

Transcript

**Brookline603: Episode 1**

Aired January 19, 2024

OUTTAKE:

Gail: We're winging! Speaking of winging, while we're waiting, Gary, two eagles flew over my head today when I went out to get the mail.

Gary: Nice!

Gail: And these screeches that go right through your soul.

Gary: Yup, that's awesome!

Gail: Two of them. I took it as a sign.

Gary: It is a sign.

Gail: NO PODCASTING!

Gary: No, no. Fly like an eagle!

Gail: "Fly like an eagle." Great!

PODCAST:

Gail: This is Brookline 603, a podcast created by Brookliners to shine a bright light on the civic life of a small New Hampshire town. I'm Gail Russell Chaddock, 8<sup>th</sup> generation Brookliner. We moved back to Brookline just as the town was celebrating its 250<sup>th</sup> Anniversary and updating its town history. [Nestled Here: A History of Brookline, New Hampshire 1915-2018]. Editor and Poet Sid Hall asked me to write about how Brookliners got their news for the last century. For a small town, it's a pretty rich history. The Brookline Beacon, the Brookline News, The Brookliner, which my grandparents kept tacked on the refrigerator door under a magnet, Comments, Our Place – and then, no newspaper. There have been lots of discussion in town about starting one. We all agree that this town needs a newspaper or something like it. And why not make it a podcast, committed to making local news accessible on a cell phone or on a computer – and as helpful as we can make it. Every second week in March, this town settles key public issues at

town meeting, an essential feature of New England local government dating back to British rule. But without a newspaper, it's not always clear who or what we're voting for, even in a small town. That's what we hope to change . This is Brookline 603 episode one, recorded in a 1757 homestead, once set in deep pine forest, now flanked by new houses. The town's population didn't reach a thousand until the 1970s, and then it soared, 5,753 by the latest estimate.

We'd like to introduce Brookliners, new and old, to their town and each other. And we invite you to join us.

Let me introduce you to some of those engaged in this venture. You'll be hearing from Gary Young, Laurie Peach Toupin. But first, we will be talking with Peter Webb, Brookline's Town Moderator since 2005. If you've ever attended a town meeting or cast a ballot in Brookline, you already know him.

We're talking today with Peter Webb, Welcome, Peter.

Peter Webb: Thank you, Gail.

*Can you tell us first what brought you to Brookline and what do you like about it?*

Fate brought me to Brookline. I got a job in Nashua, we got in the car, looked for a place we could afford and stumbled onto a place in Brookline, looked like a place we could call home and that's how we planted our family here in Brookline.

*I think the home you're in now is older than this one, isn't it?*

It is. We had had another home in town before that, where we lived for three years, and then we moved to this house. No one wrote down when it was built, but it was bought by the man who supposedly built it in 1761. Second town meeting in 1769 was held there, so maybe it was held in his log cabin on the site, no one knows.

*But that's great.*

Brookline, for the likes of my mind and priorities, it's a manageable place. It's rural, which is lovely and calming. It's a place where we can work like heck to try to do the small town thing and get to know the majority of the people in town and respect each other and listen to each other. And I think that's very hard to do in a big place. And so I was very pleased to have somehow found my way here.

*You know, you do something on town voting days that is astonishing when you see it the first time. Can you tell us what it is?*

Well, I think you're easily entertained.

*[laugh]*

Um, yes. When, when we have a new voter, um, we, uh, embarrass them. We make noise. We ring a bell. We announced to all the assembled that. The continuation of this great experiment depends upon people willing to participate, and let's hear it for our new voter who's joining the ranks of those who want to support this system. I've only had one teenager burst into tears when I did that, but with everybody else it went pretty good.

*I don't know. I think the tear sounds pretty good too. It's, it's moving. It really is when it happens.*

I think it was terror.

*You know, Brookline is not what you'd call a famous town, but we do have a famous town meeting story. Can you share that with our listeners?*

I'd be happy to repeat it, but I'd like to also share another thought about that.

*Please.*

The famous Grover Farwell story, a real iconic person in town, big personality. He, for a long time, was our town sexton. And a newcomer, understandably, at town meeting said, well, we're voting on the town sexton. What exactly does the town sexton do? An 87 year old, Grover Farwell slowly got to his feet and turned to the woman and said, I bury you. I hope her feelings weren't hurt.

