

West Newbury Town Meeting: Nutcracking, Dogfights, Cuspidors, Fisticuffs, Drama, and Humor

New England town meeting serves a vital municipal purpose, setting local government's course for the coming months and year. In West Newbury, town meetings also have had enormous entertainment value, as reported in the *New York Times*, the *Boston Globe*, *Scribner's*, and the *Newburyport Daily Herald*.

One such report, published in the [March 23, 1881 *Newburyport Daily Herald*](#), described a mid-19th century West Newbury town meeting in so compelling a manner that it demands verbatim replication here:

WEST NEWBURY.

[From Our Regular Correspondent]

The doings of various town meetings have recently occupied considerable space in the newspapers, but the proceedings of one town meeting, held here so long ago when many of the present voters had not acquired that graceful dignity of deportment so becoming to advancing years, has never been reported in print. There being no very important business to be transacted, it was decided by the leading spirits of the meeting to select for a presiding officer one who, while entertaining liberal views on parliamentary matters, was fully assured that he had a special gift to moderate a town meeting.... The peanut man had planted his stand in the hall near the door and was dispensing his stock in trade to the restless crowd, filberts, peanuts, and nuts in variety, and a large majority of the meeting were experimenting upon the best method of separating the nutritious element from the indigestible portions of the merchandise. In this process a variety of means were resorted to; some used their teeth, others jackknives upon the backs of seats, or boot heels upon the floor, and various other quiet and peaceful methods. At this juncture a motion was made that those persons not supplied with proper implements for the occasion be furnished with hammers at the expense of the town. ... As several individuals were usually addressing the chair at the same time, amid the cracking of nuts, and an occasional dog fight among the stranger curs that were unfortunately brought together, the deliberations of the meeting were in possible danger of being disturbed, and the moderator was frequently compelled [to] shout "Keep still there;

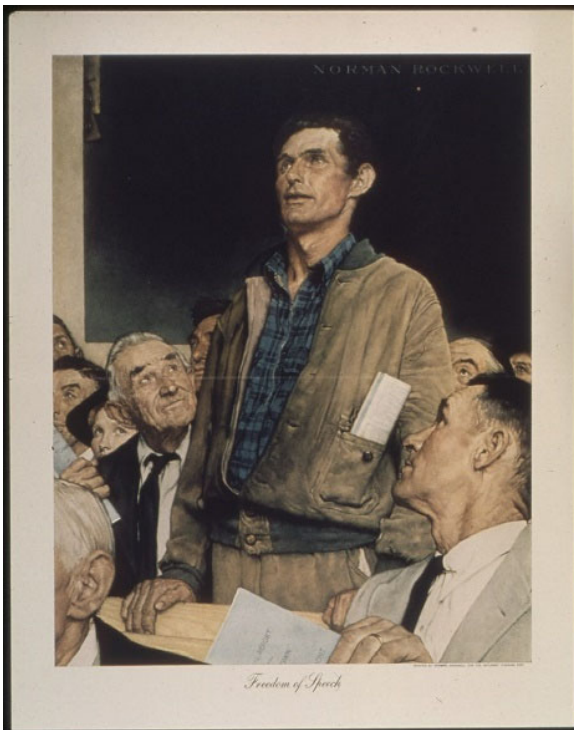
we can't hear ourselves do business." ... While several persons were speaking upon different subjects a voter enquired what motion was before the house; the chair replied, "There are three or four, and you can take up just which you are a mind to." ... The above includes a small part of the "doings" of that day. There were[,] no doubt, some things that would be amusing if we could recall them at this late day, for, as we remember it, [it] was among the most interesting secular meetings that we have attended.

If this seems implausibly raucous, consider the [1910 *Scribner's* story *Town Meeting Day*](#) supposedly based on West Newbury town meeting, in which the moderator "dropped his useless gavel, seized a chair, and poised it above the tumult." As stated in the [1915 *Annual Town Report*](#): "Article 15. Voted to appropriate the sum of \$150 to paint the exterior of the Town Hall and to procure cuspidors if there is any money left."

