

## Colebrook River Roads

The first road to access the valley of the West Branch of the Farmington River came southward from New Boston and did not penetrate into Connecticut more than a few hundred yards. The gradient of the river was greater in Massachusetts, thus providing for better dam sites to power the mills necessary for the sustainability of a community, but the valley didn't begin to open out and thus provide for agricultural endeavors until entering Colebrook. Right near the state line, both of these conditions were met, and the first dwellings and mills were constructed during the mid 1780's.

Before progressing further, a word of explanation is needed concerning the land ownership patterns as established by the original owners, known as the Proprietors of Windsor. The future township was laid out in eight generally north – south-tending parallel strips three-quarters of a mile wide. All of our tiers, as they were called, were established parallel to the Norfolk town line; this gives not only the shape of our east and west boundaries, but our internal ones as well. Immediately this was responsible for the political identity of the village of Colebrook River. The reason was that the position of the line dividing the seventh and eighth tiers extended east of the river as it entered Colebrook. Internal divisions were established as school districts, which had far greater importance than just being concerned with schools; they were the districts all able-bodied men had to register in for military drills and other duties, as well as the district you were taxed in. In 1786, when the first residents of what we call Colebrook River began to establish themselves, there were only two schools in town, neither of which was accessible to the residents of The River. Therefore a third school district was formed named the Beech Hill School District. The schoolhouse was located on Simons Pond Road at a point about one half mile north of the convergence of present Beech Hill Road and Simons Pond Road. The boundaries were established as the Massachusetts border on the north, and the tier line between the seventh and eighth tiers on the northeast. It is for this reason that the pioneers of the valley were residents of the Beech Hill School District. The rationale behind this eluded us until the lost school ledgers appeared and maps were constructed based upon the survey figures provided by them. A road leading to this schoolhouse was created a few hundred yards south of the Massachusetts boundary on the west side of the river that mounted the steep mountainside in a shape reminiscent of a lazy "S" that eventually connected with Simons Pond Rd. Two pioneering families established farms on this road, which assumed their names, thus Bush and Griswold Road became the first "Beech Hill Road", and the first link with the rest of the residents of Colebrook.

By 1794, the population center in the valley had shifted southward toward the central section close by the confluence of Slocum, or Sawmill Brook. Mills were soon constructed along this brook, which provided several excellent sites, some of which remained active until the Metropolitan Water District bought up all the property prior to the flooding in the mid twentieth century. The first accepted town road ascending this brook was in October 1796 and went almost due east into Hartland. Immediately a road branched off to the north following Sawmill Brook and entered Massachusetts. In 1805 another road to Massachusetts was constructed going up Harvey Mountain and on to connect with Mass. Rt. 57. The name Harvey is derived from the family name of Sarah Harvey, a painter of scenery during the last century who enjoyed a well-deserved

reputation. Several examples of her works exist today in Colebrook and particularly in Winsted at their historical society.

A relatively short, dead end road that always went by the name "Peck Road" extended south from the Hartland Road close to and parallel to the Hartland line. Peck was a prominent name in these parts during the nineteenth century, and in all probability, although I can't prove it, the site of learning in Colebrook's Mountain School District. This district contained few scholars, but from the 1830's through 1857, functioned as a district with school conducted in a private home. My guess is that it was in John F. Peck's house, probably taught by his mother.

The southward shift of population necessitated the construction of a replacement for Bush and Griswold Road, now inconveniently located well to the north. As Colebrook River received her first school in 1796, there was no longer need to travel up the mountain to attend the Beech Hill School. Thus we see present-day Beech Hill Road accepted as a town road in December of 1797. This road connected with the road on the west side of the river. This was always a secondary road, with the main highway on the eastern side the river. It began in Massachusetts and had its southern terminus near the Spencer, (or cement) bridge, near where a modern traveler can see the old Rt. 8 plunge beneath the waters of Colebrook River Lake.

The main road, situated on the east side of the river initially never crossed the river, but followed along the east bank down to and over the narrow, steep constriction that acquired the apt name of "The Hogback". This, in my estimation, was the most beautiful river gorge in southern New England. The river had carved a passage through solid rock creating a narrow (50-75 foot), deep (100 feet or more) gorge. The road passed over this solid ledge defined by its pointed crest after a steep climb, followed by an equally precipitous descent until it came back to the edge of the river upstream from the village of Riverton. For most of the first half of the nineteenth century, this road was named the Farmington River Turnpike and even had two toll stations; one was very close to the Mass. Border, the second in a private house about one quarter of a mile downstream from the Spencer Bridge. To all natives, it was just "the Hogback Road".

This leaves but one road to complete the list for Colebrook River, and eventually it became and remained the most important link to the outside world. We are talking of the connecting segment of present Route 8 beginning at the point where it left off south of Woodruff Hill and ending at the Spencer Bridge. Until 1852, the road passed Woodruff Hill to the east, but the route was precipitous, and drew loud complaints from residents at every town meeting. Finally a new route was devised on the west side, just to the right of present day Rt. 8 if traveling north. It remained a difficult section to traverse, however, and was a major obstacle for the economic viability of the Sawyer Brother's Cotton Mill. When the railroad came to Winsted, it left a nine-mile gap in their transportation route. They finally folded up shop in 1890, unable to compete with other cotton mills.

When the Metropolitan District Commission bought up Colebrook River, the town abandoned all roads. The roads were: West River Rd., Tolland Rd., Ramsey Rd., Tilles Rd., Peck Rd., Farmington River Turnpike, Mead or Whipple Rd. and Rose Rd.