

## A History of the Concord City Council

Few details are available about the earliest days of Concord government, since no written records of the Concord City Council survive before 1837. Mandated in 1795 by an act of the North Carolina General Assembly, the Town of Concord was created as the county seat of Cabarrus County. (The General Assembly passed legislation to create Cabarrus County from Mecklenburg County in December 1792, and the first County Court met in January 1793 at the home of the Robert Russell's widow.)

Since Concord was the county seat, it was the Justices of the Peace of the County Court who were most directly responsible for the management of the town as well as of the county. In 1798, the General Assembly passed a bill to regulate the town of Concord, directing the County Court to appoint three Commissioners of the Town of Concord to be responsible for all matters "conducive and proper for the advancement and promotion of the said town," subject to the approval of the County Court. Not until July 1799 did the County Court name the first three Concord Commissioners: James Scott, James Russell, and Matthias Phifer.

It might seem that those early Concord officials had very different duties and concerns from those of their counterparts today. After all, there were no automobile traffic problems to contend with and no water, sewer or electric utilities to supply. Concord's population numbered only 33 souls in 1800, although the town's population increased dramatically during the four weeks a year when the county court was in session. During court week, many people living in the surrounding countryside came to Concord to transact court business, to purchase supplies, and to sell their own produce at town businesses and marketplaces.

The responsibilities of those early town councils, however, actually were very much like those of the current city council. Their primary concerns were for the safety and health of the town's citizens and for quality of life. The commissioners enacted rules for the safety of the town and its citizens and appointed a constable and patrollers to enforce those rules and keep the peace.

For example, in a town where everyone cooked and heated with wood fires and where most of the buildings were constructed of lumber, it was vital that any citizen use extreme caution carrying hot coals from his neighbor's home to his own to re-light a stove and fireplace. The town council dictated the safest ways of transporting open fire and live coals from one location to another.

In a time when most people walked from one location to the other, it was important that horse and wagon traffic yield to foot traffic. Since most town residents also farmed and kept livestock, the commissioners found themselves policing public streets and common areas for free-ranging livestock. A wandering cow or hog could cause quite a traffic problem, especially during peak traffic times!

Because almost everyone in town used the same water source, the public well, commissioners also found it necessary to regulate the sanitary use of that water source and safeguard the continued protection of the public well by insuring the town's secure disposal of waste and garbage. Very early, the town council recognized the need for a health committee to guarantee the public health. The council appointed a Concord Health Committee, made up of several town physicians who made regular inspections of the town and reported any problems they found. When infection and illness struck, the health committee advised the council on measures to reduce the spread of disease, including the use of quarantines and restrictions to keep infected persons and goods from entering the town.

During a smallpox epidemic in 1850 and 1851, the town commissioners enacted very strict regulations in an effort to safeguard the health of the town. They also set stiff fines and penalties for anyone in violation of those regulations. In December 1850, all mail coaches arriving from Charlotte, which was suffering a severe smallpox outbreak, were directed to stop outside the town limits and deliver their mail to the waiting postmaster or one of his deputies. The coach was forbidden from making any stops in town, and no passengers, merchandise or goods were permitted to leave the

coach. The commissioners then appointed and hired four men to guard the four roads into town, with directions to question and turn away anyone suspected of carrying smallpox.

The commissioners also were in charge of laying out new streets, when needed, and seeing to the maintenance and repairs of all public streets. This included digging ditches to drain standing water away from streets and leveling streets where needed. When the commissioners determined a need to lay crushed stone in sections of heavier traveled streets, they solicited bids for stone and labor. Town commissioners also regulated how citizens used streets and sidewalks, insuring that no one used these public areas as dumping grounds.

The commissioners set taxes on travelling companies of entertainers before permitting them to set up within the town limits. The commissioners also set property valuation and tax rates levied for property and poll taxes. The town constable, under the direction of the commissioners, was responsible for the collection of town taxes and fees. Such revenue then was used for the needs of the town.

In 1806, the General Assembly passed a bill to incorporate the Town of Concord, enabling the free and eligible voting men from the town to elect their own commissioners, rather than relying on commissioners appointed by the County Court. Since there are no records of those early elections, held on the first Monday in February each year, the names of Concord's first elected officials are not recorded. Much later, a newspaper article from 1821 gives that year's elected officials: George Klutts was Magistrate of Police (Mayor), with Memucan Hunt, John Travis, David Storke, John F. Mahan, and R. Martin serving as Commissioners.

