

## Amy Baxter's Recollections of Colebrook River

*Amy Baxter, while in her seventies, wrote down her remembrances of Colebrook River from her retirement home in Florida in 1952. Hers is among the best of several such journals that are to be found in the files of the Colebrook Historical Society. She calls her story "The River and the Little Things"*

"The River is dying, not the river, that can never die; like Tennyson's 'Brook', it will go on forever, as part of a great reservoir, to aid in quenching the thirst of Hartford's thousands. Connecticut's legislature has passed the bill giving the Hartford water board right of eminent domain. This took long years, and much squabbling, of which I shall not write. My story concerns only 'The River' and the interesting little things of life in a small town, on a small river."

"The river for many years was a busy little fellow, turning the wheels of small factories from Otis, Mass., down through Connecticut, to the Connecticut River, then to Long Island Sound. When I first heard of The River, I was a small girl living in my native city of Hartford, Conn. Twice a year we had a woman come to our house for a week's sewing. Ready made dresses were almost an unknown thing then."

"This seamstress was a great fascination to me. First, because she had a right hand completely covered with a scarlet birthmark. How she could use that hand to produce those tiny, perfect stitches, never ceased to be a wonder. Then too, she had a grandmother who was one hundred years old, and who lived in 'The River'! How could she live in 'The River'? To cap the climax, she often visited relatives in Satan's Kingdom! This last was almost too much for me to swallow, as I went to Sunday school, and thought I knew exactly where Satan's Kingdom was located. And how could one live in The River?"

"Time went on, and in a few years my father announced that we would move to Winsted, Conn. where he and others were to start a daily newspaper. He was to be its first editor. And so I moved a step nearer 'The River'. Then, too, on our journey from Hartford to Winsted, we passed through Satan's Kingdom, a tiny village on the old Conn. Western railroad, now long defunct."

Two years later I had finished high school, and was wondering what I wanted to do next. Father said one day at the dinner table, 'How would you like to teach a country school? There are two ads in tonight's paper for teachers wanted.' 'I'd love it', I said, and asked where the schools were. Both were in the town of Colebrook, one in North Colebrook, and one in Colebrook River. Colebrook is one of the most scenic towns of Connecticut, in the Litchfield Hills, which are the foot-hills of the Berkshires".

"It is a divided town in many ways. The Center, so called, and North Colebrook are hilly. The River lies in a valley between eastern and western hills, and the West Branch of the Farmington River runs like a thread of silver through the village. The two sections of the town are five or six miles apart.

I got in touch with a classmate, Julia Persons, and we applied, and were accepted for the schools."

"She took the 'High Road', and I took the 'Low'. Mother was very doubtful about this decision, as she had heard that people in Colebrook Center were a wealthy and cultured class, mostly summer folks, while the Colebrook River folks were plain farmers, or French cotton mill people. Father, who liked to tease Mother, reminded her that she

## Amy Baxter's Colebrook River, part II

*We are continuing with Amy Baxter's recollections of Colebrook River in the latter part of the nineteenth century, written in 1952.*

"The old French families were a very thrifty lot, owning their homes. Many had come from the same towns in France. Some had started in as charcoal burners, following after timber cutting, their children going in the mill to work.

One heard as much French as English on the street, and they were a gay and prosperous people, so that when the mill finally shut down, they left for other towns with money to buy good houses elsewhere."

"Porter Carpenter was superintendent of the mill. 'Old Port' he was spoken of behind his back. He ruled the mill and the workers like a Czar, yet most of them liked him, and felt him to be fair. School laws were lax in those days, and some parents didn't hesitate to move the children's birthdays up a bit to get them in the mill. Many of the boys and girls went to school the winter term only. There were two rooms, and about thirty children in each room."

"The cotton mill was not the only mill on the river. Just over the state line in Massachusetts was a small silk mill run by a family named Greenleaf, but which was about on its last lap, and now not a sign remaining to tell its story.

On the state line lived the brothers Elihu and Timothy Persons who long before had owned and run a tannery. Their wives were sisters, and the Conn. and Mass. state line runs between the two houses, or the now cellar holes."

"A few years later I returned to The River as a bride. The mill was closed [The cotton mill closed in 1890.] the French people moved away, except the older ones who had farms now, formerly owned by the old Yankee families. There were no young people in the village, and the school was but one room." [At least one French family with children remained, as I grew up with Gene Pequignot and his twin brothers.]

"The old hall, once a Baptist church, looked bare and naked, with not a bit of paint. Catholics used the lower floor for services twice a month, a priest coming from Winsted, 8 miles away to hold mass.

The upper rooms were used by the ladies of the Methodist church for the few social affairs, such as a strawberry supper in summer, or an oyster stew supper in the winter.

When the factory was running, it employed about one hundred. The cotton duck, which it turned out, was of a very fine quality, and in much demand, until the cotton business began moving south, and the Sawyer family ceased to be interested." [A sample of their product can be seen at the Colebrook Historical Society.]

"About the turn of the century the Sawyer brothers had an offer of twenty-five thousand dollars for the building and machinery. This they refused, but after a few years were glad to accept forty-five hundred for the machinery, which was sold to the Slaters, who ran the hotel. They in turn disposed of it to dealers in second-hand machinery."

"The river had many moods; in the spring when the snow on the hills north of us melted, the little brooks were tumbling down so fast they fell over themselves hurrying to join the river, their last chance to see the world this year. Then in May and June, when the river was at its best, the trout were too, and the fishermen were out in force. Many a time I have seen eight or ten fishing right in front of our houses, all along our one street. Of course the best places were a mile or two down the river near the big rocks, and in the

shady nooks. Yet more than once, I have seen Abe Blinn walk out of his front door, step over to the river, and haul in a few trout for his dinner.”

“July and August would find the river very low at times, then some day we would see the water come hopping and skipping along like children at play, and we would say ‘Oh! The gates at Otis have been opened!’

