Noblese Oblige, or Self Interest?
A Demographic Analysis of School Committee Membership, Responsibility and Action, 1860-1900
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Abstract

Why did the school committee members in Beverly and Salem between 1860 and 1900 become involved? Did they have school age children and want to play a part in their education, or were they power-hungry individuals with desires to control the schools? By finding the names of members of the committee and using the census to discover their occupations, age, if they had children, and if they were foreign we can answer many questions about the people on the school committees. The census allows one to find out different aspects of the members' lives, and figure out why someone would want to be on the school committee.

A few books have been written about school committee membership. Reed Ueda wrote a book entitled "Avenues to Adulthood: The Origins of the High School and Social Mobility in an American Suburb". Another book written primarily about women on school committees is "Boston women and City School Politics" by Polly Welts Kaufman. Maris Vinovskis also wrote a book entitled "The Origins of Public High Schools: A reexamination of the Beverly High Controversy" that discusses the school committee in Beverly and what effect they had on the schools in Beverly.

By studying about the members of the school committee, we can become aware of what motivated people to become involved from 1860 to 1900 with the school committee. We get a better understanding of what kinds of people had power in Beverly and Salem and if it made a difference whether one was from Massachusetts or another country or state.
The Beverly School Committee began in 1854. It was composed primarily of a chairman, a secretary, and first, second, and third class members. The schools in Beverly at the time were the High School, Briscoe, South, Washington, Cove, Farms, Bass River, Centerville, Dodge’s Row, and Ryall Side. The members were elected in a town meeting [1]. The school Committee had duties such as: deciding when vacations would occur, whether or not to hire a janitor, and how much the janitor would be paid. In order to gain insight into why the members of the school board voted and decided on the issues that they did, we must first get to know the members.

What motivated citizens of Beverly to become members of the school committee? Were they caring, devoted parents who wanted to make sure their children got the best out of their schooling? Were they just passionate citizens who wanted to make sure that their issues were heard? Or were they merely self-interested people who just wanted to become involved so that they would be respected citizens with power? There are a myriad of questions to be asked, not just pertaining to why they were members. Was there a prerequisite for being on the school board? Did you have to be relatively wealthy? Did you need to have children or even be from the United States?

The occupations can be put into seven different categories; farmers, working class with jobs such as a factory worker, skilled laborers with jobs as blacksmiths or master carpenters, white-collar with jobs as clergymen or clerks, entrepreneurs with their own shop or rope business, and professionals with jobs as doctors or pharmacists. In Beverly in 1860 the majority of the members of the school committee had white-collar jobs, either working as clerks or clergymen. White-collar jobs had the highest percentage and the rest was fairly evenly divided between working class, skilled laborers, farmers, professionals, and entrepreneurs. The least common occupations among the members was farmers and professional jobs more than any other profession (See Appendix A). Based on the jobs held by members of the Beverly school committee in 1860, the committee was primarily made up of people with satisfactory jobs but certainly not excellent jobs. One did not
have to be a doctor or a teacher to be on the school board. Nineteen percent of the members were working class citizens, and only 9.5% of the members had professional jobs (See Appendix B) [2]. The school committee in 1860 did not discriminate as to as to who could be members, based on the different types of people that were involved.

In Salem, the situation was somewhat different. Occupational classes were evenly represented. The working and skilled labor classes each made up 25% while the professionals and white collars made up about 17% each [3]. Entrepreneurs and farmers were about 8% each (See Appendix C) [4]. In Salem, more of the members were people that worked with their hands, such as a master tanner or a gas fitter. Although they surely worked hard they were probably less likely to earn as much money as the white collars or professionals made. Just like Beverly, the Salem school committee’s membership didn’t discriminate against any social class. Anyone that wanted to serve on the school committee could do so.

Members with white-collar jobs were still in the majority in Beverly in 1880 as 31.25% had jobs such as bookkeepers, clergymen, and bankers (See Appendix D) [5]. In Salem show that the working, entrepreneur, and white collar class members all made up about 28.5% of the committee. (See Appendix E) [6].

