels in reaction to exposure to the cold

<sup>viii</sup> Solicitude: Care or concern for someone or something

<sup>ix</sup> Asylum: An offer of shelter and protection

<sup>x</sup> Render: Provide, give

## Primary Source: Recollections of Horace Greeley's Boyhood

*Famed newspaper editor Horace Greeley wrote his memoirs in 1869. In it, he describes what his life was like as the oldest son of a poor New Hampshire farmer in the early 1800s. Greeley apprenticed with a Vermont printer and then moved to New York City in 1831. He became the influential founder and editor of the New-York Tribune. In addition to his involvement with the newspaper, Greeley was involved in politics as well as several social movements of the time. He is accredited with popularizing the phrase "Go West, young man, and grow up with the country." He encouraged the settlement of the American West and seize the new opportunities available there. The following are excerpts from Greeley's autobiography.*

Being the older son of a poor and hard-working farmer, struggling to pay off the debt he had incurred in buying his high-priced farm, and to support his increasing family, I was early made acquainted with labor. I well remember the cold summer (1816) when we arose on the eighth of June to find the earth covered with a good inch of newly fallen snow, - when there was frost every month, and corn did not fill till October. Plants grew very slowly that season, while burrowing insects fed and fattened on them....

Here I first learned that this is a world of hard work. Often called out of bed at dawn to "ride horse to plough" among the growing corn, potatoes, and hops, we would get as much ploughed by 9 to 10 A.M. as could be hoed that day; when I would be allowed to start for school, where I sometimes arrived as the forenoon<sup>i</sup> session was half through. In Winter, our work was lighter; but the snow was often deep and drifted, the cold intense, the north wind piercing, and our clothing thin... .

Our tenancy of the "Beard farm," in Bedford, answered very nearly to my seventh and eighth years. That was a large and naturally good farm, but in a state of dilapidation<sup>ii</sup>: over-grown with bushes and briars, its fences in ruins, and the buildings barely able to stand alone, - the large two-story house more especially far gone. My father had let his own farm, on shares, to a younger brother... He was disappointed every way; his health failed, and he was for nearly a year unable to work... Our fortunes, manifestly, waned there; and I think we were all soberly glad to return to our own snugger house and smaller farm, in the Spring of 1820. As we were trying to work off a lee-shore<sup>iii</sup>, I believe neither of us boys went to school at all that Summer, though I was but nine years old, and my brother not eight until June.

All in vain. The times were what is termed "hard," - that is, almost everyone owed, and scarcely any one could pay. The rapid strides of British manufactures, impelled by the steam-engine, spinning-jenny<sup>iv</sup>, and power-loom, had utterly undermined the homely household fabrications whereof Londonderry was a prominent American focus; my mother still carded her wool and flax, spun her yarn, and wove her woollen, linen, and tow cloth<sup>v</sup>; but they found no market at living prices; our hops sold for little more than the cost of bagging; and, in short, we were bankrupt. I presume my father had never been quite out of debt since he bought his place; but sickness, rash indorsements (a family failing), and bad luck generally, had swelled his indebtedness to something like \$1,000, - which all we had in the world would not, at current prices, pay. In fact, I do not know how much property would have paid \$1,000 in New Hampshire in - 1620, when almost everyone was hopelessly involved, every third farm was in the sheriff's hand, and every poor man leaving for "the West" who could raise the money requisite for getting away. Everything was cheap, - dog cheap, - British goods especially so; yet the comparatively rich were often embarrassed, and the poor were often compulsory idle, and on the brink of famine....

Our farm, which had cost us \$1,350, and which had been considerably improved in our hands, was appraised and set off to creditors at \$500. Thus, when night fell, we were as bankrupt a family as well could be.