In winter, when a January thaw came and broke up the ice, that was a sight! Some years there was only a gradual thaw, but if a real one came, and the river broke up suddenly, the whole village came out to see. One could hear the roar some minutes before it reached us. Great logs and trees, which had been left on banks to the north of us, lumber, outhouses, small bridges, great cakes of ice, sometimes floating, sometimes standing on end for a minute, then dashing across the roads against steps or fences. Even though our footbridge was held by strong cables, I have seen it torn to pieces in an instant; all the work of weeks, and much expense, to be done over.”

“The footbridge was not a town affair at this time, but a neighborhood project. A few bore the expense, and did the work of rebuilding.”

“One could travel far in the world and not see a more beautiful sight than the river on a night when the moon was full, and shone down on our lovely valley, shut in between the high green hills.

One night I awakened at midnight to the sound of a song out in front of the house. It was a gorgeous night, the river, the moon, and I fear, a neighbor, were all full. The neighbor stood with one hand on his heart, the other held his hat towards the full moon, and inquired in not too dulcet tones, ‘Who trew de overalls in Mrs. Murphy’s chowter?’”

“One September some relatives from New York visited us. They lived in sight of Columbus Circle, and all night one could hear the clop, clop of cab horse’s feet. I had difficulty sleeping when visiting them. At our house, they complained ‘the brook’ kept them awake with its babbling. Nothing smaller than the Hudson was a river to them, of course.”

“Also, of course, honesty compels us to admit that our river couldn’t always look like a river, we were too near its source.”

“Just south of the schoolhouse, Sawmill Brook came galloping down the hills to join the river. There were always sawmills on this brook, and at one spot an ideal swimming hole known to all boys for generations. The water there was very cold and one could not stay in long. Into this brook come tiny streams here and there, from Massachusetts and Connecticut hills, all on their way to join something bigger.”

“Back in the earlier days Connecticut lost many of her sons to young Ohio. From The River went Osbornes, Manchesters, Baxters and no doubt others. One summer Father and Mother Baxter had for a week’s visit, two of these returned natives. James Manchester and his brother, Dr. Manchester, with their wives, returned from Cleveland, Ohio. Their boyhood school days had been spent at The River. Dr. Manchester had been President McKinley’s pastor and dear friend and was with the president at his death. James Manchester was a very successful businessman, as well as a musician and composer of religious music.

They had a wonderful time visiting scenes of their boyhood, and the few old schoolmates still living. They got up before daylight to fish in a brook back in the hills, and even seemed to enjoy cleaning the trout for their breakfast.”

*Amy Baxter’s story of Colebrook River will continue next week.*

needn't worry, as her ancestors were among the thousands who claimed the Mayflower as their first boat ride."

"Julia and I were told we must go to Colebrook, to one Pulaski Bowman, chairman of the school board, for an examination. We hired a horse and buggy, and in fear and trembling, wended our way up and up six long miles of muddy, hilly roads on a lovely March day. There were no State roads in those days, and the poor horse turned a most reproachful eye towards us many times, but in vain. I had never been able to identify that house until last summer when I found out quite by accident that it is now the home of Dr. Roy Chapman Andrews." *[Today the home of the son of the man who purchased it from Dr. Andrews, Bill Haskell, at 72 Church Hill Road.]*

"My recital at the supper table that night, I am sure eased Mother's worries a bit, on the comparison of Colebrook Center and Colebrook River culture."

"Pulaski Bowman received us in the kitchen, a pleasant room, with the table set for the next meal. He pushed the dishes to one side, and during the entire interview never removed his stocking clad feet from the table, nor offered any apologies. That our choice of schools was satisfactory there is no doubt, as both Julia and I found our life's partner in the district we chose."

"I went to The River on a Saturday in a dirty, greasy meat cart, with the district member of the school board, a man who could just about write his name, and not much more. I suspect the school board was a job no one wanted.

I was to get the munificent sum of six dollars a week, and pay three for board. My boarding place was on the west side of the river and the school was on the east side. Every time I looked out on Sunday, I saw that suspension bridge swaying in the March wind, and long before Monday came, I was dead sure the job wasn't worth that three dollars. It was a half-mile to the north bridge, called the Mill Bridge, and a half-mile to the south, called the Spencer Bridge, so it was up to me to do or die. At that date it was anything but a sturdy bridge, and in fact when the ice went out the following January, the bridge went too, but by that time I was boarding on the east side."

"Have you ever tried crossing a stream on a swinging footbridge? They told me that once years before, a child blew off and was drowned, but mostly the children took it on a dead run. Later when I lived at The River, I found it easy enough, except when Drive, our old hound dog, was along. He seemed to change the rhythm, and make it very difficult, and if I stopped to let him get off first, he always caught me at it, and came back to see why I was waiting." *[Looking at my old photos, and to the best of my recollection, that bridge was well over 100 feet long and ten or twelve feet above the water.]*

"On the west side of the river was the Sawyer cotton mill, the office, the lapper, where the bales of cotton came first, and the factory. There was a millpond and raceway. On the east was a row of tenement houses owned by the Sawyers. Some of the houses were so close to the bank of the river that the old privies were wired to trees, or fastened to the houses, and were frequently torn away when the river went on a rampage in the spring, or the ice went out in a January thaw. Usually the occupants of these houses were the poorer class, or new comers."

*Amy Baxter's story will continue next week.*

**Historic Bytes**  
Bob Grigg

### **Amy Baxter's Colebrook River, part III**

*We are continuing with the reminiscences of Amy Baxter about Colebrook River at the turn of the twentieth century.*

“Another famous son of The River was Abiram Chamberlain, who was at one time Governor of Connecticut. He was born in the hotel then owned by his father. The hotel was suspected of being an underground station during slavery days.”

“At the south end of the village the bridge was called Spencer Bridge. Here the Spencer family had lived for several generations, one family on the east side, and another on the west. They had their own burial plot on a hill above the east side home.”

“On the east, the road continued on to Riverton, a lovely woodsy, but poor road, gradually growing higher until it reached Hogback, a natural for a dam. Here the Hartford Water Board cast their eyes with envy for many years before actually acquiring the rights. Here too, were the speckled beauties each spring, and many fishermen along the banks, or in hip boots wading out in the river. Sometimes it seemed as though there was one to each fish. The natives knew enough not to hurry, but wait until the spring waters had subsided a bit. Some outsiders came April first regardless, and were themselves the ones who were fooled.”

