

Beech Hill and Sandy Brook Roads

From the earliest days, there were two main traveling routes running east from the Sandisfield Road between Colebrook Center and North Colebrook. What is today the western end of Sandy Brook Road began as it still does at the Rock School, but initially it was considered the western end of Beech Hill Road, which proceeded eastward to the recently rebuilt bridge over Sandy Brook, then crossed Viets Brook and ascended Beech Hill as far as the present intersection of Moses Road. Beech Hill is a geographical feature attaining the elevation of 1400 feet and is north of the last mentioned intersection. When Europeans first came to this area, American Beech was the most numerous of the forest trees; consequently there are many roads and features in our corner of northwestern Conn. and southwestern Mass. using that name. An element of confusion was interjected in Colebrook when, instead of naming the road ascending geographical Beech Hill by that name, they referred to it as “the road on the Beech Hill, so called”. That meant, strictly speaking, that there was no named road as such. To a modern person, it is disconcerting to see what is now Schoolhouse Road referred to as “the road to the Beech Hill, so called”. The old timers meant, of course, that the road around Mt. Pisgah, down to Sandy Brook, then up stream to the Campbell Road bridge crossing onto the upland named Beech Hill was the most direct route between the Center and the populated upland with its connecting road leading northward into Sandisfield, Mass.

The second road leading eastward from the Sandisfield Road commenced near the North Bridge at the south end of Phelps’ meadows and proceeded downstream along the present-day alignment, more or less, then along what is now Conn. Route 8 to the present-day Riverton Road and on into Barkhamsted. This was accepted as a public road on December 4, 1797. *Town Meetings, vol. 1, 1779-1825.* (No page numbers.)

Retracing our footsteps to the intersection with the Sandisfield Road (or Conn. Rt. 183), what is today Sandy Brook Road began its existence as Beech Hill Road, but in the mid-1800’s, acquired the name Rock School Road from that point to the intersection of present Phelps Flat Road, then named Sandy Brook Road. I’ll admit to purposefully confusing you with these names; the reason is that I want to tell you a true story that perfectly illustrates just how confusing it can be for residents when their roads are renamed.

In the mid 1940’s when town roads were under great pressure to be upgraded due to the phenomenal growth of motorized vehicles, two local farmers were helping Mason Hale get his hay in at his farm at the intersection of Conn. Rts. 183 and 182. One of the helping farmers was Bill Gray, the father of Bill Gray who lived on Phelps Flat Road. Their peers referred to them as Old Bill and Young Bill. At any rate, Old Bill, Mason, and I think the other was Johnnie Mangan, were standing in front of Mason’s barn prior to off-loading a load of hay, when a traveler drove up, heading north on Rt. 183.

He stopped, and asked “Can you tell me how to get to Sandy Brook Road from here?” All three stared at one another for a minute, all wrestling with the unexpected question, and each came up empty – no one could venture a guess as to how that might be achieved. Finally Mason said, “Tell you what, go straight ahead, and pretty soon you will come to Colebrook Center. Stop at the store there, they’ll be able to help you out.” The car was no more than out of sight when Old Bill said “Oh for God’s sake, that’s the road I live on!”

We didn't have cause to refer to the roads we lived on very often, and Bill still thought of himself as living on Rock School Road, and he was very conscious of the fact that the town had a habit of changing road names indiscriminately, so he didn't feel the need to "keep up" with whatever the latest road designations might be. I tell you this to lessen your concern about being confused about name changes; you're in good company!

Sandy Brook Road was accepted by the voters of the Town of Colebrook at a town meeting held on December 4, 1797. At a town meeting held in April 1825, the town agreed to accept a slightly new alignment and a new bridge (between present-day 189 and 199 Sandy Brook Road) on condition that they would not have to pay any construction costs. It remained as the Sandy Brook Turnpike (it was referred to as a "cross turnpike", connecting the Waterbury River Tpke. with the Still River Tpke.) It never made money, and was finally taken over by the town. The O. & G. Construction Co. made the major revisions that we enjoy today in 1947 (and for a total cost of \$50,000!).

In 1853 the lumber mills located along the mid-section of Sandy Brook felt the need for a town road making a direct connection with the Center, and one was built having its west end near the newly-completed bridge over Center Brook and its eastern terminus about mid-point along the long straightaway on Sandy Brook Road. It did not survive the lumber era, however, and no vestige of it can be seen today if driving along Sandy Brook Road.

