

Colebrook 170 Years Ago



The Colebrook Historical Society has, in its library, a book entitled “Connecticut Historical Collections” containing a general collection of interesting facts, traditions, biographical sketches, anecdotes, etc. relating to the history and antiquities of every town in Connecticut with geographical descriptions. Illustrated by 190 engravings.

This 560-page book was authored and illustrated by a gentleman named John Warner Barber. He makes mention of these engravings in the preface. Remember that in 1836, the publication date, few if any Americans had ever seen a photograph. That, coupled with the fact that the general population did not travel around sightseeing as we do today, prompted him to make the following statement: “The numerous engravings interspaced through this work, were (with five or six exceptions) executed from drawings taken on the spot, by the author of this work. Before deciding upon the correctness of these representations, he wishes his readers to consider that the appearance of any place will vary considerably as it is viewed from different points: thus a *north* view will appear quite different from one taken at the *south*.”

Of course it would make no sense today to feel the need to make such a statement, but historically, it is quite interesting to see the evolution of various technologies.

The view of Colebrook was drawn from a location about one quarter of a mile south of the Center along what is today Conn. Route 183. The church was then located two houses north of the Colebrook Store. Draper’s house, next to the store (which can be identified by the

columns in front) does not have the rear addition yet. The barns on the extreme right side are where Jake Thompson's house sits today; the church is presently located where the road drops out of sight. That's Mount Pisgah in the background, its flanks denuded of trees for firewood and charcoal and replaced by grazing land for cattle and sheep.

Here is the text for Colebrook:

"Colebrook is an elevated township, the central part of which is 31 miles northwest of Hartford, and 18 miles northeast from Litchfield, bounded north by Massachusetts line, east by Hartland, west by Norfolk and south by Winchester. Its length from east to west is six miles, and its average breadth five. The township is hilly and mountainous and the soil a hard gravelly loam, and generally stony. It is in general rather cold and wet, but affords tolerable good grazing. The main branch of the Farmington River intersects the eastern part of the town, and affords excellent mill seats. The population of the town in 1810 was 1,243; in 1830, it was 1,332. [It is 1,471 at last count.]

It is said that in the year 1796, some laborers in this town, digging to the depth of nine or ten feet, found three large tusks, and two thigh bones, the latter of which measured each about four feet and four inches in length, and twelve inches and a half in circumference. It is added that when first discovered they were entire; but that as soon as they were exposed to the air, they moldered into dust."

The first settler in the town, Benjamin Horton, located himself about three quarters of a mile south from this place. [Here the author lists several of the original settlers and describes how virgin land was cleared. While the techniques described are accurate, they did not apply to Colebrook. The girdling of the original forest giants was accomplished twenty or thirty years prior to the first settlers arriving from Windsor.]

"When the land was new, it produced good oats and turnips. Apple trees, at the first settlement of the town, did not flourish. The town was organized into an ecclesiastical society in 1786, and the first meetinghouse was built about the same time. Rev. Dr. Jonathan Edwards, of New Haven, son of the celebrated divine of the same name, was installed the first pastor in 1795. He however continued here but 3 or 4 years, being appointed president of Union College in Schenectady. The Rev. Chauncey Lee, D.D. was the next minister. [And was still there in that capacity when this book was written.] There are at present five houses of worship in the limits of the town, 1 Congregational, 2 Baptist, 1 Methodist and 1 for various denominations."

The mammoth bones referred to were discovered somewhere in Colebrook River and what remains of them are at the Connecticut Museum in Hartford. In the twentieth century more bones of this type were found in the meadows west of the Center and also in the swampy area just to the left of the access road to the Colebrook River Dam. These Pleistocene creatures followed the retreating glaciers and eventually went extinct, probably at the hands of the first humans who populated North America, some 8 to 10,000 years ago. When I was in college in Worcester, Mass during the late 1950s, the Mass Pike was under construction, and a deposit of pre-glacial soil was unearthed in the town of Shrewsbury by the blade of a bulldozer. The operator couldn't believe his eyes, as the lowest layer of gravel revealed a layer of brilliant red material, which faded into a dark brown in the space of five to ten seconds. It turned out to be a deposit of peat that had been covered by the glacier, more than 100,000 years ago, and kept in an anaerobic [oxygen free] environment until exposed to our oxygen-rich air. Harvard and the Smithsonian obtained core samples of this material, which proved to be deeper than 15 feet. I mention this only to confirm the 1836 statement that the bones "moldered into dust" before their eyes.