“At Spencer Bridge the traveler crossed over to the west side and climbed Woodruff Hill. At the top of Woodruff Hill lived Billy Woodruff, called the ‘Hermit of Colebrook River.’ His life had been a sad and lonely one. Billy had lived all his life there, with his mother and grandparents. His mother never told the name of his father, not even to her own people, and as far as anyone knew, had a beau.

When Billy was small, he was hurried out of sight when anyone came to the house. His mother seldom left the house as long as she lived. Billy walked to the River school for a few years, but not many, for he was a shy child, and children can be very cruel if they hear gossip at home. He did learn to read, and all his long life enjoyed the old magazines and newspapers given by friends. While I lived at the River his house was just a shack. Whether the original home had burned or just fallen away, I do not know, but the only time I was ever inside, it was a narrow one-room shack, a bunk, a stove, a chair, piles of old papers and dirt everywhere.”

“At Christmas and some other times, Miss Rocella DeWolf and a few others took him groceries, and some home cooked sweets. Billy saw a cake of soap in one box, and asked if ‘Rocelle’ had sent him that. I said ‘Yes’ and was told I could take it back; he hadn’t used the last one. (A self-evident fact!)

A Winsted photographer persuaded Billy to let him take his picture. Later this was put on a postcard and sold as ‘The Hermit of Colebrook River.’ I always doubted that Billy had any idea that he would be exploited in that way. Perhaps he never knew it.

Some rowdies from out of town, seeing these postcards, went to the shack one night and ransacked it looking for money. Poor Billy was beaten, and frightened half to death, and the rowdies got nothing.”

“A few years later the shack caught fire, and Billy was burned rather badly. He was taken to the Winsted hospital, where he was not only treated for his burns, but had a real bath. I think that bath was to the nurses, the bath of all baths in their experiences!

Billy’s last years were spent in a good home at The River, where the town boarded him with a kindly woman. The only real home he ever knew.”

“On the south side of Woodruff Hill, on the road to Winsted, lived two brothers who made their living by trapping. They had traps set all over the surrounding hills. If they were on our side of the hills they sometimes came down to trade at our store, or drink at the hotel. Every dog in the village hated them, and barked as they went up or down the road. In fact before they came in sight, our hound ‘Drive’ would begin to growl. Drive might be lying behind the stove, where he could neither see nor hear, but would start growling and giving short barks, long before they came in sight. Drive loved everyone except these trapper brothers.”

“The church and cemetery were halfway between the two large bridges, on the east side of the river. The old New England families were buried here, but the French, being mostly Catholic, bought burial plots in Winsted. Close to the church is the grave of Barney White, and it tells on the headstone that he was murdered on a certain date. [March 1850] There was an Indian, and two white men in the plot. They evidently thought Barney had money. The Indian took no actual part in the murder. Coming down the hill to The River he pretended to sprain his ankle and claimed he could go no further, but would wait for them there.

The men had been noticed by the proprietor of the Riverton Inn, in his barroom, whispering together over in a corner, while having their drinks. Later he remembered this, and told the authorities. This was kept quiet for a time, as one of the men named Balcom[b] had left the state. However he was found, watched, and in time talked too much when drunk. All three were finally brought to justice.”

“At the west end of the footbridge stands the old Squire White homestead. Here, for many years, lived the Bourquin family, and the last I knew, still did. Eugene the second, having refused to sell to the Water Board, the house stands like a lone sentinel, but it is no doubt a losing fight, perhaps already lost. Gene Bourquin the father got his start as a charcoal burner, saving his money until he could buy this farm. He was a hard worker, and a great visitor while he worked, especially if one got him talking about life in France, or ‘The Old Country.’

Gene had a dog named Shep who took the cows to pasture and brought them home each day. When Shep got old and lame, Gene bought a pup, which he and Shep trained.”

“Just over the Massachusetts state line lived the Rose family on the west side of the river, and the Verchots on the east side. Both were part of the life in The River. Mary Rose went down to Gene’s about twice a week to buy milk, and the two families visited back and forth, as did all the few remaining French families. Old Shep was very fond of Mary, and often beaved her home, knowing he would be rewarded by a cookie or a bone.

One night Gene said to the family, ‘Guess it’s time to get rid of old Shep; the pup does alright now and we don’t need two dogs.’ Shep was lying on the kitchen floor. A bit later he asked to go out. Shep went up to the Rose place, and never again did he enter the Bourquin yard. He would come down with Mary, but always waited outside the fence. He lived two years after changing his residence.”

*Amy Baxter’s saga will continue next week.*

**Historic Bytes**

Bob Grigg

## Amy Baxter's Colebrook River, part IV

*Amy Baxter's recollections, written in 1952, continue.*

"In September 1863 the old Squire White homestead was the scene of a double wedding. Celia White married Richard Bushnell, and Melissa Seymour married Dennis Baxter. [*These were Amy's Mother and Father-in-law.*]

The girls made a trip to Hartford to buy the silk for their wedding gowns. Celia's was a lovely golden brown, and Melissa's a blue like a heavenly blue morning glory. It took yards and yards of material to make those dresses, as you can see by the photographs they had taken while in New York on their wedding trip. Sixty-two years later the blue silk was as firm and lovely as the day it was worn as a bridal gown."

"When the old Squire White farm was sold to the Bourquin family, an auction was held. Among the pieces of fine old furniture was a beautiful Lyre table of mahogany, with a turn-top. Miss DeWolf purchased this table and placed it in the church, where it was always after used for a communion table."

"Miss Rocelia DeWolf was a sort of Godmother to the entire village. To her went all who were in need of help or advice; no one was ever turned away. Sometimes, perhaps, she may have been imposed upon, and sometimes I suspect she wondered, but would rather help than risk not helping a real need. Her money came from relatives who had migrated to Ohio years before. In younger years she had been engaged to be married, but the man died."

"With very little help she kept the church going for many years. After the deaths of a few of the older members, there were not many who could help. We shared a minister with West Hartland for a long time, then later with Pleasant Valley."