Four roads tie into Beech Hill Road that have not been covered. Starting from the west is Campbell Road, probably the oldest segment to cross the stream, as there are very low banks at that point. Because of that, cattle were driven there to drink "at the watering hole". About a mile along Beech Hill Road, on the north side, is Simons Pond Road. This 1780's road served the upland farming community as a major link with Sandisfield for about 150 years. Its life effectively came to an end in the late 1920's when a disturbed youth burned all the houses from the Mass. line to the Beech Hill Road. The 1938 hurricane added the final blow by washing out sections that were not restored.

Another connecting road to the north is Moses Road, a 400 foot-long spur that originally served as a short cut to the Beech Hill Schoolhouse. Until the 1980's, no dwelling house was ever located on this road.

Chapin Road, proceeding south opposite Moses Road, forms the crossroad here. It is approximately one half mile long with the northern section built as a private farm road in the 1820's. After it was made a town road, it was extended about another one half mile where it terminated in the front yard of a sheep farm owned by Mr. Augustus Elmore, father of the Mexican War soldier buried at the Beech Hill Cemetery. In the nineteenth century, five farms were located on this road, and depending on the date, it was known as either Elmore Road or simply South Road (because of its direction).

Chapin Road was named for Dennis Chapin, who occupied numbers 33 and 44 from the 1870's through 1917. Moses Road is another of those "pulled from a hat" by the ad hoc committee charged with naming all previously un-named roads at the beginning of the 911 era. Here is how the name came to be chosen:

Fred Wilber and George Gray were first and second selectmen respectively. One day they were working on a town road when Peggy Lee, a member of the ad hoc committee charged with naming all Colebrook roads, approached them. Her job was nearly complete, with only a couple of final adjustments to be made prior to finalization.

The newly reconstructed spur that once served as a shortcut for the children living along the eastern reaches of Beech Hill Road and present day Chapin Road needed an official name. Peggy sought out the first selectman; he would know the answer. After describing the nameless road, she awaited a reply. Fred scratched his head, because he knew that this particular road had never possessed a name, so as a joke he said "Holy Moses Road". George, with a perfectly straight face said "Won't so holy was it?" Fred, going right along with that line of thought said "Guess you're right, it's just plain Moses!" At this point Peggy wrote the name in her notebook and said "Oh, thank you so much!" and departed. If she had suddenly turned around, she might have seen two men rolling around on the road, holding their sides to keep from splitting open. She submitted her list to the appropriate committee in Hartford, and now and forever Moses Road will be one of Colebrook's roads. Actually, there had once been a family named Moses who lived on what is now Simons Pond Road, but they never lived on the road, nor did they own property there, I doubt that either Fred or George knew of their existence in town back in the mid-1800s. Simons Pond is named for a prominent family, some of whom lived in Sandisfield, others in Colebrook. We weren't very careful in naming that road, either, as the family name was Simonds.

Construction on the new Sandy Brook Bridge began April 17, 2000 and was completed about one month ahead of schedule on September 8, 2000.

The first crossing to gain access to the Beech Hill upland was near the site of Campbell's Bridge. The reason for this choice was that it is the only location south of Phelps' meadows in North Colebrook that has no prominent river banks, thus permitting the construction of a ford, and by so doing, avoiding the extra expense of constructing a bridge.

In the following years, as the population grew, the cost of a bridge was no longer considered an obstacle. As much of the trade in those days was between Beech Hill and the Phelps' operations in North Colebrook, a more westerly orientation of the road was called for. The present alignment of Beech Hill Road must be the same as its initial layout, because a vote at a town meeting held in Sept. 1811, directed the selectmen to build a bridge across Sandy Brook and Viets Brook at or near the place where the last bridges were built.

Colebrook doesn't mention the cost of bridge construction in those days, but Winchester's records shed some light on the subject. They give the rate of 2 shillings per day per worker building bridges (.67¢). An entry made Dec. 7, 1788 states: "Voted to give John Balcam 9 dollars for 2 Whitewood trees, which the committee cut on said Balcam's land to build Still River Bridge."

I don't know the amount of funding that has been set aside for the latest bridge. (I could easily find out, but in the interest of my blood pressure, have postponed that for a future date!) Modern concrete bridges will last far longer than their old wooden predecessors that had a nasty habit of "going out" with every moderate flood, and those of us old enough to remember "the good old days" appreciate what we have today.