*No, I hope she laughed. I hope she didn't cry like the voter.*

Let me say something else, if I may. Town meeting story, not an incident at town meeting, but the general context that we used to have town supper, even in my time here. I came here in 1980. We'd have town supper at the Congregational Church. People would get together before town meeting, then go to town meeting. And this story is told how, I'm not sure exactly who the individuals were, but one was Grover and the other we'll say is Eldorus Fessenden -- just chumming it up and enjoying each other's company at the town supper, and then went to the town meeting and like fighting dogs, went after each other, and then the next day they're back slapping buddies again.

There's a real lesson for all of us. We like to think we're sophisticated. I'm not sure we're more sophisticated than people used to be when they could disagree, not personalize it, and maintain their friendship.

*That's another question I wanted to ask you. National politics looks polarized and gridlocked a good deal of the time. Have town politics somehow avoided that extreme partisanship?*

Well, I think the answer is yes. Hard answer is why. In part, the moderator will not permit incivility. That's just a bright line that we have, and that's how we do business, but you know, it's a different dynamic when you're looking in the face of the person of differing opinion. It's nice when you're in your silo and expressing your passions, but you're not dealing with the human being. That's part of the beauty for me of town meeting is people are looking at people expressing other opinions and hearing people's reasons for their opinions, and it breaks down that simplistic polarity where you can understand why someone might feel differently, and you might understand that other opinion, and that's just so crucial to the town meeting process where we get to hear and see and connect with the, the people in our little republic here who are, uh, making these decisions.

*I love that. What exactly does a town moderator do?*

I don't know. I'm still trying to figure that out. Basically, I help the voters conduct their town meeting. The more tedious job of a moderator, by the way, is overseeing the elections and staying there from 6:30 in the morning to sometimes 10:30 at night. But I think you're asking me about town meeting, and so I try to be as invisible as I can. There are certain statutes which I have to familiarize myself with that interfere with the people's simply making decisions and talking. There's a limit to their ability to make decisions. So I have to use that template from my position.

But I follow four principles: Civility, understandability, efficiency, and fairness. And they're competing principles, because if I was fair to everybody and I let them talk until everybody's falling out of their chairs, that isn't efficient. And I want people to be honest, but they have to be civil. So we balance these four competing principles of civility, understandability, fairness, and efficiency. And that's what I try to bring to the floor and make things understandable, make things fair, let people be respected, have a system by which the town meeting is governed where there's no jargon and no esoteric parliamentary procedure,

It's a time when people get together and feel a part of the governance of their town and feel good and enjoy seeing each other and being a part of that process.

*And that is something you do extraordinarily well.*

Well, thank you very much. I learn every meeting how I screwed up, so I, I, I try to remember.

*You mentioned parliamentary procedure.*

Yes.

*Am I right? Parliamentary procedure is not how the meeting is governed, right? There is someone in every other meeting I've been in that knows Robert's rules better than anybody else and manages to put spokes in the wheels of every bicycle that drives by.*

Yes, I have seen parliamentarians who take great joy in pulling the parliamentarian card on people and it's shameful. And parliamentary procedure under our laws is a simple, useful template for the way by which we conduct our meetings.

The townspeople at the meeting can change any rule that I might follow. They can vote on the floor and say, Pete, you made the following judgment or following procedure and we don't like it. So if they vote to change it, it's changed. So, parliamentary procedure is simply a background resource template, which helps structure our routine a little bit, but it does not bind us in any way.

*Thank you, Peter. We will be hearing more about this on our next episode of Brookline 603.*

*[Music]*

*For another take on town meetings, we're talking with Gary Young, born in Brookline in a farmhouse just down the road from this one. After jobs that range from tending monkeys at the late Benson's Wild Animal Farm to communications for oil rigs off the Gulf Coast, Gary returned to family land in Brookline and his first love, music.*

*Gary, what do you remember about town meetings as a kid?*

Gary Young: Thank you, Gail. Yes, I was an employee of Benson's Wild Animal Farm. I managed the monkey house. As far as the other monkey house, it was at the Daniels Academy building on the nights that there were town meetings. Back then, this was in early 60s, I was about seven or so, and we were allowed to go to watch the show. Like Peter said, it was pretty fiery at times. I remember Grover Farwell very well, and I was terrified of him. He had a very limited sense of humor when it came to children. I see him as the perfect Yankee in New Hampshire and well respected.