When I came to The River to teach, just out of school myself, Miss DeWolf gave a little party for me, one of her thoughtful kindnesses to a stranger. I had never lived, nor even visited in a very small village before, and everything was a delight. We sat about the long dining table with pans filled with snow in front of us. I was very curious and waited to see what kind of a game this was to be. Soon our hostess came with hot maple syrup, boiled to just a certain consistency, which she carefully poured here and there on the snow. 'The nectar of the Gods!' Later, when I married, and came to make my home in The River, I had another maple treat."

"Mrs. Whipple, a spry young lady of ninety, invited me to come and eat soft sugar. I asked my husband what that meant, but all I found out was 'wait and see.' He had been brought up on a farm where they had several hundred maple trees, and their syrup was the main export of his grandfather's place. Mrs. Whipple kept house for herself and son George, and never have I seen a more spotless home. We were each supplied with a large saucer of hot syrup, and while we visited, we stirred, and stirred, and stirred. I was almost in despair, thinking there must be some trick about it, when lo and behold, I had a saucer of creamy, soft sugar. Delicious, but to be eaten with some self-control. Some folks served pickles with this, or so I later heard, but never tried."

"I have often marveled at the amount of maple products one could consume without being ill, when the same amount of store candy would have certainly done so."

"On the east hill back of the store and hotel ran a roadbed, laid out for a railroad to connect Collinsville, Connecticut and Lee, Mass. This was never finished, as the Housatonic Railroad fought it to such good purpose that the Mass. legislature refused to

pass the bill. Some towns had invested quite a few thousands in the venture, and of course, lost it all. Years later this roadbed was again talked up, this time for a trolley road, but this too fell through.”

“One day, walking slowly along between the hotel and my house, I happened to glance up at this road, and saw a sight I’ve never forgotten. A large gray fox was trotting along behind a black cat. He would catch up with Miss Kitty, and just as he put his head down towards her, she would whirl and give him a dig, which set him back in a hurry. This went on until the cat reached the bars of an old fence, leaped out into the road and darted into an old barn. The fox stood a minute with his head between the bars, then trotted off up the hill.”

“There were many foxes on our hills, and in the fall and winter months the hunters were out every day. Once or twice a season there might be a real hunt, with some of the Winsted and Winchester Center fox hunters joining in.”

“Among our wedding gifts was a rug made from the most beautiful red fox skin I have ever seen. It lay for years in front of my husband’s gun case. One winter day the foxhunters gathered for a day of sport, with their hounds and guns. They decided to go up on Beech Hill, and work north. There were five or six in the party, and before starting, one expressed regret that Father Baxter could not go along to share the fun. Father was at that time in his seventies. He had been from childhood crippled from hip trouble, so never did much walking.

After the hunters had been gone for an hour or so, Father took a gun and started off up through the pasture to our own reservoir on a hill back of the house. There he sat down and waited. Some hours later the foxhunters returned, tired, hungry and disgruntled with their lack of success. Then Father brought out a fine red fox he had shot, just sitting on a rock and waiting for Mr. Reynard to come along.”

The hunters were rather chagrined at first, but soon were taking it with hilarious enjoyment.”

“One Autumn day my husband and a cousin had just returned from hunting and were standing on the store porch. They noticed a strange bird flying low, as though exhausted. My husband, after telling his cousin to take a shot, which he did and missed, shot the bird. No one had ever seen a bird like it, and it was beautiful. We took it to Winsted the next day, and at my home there, looked it up in the encyclopedia, and found it was a guillemot, an Arctic Ocean bird. On rare occasions one had been found as far south as the coast of Maine, evidently lost from his flock. We took it to Mr. Crossman, a taxidermist, and for many years it adorned the gun case.

A guillemot is black, with a white breast, and has webbed feet, like most water birds, but a bill like a land bird, sharp and straight. The back and breast were soft as velvet.”

*The saga continues next week.*

**Historic Bytes**

Bob Grigg



## Amy Baxter's Colebrook River, part V

*Amy Baxter, writing in 1952, describes her life in Colebrook River, now a fading memory among the older folks still among us who remember this now drowned village.*

“On the east side of the river, about half-way between the two main bridges, a road branches off. This leads to Hartland, Conn. and Tolland, Mass. Up to about the year 1900, the road to Tolland kept straight up, but at that time the Tolland Fish and Game Club was formed by a group of New York businessmen. They purchased land, built a clubhouse, or rather enlarged an old farmhouse. Later, cottages and a pond were added to the place. The pond necessitated changing the road to Tolland. It is a winding, lovely drive following the course of Sawmill Brook to the left; here are some of the most beautiful and rare wild ferns I have ever seen.”

“The Hartland road turns right from the main road, further up the hill. Just below the Tolland turn, on the main road, lived Theron Gillette and his wife. I do not think Theron had ever lived anywhere else. They lived such a quiet life one would not see them for weeks. Theron loved thunderstorms, and when an old crackling one came, as they did quite often, amid those hills, Theron would mount his old white horse, hold an umbrella over his head, and ride about his farm. He always put a bottle on the tip of the umbrella. With his long flowing white beard, he was certainly an unusual sight. With a cow, a garden and a few hens, they managed to live very well, in a manner that suited them. All Theron wanted beyond that, was plenty to read. Books and magazines of whatever vintage were grist to his mill.”

“I was once told that when he was a young man, his father sent him to New York, to buy flour. Because this was at the time of the Civil War, flour was very high and scarce in Connecticut. The story goes that Theron returned minus the flour, but with books galore, which kept him occupied for some time.”

“There were two roads leading from The River to Tolland, Mass. One was just opposite the factory bridge, and the store was on the south corner. It was a very steep hill, but grand for coasting on winter evenings. The other so-called Tolland road was south of the school. It led to both Tolland, Mass. and to Hartland, Conn., a much more gradual rise, and carried most of the traffic going to those towns. On the south corner lived the Burke family, one of the few families of Irish descent.” [It was Mrs. Burke who used to reprimand us kids for horsing around on the swinging bridge.]

“On the north corner lived Jacque Rebillard and his wife. Jacque was a giant of a man, with a voice that matched. If he got in an argument, or a bit excited, most of the village was able to hear all the details.