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<sup>i</sup> Forenoon: The morning

<sup>ii</sup> Dilapidation: the state of falling into disrepair

<sup>iii</sup> Lee-shore: Working hard

<sup>iv</sup> Spinning Jenny: a spinning frame, a key development for textile factories during the Industrial Revolution

<sup>v</sup> Tow cloth: a coarse fabric made from linen and used for clothing

## Primary Source: Advice: How to Endure Poverty by Lydia Maria Child

*In the 1820s and 1830s, dozens of books appeared offering Americans advice on every aspect of life in a changing society. One of the most popular pieces of advice literature was Lydia Maria Child's American Frugal Housewife, first published in 1827. Along with recipes, maxims for health, and tips for the housekeeper, Mrs. Child included what she called "Hints to persons of Moderate fortune." This selection on "How to Endure Poverty" reveals her ideas about the causes and responses to poverty.*

That a thorough, religious, useful education is the best security against misfortune, disgrace and poverty, is universally believed and acknowledged; and to this we add the firm conviction, that, when poverty comes (as it sometimes will) upon the prudent<sup>i</sup>, the industrious, and the well-informed, a judicious education is all-powerful in enabling them to endure the evils it cannot always prevent.

In a late visit to the alms-house<sup>ii</sup> at \_\_\_\_\_, we saw a remarkable evidence of the truth of this doctrine. Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_ was early left an orphan. She was educated by an uncle and aunt, both of whom had attained the middle age of life. Theirs was an industrious, well-ordered, and cheerful family. Her uncle was a man of sound judgement, liberal feelings, and great knowledge of human nature. This he showed by the education of the young people under his care. He allowed them to waste no time; every moment must be spent in learning something, or in doing something... .

...In this excellent family Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_ remained till her marriage. In the course of fifteen years, she lost her uncle, her aunt, and her husband. She was left destitute<sup>iii</sup>, but supported herself comfortably by her own exertions, and retained the respect and admiration of a large circle of friends. Thus she passed her life in cheerfulness and honor during ten years; at the end of that time, her humble residence took fire from an adjoining house in the night time, and she escaped by jumping from the chamber window. In consequence of the injury received by this fall, her right arm was amputated, and her right leg became entirely useless. Her friends were very kind and attentive; and for a short time she consented to live on their bounty; but, aware that the claims on private charity are very numerous, she, with the genuine independence of a strong mind, resolved to avail herself of the public provision for the helpless poor. The name of going to the alms-house was nothing terrifying or disgraceful to her; for she had been taught that conduct is the real standard of respectability. She is there, with a heart full of thankfulness to the Giver of all things; she is patient, pious, and uniformly cheerful. She instructs the young, encourages the old, and makes herself delightful to all, by her various knowledge and entertaining conversation. Her character reflects dignity on her situation; and those who visit the establishment, come away with sentiments of respect and admiration for this voluntary resident of the alms-houses.

What a contrast is afforded by the character of the woman who occupies the room next hers! She is so indolent<sup>iv</sup> and filthy, that she can with difficulty be made to attend to her own personal comfort; and even the most patient are worn out with her perpetual fretfulness. Her mind is continually infested with envy, hatred, and discontent. She thinks Providence has dealt hardly with her; that all the world are proud and ungrateful; and that everyone despises her because she is in the alms-houses. This pitiable state of mind is the natural result of her education.

Her father was a respectable mechanic<sup>v</sup>, and might have been a wealthy one, had he not been fascinated by the beauty of a thoughtless, idle, showy girl, whom he made his wife. The usual consequences followed - he could not earn money so fast as she could spend it; the house became a scene of discord; the daughter dressed in the fashion; learned to play on the piano; was taught to think that being engaged in any useful employment was very ungentle<sup>vi</sup>; and that to be engaged to be married was the chief end and aim of woman; the father died a bankrupt; the weak and frivolous<sup>vii</sup> mother lingered along in beggary, for a while, and then died of vexation<sup>viii</sup> and shame.

The friends of the family were very kind to the daughter; but her extreme indolence, her vanity, pertness, and ingratitude, finally exhausted the kindness of the most generous and forbearing; and as nothing could induce her to personal exertion, she was at length obliged to take shelter in the alms-house. Here her misery is incurable.

May not those who have children to educate, learn a good lesson from these women? Those who have wealth, have recently had many and bitter lessons to prove how suddenly riches may take to themselves wings; and those who certainly have but little to leave, should indeed beware how they bestow upon their children, the accursed inheritance of indolent and extravagant habits.