Twenty years later there were no farmers or skilled workers on the school committee. Jobs in the twentieth century began to change from occupations such as blacksmiths and shoemakers to jobs as machinists and clerks at the factories that make shoes. Half of the members on the Salem school committee in 1900 had white-collar jobs, 25% of the members had professional jobs, and working class and entrepreneurs made up 12.5% each (See Appendix F & Appendix G) [7]. Compared to Salem, Beverly is similar in the sense that there were no longer skilled laborers or farmers on the committee; but in Beverly, 71.5% of the members were entrepreneurs (See Appendix H), a significant
difference from 12.5% in Salem. White-collar workers make up on 14.25% in Beverly but they made up half of the committee in Salem [8].

From 1860 to 1900, Beverly evolved from a school committee with a range of occupations and different levels of wealth. In 1900 it was almost all well-off entrepreneurs; while Salem stayed fairly well spread out with working class, white collar and a few professionals.

A large percentage of members of the school committee in both Beverly and Salem had children in 1860. Only 25 and 23%, respectively, did not have children (See Appendix I) [9]. Perhaps this means that a large number of members were parents who wanted to be involved in their children’s education. School committee members could vote on how much money to pay teachers and other staff at the schools, and if you were a parent, you would probably rather buy new books for all of the students rather than raise the teacher’s salary. The school committee also dealt with corporal punishment. Many parents became school board members to try to end this policy. Members of the school committee who had children would be more likely to agree with the parents of student being abused compared to members without children. Having children could change attitudes about many issues that the school committee members faced. Considering that only about 25% of the members on both Beverly and Salem did not have children, it was probably very hard for them to win on issues that parenthood would change your ideas about.

The percentage of members without children increased in both Beverly and Salem from 1860 to 1880, but not significantly. About 65% of the members had children and more than half of those children were school age (See Appendix J) [10]. For Beverly in 1900, the number of members without children rose to 40% but the case was different in Salem. The number of members without children was only 22%, and there were only 22% of the members with school age children [11]. Also in Beverly there were 60% of members with children but 60% of them did not have school age children (See Appendix K) [12].
This was drastically different from the other years, probably because the members were older and therefore had older children.

Another question is: were foreigners allowed on the committee, and if they were, were there a lot involved? In 1860 in Beverly, none of the members were from different countries but there were three from Vermont, New Hampshire, and Pennsylvania (See Appendix L) [13]. Every member of the school committee in Salem in 1860 was from Massachusetts. There is no documentary evidence to determine whether or not foreigners were permitted to be on the school committee in Beverly in 1860, however in Salem in 1880, 36% of the committee were foreign born (See Appendix M) [14]. The committee was composed of members from both Ireland and Scotland. In Beverly, the committee was 100% native born from Massachusetts. Each member’s parents were also all born in Massachusetts (See Appendix N) [15]. In 1900 the foreign population of Beverly and Salem school committees was both about 10%. Even though more and more immigrants were coming to the United States, the school committee did not reflect that.

“Beginning in 1879, Massachusetts women could vote in school board elections” [16]. In 1900 there were two women on the school committees in Beverly and Salem. In Beverly, Bessie Kilham, 44, and Annie Kilham, 48, were the two women. They were both single with no children. There were no jobs listed for them in the city directory or the census and they each boarded in houses on Cabot Street (See Appendix O) [17]. In Salem, Martha Roberts, 37, and Sarah Sherman, 55, were the women on the school committee. Similar to the women in Beverly neither of the women in Salem had children or was married. In contrast to Beverly, Roberts was a counselor-at-law and Sherman was a doctor (See Appendix P) [18]. Considering women did not get the right to vote until 1920 in Massachusetts, it is a wonder why more women were not involved. In a male dominated society it was probably very hard for women to become involved with the school committee. The women who were on the committee were very strong and independent women. Just by being on the committee shows a lot about their character.
The Beverly and Salem school committees from 1860 to 1900 demonstrate many aspects of the time. They reflected how the major occupations changed from skilled labor and working class to white collar and entrepreneurs with their own businesses. In 1860 and 1880 all of the jobs are fairly evenly represented, however it changes in 1900. White collar, entrepreneurs, and professionals were the majority in 1900. The majority of the committee was basically white, native, middle to upper class men with children, but not necessarily school age children. The school committees in 1860 and 1880 were organizations that any citizen of any class could join. They were people who wanted to be involved with the politics of the city and have a say in what happened in their schools, and the school committee was an easy place to do it. As school committees became more influential and more important people who wanted to have a say in what happens in the school system began becoming involved and therefore by 1900 the committee members were starting to become people of a higher class and a lot less working class citizens.
Footnotes