He had been a woodchopper, and it was said could do a prodigious amount of work in his younger days. In his evenings, he carved out sabots, as some of the French still wore these wooden shoes around a wet yard, or when mopping their floors. I admired his work, and rewarded by the gift of a pair of sabots in a small size, which reposed on my mantle for a long time.”

“His wife was a tiny old lady, who did laundry or cleaning work occasionally. For a while I was fortunate in having her help. If I deplored a stain on my table linen, I always enjoyed her reply: ‘Well, I wash him, and wash him. She no come out.’ If her work was finished a bit early, she looked about for another job. Not to help me out, but to see and hear my cuckoo clock strike twelve. She would stand before the clock

patiently a full quarter-hour, hands crossed behind her back. Then when it was over, I always heard, ‘Heh, heh?’

After the Tolland Fish and Game Club came into being she did immense washings for them, but for no one else. If she had laundry for herself, she never bothered with tubs and well water, but went across to the river, and there on her knees, did as she, and her family, had done their wash in France, for generations past.”

“About a half mile north of the state line stands what was originally the Baldwin homestead. Owned now, and for many years, by the Du Bois family of New York as a summer home. The house is a sturdy old colonial type, in a perfect setting. It stands on a bank above the road, and somewhat back, but overlooking the river, with a view to the north. At the left of the house is a waterfall, which in the spring and early summer is a lovely sight. The water comes dashing and foaming down from high up on Prospect, as the mountain in the back is called.” [*This waterfall is on the stream that flows from Lake Marguerite.*]

“While I lived at The River this lovely old home was owned and occupied by Charles McCaffrey and family. Mrs. McCaffrey had taught at The River school both before, and after her marriage. Many thought she was about the best teacher they ever had. She was a quiet, refined gentlewoman, and a devoted wife and mother.”

“All these nearby Massachusetts families sent their children to The River school. There were no school busses, and the children made no more fuss over a mile or two of walking than children of today would over a city block. They had a grand time going both ways and worked up good appetites.’

Charlie had a pet trout that he kept in a spring. At the time I saw it, the fish tipped the scales at four and one-half pounds, and was about the size of a large shad.

Charlie McCaffrey was one of those men who could do most anything, and do it well. Before his marriage he had lived in cities, and worked at various trades. He was an expert cigar maker. Here on the farm he raised some very fine tobacco, and cured it, and made his own cigars. His friends sometimes were recipients, and my husband said they were the best cigars he ever smoked.”

“The family is all gone now; none lived to be old. Charlie’s death was cloaked in tragedy and mystery; he had invented something, and started for New York with over \$1,000 dollars in his purse. His business was to get a patent for his invention. He did not return when expected. After a day or two, a cousin in Winsted was notified of his death in a New York hotel. The thousand dollars was gone. Hotels do not like that kind of publicity, and the matter was hushed up. The mystery was never solved, and there was little or nothing for evidence.”

“On the hills to the east, running up into Hartland, Conn., and Tolland, Mass., were fields of mountain laurel and blueberry bushes. Not little measly black huckleberries, but luscious blueberries. One could walk around one of those tall bushes and fill his pail in no time. Some of the farmers allowed pickers to come in and pay a sum to pick all they wanted. At first the charge was fifty cents for a small party, later fifty cents a head.”

*The story of Colebrook River in the early years of the twentieth century will continue.*

## Amy Baxter's Colebrook River, part VI

*Life in Colebrook River before the dams continues with Amy Baxter's journal.*

“One family living in The River also owned some berry lots over the line in Tolland. For several years they camped out in the berry lot during the picking season. Their small boys had to pick a certain number of quarts, then the day was theirs to play.

They found a customer for all of their berries in one of the Winsted restaurants. I believe they also canned berries, for this restaurant. In a few years the family moved to Winsted, but continued the berry project each summer, as long as they were able to work. Thus in spite of the closing of the cotton mill, one family solved the living problem.

During June and July the mountain laurel was a gorgeous sight in the pastures on the hills. This I loved, but left the berry picking to the natives. What few I ever picked did not go in pails.”

“About where the Hartland road turns off to the right, the old Baxter home stood. Built by Moses Baxter in the late seventeen hundreds, it had been occupied by four generations. Beautiful maples stood on the bank above the road. The house was a large two-storied affair, one of the types that cover quite a bit of ground. There was a milk room, a cheese room, a woodshed and at right angles, a horse barn, all connected.

When Dennis Baxter was a boy, the main product of the farm was maple syrup. They set 1500 trees for some years. The syrup was sold to one of two firms; either one in New York, or one in Albany. The only sugar made was for their own use, but it was used in almost all cooking, as well as for eating.”

“Moses Baxter left nine children when he departed this life, which he did of his own volition. He went out in the apple orchard and hung himself, though just why, no one ever knew. His son Gilbert took over the farm. Gilbert had two sons and three daughters. Two of the daughters married two brothers, Timothy and Elihue Persons who owned the tannery at the river. Dennis Baxter went into the store, owned by the Sawyers, who also owned the factory. After a few years he went on the road selling shoes, then later scythes for the Thayer Scythe Co. of Winsted, in which he held a one-third interest. He traveled mostly by team, except on his trips to the Middle West, once a year, when he took a train.”

“I asked him once where he sold the most scythes. He gave a chuckle, and said ‘In the small towns along the St. Lawrence River, and I never inquired what they did with them.’ He also took orders, on commission, for the Rake Shop in Otis, Mass. Rakes and scythes made a good combination. He was seldom at home except June to September.”

“On July first 1884, the haying on the Baxter farm was finished. Mother Baxter had also finished setting her parlor that day. Everything was brand-new; carpet, wallpaper, a black walnut furniture set, curtains and all the little extras. There was to be a strawberry supper that night down at The River, so after she had frosted her cake, to take with her, and finished her room, she went upstairs to rest.

My husband, then in his teens, had been out exercising a beautiful new horse that his father had just purchased for him. About two o'clock a severe thundershower came up, just after he had put the horse in the barn. A Tolland man stopped to wait until the storm passed. As they stood in the open woodshed, a blinding flash came. Mr. Moore said ‘That must have struck near by!’ My husband said ‘Right here!’ and ran for the

barn. His new horse was killed instantly, and in another instant the barn, filled with new hay, was ablaze.”

