

Colebrook Center in 1811

I have been documenting the Colebrook Land Records from the Proprietor' Book, earliest date: 1720, through volume 6, latest date: 1819, for the better part of this past winter season, 2011-2012. The reason for choosing these particular volumes was because a recent grant was made available to make readable the earliest volumes, which, as anyone who does research knows, is not the easiest thing to do. The entries are all made by the various town clerks, some of whom had notoriously poor penmanship, and were even worse spellers. If one person has cause to spend a considerable amount of time with these documents (such as the town historian), he eventually learns to read them with relative ease. However, the majority of researchers is either tracing a certain plot of land, or birth or marriage record, and find it all but impossible to make head nor tail out of the text.

Apparently this difficulty carried over to the person chosen to do this research, as they began with volume 7, which was about the time period that the bulk of the terminology employed in the Land Records Volumes came pre-printed, with only the names and certain other necessary information needing to be filled in by the clerk. This, of course, meant that anyone doing early research in Colebrook was confronted with the worst of the worst to wrestle with.

No one asked me to undertake this project, but it was one that I felt would be of considerable value to not only the town, but also the historical society, which gets a considerable number of requests every year, especially for genealogy.

The project, now complete, turns out to consist of 67,461 words, a figure I'm glad I didn't know before beginning.

As each page was quickly scrutinized, any especially interesting scraps of information were given an identifying mark, so that I could return later and copy it down. One such example was a deed made by Solomon Rockwell and his brothers to another brother, Reuben. The basic reason for this transfer of title to Colebrook lands was that the year was 1811, a time of a deep recession in the newly created nation, and partly as a result of this, the majority of the Rockwell enterprises were moved to Winsted, where the business climate was better than isolated, water-poor Colebrook. It was Reuben who remained, keeping alive the Rockwell name in the town that had given birth to the steel industry in North America.

This two-page entry, written in a tiny, quill-pen hand, begins as follows: "All lands and buildings in Colebrook, beginning with the Higley Lot, so called, consisting of 121 acres." This piece of land today consists of a southerly section of Mt. Pisgah Rd., which contains Beulah Falls and two foundations, one for a lumber mill constructed in 1829, and a grist mill site, dating back to the 1790s. It is also interesting that the name "Higley" relates to the Higley of Granby, the manufacturer of the so-called Higley halfpenny, an example of early Colonial copper currency. These coins today are extremely rare and have a current numismatic value of between \$6,000 and \$60,500 each. I wonder if he paid for that 121 acre plot with his copper coins?

The land descriptions go on to include most of the land between Colebrook Center and that part of Sandy Brook downstream from the intersection of Pisgah Mountain Road to the sharp curve where Jerry Peters lives. With the exception of the potential building sites along

Pisgah Mountain Road, Schoolhouse Road and Center Brook Road, none of these lands were ever developed, although they certainly were stripped of most if not all of their forest cover, which was converted into charcoal for the iron and steel industry or lumber for construction or firewood.

If one were to take a close look at the location and date of construction for sawmills, the progress of the development of the town can be determined. For example, the first two structures erected in Colebrook Center in 1766 was a sawmill and the house for the sawyer. This mill was constructed immediately to the right (east) of the bridge carrying CT Rt. 183 as it crosses Loon Brook, at the site of present-day Abbott property at 2 Center Brook Road. Presumably the lumber for the early buildings that were to make up the village came from this mill. Then in 1829 we find that a new sawmill is constructed on Center Brook, about one mile east of the village. We don't know when this Pisgah Mountain sawmill used up its surrounding forest, but we do know that the town constructed a road running eastward from the bridge separating Schoolhouse Road from Pisgah Mountain Road, in front of McNeill's at 36 Schoolhouse Rd. in 1853. The purpose of this road was to connect the Center with the three sawmills then in operation on Sandy Brook.

This previously mentioned land excluded certain small plots of land, which document the construction of several houses, most of which still exist. Thus we see that Jesse Carrington has already purchased one acre of land "on which said Carrington's dwelling house now stands". This is 20 Schoolhouse Road today.

An obscure bit of information that emerged embedded in the Center's land ownership is the fact that Colebrook Road, from the bridge over Loon Brook to the top of the hill past the Center Cemetery, was named "Phelps' Hill" two hundred years ago. This seems an odd choice, as there is nothing in the contemporary list of land owners with the name "Phelps" in Colebrook Center, and as the town was only 32 years old in 1811, there couldn't have been a previous owner who lent his family name to that short section of hill.

As an aside to this article about the Center, there are other geographical locations that have names that give no clue as to their origin; Prock Hill, in northwestern Colebrook is one. Who was this named for? We know all the land owners, but no one with a name anything like Prock or Proctor ever appears as Colebrook land owners, either there or elsewhere. Then there is the western section of present-day Stillman Hill Road, as it ascends the elevation culminating at the intersection of that road and Rock Hall Road. I have come across a document naming it "Governor's Hill, so called". Again, there doesn't exist another example of this name, but the fact that it was used in an official document has to carry some weight.

There are many more scraps of interesting Colebrook History that have been noted at the tops of my research pages; this includes Colebrook Center, as I have barely scratched the surface at that location, and as soon as they can be untangled, they will be made available.

Historic Bytes

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