



University of Connecticut
Department of History

The Draper Chair of Early
American History

Robert A Gross
Professor

November 6, 2025

Nathaniel Smith(he/him/his)
Municipal Archivist/Records Manager
Town of Concord
Concord, MA 01742

Dear Nate:

I write in enthusiastic support of your proposal for a community preservation grant to conserve and digitize the early town records, extending from the founding of Concord in 1635 to the dawn of the new American republic circa 1790, all preserved in five manuscript volumes.

When I began the research that culminated in *The Minutemen and Their World* back in the early 1970s, I needed to track the responses of the Concord town meeting to the various issues in debate over British taxation and regulation of the American colonies. What better place to do so than the community where the first shots were exchanged on April 19, 1775? Concord promised an ideal test case of how Massachusetts towns mobilized to protest imperial taxes and “tyranny.”

And so I visited the Concord Free Public Library, introduced myself to curator Marcia Moss, and was led to the basement “cage” to consult the town meeting minutes – or more precisely, notebooks with transcriptions of those minutes. Eagerly, I opened the pages to the year 1765 and looked for the resolution against the Stamp Act, which I was assured by Lemuel Shattuck’s *History of concord* the town had approved, with instructions to the town clerk to inscribe the statement in the town book. The meeting had been held at the end of October 1765, so I confidently turned the pages to that date in expectation of reading the stirring words. Nothing was there. So, I kept paging through the notebook and could find no protest against the Stamp Act. Had the transcribers overlooked that resolution? I asked Marcia Moss to see the original, explaining the surprising gap in the records. She went and retrieved the original for my consultation. Once again I could find no anti-Stamp Act protest. Evidently, the town clerk, Jonas Heywood, had failed to follow instructions. Nowhere has the statement against the Stamp Act ever turned up.

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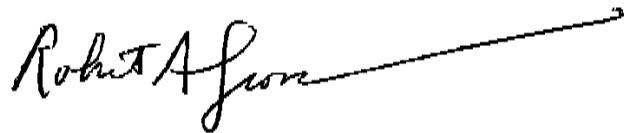
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Why not? This was the beginning of the journey I made then and continue now to pursue: Concord was not a radical and militant town from the start of the pre-Revolutionary movement. It took a moderate, indeed conservative course in the decade of activism against British imperial policies, and the evidence for that interpretation lay in the manuscript pages of the town books. Here, too, were the names of the men elected to town offices, from representative and selectmen through highway surveyors down to lowly hog reeves and keepers of the town pound. From the issues coming before town meeting to the roster of individuals chosen for local office, I was able to discern both the routine business of a New England town and the contentious issues that divided it, such as the request of the inhabitants in the north part of town to hire their own preacher. And if one wanted to know how the town's money was spent or its agenda determined, the town books contained the records of the selectmen and the treasurer. On these pages a political culture was made manifest, even in the changing handwriting of the town clerks. It was a *tangible* history, which I was fortunate to hold in my hands.

But as Concord has become an ever-more popular site for historical research, both by local residents and organizations and by visiting genealogists and scholars, the original town books have suffered the wear and tear of extensive use and need to be kept out of eager hands. Conservation is one good reason for a community reservation grant. Another is the opportunities that can arise from digitization. The original town books overflow with the names of inhabitants who came in contact with town government. Beth Van Duzer has combed the microfilms to find the traces left behind by enslaved and free blacks in the town. The lives of the poor, the transient, the apprenticed, the orphaned and the widowed are documented in these pages as well. But to trace such individuals requires frequent turning of manuscript pages, to their cumulative detriment. How much better to digitize the originals in electronic format, so that the names of people or the subjects before the town can be found with the click of a search button?

The town of Concord stands at the center of historical inquiry into early America and well into the age of anti-slavery and reform. Our records comprise not just local history but also the annals of an emerging nation. What better gift to the U.S. during the 250th anniversary of the Revolution than a provision of those originals in a format that everyone can read, use, and admire?

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Robert A. Gross". The signature is written in a cursive style and is followed by a long, thin horizontal line that extends to the right.

Robert A. Gross
401 Main Street
Concord, MA 01742

Draper Professor Emeritus