“As soon as the smoke and blaze was seen in The River, Mr. Carpenter closed the mill and sent a load of men and buckets to help. Unfortunately the first man at the well had let the bucket go down with a whirl. The rope broke, and there was nothing more to do but dismantle the house. They tried to chop between the house and woodshed and back rooms, but to no avail. The house had lasted a hundred years and was good for another hundred. The hay made a furious fire; nothing to do but watch it burn.”

“The Baxter family then purchased a home on the west bank of the river, opposite the road to Tolland. The house had been built by Barney White, the man who was later murdered. It had only three rooms. He had sold it to a man named DeMartin who had come up from Texas. DeMartin added a second story, and an ell of two rooms. He also had an unexpected addition to his household. One day his wife walked in. Evidently he had not figured on this, as it was told that he asked her, ‘How did you find the road up here?’ ‘Oh,’ said she, ‘I found it good enough.’

Father bought the place from DeMartin. Then he too added on. A large kitchen, large pantry and storeroom; altogether it became an eleven room house, made like a patchwork quilt.”

“Father Baxter had a reservoir on the hill in back of the house, which furnished water to house and barn. It was fine spring water, yet the drinking water was always drawn from the well in the front yard. Often passersby would stop for a drink. It was icy cold and clear as crystal.

When the call came, ‘Dinner’s ready’ Father went to the well with a large pitcher and oh! How good it always tasted!

The last owner never used the well, but dolled it up with fancy stonework and a well sweep. So, like many old people, their usefulness past, they sit dressed in their best, and wait – and wait.”

“Father Baxter and I took many rides over the hills and his stories of the old families who had once lived on the abandoned farms, or whose homes had stood on the empty foundations, were of great interest to me. So many, many cellar holes, everything gone, but the great bushes of lilacs, or roses turned wild, told of the loving care some woman had given her home. In back were usually currant and gooseberry bushes.

To the west, the hills rose to Beech Hill and Simons Pond, which in later years was renamed Lake Marguerite by the McClave family of New Jersey who acquired enough land to create quite a village of their own, called McClaveville.

In the earlier days, many families lived along Beech Hill, and were a party of the life of The River, coming there to trade and to attend church. Once a family moved away, or fire destroyed a home, that was for many long years the end. Within the last few years small weekend cottages have sprung up, so I am told.”

*Next week we will travel about the eastern hills of Colebrook, guided by Amy Baxter’s reflective pen.*

## Amy Baxter's Colebrook River, part VII

*Amy Baxter continues her reflections of life in "The River" before it was forever submerged under the waters of Colebrook River Reservoir.*

"One day Father asked me to drive him over towards Hartland. He needed boots, he said. His boots were old-fashioned high boots, with a built up heel for the shorter leg. They were beautifully made, of soft fine leather, and the same man had made them for fifty years or more.

We rode up the hills to the east until we came to an old story and a half house where the shoemaker and his wife lived alone. While the men talked shoes and reminisced, the wife entertained me. I was thrilled to see and hear about her weaving. The loom was an immense wooden affair, occupying one end of the kitchen. She had been working on a long strip of rag carpet, in what she called a 'hit or miss' pattern, I asked if she had many orders, and she said she had all she was able to do. She and her husband were each in their eighties, I believe. As we left, the shoemaker said, 'Well, Mr. Baxter, I fear these will be the last boots I shall ever make for you.' Then Father replied, 'I think they will be the last boots I shall ever need.' And so it was."

"As we rode along past a fairly good looking place, I asked whose farm it was. Father said, 'I don't know who owns it now, but it is where the Fools lived when I was a boy.' 'What in the world do you mean by that?' I said." Then he told me a most unusual story."

"Back in the 1820s or 30s the daughter of a certain family was urged by her parents into a marriage, much against her own desire. Finally she agreed, but told them she hoped if she ever had children, they would all be fools. Certainly no one ever got a wish fulfilled to any greater amount than she did. Her first three sons were all just what she had hoped for. Probably the poor girl made her wish in the heat of anger, and never really meant it. One son died young, but the other two lived for many long years. Father was born in 1830, and as a boy he saw 'the fools', as everyone called them, many times. One of them was sometimes chained to a stake in the yard. Often they would chase each other around the house like children, though they lived to be men, with white hair and long white beards."

"There was a fourth son, near to Father's age, who was certainly not a fool, but disagreeable, sharp and shrewd. He lived at The River when I came there to teach. His sons had left home early to shift for themselves. His wife was dead. Everyone said she had been a fine woman and surely there must have been good blood somewhere, for all the sons and his one daughter turned out well. This, in spite of the fact that he gave them no schooling whatever, and there were no very strict educational laws then. One or two it was said could not even sign their names, but all managed to make good livings and raise fine families."

"Life in The River was entirely different after the shut down of the Sawyer cotton mill. Almost no young people were left in the village.

The factory tenement houses were either left to fall in ruins or rented to teamsters and lumbermen who worked for the various sawmills on the hills around us."

"Unlike the factory hands, these people took no interest in their homes. Often too, they moved without paying their rent or grocery bills. Some were drinkers and not good to their horses, even though the teams were their means of livelihood. Some were

good people, raising their families as well as one could with such short residency in any one town.”

“The Sawyer house, as it was called, was next to the hotel. It was a well built house of twenty-six rooms, and occupied by the Sawyer family, or two brothers and their families in the early days of the mill.

After the death of Henry Sawyer, his two sons Charles and Frank became owners. Charles made his home in, or near New Haven and Frank in New York City.

The Sawyer house was made into tenements for the mill hands for a few years, and then stood idle and empty, gradually falling to pieces. First the roof went, and after that it gave up little by little. Along and sorry sight to see a house of that size and sturdiness die by inches.”

“Next south of the old Baptist church, or ‘The Hall’, as it was called, because few remembered the days of a Baptist society, lived Dr. Charles Sawyer and wife. Back in the 1860s and up to the 1880s, there were two or three Doctors at The River. In my day we had to send to outside towns such as New Boston, Mass., Riverton or Winsted for a physician, not too far away in these days of autos and good roads, but quite a different story in those days, especially in winter, which is when sickness strikes most often in New England.

