

Colebrook Center's Beginnings

What made Colebrook Center the center? It is a question that has no easy answer; colonial laws and practices dictated a certain pattern, or framework that should be adhered to. The essentials were generally agreed to be that each new community be on an upland if possible, must be supplied with a meetinghouse, parsonage, school(or schools), a parade (a drill field for the militia to practice on) and a highway system calculated to best serve the pioneering citizens who were to populate the future town. Colebrook and Barkhamsted's case however, does not quite fit the pattern because we were the last townships in the colony of Connecticut to be carved from new or undivided lands. This meant that towns and communities that were already established surrounded us. The earliest of our settlers could, if they wanted to, avail themselves of gristmills, lumber mills and perhaps churches in Winchester, Norfolk or Sandisfield. Perhaps this uniqueness was behind the General Assembly's granting us town status despite our failure to implement certain key elements of colonial law.

What the original settlers did do was to establish a parade. The site chosen was on today's Smith Hill Road where the South Cemetery is located, which is between numbers 402 and 408, about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile south of the Center. It wasn't always adhered to, but the recommendation was for the meetinghouse to be erected on the parade. A highway system was established, built around the original three military roads that had been established to permit rapid troop deployments toward the upper Hudson River Valley during the French and Indian War (which ended in 1765). A plot of land was set aside for the first minister, as well as another ministerial plot for the support of subsequent ministers. A school lot was created, not necessarily for a schoolhouse site, but to supply revenue for the support of the town's schools.

What the original settlers failed to do was build a meeting house and employ a minister. As it turned out, the residents of Colebrook argued and bickered for 16 years, from the fall of 1779 until 1796; not whether to build a meetinghouse, but where this building should be located. With no physical structure, there was no minister. Lacking both a minister and a meetinghouse, the community should not have received its certificate of occupancy (in today's terminology), yet they did; permission came in 1779 and Colebrook held her first town meeting on December 13 of that year in the home of Samuel Rockwell. This structure still exists as the center portion of 561 Colebrook Road, next to the Colebrook Store.

You have to know all this background in order to keep straight in your mind the events that unfurled that resulted in the layout of the present community. One of the main sticking points was where to erect the meetinghouse. Those in the northern half of the township insisted that it be built north of Center Brook, specifically near the crest of the hill across from 593 Colebrook Road. The residents who lived south of this brook were equally adamant that it should be built on their side of the stream. For years and years the battle raged, with votes no sooner taken than they were rescinded. Eventually a church committee from outside town set a stake at a site south of Center Brook, recommending a building 40 feet on a side to be built, and construction began. Our problem is that nowhere is there mention as to the location of this stake, all we know is that yet another vote resulted in a decision to place the unfinished structure north of the stream. Now, for the first time, we know the exact location it was destined for. The

owner of what is today 593 Colebrook Road owned both sides of the road. Their names were Nathaniel and Hannah Mather, descendants of the prominent family that had supplied so many ministers in the New England colonies, the best known today probably being Increase and Cotton Mather. Nathaniel and Hannah sold to the church committee $\frac{3}{4}$ of an acre of land in what is today the middle of the Center Cemetery, specifying that its sole use was to be for a meetinghouse site. The date was May 7th, 1793. The wording, at least for us, is startling when it is realized that this plot is on the highway. When a map is constructed of the measurements, an alignment emerges quite unlike any other we ever saw. The original Sandisfield Road, after crossing the brook at the same place as the present Conn. Route 183, proceeded about one third of the way up the hill, then made a 90° right-hand turn to a point close to the present midpoint of the cemetery, then made another 90° left turn to a point near the present northern boundary of the cemetery, then another 90° left turn back to the present day alignment of Rt. 183. In the town record books an entry dated April 7, 1794 refers to this situation. "Accepted alteration of Sandisfield Road crossing Joseph Taintor land and others til it enters the old road a little north of Capt. Rockwell's Mill Brook." Why the original alignment was such, we haven't a clue, but one thing it does do is explain why the unfinished meetinghouse never got to its destination. Remember that it had been started south of the Center (perhaps at the parade on Smith Hill). It was moved northward along an existing road until it reached a site (presumably on the road) where it was then decided that it would be impossible to negotiate the hill opposite the brook. We have always puzzled over that, as the hill isn't all that steep. However, when you look at the steepness of the embankment between the cemetery and the brook, and remember that the present alignment did not then exist, the picture completely changes – it would have been an impossible task, especially if the building was 40 feet square. We don't know what the actual dimensions were, though, only those recommended by the outside committee.

For this reason, the Mathers, on April 13th, 1795, re-deeded that same $\frac{3}{4}$ of an acre with no restrictions to the church committee. This became the core for what has forever since been the Center Cemetery.

Remember that we left the unfinished meetinghouse sitting on a road south of the brook? The original alignment of Highway No. 3 through Colebrook Center brought it down present-day Smith Hill probably nearly as it is today, then it made a left turn along what is now Rockwell Road to a point just past the Woodbine Cottage (the small building behind the Colebrook Store). There it made a 90° right turn along the edge of the meadow to a point directly west of 563 Colebrook Road, then yet another 90° right turn to a point on the present state highway just north of the parsonage at 564.

The highway alignments were changed to their present configuration in 1772. The old road west of the buildings in the Center was abandoned and title went to the Rockwells. It seems logical that if a building were to be moved through the village, the abandoned route would have been the obvious choice. The dilemma of what to do with the meetinghouse after it was determined that it could not move further was resolved when they decided to leave it right where it was; and after construction was completed, it remained on site until the present Congregational Church replaced it in 1843.