

SIDE WALKS SANDI SERKESS SWEEP STAKES OF A DIFFERENT KIND...

Thanks to Michael Donlan of West Roxbury. No, I take that back. A huge, great big, thanks to Michael Donlan of West Roxbury. He contributed to the West Roxbury Historical Society a set of books inestimable in their historical and cultural value. What are they? You could never guess. They are the minutes of the Boston Town Meeting, some held in our own Faneuil Hall, from 1660 on. Their perspective and report on the episode-by-episode deliberation of the colonists' reactions to the Mother Country's actions, and their reports of daily life, offer us an outlook we could never imagine. I can't read these fast enough, and they are only some of the most wonderful documents these archives contain. I hope I can communicate to you some of my enthusiasm for their information.

This particular article is about chimneys. Yes, chimneys. Of great concern in those days as all heat and cooking emanated from their eminence. Thus, to some degree, they had to dominate consciousness. Another basis for distress was the prevalence of fires by burning. Consider that most houses in those days were made of wood and that lightning was still a very real threat. Though Benjamin Franklin had discovered the properties of lightning and thus the lightning rod in his famous "kite and key" experiment in July of 1750, the consciousness of the colonists was still in contradiction of their control of the circumstances. To wit: the lightning rod would and could dispel a great deal of the danger from fire, but since they believed with all their hearts that lightning was not a random occurrence of nature, but rather a *deserved* punishment from God, most towns refused to install them and thus chimneys, especially on churches, were an endless source of apprehension.

St. Thomas Aquinas wrote, "It is a dogma of faith that demons can produce winds, storms, and rain of fire from heaven." Martin Luther declared that winds themselves are good or evil spirits. Franklin's research afforded a rational cause for the lightning, but that still wasn't enough! The pastor of the Old South Church, Reverend Thomas Prince, blamed Franklin's invention of the lightning rod for causing the Massachusetts Earthquake of 1755!!!

Consider also that lightning travels at about 22 million miles per hour at twenty-seven thousand degrees Fahrenheit. Shudder!!!! And thus we see how important chimneys are...

These first entries are written on March 12, 1770, at ten o'clock. The meeting lasted until 12:00 PM. Please remember that this is one year and one week after the occurrence of the "horred (sic) massacre" on the Boston Common and much of the meeting concerns this. Please also take into account that these meetings were held during the British occupation of Boston, which suggests that few of their liberties up until this time had been suspended.

"To consider what measures are proper for procuring some suitable Person or Persons to undertake the sweeping of the chimnies (sic), whereby the Town will be better secured from Fires. Voted that Thomas Dawes, Esq, Jonathon Williams, Esq. and Mr. Samuel Austin be a committee to take this article into consideration and report on it."

In the meeting of March 19 the chimney matter was postponed until the May meeting.

On May 7, 1771, the committee is ready to make its report. " Supposing that there is (sic) 1800 Dwelling Houses and that 3 funnels be estimated to a house the number of funnels would then be 5,400 and if necessary to be swept four times a year would be equal to 21, 600 funnels which at the present price would amount to more than 1200 pounds, and it is supposed that it costs many who have their chimnies swept 15 or 16 pence a year, notwithstanding which by their neighbors neglecting to sweep their chimnies from their houses are constantly in more danger from such than from their own...

Your committee is of the opinion that if some such plan as the following be come into, it would be found very beneficial to the community, that the expense arising by the sweeping of the chimnies be paid by a tax as the other charges of the town. That there be a master and six sweepers, said Master to be a man of fair character, and that will carefully attend the business; And that he be allowed 100 pounds- and for each of the six sweepers fifty pounds- lawful money per year to be paid quarterly which sums make 400 pounds—by which a savings will be made (supposing that all chimnies are swept as they ought to be) of 800 pounds per annum at least.

The said master shall keep a book of all the dwelling houses, the number of funnels made use of in each house and ward, and that he begin with one ward, minuting the time of sweeping in order to exhibit the same to the Selectmen who shall draw upon the Treasurer once a quarter for the sum of one hundred pounds upon his rendering to them an Account to their satisfaction that the funnels have been swept in each ward, and that if any chimnies catch on fire by his neglecting to sweep the same, or by the carelessness of the servants in sweeping, that he be subjected to a fine to be determined.

And that said Master provide the books, suitable clothing, and implements of the sweepers, and all other charges attending the same. Upon the above plan it will turn out 1200 funnels per day for each sweeper, allowing him 300 working days which will complete the above mentioned 21,500 funnels."

Meeting Adjourned."

Sandi Serkess can be reached at sserkess@juno.com.