After Dr. Charles Sawyer died, his home was owned by Mrs. Sanford, who came to spend her last days in her native town. The house was finally struck by lightning and burned to the ground.”

“Just north of the cemetery was the old Ives house, home of Mr. George Ives’ mother. Later, this house was sold to the McCormack family from New York. They were devout Catholics. By the time they came to The River, the old hall had become unsafe for any use. The old Ives house was an upright two story, with a long ell running to the south. Mrs. McCormack had the double parlors in the upright part made into one long room which was then furnished for a very nice little chapel for Catholic services.”

“As one drives down the north side of Woodruff Hill to The River, there is a private road running back to what for a hundred years was called ‘The Island’; just a small farm, and not a very good one at that. If the river went on a rampage it would indeed be an island for a few days.

For many years now The Island has been owned by the Wm. L. Gilbert orphanage, or Gilbert Home, as it is called, and used as a summer camp for their children. Rightly named ‘Happy Valley’, it has given these children six weeks of a free life not possible when in an institution. Happy Valley has now been sold to the Hartford Water Board at a price that once would have purchased the entire village, if gossip is truth.

The Island changed hands many times over the years, but during my last four years at The River, it was owned by Charlie and Grace Gray. Charlie was freight agent in Hartford for the old Central New England RR, now out of existence. On account of ill health he decided to try farming for a while. Grace was born and raised at The River; she and Charlie had married while still in their teens. Orphaned at an early age, Charlie often said he never remembered when he had not earned his own living.

## Amy Baxter's Colebrook River, part VIII

*Colebrook River of one hundred years ago, as told by former resident Amy Baxter, continues.*

“Just across from The Island, on the east bank of the river, lived Grace’s father and mother, Sidney and Adelaide Seymour, also a bit further south her brother Ed and his family. It would have been quite a walk to either place by road and bridge, but stepping out to the river’s edge, one could call across and have a visit any time.”

“During the few years the Gray’s lived on The Island, they were a great addition to our village life. Ill health never kept Charlie from enjoying life. He always had a joke or a story, or a kind deed for a neighbor,”

“One year they put on a clambake, to which the whole village was invited. As Charlie was a Mason, an Elk and an Odd Fellow, he certainly knew how to put on a clambake.

There was a contest to see who could eat the most clams. Those who dared enter the contest were given a large milk pan of clams. It soon simmered down to Charlie and our pastor, Heber Ives. The latter won by a few clams. Mr. Ives was one of the few ministers who stayed with us more than one year. He was young, active and spent much more time at The River than some.”

“If our ministers were young, and good preachers, they were generally moved on; if old, they could seldom stand the long cold winter rides over the poor roads from West Hartland, their other charge, and where the parsonage was located.”

“It was a problem to keep our little church and Sunday school going; to find teachers for our few classes, or to take a paper from house to house each spring and ask for subscriptions towards the pastor’s salary.

In autumn we gathered donations of food, wood, furniture or money, and carried it to the parsonage in West Hartland. As that village provided the parsonage, they were not expected to give quite as much towards the salary.”

“Just at the end of the nineteenth century the church was entirely renovated with new seats, new lamps, carpet and altar furniture. We were very proud of it. The choir of the First Congregational Winsted church came up and gave a concert for us, donating the proceeds, which we used for the new lamps.”

“Up until 1907, the mail had been brought from Winsted by stage as far back as anyone could remember. We spoke of the stage, and perhaps in the dim past it may have been a real stagecoach. In my day it was just a three-seated wagon drawn by a pair of horses. The route was from Winsted to Riverton, Colebrook River, New Boston, Mass. and ended in Montville, Mass. There usually were passengers, as Winsted was the nearest railroad center.

The mail left The River in the morning at 6:30 promptly, but arrived back in the afternoon at any time after 3:30, according to weather or conditions of the roads, and in winter these could be terrific.”

“The store was always well filled at mail time; the men sitting around talking politics, fish stories or hunting yarns. The women doing their trading, perhaps turning in a few dozen eggs if they were the farm wives from the hills around.

George Ives had spent most of his life in the general store, which carried groceries, shoes and yard goods such as apron and dress material, candy and patent

medicines. Mr. Ives had owned a half interest in three partnerships. When the cotton industry declined, so too did the store business, until there was not enough to keep two men busy or to support two families.

The post office was in the store, as is usual in small towns, or was in the early days.

Mr. Ives had a cousin, George Deming of Hartford, Conn. who, with his wife, occasionally came for a weekend visit. If word got around that George Deming was in town, the store was sure to be well filled at mail time. Every boy in the village just had to see Mr. Deming. He was a likable, jolly man, a good talker and enjoyed his visits at the store. But to the boys, his attraction lay in the fact that although he had no arms below the elbows, he drove a spanking team of horses, not only on the road, but also on the racetracks in and around Hartford. Mr. Deming had not lost his arms in any war, but during some celebration in Hartford, either the Fourth, or some other holiday. He went to see why some explosive didn't explode, as quickly as he thought it should, and nearly lost his life. In spite of the terrible handicap, he lived a busy, useful and very happy life. He was born in New Boston, Mass., five miles north of The River. The Demings, Sages and Denslows all left New Boston for Hartford, where they bought farms. Farms that lay just at the outskirts of the city became very valuable city property in the course of time. Today that section of Hartford has factories such as the Fuller Brush Co. and others.

George and Mamre Ives were fine Christian people whose lives centered around their only child, a daughter living in New Haven, but never well, and they both outlived her."

"I never heard either Mr. or Mrs. Ives speak one word against anyone. They gave generously to the church and any other village project. Sometimes George Ives' patience was sorely tried by one or two French women, who would haggle over the price of every article they bought."

"The post office had not been a paying proposition for a long time. It had become just a nuisance, which was endured because it had always been there. While Mr. Ives was the actual postmaster, he much preferred to wait on customers. My husband gradually took over the post office work, getting off the early morning mail before breakfast, making it a point to always be there when the mail came in the afternoon. One day in the autumn of 1906, a very dapper and important man from Washington, appeared and demanded to see the books and the cash. The books were in perfect order, but on finding that the money was kept in the store cash drawer, he became more important, and a bit offensive. After a minute or two, Mr. Ives, usually so quiet and calm, proceeded to tell the young man to get out, and take the post office with him.

