

## **Colebrook Road (State Route 183)**

Written in 2000

Route 183 (Colebrook Road) from Colebrook Center to North Colebrook has been under major reconstruction by the State Department of Transportation, a fact that all of you who traveled over it for the duration of the summer don't need to be reminded. It isn't the first time this has happened, and it no doubt won't be the last. Here is a brief history of this section of public highway:

In May 1756, a committee was appointed to run a line around Colebrook and erect proper monuments and lay out a highway six rods in width. (99 feet – they didn't mean for the road surface to be that width, only that strip of land through which the road would meander as it avoided rocks and other objects too large to be moved.) This highway was to run northwardly through the town as near the middle as they should judge most convenient for the accommodating traveler and the inhabitants that may thereafter settle in the town.

In 1784, shortly after the signing of the peace treaty between Great Britain and the brand-new United States, the Connecticut General Assembly granted permission for towns to tax themselves for the purpose of building and maintaining their highway systems.

1791 saw Connecticut establish the Turnpike Law, giving investors permission to improve sections of existing roads, or in some cases to create new ones. In 1801, the Waterbury River Turnpike was chartered running over this roadbed from the Massachusetts line in North Colebrook through Colebrook Center, south along Millbrook Road and points south. This corporation remained as such for 49 years, when it passed out of existence and the town resumed responsibility for the maintenance of Sandisfield Road, as it was known.

A new segment of road was surveyed in 1825, but wasn't built until 1845. This ran from the northern end of Millbrook Road to the Winchester line. This was the last segment needed in the creation of what we know today as Conn. Route 183, or Colebrook Road.

The coming of the automobile created demands on the existing road network which was beyond the scope of individual towns or their ability to meet the new standards; State and Federal governments began to take over what was referred to as trunk routes (main connecting roads) in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Our State had a highway commissioner at least as early as 1912, as Colebrook discussed in a town meeting of that year the condition of roads and the difficulty in getting any notice from the Highway Commission.

In July 1916, the first mention of a State Highway, so called, occurs in the selectmen's meetings when they refer to the "State Highway now being constructed from Robertsville to Colebrook River." (Today, Conn. Route 8.) It was in this period that the state began taking over segments of what we know as Route 183, starting in Winsted and preceding northward.

By March 1924, just prior to the States' acquisition of Route 183 north of Colebrook Center, our selectmen were authorized to improve the public highway from the Rock School northward one mile, this to be done under the law for resurfacing State Aid Roads. The amount was not to exceed \$25,000.00. The traveled portion of the road then was 16 feet. Town roads at that time were only 12 feet wide, all of which was

gravel. In 1932, the State, now having jurisdiction over the entire length of Rt. 183, rebuilt and surfaced with bituminous materials the stretch from the Rock School to the Norfolk town line. The width was 16 feet.

Soon the individual towns followed the lead established by the state, and began resurfacing their gravel roads with bitumen (usually referred to as an oiled surface – the process was called “oiling the road”.) This is literally how it was done: a tank truck equipped with a boom containing many nozzles was driven slowly over the gravel road, spraying hot liquid tar on the surface, which was immediately covered with a layer of sand. This was then dragged with a square device about 8 feet on a side containing stiff bristles. The surface was then rolled, but not the way you might think. Some larger towns may have had professional “steam rollers”, but certainly not in Colebrook. The town truck (note the use of the singular case) rolled a portion of the traveled section; the remainder was accomplished by the driving public, who would drive on the un-rolled sections until the whole surface was done.

Compare this with the process currently employed by the state. Now the entire former portion of the roadbed is ground up, re-laid and then covered with about three inches of bitumen and crushed rock material, all of which is done by a machine that delivers the finished product. From curb to curb in front of the Rock School, the paved surface measures 33 feet; the actual driving lanes are about 12 feet wide.

What would Erastus Wolcott, Josiah Phelps, Nathaniel Filley and James Rockwell, our first road committee, say if they could observe the road in front of the Rock School today? Could you imagine what they might say if they were to ask the foreman of the highway road crew just how much it cost for the one-mile section stretching northward from the school?