

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Celebrating 375 Years

October 19th marked the 375th anniversary of the first meeting of the Massachusetts Bay Colony General Court in Boston. That body descended to the present day as our state legislature, the oldest continuously meeting legislature in the new world. The State House celebrated the occasion with a day of ceremony, and I was invited to be one of the speakers. These are the words I spoke.

Three hundred and seventy-five years!

A historian reminded me recently of a fact that is obvious when you think about it: The Englishmen who came to Massachusetts Bay Colony lived in our past. They lived in olden days.

But they lived in *their* present day. They did not know what tomorrow, next month or next year held in store when they arrived in Salem Harbor carrying their charter from King Charles.

Their wisdom and their political skill started Massachusetts on the road that brings us here today.

Before they left England, they secured the charter, a charter that differed from those of earlier colonies. Because of their careful negotiation, it granted the principals the right to make a seat of government in New England. That provision helped the colony develop with a unique sense of freedom from the mother country.

And when the charter fell short, they worked around it.

The charter stated that the General Court, the law-making body, was to be composed of freemen who were to transact all public business at general meetings, by the majority vote of those present. It was a pure democracy.

At the first such meeting, October 19th, 1630, 109 freemen showed up for the session. The leaders did not expect such a turnout. Yet they could not refuse to admit additional freemen. It would disfranchise the great body of the people. So, without accepting the 109 freemen, they placed this vote before the assembly.

“For the establishment of the government. It was propounded if it were not the best course that the freemen should have the power of choosing assistants when there are to be chosen, and the assistants from amongst themselves to choose a governor, who, with the assistants, should have the power of making laws and choosing officers to execute the same. This was fully assented unto by the general vote of the people, and erection of hands.”

And representative government came at that first assembly. Politics, the art of governing people.

On a personal note, I am a native of Kansas. The state of Kansas owes a particular debt to Massachusetts. In the 1850s, Massachusetts sent “emigrants” west to establish Kansas Territory as a free state. Massachusetts legislators and settlers share in the success of that effort, and the capital city of Lawrence was named to honor the financial backing of Amos Lawrence of Massachusetts.

It is a privilege and an honor to serve as a 21st century “assistant” in the Great and General Court. Every day we add a page to the history that we celebrate today