Letters from Washington arrived asking for re-consideration, but the answer was definitely 'No.' For a few months the post office was in a private house, but soon was put on a regular rural route."

*Next week we will conclude Amy Baxter's account of life as it was in the years prior to the building of the dams that were to forever submerge the community of Colebrook River forever.*



## Amy Baxter's Colebrook River part IX (Conclusion)

*Last week we ended with the demise of the Colebrook River post office, precipitated by the overbearing attitude of a Washington bureaucrat who discovered that it does not pay to ruffle the feathers of an old Yankee.*

“This was just the break my husband welcomed. He knew Mr. Ives would never wish to give up work and sit idly at home. We were needed more and more in the home of our parents, so in the spring of 1907, Mr. Ives became sole owner of the store where he had started as a young clerk under the ownership of the Sawyer Brothers, before the Civil War. For many years too, he was paymaster for the cotton mill.”

“That same spring we sold our small home and moved in with my husband's people. I had always loved the place, with it's row of locust trees in front, so heavy with great creamy blossoms in the summer. Bees came from long flights to gather the sweetness and one could get the odor even across the river. One giant maple stood in the back meadow along with a few apple trees.

One spring before we came there to live, a cousin and his roommate from Princeton, came to spend the Easter vacation. Their homes were in Kansas, where maple sugar is not a native product. The cousin asked if any of the necessary articles for making syrup had ever been kept. To the boy's delight, Father hunted up buckets and quills. If ever two young men spent a busier vacation than they, I doubt it. The tree was quite a distance from the house and they made literally hundreds of trips. In the end they took back to college several cans of maple syrup. They were with us two Sundays and each one preached in our little church in turn.”

“Not long after the turn of the century autos began to appear on the roads. Two brothers, Charles and Albert Slater, were in the lumber business, and I believe were the first in The River to purchase cars. Charlie bought a steamer. I really think his interest and enjoyment were entirely in what made it go. I do not know what make Albert's car was, but I do know it was a curiosity. The door was in the back; a few steps to walk up, and there you were. Albert and his wife invited us for a Sunday afternoon ride. There were few, if any, state roads in our section of the state; ours were gravel roads with plenty of bumps and holes. Tires and springs were not as of today either.”

“We had a grand ride, though we stopped once or twice to see if the engine was still with us. We arrived safely home, and as we climbed down the back steps of the car, my husband said, ‘I'm sure going to have one of those things!’

“It was not, however, until a year or two later that we had our first car, a four cylinder Maxwell. Meanwhile my better half's reading changed from Field and Stream to Motor and Automotive Industries, which he studied faithfully. In spite of all his reading, when he drove his first car home from Winsted, he drove into our carriage house and almost forgot to stop. Only one lamp was smashed. I always wondered if he hollered ‘Whoa!’, but thought best not to inquire. One of our Winsted friends had driven his new car through the barn, and on into the pigpen. His car had wheels as high as wagon wheels and thus had an advantage.”

“In 1908 we moved to Winsted, only eight miles away; so near that I always found an excuse to ride up the valley.

As long as Father Baxter lived, we would take a five-gallon bottle up to fill with water from the well. Two years later we sold the place to Major Tucker of Waterbury. In

the spring I must ride up to see if the locusts were blooming; in the summer I must see if the big white egret had come back to the river up near Hawley woods; in autumn I loved to see the gorgeous foliage, which grew more beautiful with every mile to the north.”

“The ride up the Farmington River from Winsted to Otis, Mass., or to Becket, over Jacob’s Ladder to Lenox, Pittsfield, or sometimes turning towards Westfield was wonderful, and the roads were constantly improved.”

“The River changed so fast in the next few years that we were wondering who lived in this or that place. Mr. and Mrs. Ives passed away, and their place passed to strangers. Miss DeWolf fell and broke her hip. For some time she lived in a sanitarium, dying there at the age of 96. Most of her money went to the Home for Crippled Children, at Newington, Conn.”

“Victory Grange was formed in The River, though hardly of The River, as its membership was made up from several towns. In 1938, when Connecticut suffered from its famous hurricane, Grange Hall, and other nearby houses were completely demolished.

About that time too, one began to hear of the Water Board of Hartford, though some thought it might be some factory owner, or someone acquiring land here and there, or rights to buy it. Finally it came out in the open, and places began changing hands.

The old Spencer place on the west was now owned by the Eurlie family. They raised fine vegetables and berries and had a roadside stand. They sold to the Water Board for a big price and moved to Maryland. Unfortunately, they never lived to enjoy their new home, as both were killed when their car was struck by a train.”

“In September 1950 a friend asked me if I would like to ride to The River. I hesitated, as I knew it would be a sad ride; so many homes completely demolished. Finally I said, ‘I would.’

We went up the west side of the river to our old home. The owner was in the yard, and asked if we would like to come into the house. We would, and there I found a last link connecting my life with The River. In the front room stood a drop leaf cherry table, with cloverleaf corners, and not one nail in it. I asked if she had bought it from a certain antique dealer in Winsted. She had, and was anxious to know its history. The table had belonged to my great-grandmother, who had moved with her family in 1826 from East Hampton, Conn. to Cairo, New York. Her father, William Barton, had left his son Hiram to run the bell factory in East Hampton, while he went to Cairo to start another.

The table did not come to me until many years after I left The River. I sold it before moving south to my retirement home.

As we started back up Woodruff’s Hill, my friends said to turn around and take a last look. I said ‘No, I don’t want to look again at the river, nor The River’. I shall always have the memories of all the ‘Little Things’ and that is enough; memories of the older people who were so kind to me when I came as a bride to their village, memories of the gay French voices calling their ‘Bon Jours’ and ‘Bon Soirs’ across from one side of the river to the other. And so, like them, I say, ‘To The River – Bon Soir.’”

**Historic Bytes**

Bob Grigg