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<sup>i</sup> Prudent: Showing care and thought for the future

<sup>ii</sup> Alms-house: Another name for the poor house/poor farm

<sup>iii</sup> Destitute: Without basic necessities

<sup>iv</sup> Indolent: Lazy

<sup>v</sup> Mechanic: In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this meant a man who worked with their hands.

<sup>vi</sup> Ungenteel: Lacking in refinement or unfashionable

<sup>vii</sup> Frivolous: Carefree and not serious

<sup>viii</sup> Vexation: Annoyed, frustrated, worried

## **Town Meeting and Local Government Post-Visit Materials**

### **Lesson 3: Making a Difference in Your Community**

**Grade 8**

**Time: 60 minutes** *(plus optional extension activities)*

#### **Background**

This lesson is the fourth of five lessons to help students understand local government and how they can have a voice in the democratic process. In previous lessons—and during their visit to Old Sturbridge Village—students learned that the care of the poor was the responsibility of the local government. During a simulation of an 1830s-style town meeting, the class decided what form of relief was best for their community, and then voted on raising taxes to pay for relief.

During this lesson, students will apply what they have learned about local government and town meetings to take part in a town hall meeting about a contemporary issue. All of this will serve to increase an appreciation of the fact that even though students are not old enough to vote, what happens in their community, state, and nation is everyone's concern.

#### **Lesson Objectives**

1. Through and discussion with classmates, students will consider multiple sides of a contemporary issue and be able to clearly articulate talking points in class discussion.
2. Students will compare and contrast the responsibilities of contemporary local government with local government in the early 1800s.
3. Students will learn more about their own communities and how to get involved, take action, or make their voices heard on local issues.

#### **Essential Questions:**

1. How does one get their voice heard today?
2. Why is it important to respect those with differing opinions?

#### **List of Materials and Resources:**

- Notebook
- Whiteboard or smartboard
- Primary Source: **A few plain Facts and Questions to Distillers and Dealers**
- **Researching Current Events** worksheet

### Key Terms and Vocabulary:

- **Mayor:** The elected leader of a city, town, or other municipality.
- **Ballot:** A process of voting, in writing and typically in secret.
- **Council:** An elected governing body in a town.
- **Referendum:** A general vote by the electorate on a single political question that has been referred to them for a direct decision.
- **Majority:** The greater number.
- **Bias:** Prejudice in favor of or against one thing, person, or group compared with another, usually in a way considered to be unfair.
- **Distiller:** A person or company that manufactures liquor.
- **Intemperance:** Excessive indulgence, especially in “pure” alcohol (ie. not alcohol that has been fermented, like beer or wine.) By the late 1820s, American alcohol consumption equaled about four gallons per person, per year. During the 1830s and 40s, many temperance societies formed to press the cause of abstaining from liquor to reduce drunkenness and alcoholism.

### Procedure:

#### Opening to Lesson:

- Briefly review the town meeting discussion from the previous lesson.
  - What was the final decision?
  - Why did the class vote the way it did?
  - Who could vote/attend a town meeting in the 1830s? How did people make their voices heard? How does that compare to today’s local government?
  - Do you have any additional thoughts about the discussion?
- Today we are going to consider some of the contemporary issues that our community faces and how we can express our opinion and make our voices heard.

### Activity 1: Analyzing an Opinion (15 minutes)

- Ask students:
  - How do people make their voices heard today?
  - How did people make their voices heard in the 19<sup>th</sup> century? Was it similar? Different? Could everyone make their voices heard? Who could not?
- One of the ways that people have expressed their opinions for a long time is through the written word. Today, we might see this in the form of op-eds or blog and social media posts. Most newspapers and news websites today have an opinion section.
- Pass out copies of “**A few plain Facts and Questions to Distillers and Dealers**” document. This is a piece from the *The Temperance Almanac*. Temperance was a reform movement during the early 1800s that emphasized refraining from pure alcohol. People often drew connections between pauperism and alcohol at the time.
- For some in the 1830s, this was a very pressing contemporary issue.
- Before you read the piece, ask: What is the difference between a fact and an opinion?

- Fact: A fact is something that can be proven true or false.
- Opinion: refers to a judgement or belief in something, often based on a personal view of the subject.
- Give students 5 minutes to read the document. While they read, they should identify one fact and one opinion mentioned in the article.
- Other questions to consider:
  - What is this reading about?
  - Why are these ideas relevant or important?
  - From whose perspective is this text written?
  - How might that influence the ideas expressed in the text?
- Discuss as a class.