The town back then was much smaller. Town meetings, even then, lasted until midnight, because I can remember falling asleep there. That's my memory of the

town back then. It was small. We had one police officer, Alvin Taylor. We had Whitcomb's Ice Cream. We had the Town Village Store and we had the Post Office. And that was, that was Brookline back then.

*Remember, Whitcomb's Ice Cream came with fried clams – an unusual combination in any other part of the world but not in Brookline.*

No, no. They were famous for that. And Eddie and Barbara did an amazing job, and Barbara is still alive. I so remember watching Eddie run around town, like he was always at a trot, he was always moving quickly, and he cared about the people that he worked with, and he's a great person.

*Thank you, thank you for joining us for these podcasts and thanks for agreeing to work on the music.*

It's a privilege and it is a privilege to be here and this I can see is my first stab at civic duty. I'm not very active in town, but this is awesome. I love this.

*Gary, thank you.*

Thank you.

*[Music]*

*Finally, a historic look at the holiday spirit in Brookline, best expressed by the very large tree that graces the front of our town hall. After working in daily print journalism, Laurie Peach Toupin moved to Brookline in 2004, where her children attended public schools. We're happy to be working with her on this podcast.*

*Laurie, what can you tell us about that tree?*

Laurie Peach Toupin: Well, thank you, Gail. I got to tell you, at this time of year, driving down Main Street of Brookline just fills my heart with joy. Not only are all those buildings beautifully lit, but then you come to the center and you have that Christmas tree shining bright with Christmas lights with its glass and metal star lit from the inside.

When we first moved here almost 20 years ago, I was smitten with that annual Christmas tree lighting ceremony. Coming from a little larger town, this was just so intimate and so cozy. Our two girls, Maria then was age three and Colie was only 18 months, giggled and squealed as Santa rolled in on the firetruck.

Although neither would sit on his lap. They did pose in front of the tree for a picture, and we've done that every year since. But man, that first year, they looked so small. It's nice to think that that tradition, now 55 years old, is still going strong.

In 1968, Eleanor Marshall brought a new idea to the Selectmen. How about letting the Boy Scouts plant a tree in town that would become a community Christmas tree? They loved the idea. So on December 1st, 1968, the Boy Scouts planted that first tree on the lawn of the Daniels Academy building. After it was decorated, a ceremony featuring caroling and a surprise visit from Santa was held in the upper Town Hall. Candy canes and oranges were donated by local businesses. As the tree grew, the town had to get creative on how to decorate it. Ellen Fessenden used a telephone company truck to string the lights. Later, Clarence Farwell used a variety of ladders and vehicles.

In 1984, the first Christmas tree committee was formed. Their first order of business, who should light the tree? They decided to honor a special Brookliner, a longtime resident, who's donated a lot of his or her time and energy to the town. This person, not known until announced at the lighting ceremony, gets to throw the switch that announces to the town. It is Christmas in Brookline.

That year, the ceremony started with music led by Charlotte Farwell and the Brookline Chorus to a standing-room-only crowd. Then they moved outside where Grover C. Farwell was announced as the first recipient. Carols were sung and Santa arrived on the firetruck. Sound familiar? It should. This was a scene that awaited my family when we first moved to town, and it greets us every first Sunday in December.

We still like to watch the ceremony, but the awesome Christmas cookies from the library's bake sale can't be beat. Merry Christmas, Brookline! May all your trees and days be bright.

*Thank you, Laurie, for your interest in sharing town history and for joining us on this venture.*

Thank you for inviting me, Gail.

*And thank you, listeners.*

*You can find more, including an archive of this and future podcasts, at our website, Brookline603.org. This episode was edited and hosted by me, Gail Russell Chaddock, reported by Peter Webb and Gary Young, and Laurie Peach Toupin. Our producer and audio director is Michael Moss, who recorded and arranged original music by Gary Young. Copyright 2023*