On February 24, 1952, the [New York Times](#) printed a multi-page feature about West Newbury town meeting by local author [Margaret Coit](#), who had herself [moderated the December 1951 special town meeting](#). Describing town meeting as "West Newbury's favorite indoor sport," Coit wrote that "[t]he hours at Town Meeting on rock-bottomed seats offer drama that dims television or dulls radio into oblivion. Some come out of a conviction of civic duty; some to best their enemies; some for the fun of watching their neighbors make fools of themselves. ... Verbal brawls within have more than once ended in fisticuffs outside." She concluded, "In West Newbury, they all try to run it, each in a different direction."

[Julian Steele](#), West Newbury's town moderator in the 1950s-1970s, deployed charm, common sense—and gentle fun—to manage town meeting. Once he famously asked an excessively expostulating town meeting participant, "Why be so difficult when with a little trying you could be impossible?" He explained to the [Boston Globe](#), "There are times when a little humor should be introduced into a meeting, for instance, when there is excessive wrangling over an issue." One of Steele's observations at that time remains true today: "People will approve a \$2 million school building after five minutes of discussion, then spend all afternoon debating a \$100 lamppost."

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Norman Rockwell,
Freedom of Speech, based on a VT town meeting
Source: [Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norman_Rockwell#/media/File:Freedom_of_Speech)

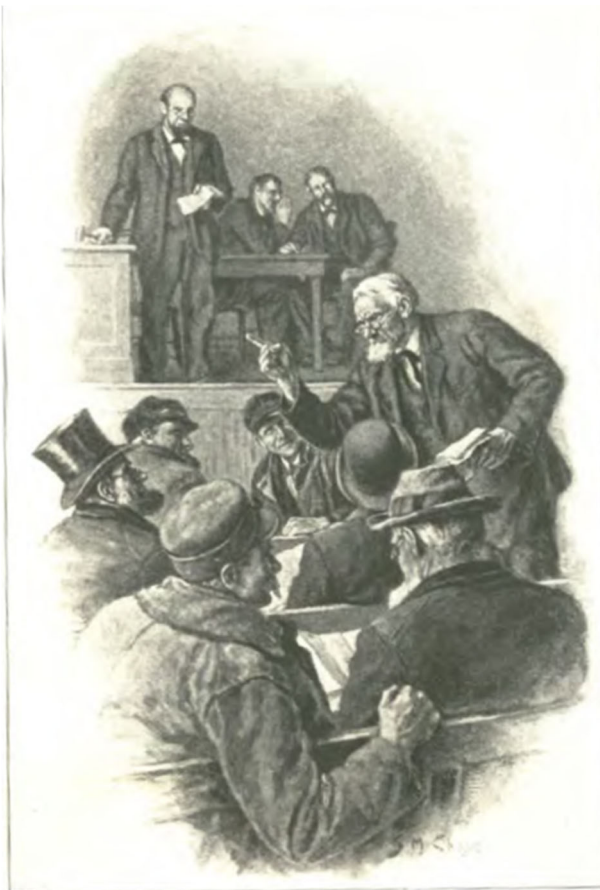


Julian Steele with his predecessor as moderator, Charles Brown
Source: [New York Times](https://www.nytimes.com/1910-11-10/nyregion/10-nw.html) G.A.R. Library copy



He seized a chair and poised it above the tumult. "Set down!" he thundered.—Page 552.

Above right & left [Town Meeting Day](#) by Haverhill's [Sidney M. Chase](#), supposedly based on West Newbury town meeting, Scribner's November 1910
Source: [G.A.R. Library Digital History Collection](#)



"I'd like to enquire, Mr. Moder-ay-tor," he stormed, "ef this town is a-collectin' tramps!"—Page 556.