### **Activity 2: Brainstorming Important Issues in the Community (20 minutes)**

- Break the class into small groups (3-5 students).
- In their small groups, students should think about contemporary issues facing their community. This could be an issue that is very specific to your town (for example, creating a new skate park), or something that is more endemic to society (for example, care for the unhoused population).
- As a group, create a list of these issues. Remind them that it doesn't matter if the issue is big or seems inconsequential, and that they don't have to know much about the issue at this time.
- If the class is having trouble getting started, bring up a current event or debate in your city or town. Show them a news report or article from the local paper, if applicable.
- Remind them of common issues that many communities grapple with today include topics like:
  - Low-cost ride programs
  - Bike paths, public beach access
  - Caring for the unhoused population
  - Public School students and hybrid learning vs. learning in person
  - Policing
  - Tearing down of historic buildings
  - Sanctuary cities
- Do any of these apply to your city or town? What else? What pros and cons do they know about for these issues?
- After 10 minutes of discussion in small groups, bring the class back together for discussion.
- Call on one representative from each small group to report back on some of the issues that the group identified. Take notes on the whiteboard/smartboard/paper.

### **Activity 3: Introduction to Researching a Topic and Developing an Opinion (30 minutes)**

- After creating a list of issues within your community, either
  - 1.) ask the whole class to vote on **one issue** to discuss, or



2.) decide on one topic for **each small group** to discuss.

The teacher should eliminate those issues that are not applicable to the assignment before the vote.

- After the topics are chosen, students should fill in the **Researching Current Events worksheet**. They can do this in their small groups or as a class.
- The worksheet contains the following questions:
  - What is your topic?
  - What is your **opinion** on the topic?
  - What is something you **know** (or think you know) about this topic?
  - What is something you **would like to know**? Phrase this in the form of a question to help direct research.
  - How might peoples' **biases** dictate their opinion on this topic?
  - Where could you look to find more information? What resources could you consult? What resources should you avoid?
- After completing the worksheet, the class can come together to discuss.
- Wrap-Up questions:
  - What are the rights and responsibilities of citizens today?
  - What is the local government responsible for? How is this different than in the 1830s?
- For some classes, this may be enough of a culminating activity, spurring debate and discussion. Otherwise, teachers can choose one of the following activities to encourage students to think critically and make their voices heard in the community. Teachers may choose to have the students complete more independent research on the issue before wrapping up with one of these culminating activities.

**1. Speak with a Town Official:** Invite a town official to visit your classroom (in person or virtually) to discuss how policies are introduced to municipal referendum meetings and how they are influenced by the public. Students should be encouraged to ask the official questions about the local issue they discussed in class.

**2. Writing an Op-Ed:** Using the local issue from this session or another issue of their choice, compose an argument letter to present their opinion of the issue, making sure to introduce a claim, acknowledge and distinguish alternate or opposing views, and organize the reasons and evidence logically. Follow this format:

- Intro
- Thesis
- Argument (based on evidence)
- 1-3 points, substantiated by evidence
- Acknowledgement of potential counterarguments
- Conclusion

Encourage them to make their voices heard in the community. If applicable, students may determine if there is a publication they could send their letter to, or maybe a local official.

### **3. Public Forum on Contemporary Issues in the Community**

- For this activity, the classroom teacher will assume the role of mayor or town manager.
- The town council will need seven students to serve as the town council. The teacher may allow students to volunteer to this post or elect them directly to the council.
- The mayor will begin the town meeting by introducing the warrant to those attending the event.
- The council members and the mayor will then discuss the referendum, determining pros and cons.
- After a few minutes of deliberation, the mayor will open the floor for town citizens, one at a time, to ask questions or offer opinions on the proposal.
- Once everyone has had a chance to discuss the issue, the mayor will call on citizens to vote by ballot.

## Primary Source: A few plain Facts and Questions to Distillers and Dealers

FIFTY–SIX THOUSAND PERSONS die annually in this country from intemperance<sup>i</sup>. The evidence of the fact is incontrovertible<sup>ii</sup>.

