

## Colebrook River Recreation

The boat launch site off of Conn. Route 8 is a busy place year around, particularly in the warm summer months. We take the second and third grade students from the Colebrook Consolidated School there every year just before summer vacation, and it is a very popular trip. Each year the same questions are asked – where was the village, where were the roads? Sometimes someone has been told about the ski jump; where was that?

The next time you visit Colebrook River Lake with a boat, perhaps it might make it more interesting if you had some sense of what you will be passing over. Here then is a short history and guided tour of what used to be the most populous village within the town of Colebrook:

“The River”, as Colebrook residents knew the village, was the last geographical region to be inhabited in town. What is now the Robertsville section had easy access to Winchester, and had a dynamic watercourse in Still River, the site beginning with 1771 of a major forge with 10 support buildings and followed by important industrial enterprises down to and including the present day power generating plant.

Colebrook Center, besides having a central location, also had a stream which flowed year around with a sharp drop in elevation, making it suitable for the construction of mills with water wheels. 1765 witnessed the beginnings of its industrial era with the construction of a lumber mill on this stream.

Colebrook River had to wait until the late 1790’s. Population arrived from the north along the banks of the West Branch of the Farmington River, but once in the valley, there was no easy way out except by the route they arrived on. Where the two dams are now located was a steep-sided, narrow gorge culminating at a high, sharp ridge – thus the name “hogback”. Although you don’t realize it while driving north on Route 8 near the entrance to the Colebrook River dam, the land originally presented difficult obstacles, particularly in the vicinity of the small, Hemlock-covered hill that we call Woodruff Hill (named for a local character who lived there in the nineteenth century known as Billy Woodruff). The location of the first north-south road was along the east side of this hill, through the present day beaver dam. It was a steep and precipitous route.

The valley in which the future village was to be built was quite broad and fairly flat. This lent itself to the construction of roads and the creation of farmland, although spring floods and heavy rain events always posed a threat.

With one exception, no significant dam was ever built across the Farmington in the valley. This was a large wooden structure, constructed in the 1830’s to supply power for a gristmill. In 1840 the site was expanded to include a cotton mill. This was the largest industry Colebrook was ever to have. It averaged 100 employees, although at times as many as 200 worked there. The location of this mill was immediately upstream from the iron bridge that is visible during low water, near the north end of the reservoir.

As you stand on the boat launch site facing east, directly across the lake, imagine that you are looking at the face of a clock, with 12 o’clock straight ahead. Raise your left arm and point at the imaginary 10 o’clock position. You are pointing at Slocum Brook, usually referred to by old timers as Sawmill Brook, because there used to be two, and sometimes three sawmills operating along this stream at any given time. This is the largest stream emptying into the Farmington as it flows through the valley of Colebrook River. Also, about three-quarters of the way to that brook from where you are standing is

the location of the main section of the village. Here once stood a school, two churches, two lumber mills, a store, post office, automobile garage, private homes and rentals. There were cultivated fields and fruit orchards, roads and intersections, some lined with stately American Elms.

Just south of the village center was a suspension footbridge, wide enough to ride a bicycle across without barking your knuckles! That bridge, which had to have been 100 to 150 feet long, could be made to undulate by walking a short way out from an abutment and applying a rhythmic pressure with your feet. On the east side of the bridge, across the road that was then Conn. Route 8, was the home of Mrs. Burke, who saw herself as the self-appointed guardian of this footbridge. At the first false move on the part of a crossing youngster, her living room curtain would be pulled aside for a second, then released, followed seconds later by the door flying open and the shouted words "You kids cut that out!" We always did cease our indiscretions, because we were afraid of her, but our fears were really baseless, as she never pursued the issue, and except for correcting youthful exuberance on the bridge, never bothered us in any way. I suppose these were the days when children were taught to respect their elders (and themselves), and to accept correction graciously.

On the east side of the valley there used to be several roads that led to Tolland Mass. and Hartland Conn. One of the principal roads emerges from the waters of the lake alongside the southern bank of Slocum Brook. These roads make wonderful trails for hiking and exploring this long-abandoned section of Colebrook. They are passable by foot from the top of the cliff overlooking Colebrook River Dam on the south to two abandoned roads that pass into Tolland on the north, and into West Hartland on the east.

Proceeding northward along the eastern shore, east of the iron bridge, you will come to another road that emerges from the waters and wends its way up a hill known as Harvey Mountain, the summit of which is in Tolland Mass. This was named for the family of one of its best-known residents, Sarah Harvey, the acclaimed artist, who left us some wonderfully accurate paintings of Colebrook River in its hay day.

The ski jump, previously mentioned, was situated on the east face of Spencer Mountain, which has the first rock cut that Route 8 passes through as one travels north into the valley. As you stand on the boat launch facing east, the ski jump was on the hill ninety degrees to your right, the one with the notch for Route 8 going through it.

This ski jump was a gigantic undertaking in the early 1930's, when it was built. Interest was so great that on opening day, the worst traffic tie-up ever to occur in the state caused cars to be backed up as far south as Thomaston. Physically, it was of a length comparable to the distance between the Colebrook Consolidated School and the Colebrook Post Office. It did not prove to be financially successful however, and after a few short years was abandoned. As those of us now in their 70's grew up, we watched it slowly disintegrate, until by the time the M.D.C. cleared out all wooden structures, there wasn't much left.

Due east from the ski jump site was the Spencer Bridge, a cement structure that once carried Conn. Route 8, named for a prominent farming family with land on both sides of the river. Standing with Spencer Mt. behind you and looking toward the dam, beneath the waters to your right lies the site of "Happy Valley", summer home to the Gilbert Home children, and truly a happy place for them.