

## **Colebrook History at a Glance \***

Long time residents of a rural town tend to slowly accumulate bits and pieces of local lore, which in their minds, comprise what they think of as their town's history. This is risky at best; some of what you hear could be partial truths, liberally intermixed with yawning gaps, other information could fall victim to slanted views, such as misguided regionalism; the old "us" vs. "them" syndrome. (Yes, such attitudes exist in Colebrook!) Today we find ourselves just entering a brand-new century. What is it that makes this town "special"; why did you come here to live, either full or part time? This question can be asked equally of a new resident from an adjacent town or someone from New York City, and in all likelihood, the replies would be similar.

We have been blessed with what amounts to a virtual wall-to-wall carpet of mature forest growing on the southern reaches of a range of hills known as The Foothills of the Berkshires. In Colebrook, the highest elevation, 1552 feet, is reached by Pond Mountain; the lowest, 510 feet, occurs on the surface of Still River as it exits town into Barkhamsted. The Berkshires in western Massachusetts are the southern extension of two mountain systems, the Taconics and the Green Mountains. All are part of the Northern Appalachians.

At the heart of our highway system are two state roads; Conn. Route 8 running north-south on the eastern side of town and Conn. Route 183, running northwest-southeast from the Winchester town line to the extreme northwest corner almost at the Massachusetts state line. The topography is such that with few exceptions, it is not possible to have a straight road going very far in any direction. Scattered about town there are several locations that lend themselves to a neighborhood environment. Initially, these were agricultural sites; flat land alongside rivers or the bottoms of what had long before had been glacial lakebeds, now covered with rich, dark loam. District names such as North Colebrook, Colebrook Center, Robertsville, Colebrook River and Millbrook mark these locations. The road network connecting these neighborhoods looks like a tortured spider web as it negotiates our geological obstacles.

The work parties sent into the virgin forest in the mid eighteenth century to create roads and begin initial land clearing in what was to be Colebrook found not one lake or other body of standing water. There was an adequate supply of waterpower however in Sandy Brook, running diagonally across town from northwest to southeast, the West Branch of the Farmington River, Center Brook/Loon Brook (originally named Mill Brook throughout its entire length), and Still River tucked into the southeast corner of the township. Of all the rivers having potential to power waterwheels, none exceeded Still River. The original owners of Colebrook were a group from Windsor, Connecticut, known as The Proprietors. These men were charged by the General Assembly of the Colony of Connecticut with preparing the area for colonization. The first task was to create roads, and the men who made them had to be paid; therefore the real estate considered the most valuable was set aside to be sold to the highest bidder for this purpose. Still River, beginning with the falls eventually known as Tunxis, containing three other major mill sites in just over a quarter mile, was chosen for this purpose.

The first industrial use at this site was a complex consisting of 11 buildings centered on an iron forge in 1770. All throughout the War of Independence, this facility turned out not only iron products, but also high quality steel. Chief among the steel

products were bits with which the cannon manufactured in Salisbury, Conn. were bored. The steel products produced in Robertsville were truly of inestimable value to Washington's military campaigns.

Contemporary to this were two other sites in Colebrook with major forges; the industrial site on Center Brook owned by the Rockwell family, and another on the Colebrook-Norfolk town line owned in part by the Phelps family. These two families, the Rockwells and the Phelps, remained the dominant political and commercial powers throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and indeed remain town benefactors to this day.

After the War of 1812, iron never regained its former importance and was replaced by lumbering and animal husbandry such as Marino sheep and cattle for beef and cheese. One major exception to this was a cotton mill that operated in Colebrook River from 1840 – 1890. It averaged 100 employees, and was thus the largest employer the town has ever had.

A railroad came to Winsted in 1841, effectively curtailing further industrial development in Colebrook, as well as eventually forcing existing businesses such as the cotton mill to close down.

In 1871 a railroad was created reaching from Hartford to the Hudson River Valley, which passed through Winsted and Norfolk. This route, while never being very lucrative, never-the-less allowed business men with offices in New York City to come here for summers or even relaxing weekends. Land prices were depressed around here following the Civil War, and former farm land, for the most part denuded of trees, much of it used for charcoal making, but as a consequence affording spectacular views, could be picked up for a song. Thus the role of the "summer people" was established, one which is more prevalent now than at any previous period.

The most dramatic event that has ever taken place in Colebrook was the creation of two dams and reservoirs on the West Branch of the Farmington River by the Metropolitan District Commission. This took place over a period of years beginning in the 1930's and culminating with the completion of the Colebrook River Dam in 1964. Below the waters of Colebrook River Lake lie the foundation stones of nearly 100 dwellings, shops and mills.

Today urban sprawl, industrialization and the general rigors of late 20<sup>th</sup> century living have left vast areas of the northeast, in particular the New York Metropolitan Area and the so-called Northeast Corridor, devoid of clean, verdant quietude. Something in the human soul yearns for open space, whether it is on the prairies, in the mountains, or just a piece of land where he and his neighbor need not live in each other's hip pocket. All the many years that Colebrook languished in the backwaters, consisting of land considered all but useless, and which could be picked up for \$1.00 an acre, has, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, found herself in the most admirable of positions. We have something that cannot be manufactured by man; we have unspoiled natural beauty, and we have it in easy commuting distance from centers of high-tech employment such as New York and the Connecticut River Valley. Having recognized that, it should be obvious that all of us have an obligation to retain and protect those attributes that make this the wonderful place to live that it is.