The first surviving written records of the Concord Board of Commissioners are found in the Minutes of the Concord City Council beginning in 1837. Security microfilm copies of these important city records for 1837 through 1991 are located at the North Carolina State Archives in Raleigh and in the Local History Collection, Lore Room, at the Cabarrus County Public Library in Concord. The March 13, 1837, entry records that Magistrate of Police (Mayor) J. L. Beard and Commissioners William J. Blume, Thomas S. Henderson, Richard C. Carson, and Samuel Kesler took their oaths of office. Commissioner Edwin R. Gibson was absent and took his oath at a later meeting.

The elected official designated as the magistrate of police became known as intendent of police around 1851. He was known by that title until about 1871, when the minutes first indicate the usage of the current title of mayor. According to Town Council Minutes, the first man to hold the new title of Mayor was J. S. Fisher. Councilmen who served with Mayor Fisher were George W. Brown, D. M. Fink, P. B. Means, and W. A. Patterson.

As the Town of Concord slowly grew in both population and size, so did the duties of the mayor and commissioners. More people and more businesses meant more regulations. By the 1870s, almost 700 people called themselves Concord residents.

With so many more people, animals and vehicles sharing public by-ways, street maintenance and order became even more important. The Minutes of the Town Council show the commissioners spending more and more time and effort in opening new streets and repairing old ones. Many private alleys were opened up as public thoroughfares. Each time private property became part of the public streets, the commissioners calculated appropriate compensation for the owner. Even when an owner refused compensation because he benefited in some other way, the commissioners still had costs to consider—who should be responsible for repairs and how should repairs be financed.

In 1876, the Concord Town Council considered a petition calling for the widening and paving of East Depot Street (now Cabarrus Avenue), including sidewalk construction. In September, the Council ordered two-foot-wide sidewalks to be laid out on either side of the street. Sidewalks on Union Street (sometimes called Main Street) likely had already been paved with crushed rock.

As sidewalk and street paving became more popular, Town Council determined the order of such projects—and how they could be financed. In 1893, the Town of Concord advertised for bids for street repairs and new sidewalk construction. Council awarded the job to R. A. Brown, with the provision that Brown pay the town \$25.00 rent on rock crusher he would use to brick the sidewalks. The *Daily Standard* newspaper approved the expense, declaring that brick sidewalks would be “cleaner, nicer and decidedly more beautiful.”

By 1901, the new downtown sidewalks were cement, but progress was not cheap. The council charged each property owner along the new sidewalks one-half of pavement costs and required that each owner put in the curbing at his own expense. The July 9, 1901, minutes record the cost of the cement pavement in front of the J. W. Cannon residence on North Union Street at a total of \$99.45; the town portion was \$49.72, leaving the remaining \$49.73 for Cannon to pay.

Even though the town councilmen began appointing a Concord constable at least as early as 1837 and patrollers not long after that, it was not until 1879 that the council began planning for a regular policeman. The councilmen were beginning to think in terms of hiring a policeman with a job description and a set salary. In May 1879, Mayor J. N. Brown and Commissioners J. S. Fisher, J. L. Phifer, M. W. Johnson, and D. R. Hoover combined the two positions of constable and tax collector, electing M. L. Harris to the post. Mayor Brown then appointed Phifer and Hoover to draft an ordinance defining Harris' hours and duties and to propose an employment contract. Establishing a “regular” police force must have been a trying prospect, for the Concord Council elected and lost, through resignation, three constables before finding success with H. C. Dowd in August of that year. Dowd began work as constable/tax collector/policeman at the grand salary of \$16.66 a month.

One hundred years later, by 1979, the Concord Police Department boasted 38 paid police officers and 20 volunteer auxiliary staff. The Department went from working out of a one-room office in the 1903 City Hall on the corner of South Union and Barbrick streets to the current Market Street building, completed in 1975.

From Concord's earliest days, fire prevention and fire fighting were town activities requiring each citizen's cooperation. The Concord Commissioners set up the town's fire limits in 1884, but all firefighters were unpaid volunteers. The Concord Hose and Reel Company, formally organized in 1887, had 27 volunteer members. The Concord Hook and Ladder Company, comprised of 20 African-American volunteers, was in operation by 1896. Neither company, however, could count on regular fiscal contributions from town funds.

