

Beech Hill Road

The history of Beech Hill Road is complex, not at all what you might think as you drive along it.

Prior to people moving onto virgin lands, access roads had to be established. In Colebrook's case, there were three routes that were established by orders of the General Assembly in Hartford as military roads specifically for the movement of British troops as well as Colonial militia when and if they were needed to repel the French and Indian forces in Canada that were seen as a very real threat to the safety and well-being of the British colonies in what was then known as British North America. This is the reason all these routes tend to be laid out in a northwest-southeast alignment. Although we do not know for certain, it is probable that these three highways were laid out following established Indian trade routes, which could have been in use many hundreds of years prior to the coming of the first Europeans,

The remainder of the road network in Colebrook was dictated by the needs of the settlers, the vast majority of whom were farmers. Here is the history of one such road.

Immediately upon the arrival of the first settlers, if not just prior to their arrival, spur, or connecting roads were established. For the most part, the landowner who wished to make his home there created these first roads leading to prospective farm sites. Basically, they would have been not much more than ox-cart paths. Once established, and particularly if others chose to build their dwellings along the route, the town would be approached by these individuals in town meeting, and asked to survey and accept the layout of their access road as an official town road. We have found no cases of these requests being refused.

The first building in Colebrook Center was erected in 1765; the first building on Beech Hill was built in 1786 by Seth Hurd, who had recently married in his home town of Roxbury, Conn. and immediately moved to the brand-new town of Colebrook to create a farm and to raise a family. He purchased land in the fifth tier, right on the tier line between the fourth and fifth tiers. (The layout of the town called for it to be divided east and west by strips of land $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile wide, called tiers. Colebrook had eight of these tiers, which began at the Norfolk town line and proceeded eastward to the Hartland town line.)

Two years later, in the minutes of the June 4th Town Meeting, we see that the town "voted to accept a highway commencing between the 4th and 5th tiers near Seth Hurd's to the Sandisfield Road near Samuel Mills" (667 Colebrook Road). In other words, from the intersection of Beech Hill Road and Chapin Road westward along present-day Beech Hill Road, across the Sandy Brook Bridge, then right along Sandy Brook Road to the intersection of Conn. Route 183 at the Rock School.

Before a decade had passed, the term "Beech Hill Road" was to take on a much more complicated nature. To begin with, a new route had been created from the Center eastward; passing along (Using current terms) Schoolhouse Road, around Mt. Pisgah over today's Mt. Pisgah Road, then a left-hand turn at the intersection of Sandy Brook Road upstream to Campbell's Bridge (referred to as "the Watering Place" by the old-timers), then up Campbell's Road to the intersection of Beech Hill Road.

Reuben Rockwell, builder and owner of the Gray Barn, who lived at the Center, and who was for many years Town Clerk, always referred to this route as "the Beech Hill

Road, so called”, meaning that it led to the geographical upland known as Beech Hill. The fact that this upland also had an established road already named “Beech Hill Road” never seemed to bother him, although it caused much head-scratching in the late 20th century.

All this deals with the western portion of what is today named Beech Hill Road. Keeping in mind that Seth Hurd lived at the boundary line between the 4th and 5th tiers, and that the road ended at his farm, you realize that there must have been another connecting road between Colebrook River and the rest of the town. There was, and it was just north of Seth Hurd’s place. This first road, ascending Beech Hill from the east, began very close to the Massachusetts line (where the majority of the early settlers lived). In a circuitous route curving around to the south, it eventually tied into what is today Simons Pond Road. There were only two farms on this road; one was owned by a man named Bush, the other by a Mr. Griswold, and thus went by the obvious name of Bush and Griswold Road. This remained the only route west out of Colebrook River until 1797, when the valley, so slow to establish itself due to its isolation, began to be populated further south along the river, and away from its roots at the state line. At this point, a search was made to see if there couldn’t be found a more direct route up onto the upland known as Beech Hill. What today is the gravel portion of Beech Hill Road (the portion which is closed to traffic during the winter months) was surveyed and accepted as a town road. The actual words used at the December 4th, 1797 Town Meeting reads: “Voted to accept a road leading from the Farmington River, so called, westward to Beech Hill Road between the dwelling houses of Stephen Skinner and Seth Hurd.”

