

History of the City Recorder/Municipal Clerk

Early Beginnings

The profession of City Recorder/Municipal Clerk is a time-honored and historical one, extending to biblical times and beyond, and along with the tax collector, is one of the oldest of public servants. The Old Testament of the English Bible (II Samuel, I & II Kings, Isaiah and I & II Chronicles) refer to the 'Recorder', who was "one who caused to remember" or "called to mind". The New Testament refers to 'Clerk' rather than 'Recorder'. Oregon, Tennessee and Utah are the only states that still refer to the office as 'Recorder'. The Recorder/Clerk was an official of varied powers and functions in ancient times. It was the Town Clerk who persuaded the rioting citizens of Ephesus to leave the followers of St. Paul unharmed and to return to their homes, thus preserving law and order. Ancient Greece had a city secretary who read official documents publicly. At the opening of a meeting, one of his first duties was to decree a curse upon anyone who should seek to deceive the people.

Reportedly, the regency line of France descends from the office of the Clerk! According to James Bryce in his book "The Holy Roman Empire," there is a direct link between the position of 'Mayor of the Palace', a clerical post created by the Merovingian Kings of France, and all subsequent Kings of France. In the eighth century, the Frankish Kings of France depended on the 'Mayor of the Palace' to perform all manner of clerical and administrative tasks for the King, including collecting taxes and fees, publishing documents, keeping state records and assisting in the enforcement of the King's justice.

In 751, the Merovingian King, Childeric, was deposed and his assistant, Pippin, the Mayor of the Palace, became not only the monarch of France but was simultaneously created a Patrician of Rome by Pope Gregory the Third. Pippin was, in turn, father of the great Charlemagne, the first Holy Roman Emperor and founder of the Carolingian Dynasty of Europe on High, which in successive generations, produced the Kings of France, as well as the Emperors of Germany and Austria.

Development in England

The title "Clerk" as we know it developed from the Latin clericus. During the Middle Ages, when scholarship and writing were limited to the clergy, clerk came to mean a scholar, especially one who could read, write, and thus served as notary, secretary, accountant and recorder. The beginning of the office of city clerk in England can be traced back to 1272 A.D. in the history of the Corporation of Old London. The "Remembrancer" was called upon to remind the councilors (members of the council) what had transpired at their previous meetings, since the meetings of the early councils were not recorded in written minutes. In 1354, the Mayor of Nottingham appointed the Clarke and provided for his remuneration. In 1439, Symkyn Birches was awarded the office of "Toun Clerk" in another community for the rest of his life. In 1477 Thomas Carton, a town clerk, was the first English printer, and served as diplomat for the King. In 1485, Nicholas Lancaster, the Clarke, became Mayor of York.

Colonial Development

When the early colonists came to America they set up forms of local government to which they had been accustomed, and the office of clerk was one of the first to be established. When the colonists first settled in Plymouth, Massachusetts, they quickly appointed a person to act as Recorder. That person kept all the vital records for birth, marriages and deaths for the church, as well as various other records of appointments, deeds, meetings, and the election of officers at the annual town meeting.

Indeed, in Massachusetts, the town clerk was one of the earliest offices established in colonial towns. The settlers were well aware of the importance of keeping accurate written records of their agreements and actions including grants of land, regulations governing animals, the collection of taxes and the expenditure of town funds. The person given the responsibility for recording these orders was also often given other duties, such as sweeping the meeting-house and selling the seats, ringing the bell, and paying the bounty for jays and blackbirds whose heads were presented to him by the citizens.

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The Puritan town of Woodstock, Massachusetts, appointed a town clerk in 1693 to record deeds and mortgages and to record the books. Because the town's people wanted to keep him on a permanent basis, he was given 20 acres of land and a fee of 12 pence for each town meeting plus 6 pence for each grant filed. The Town Clerk of Middleboro, Mass., on the other hand was compensated with "one load of fish taken at the herring-weir and delivered to his house." Three centuries later, one of his seventh-great-grandchildren served as City Recorder for the City of Newport, Oregon.

Summary

Over the years, City Recorders/Municipal Clerks have become the hub of government, the direct link between the inhabitants of their community and their government. The Recorder/Clerk is the historian of the community, for the entire recorded history of the town (city) and its people is in his or her care.

The eminent political scientist, Professor William Bennett Munro, writing in one of the first textbooks on municipal administration (1934), stated: "No other office in municipal service has so many contacts. It serves the mayor, the city council, the city manager (when there is one), and all administrative departments without exception. All of them call upon it, almost daily, for some service or information. Its work is not spectacular, but it demands versatility, alertness, accuracy, and no end of patience. The public does not realize how many loose ends of city administration this office pulls together."

These words, written more than 70 years ago, are even more appropriate today.

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