QUESTION.—Who are the direct instruments in producing such a destruction of human life?

ANSWER.—The *Distillers* and *Dealers*. They make and furnish the poison directly to the unfortunate victims, with a full knowledge of its fatal qualities, and generally with the full knowledge of the habits of the individual to whom they furnish it.

QUESTION.—If 56,000 persons are killed annually by intemperance, and if 73 million gallons of spirits are sold annually, how may a distiller or dealer know what number he is probably instrumental in destroying?

ANSWER.—By ascertaining what proportion 56,000 bears to 73 million, which is about as one to 1,300, so that there is every reasonable certainty that *every 1,300 gallons that is made or sold destroys one human being!!*

148,799 persons are confined during the year in jails or poor–houses. Certificates from numerous keepers and officers place the fact beyond all dispute.

QUESTION.—If 73,000,000 gallons send 143,799 persons to the jail or alms–house annually, what will the average be for one person?

ANSWER.—183 gallons, or every dealer may reasonably calculate that for every 183 gallons that he sells, one person will be driven to crime or reduced to poverty.

Source: *The Temperance Almanac*

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<sup>i</sup> Intemperance: Excessive indulgence, especially in “pure” alcohol (ie. not alcohol that has been fermented, like beer or wine.)

<sup>ii</sup> Incontrovertible: not able to be denied or disputed

## Researching Current Events Worksheet

1. What is your topic?
2. What is your ***opinion*** on the topic?
3. What is something you **know** (or think you know) about this topic?
4. What is something you **would like to know**? Phrase this in the form of a question to help direct research.

5. How might peoples' **biases** dictate their opinion on this topic?

6. Where could you look to find more information? What resources could you consult? What resources should you avoid?

## **Additional Resources**

The following primary and secondary sources are not included in the lesson plans, but educators might find them useful for their students or for their own information.

## Primary Source

### A Warrant for a Town Meeting on the Poor Farm Issue

Worcester. To either of the constables of the town in the County of \_\_\_\_\_.

Greeting.

In the name of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, you are hereby directed to notify and warn all the inhabitants of said town qualified to vote in town affairs, to meet on \_\_, the \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_, at \_\_\_\_\_, then and there to act on the following articles, viz.

1<sup>st</sup>. To choose a moderator to preside in said meeting, and a clerk to record the proceedings.

2<sup>nd</sup>. To see if the town will vote to purchase the farm owned by the Bullock heirs, to be used as a poor farm for the town's paupers, said farm containing one hundred and twenty-five acres of land, a house, and two barns for the sum of twenty-five hundred dollars (\$2500).

3<sup>rd</sup>. To see if the town will raise said twenty-five hundred dollars by raising the property tax from \$1.20 per \$100 valuation to \$1.50 per \$100 valuation.

4<sup>th</sup>. To see if the town will appoint a committee to oversee the making of necessary repairs to the house and farm, and to choose a respectable person to reside in the house and take charge of supervision of the paupers and the cultivation of the farm.

And you are hereby directed to serve this warrant, by posting up attested copies thereof at each of the public meetinghouses in said town seven days at least before the time appointed for holding said meeting.

Hereof fail not, and make due return of this warrant, with your doings thereon, to the Town Clerk, at the time and place of meeting aforesaid.

Given under our hands, this \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_, in the year \_\_\_\_\_

Jacob Corey

Levi Barnes

Zenas Dunton

Selectmen

## **Primary Source**

### **Instructions to the Moderator**

1. At all town meetings, except those at which major state and federal officers are elected, a moderator shall first be chosen.
2. During the election of the moderator, the town clerk shall preside, and shall, in such case, have all the powers, and perform all the duties of a moderator.
3. The moderator shall preside in the meetings, for which he is chosen, and shall regulate the business and proceedings thereof; he shall decide all questions of order, and shall make public declaration of all votes passed; if a vote declared by him, immediately upon that declaration be called into question by seven or more of the voters present, he shall make the vote certain by polling the voters, or dividing the meeting, unless the town shall, by a previous vote, or by their by-laws, have otherwise provided.
4. No person shall speak in the meeting, before leave is received from the moderator, nor while any other person is speaking by his permission; and all persons shall be silent upon his request.
5. If any person shall conduct himself in a disorderly manner, and after notice from the moderator, shall persist in his disorder, the moderator may order him to withdraw from the meeting, and on his refusal may order the constables or any other persons to take him from the meeting and confine him in some convenient place until the meeting shall be adjourned; and the person refusing to withdraw shall, for such offense, forfeit a sum not exceeding twenty dollars to the use of the town.