Careful interpreting of these words reveals the cause of a very dangerous curve at the point of joining between the paved and graveled portions of Beech Hill Road, where Chapin Road branches off to the south. Remember that Seth Hurd was the first resident on the hill, but he didn’t remain alone for long - within a year, Stephen Skinner built a house diagonally across the road from Hurd’s place. As the road came to an abrupt end, Skinner constructed his dwelling house at the exact end of the existing road, so that his driveway was a straight extension of the public road. (Today, as you approach Moses Road from the west, notice the position of the straight stonewall on your left. The original road was right alongside this wall, and they both ended where the wall does.)

Ten years later, when population shifts and increases necessitated a new road, it was not possible to fashion a smooth convergence between the original road and the new one coming up from the river because Skinner’s house was in the way. As this was the era of the horse and ox, jogs in the road and sharp curves were not necessarily impediments to travel; thus there exists today a sharp curve, the result of two ninety degree turns, which, if you look at it with this information in mind, is just about the width of a house. This dwelling was removed in the late 1990s, but it was the house I grew up in, and was also the house all descendants of James O’Neill can look upon as their first home in America, as the O’Neill’s owned and lived in it from 1871 until selling it in 1930. The curve, however, remains.

This eastern portion of Beech Hill Road used to be perhaps one third longer than it is today, with the steepest portion having been eliminated. I realize that to many of you who have made the ascent and decent of the present road, this seems to be an impossible statement, but I assure you, it is true; when the present Conn. Route 8 was built, its position part way up the eastern base of Beech Hill eliminated the steepest section, as

well as two switch back curves. There was also one particularly muddy spot that remained a quagmire well into the summer season, long after other wet spots had disappeared, which has fortunately been relegated to the mists of remembered times past. However, my father would have chided me if he could have seen what I just wrote, pointing out that that one particular mud hole provided our family with a source of income during those difficult depression years. Here is how it worked: my father would answer a knock at the door, listen attentively, nod his head in sympathy, go out to the barn, harness up old Major and go “down the back hill”. The horse would be hitched to the usually half buried vehicle that the road was attempting to swallow, and pull it out. This was a smart horse, having been used for years as a “snaking” horse in the woods dragging logs out to the road. These horses operated independently from their owners. They wore harness equipped with traces with which the logs were attached and the horse was set free to return to the designated spot where the logs were to be piled for later transport to the mill. The men at this location would unhitch the horse from the log, fasten the traces onto the harness so as to be out of the way, and the horse would walk back to the cutting crew up in the woods to repeat the cycle. Obviously, these horses had to have the ability to think for themselves. This ability showed itself when pulling out mired autos. After being hooked up, Major would lean forward so as to take up the slack, turn his head to allow him to see the car, then he would wait until the driver put the car in gear and began to spin the wheels. At this point, he would begin to walk, bringing the car along with him. If the driver didn’t attempt to help, the horse would stand there all day. I seem to remember that the fee was \$1.00 or \$2.00, depending on how shiny the car was!

As to realignments, there have been very few; what is interesting however, is what changes were made in 1947, when the firm of Oneglia & Gervasini completed the modern phase of the road, which has remained unchanged ever since. The changes being alluded to here are not changes from right to left, but rather those up and down. If close attention is paid as Beech Hill Road is being traversed, a reasonable feeling for the position of the old gravel road can be gained by observing the stonewalls that parallel the road. Note that in some places walls are quite a bit higher than the surface of the road, while in others they lay several feet below. In general, the original elevation of the surface of the highway was at the same position as the base of the stonewalls. In other words, several blind spots, caused by crests of small knolls, have been eliminated. If traveling eastward from the Sandy Brook Bridge, the most notorious of these were just past number 40, where it will be noted the position of the stonewall below and to the right after passing the barn at the crest of the hill, and another near the top of the hill just past the two small ponds, particularly between numbers 120 and 122, which used to have a short section that seemed to be unnaturally close to perpendicular! The last of these blind spots was a little east of number 132, which once plunged from the stonewall on the right to almost the level of the small brook a few yards to the east.

At this spot there is an old cellar hole on the right. This is the site of Seth Hurd’s house. The rather insignificant stonewall immediately west of this cellar hole marks the boundary between the 4th and 5th tiers, one of the few places in town where these demarcations can still be observed from a road.