The Concord Fire Department was born in December 1900, with one paid fireman, one fire wagon and four horses; the rest of the firemen were volunteers. The fire department office was housed in the 1903 City Hall, but the firemen had to raise their own funds to buy equipment. The town council did contribute toward equipment purchases, however. In 1905, Concord commissioners voted \$200.00 toward the purchase of a horse and wagon; in 1906, the commissioners paid \$475.00 for a pair of fire horses; in 1909, the commissioners began paying a yearly salary of \$50.00 to the fire chief. Now, of course, the Concord Fire Department has eight stations staffed by paid firemen, with a budget fully funded by Concord revenue under the direction of the Concord City Council.

During the past 100 years, Concord has undergone tremendous growth and change, causing the City Council's corresponding work load and responsibilities to grow, as well. The underlying charge to insure the safety and quality of life for Concord's residents remains the same, but the many areas that encompasses have changed dramatically.

To insure public health and safety, the town commissioners moved from safeguarding a town well and regulating outhouses to constructing and maintaining an extensive city-wide water and sewer system. In 1886, town council contracted with P. B. Fetzter to put up and maintain six to ten water hydrants on Union Street to supply adequate water in case of fire. In 1887, Fetzter built a standpipe reservoir behind his downtown business and constructed lines to carry water to the Union Street hydrants. While Fetzter's contract was written for 25 years, town council eventually persuaded him

to sell his water plant to the town. Concord purchased the Fetzer water plant on July 13, 1901, for \$9,000.00. Since then, Concord residents have used water from Cold Water Creek, Lake Concord (built 1926-1927), Lake Fisher (built 1946), and Lake Howard (built as the Coddle Creek Reservoir in 1995). Today, the city pursues additional water supplies from Albemarle and Charlotte.

Other utilities, services and facilities for which the City of Concord has assumed responsibility, at various levels, include electric, sewer and garbage collection services; parks and recreation programs; and library facilities. Under the direction of the commissioners, Concord has built and/or renovated recreation centers and parks, including Logan Community Center, and Myers and Caldwell Parks. When the over-crowded Concord Library needed assistance toward expansion in the 1970s, the City supplied benefits and funds for additional staff and a new facility, which opened in 1977.

Over the years, the Concord Commissioners have regulated telegraph and telephone services, pool halls and cab fares, entertainment halls and barber shops. The town council was responsible for collecting Concord City School taxes and overseeing city elections. During the last five decades, the City of Concord has directed and funded housing and community development programs, recruited new business and industry, and built a regional airport, a golf course, and a new operations center. The councilmen approved and supported Concord's month-long 1996 bicentennial celebration, celebrating the city's 200<sup>th</sup> birthday, and accomplished the 2001 dedication of Warren C. Coleman Boulevard, honoring the native son who owned and operated the nation's first African-American owned and operated textile mill in Concord.

Moving in new directions and with expanded horizons, the Concord City Council has deliberated hundreds of annexation petitions and rezoning requests since the mid 1950s, all with a view to providing continued income and vital services to a growing city. The Concord City Council has grown from a trio of commissioners appointed by the county court to a non-partisan Board of seven elected council members, led by an elected mayor. During the 2001-2002 fiscal year, these elected government officials directed a total budget of \$127,332,515.00, serving a city population of over 50,000 people. The weight of their responsibilities, and the way they approach those duties, may have changed dramatically in the last 200 years, but their level of commitment to Concord and her citizens has rarely been in doubt.

Sources for additional reading:

Books by Clarence E. Horton, Jr., available at Cabarrus County Public Library:  
*A Bicentennial History of Concord: From the Pages of Progress Magazine* (1996)  
*An Historical Sketch of Olde Concord, 1796-1860* (1994)

Other materials located in the Library's Local History Collection:  
Concord City Directories  
Minutes, Concord City Council (Board of Aldermen), 1837-1991 (v1-24) (microfilm)

Researched and written by Kathryn L. Bridges, ~~Local History, Lore Room~~  
~~Cabarrus County Public Library, Concord, NC~~  
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