## Primary Source: Excerpts from Accounts for the Poor House, Boston—1821

*These are excerpts from the account book of Boston's poor house in 1821. They detail what that community paid for in the day-to-day operations of the institution. In 1821, the Boston poor house had 319 residents: 78 of these residents were sick, 77 were children, 9 were considered "maniacs and idiots." There were an additional 155 "inmates," most of whom were elderly.<sup>1</sup>*

1821

Sept 17	Cash p. <sup>d</sup> for bringing William Marsh, in a hand-cart, to the house, sick, on a/ct of the state...	.50
Oct. 5	Do p. <sup>d</sup> John Cotton + son for painting room, closet +c at the alms house, + for hanging 11 rolls of paper <sup>i</sup> , per bill & receipt...	17.55
	Do p. <sup>d</sup> Samuel H. Hewes, coroner, for the burial expenses of an unknown child, per bill & receipt	4-
"	"Do p. <sup>d</sup> H. & J. Lovering for 8ps. (?) tow cloth <sup>ii</sup> , 10 ½ yds. a 14 ct pyd, per bill & receipt	14.21
Oct. 16	By amount brought forward.....	\$965.54 ½
"	"Cash p. <sup>d</sup> for the passage of Mercy Appleton, in the Bangor Packet <sup>iii</sup> , to Bangor (Maine) on acco <sup>t</sup> of this town.....	3-
"	"Do p. <sup>d</sup> constable Braman for bringing 2 boys to Bridewell <sup>iv</sup> , viz. Leven Smith, col <sup>d</sup> on account of the State 75 Isaac Dyer, col <sup>d</sup> on act of the Sharon 75	1.50
17	"Do P. <sup>d</sup> George Spooner a weekly allowance, p. rect	1-
"	"Do P. <sup>d</sup> for bringing Francis Robinson, a boy, to the House, on account of the State.....	.25
18	"Do P. <sup>d</sup> Dr. David Townshed for 6tt potash <sup>v</sup> a 10ct. per bill + receipt .....	.60
"	"Do p. <sup>d</sup> for bringing Nath. G. Chase to the House drunk, on account of the state..... settld.	.50
19	"Do p. <sup>d</sup> Dr. Edward Reynolds, Jr. in part of his salary as physician to the Alms House per receipt .....	100
"	"Do p. <sup>d</sup> for 1tt <sup>vi</sup> of butter for Mr. Hooper .....	.22
"	"Do p. <sup>d</sup> for bringing John Boyle to the house drunk, on account of the state	.25

<sup>1</sup> *The History of Public Poor Relief in Massachusetts, 1620-1920*, Robert Kelso, 173

20	"Do p. <sup>d</sup> for carrots ....	.10
22	"Do p. <sup>d</sup> constable Barker and his assistant for bringing Sarah Brown, a State Pauper, to the house .....	1.50
"	"Do p. <sup>d</sup> John Jones for the service of himself and Mr. Nourse in singing 5 Sundays in the Alms House Chapel, ending the 21 <sup>st</sup> inst. A \$1 p Sunday, per rect. ....	5-
23	"Do p. <sup>d</sup> John S. Harris for removing to New York the wife of James Allen, with four children, who were born in England, + who resided in this town about one year, per receipt, on ac <sup>t</sup> of the State	10-

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<sup>i</sup> Paper= wallpaper

<sup>ii</sup> Tow cloth= heavy and coarse plain-weave fabric

<sup>iii</sup> Packet= medium sized boats that carried passengers and mail

<sup>iv</sup> Bridewell= jail; named after Bridewell Prison in London

<sup>v</sup> Potash= an alkaline potassium compound, used in cooking, farming, textiles, and soapmaking

