

Origins of 474 Smith Hill Road

It is not uncommon to know the date that an historic building was constructed; it is not common, however, to be able to find the chronology of a particular house from its planning stages to its completion when the dwelling in question was built in 1828.

474 Smith Hill Road, adjacent to Cooper Lane in Colebrook Center, is the subject of this paper. It is located at the very hart of the Center, and despite its building date, is one of the youngest dwellings in the Colebrook Center Historic District. Located on what had begun in 1761 as Highway Number Three, a military road established by the Colonial Legislature for troop movements from the populous Connecticut River Valley toward upper New York during the French and Indian War, it began as the home of a physician, was deeded to the Colebrook Congregational Church, sold by the church to a private family, which turned part of the ground floor into a store, with the Colebrook Center Post Office in one corner. Shortly after the coming of the automobile, a gasoline pump was added on the narrow strip of land between the building and Smith Hill Road. Thus it remained until almost the middle of the Twentieth Century

In 1820, George O. Jarvis was a physician in Torrington, Connecticut, twenty miles to the south of Colebrook. At that time, Colebrook had been an established town for only 41 years, and could still be considered as in its formative years, although not what could be referred to as a pioneering environment. Never the less, it must have held out an allure to many who sought to escape the valley towns with their new industrialism.

Ledgers belonging to two Colebrook men, one a prominent builder, the other a prosperous farmer, can be pieced together so as to give us a fairly complete picture of a man's dream of building an abode for himself and his wife.

The first entry uniting Dr. Jarvis with Colebrook occurred on May 8th, 1823, when Jarvis paid Lorrain Thrace for the use of his cart to transport goods to Colebrook. On the same day he paid a Nr. Seth Marshall's son and a team to transport those goods to Colebrook from Torrington. The price agreed upon was \$3.00. Dr. Jarvis had rented a house in Colebrook, but didn't live there full time, as his ledger continues to reflect his medical practice in Torrington.

Three parcels of land were purchased by Jarvis between May 10, 1824 and Oct. 4. 1827, although none had dwellings on them. He put the acreage to good use however; the entry for May 28, 1824 reads: "Capt. William Swift – this day took pair of oxen to pasture." The following entry: "Capt. William Swift – took your cattle from my pasture the 9th of June having been in one week and five days.....86¢ [This Wm. Swift was a master builder who lived at the present 38 Millbrook Road. In 1806, his first year as a Colebrook resident, he built 191 Stillman Hill Road, at the intersection with Rock Hall Road. This was followed by the Colebrook Store in 1812, the Solomon Rockwell mansion in Winsted in 1813 and the building erected as the Colebrook Inn in 1816, now the home of the Colebrook Historical Society. This building is almost an exact copy of the house on Stillman Hill Road. The Colebrook Store has been open since its construction, making it the oldest continuously operated general store in the state.

Turning our attention to another ledger belonging to farmer, tavern keeper and entrepreneur Enos North, we see that in April 1828, North charges Dr. Jarvis for transporting a load of boards to Wm. Swift's. On June 26th 1828, there is a bill for fetching boards from Wm. Swift's, and the same day selling Jarvis 472 feet of maple

boards for flooring. In August, North brings doors to Jarvis from Wm. Swift. In October, two loads of laths arrive, one from Arah Phelps' saw mill, the other from Theron Rockwell's. [It is interesting that two saw mills supplied the lath. The Rockwells and the Phelps' were economic and political rivals, and I would venture a guess that either would have preferred to supply the entire amount. What might have happened could be a signal of a technological advance, which occurred around here about this time, and that was the ability to manufacture individual lath strips, which were sold in bundles of 100. Prior to that, scrap boards of various lengths and widths, but the same thickness of about 3/16 of an inch were used. If in fact this was at the transition point, perhaps neither mill could produce enough to meet Swift's timetable. It's just a guess.]

In November, we see: "Paint from Hartford – 1 keg, weight 177 lbs.....58¢" [The weight indicates it was most likely white lead.] Later in November 1828, an entry reads: "Moving your goods to your house.....\$1.00."

William Swift lived on Millbrook Road, and had his shop there. North's home was the farm at the foot of Stillman Hill at the intersection of Colebrook Road and Stillman Hill Road. His ledger indicates a long business relationship with Swift, part of which verifies Swift's involvement with Dr. Jarvis.

Today the house occupies the same spot that it has sat upon for some one and three-quarters of a century. It is no longer a store, nor is it the Post Office, but it is a wonderful example of the beauty and craftsmanship the Yankee master builders were capable of.

Compiled by Robert Grigg, Municipal Historian, Town of Colebrook, Connecticut.

