

## Butter Presses and Paper

Recently, two items were brought to my attention that happened to have originated at the same industrial site, but at widely separated times. The first was a butter press made expressly for Rockwell Hall in Colebrook Center that had turned up on Ebay and was subsequently purchased by a family associated with the Colebrook Historical Society. This particular model was made of walnut and measured out one-half pound of butter that would be embossed with “R-H” and a beautifully carved sheaf of wheat. The other was a gift of a button collection made from buttons recovered by local girls who searched the area around the old paper mill. This site has been owned by the Campbell family since 1937 and now contains a dwelling house.

Butter molds were made in Colebrook about one hundred years ago on the site of what had formerly been a paper mill. Actually, I should say mills, as there were at least two different paper mill owners – Bliss and Wrinkle, and the buildings had burned to the ground at least once and had been replaced. Originally Hiram Sage had built a gristmill at the site in the 1790s, and it remained an important mill location for more than one hundred years, spanning parts of three centuries. The last use of the location was for the manufacture of butter molds by the Colebrook Manufacturing Company. This company remained in business from about 1906 until 1911 or 12.

Not a great deal of information would be known about this company had it not been for a loan of \$8,000 taken out in 1909. The owners put up as collateral all the machinery in the shop, and as a consequence they were itemized in the Colebrook Land Records. Among the items listed was a device much like a pantograph that replicated the design chosen for a particular job. This proved to be a great eye-opener to those of us who had grown up in town and had been told in reverent tones that the company that manufactured the molds employed highly skilled wood carvers in Colebrook who were responsible for all the wide variations of designs. Another bubble about our potentially glorious past had been exploded!

Had the owners of the Colebrook Manufacturing Co. been able to sell their product at a fraction of the cost that is currently being asked by Ebay, they would have remained in business longer than they did. I don't know what the selling price was for a newly manufactured mold, but I would guess it was in the neighborhood of something less than two dollars. The historical society has several of these butter molds, ranging from oblong ones (the most common) to square and round. The smallest one measures out a one-once round patty.

Now for the second part of this saga:

Many years ago I was shown a very interesting button collection by Ruth Williams, great grandmother of Fred Williams, the math teacher at Regional. It was mounted on a board that contained a wide range of buttons, some of which came from Civil War clothing, others from shirts, pants and underwear. Ruth explained that several girls who had grown up in the general vicinity of the old paper mill had made these button collections by digging at the site. She said that there was at least one other collection that she knew of, and that was in the possession of the Campbell family. A logical question at this point would be why the buttons existed there in the first place; the answer lies in the technique employed in manufacturing high quality paper in the nineteenth century.

Girls and young women had been employed to sort the rags that had been purchased for what was to be the rag content of the finished paper. The most obvious objects needing to be eliminated were the buttons, which would be cut off, then thrown out the nearest window, providing a rich area for exploration by a subsequent generation of young ladies to make collections from.

The best description that I have ever seen by far as to the process of manufacturing rag content paper was written by a 13 year old Colebrook girl, Mary E. Butler as a composition for homework in 1854.

“The art of making paper was invented in the eleventh century. It is made of old rags, ropes and silk. Writing paper is made of linen and cotton rags. They are first given to women and girls who sort them according to their color and quality, and also take out whatever would injure the texture of the paper. They are then put into a large wire sieve where they are freed from dust. They then are put into a cistern where pure water is constantly flowing, and by means of a cylinder filled with iron spikes, which turns about very rapidly, they are torn in pieces and reduced to a fine pulp. By this process they are cleansed and regain their original whiteness. They now form it into sheets by using a mold, which is made of wires crossing each other and framed. They dip this mold into the pulp, which retains a sufficient quantity of the pulp for a sheet.”

“It is then taken from the mold and placed on a piece of felt; this is repeated until they have a large pile, when they press it to remove the water from it.”

“The next process is that of drying it, which was formerly done by hanging it on lines, but I think it is now dried by steam. It is next dipped into a kind of glue called ‘size’, which prepares it so that it can be written upon. It is again dried and pressed, which gives it gloss and smoothness, and is then done up in quires and ready for sale.

Colebrook, Dec. 5, 1854”

So two items, preserved carefully by caring generations of citizens, have provided us with a remarkably clear view into the world of our ancestors. A special thanks goes to Rosy Campbell, daughter of Ronald B. Campbell, who purchased the mill site in 1937, for donating to the Colebrook Historical Society an item obviously of great importance to her, and now will be cherished by the citizens of Colebrook.

#### **Historic Bytes**

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