<sup>vi</sup> tt= most likely a way of noting pounds

## Primary Source: Complaint of Molly Street, 1807

To the gentlemen Selectmen  
of that town of Sturbridge; your petitioner  
humbly Shueth that I have no home  
and I will your honnours would take  
me under your Care. as in duty bound  
Shall ever pray  
Sturbridge October 23—1807

Molly Streeter

X

her mark<sup>i</sup>

NB<sup>ii</sup> I reside at Mr. James Dike

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<sup>i</sup> Mark: an indication usually in the presence of witnesses by a distinctive sign or mark (such as an X) of acquiescence in or assent to the content of a document by one unable to write

<sup>ii</sup> NB: nota bene, written before an important piece of information so that the reader takes note

## Primary Source: List of Paupers in Sturbridge, 1835

	Age	Birth place	Chargeable*	
Anna Upham	62	Charlton	35 years	female
Joanna Shumway	72	Sturbridge	18--	female
Comfort Johnson	88	Sturbridge	9 months	male
Henry Plimpton	73	Medfield	9 months	male
Aaron Hobbs	68	Brookfield	3 years	male
Hannah Johnson	77	Sturbridge	5 years	female
Jemima Blanchard	76	Sturbridge	4 years	female
Willard Richardson	68	Brookfield	2 years	male
Pat Child	27	Sturbridge	2 years	male
Levi Simmons	58	Charlton	5 years	male
Mary Atwood	26	Sturbridge	5 years	female
Lucia Shumway	37	Sturbridge	9 months	female
Joseph Benson	58	Sturbridge		male
Samuel Weldon		state charge age 75		male
Orel Morris	35	Sturbridge	12 years	female
John Dunton	23	Brookfield	6 years	male
Mary Benson	19	Sturbridge		female

\***Chargeable** refers to the period that person has received poor relief.

## Primary Source: Excerpt from “Over the hill to the poor-house”

By Will Carleton (1845–1912)

Over the hill to the poor-house I 'm trudgin' my weary way—  
I, a woman of seventy, and only a trifle gray—  
I, who am smart an' chipper, for all the years I 've told,  
As many another woman that 's only half as old.

Over the hill to the poor-house—I can't quite make it clear!      5  
Over the hill to the poor-house—it seems so horrid queer!  
Many a step I 've taken a-toilin' to and fro,  
But this is a sort of journey I never thought to go.

What is the use of heapin' on me a pauper's shame?  
Am I lazy or crazy? am I blind or lame?      10  
True, I am not so supple, nor yet so awful stout;  
But charity ain't no favor, if one can live without.

I am willin' and anxious an' ready any day  
To work for a decent livin', an' pay my honest way;  
For I can earn my victuals, an' more too, I 'll be bound,      15  
If anybody only is willin' to have me round.

Once I was young an' han'some—I was, upon my soul—  
Once my cheeks was roses, my eyes as black as coal;  
And I can't remember, in them days, of hearin' people say,  
For any kind of a reason, that I was in their way.      20

'T ain't no use of boastin', or talkin' over free,  
But many a house an' home was open then to me;  
Many a han'some offer I had from likely men,  
And nobody ever hinted that I was a burden then.

And when to John I was married, sure he was good and smart,      25  
But he and all the neighbors would own I done my part;  
For life was all before me, an' I was young an' strong,  
And I worked the best that I could in tryin' to get along.

Source: [www.bartleby.com](http://www.bartleby.com)

## **Historical Background on Town Government in Early 19th-Century New England**

**Tom Kelleher, Curator of Mechanical Arts, Old Sturbridge Village**

*A brief introduction to town government in early nineteenth-century New England.*

From their earliest days of settlement, the six New England states have had a system of local government that is distinctively different from that of any other region of the United States. Every community is organized as a town (or a city) and there are few unorganized rural areas. In the early nineteenth century there were over a thousand New England towns. Each was a geographic area with between fifty and a few hundred families living within it, chartered by the state as a self-governing corporate body. (At that time only a handful of communities were organized as cities, with mayors, councils, and representative rather than direct government.) Towns had the power as well as the responsibility to tax their inhabitants and make by-laws to regulate and provide for their own collective needs. Towns primarily concerned themselves with building and maintaining roads, operating schools, and caring for the poor and disabled who could not care for themselves. At a time when travel and communication were slow and difficult, the federal government and even state governments were remote, far smaller in proportion to population than they are today, and their taxes relatively low. Local government far more directly affected people's everyday lives.

On the local level, New Englanders governed themselves through town meetings, a more or less limited version of direct democracy for adult males. Voting requirements varied somewhat from state to state, but generally the right to vote in town affairs became more accessible over the years. By the end of the eighteenth century in Massachusetts, for example, all male residents twenty-one years of age and older who had paid some taxes could attend and vote in town meetings. Here they chose town officers and voted for representatives to the State and Federal governments. Here they determined what the needs of their community would be in the coming year, and decided how to pay for them, voting on their tax burden. Here they decided what rules and regulations would make life better in their town.

Prior to each meeting, a warrant was publicly posted so that all citizens could know the issues to be discussed or decided. Towns were required to have at least one meeting early each spring, but often held others throughout the year as needs arose. One of the first items on the agenda was to choose a moderator to manage the meeting and then the other necessary town officers. These included a clerk to keep town records, including the minutes of the meeting; tax assessors and tax collectors; a treasurer to manage town funds; and constables to enforce the laws. Perhaps the most important posts were on a board of 3, 5, 7, or 9 selectmen chosen to manage town affairs on a day to day basis. Scores of other posts, from field drivers who rounded up stray livestock to sealers (inspectors) of weights and measures; highway surveyors who maintained the roads and school committeemen; and many, many more, including members of special committees; had to be filled. None of these jobs were anyone's full-time employment, and most were unpaid (although a few did receive compensation or could collect fees). With so many responsible positions in each community, a man stood a good chance of serving as a town officer or on a special committee at some point in his life. Government was thus not a remote abstraction, but a participatory reality composed of family, friends, and neighbors.

Towns had to provide certain basic services to residents, and some chose to do other things as well. The citizens had to decide how much these things would cost, and how to raise the taxes to pay for them. The three primary responsibilities (and expenses) of towns were building and maintaining roads within the community, caring for the poor, and providing public education. Other town functions included regulating livestock, protecting crops by offering a bounty on pests, and providing for and regulating the burial of the dead. Every year towns also dealt with idiosyncratic local matters, and considered the specific requests and proposals of individual citizens or groups of citizens. But how towns managed their responsibilities was beginning to change by the 1830s.

Most towns divided themselves into smaller districts for ease of administration. A surveyor of highways in each district planned and directed road construction and repair in his area. Many towns still allowed taxpayers to “work off” some or all of their highway taxes by turning out on pre-arranged days to help maintain the roads. By the 1830s, however, highway surveyors increasingly favored using tax money to hire laborers, considering it more efficient.

Since the 1600s most New England communities had provided tax-supported public education. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, towns had divided themselves into school districts so that a schoolhouse served each neighborhood. The town school committee licensed local teachers, chose approved textbooks to be purchased by parents, and set general standards. Each district then had a prudential committeeman who hired a teacher, kept the schoolhouse in repair, and generally managed his school district. Often economy was favored over instruction in the local schools, both in the quality of schoolhouses and the pay given to teachers, but they provided better and more consistent instruction for ordinary people than anywhere else in the United States or all but a few parts of Europe. By the 1830s, a movement for educational reform was taking hold, under the leadership of Horace Mann in Massachusetts and Henry Barnard in Connecticut, that would reshape district schooling.

Towns had to provide care for anyone who could not care for him or herself, and had no family to do so. Some poor individuals were helped through small grants of money or supplies, but most needed more care. Many communities annually auctioned off the care of poor or infirm individuals to the lowest bidder, paying citizens to take paupers into their homes. This system was called the “vendue.” Objections to the vendue rose as the century progressed, and by the 1830s many towns instead cared for their indigent collectively on town-owned “poor farms” or in more urban “work houses.” Contemporary thinking was that this method was more progressive, efficient, and humane.

Today most American communities, and many New England towns, are no longer governed directly by citizens acting in town meetings (although quite a few smaller towns still are). The early New England town meeting nevertheless continues to have a lasting influence on modern local governments and the public perception of what American democratic government means today.