

Colebrook in the Eighteenth Century

Although Colebrook's historical existence begins in the eighteenth century, a primary event took place in 1687 that laid the groundwork for the way in which northern Litchfield County would ultimately develop. King James II sent Edmund Andros to America to govern New England, New York and New Jersey. Immediately following his arrival in the fall of 1686 it became obvious that his instructions were to dismantle the political fabric of these colonies and consolidate Royal authority.

All of Connecticut had been laid out as townships with the exception of what is today northeastern Litchfield County, specifically the present townships of Barkhamsted, Colebrook, Hartland, Winchester, Torrington, Harwinton and Canaan. Because this territory was not incorporated, Andros would have appropriated it for the crown. To thwart this, the Colonial Legislature asked the towns of Windsor and Hartford to assume ownership over this territory with the exception of Canaan, which had been assigned to the governor and his council. The plan was successful, and after Andros was arrested and sent back to England in 1689, this land lay fallow as far as potential settlers were concerned. In the first third of the eighteenth century, the residents of the rich farmland in the Connecticut River valley realized that in another generation or so, their descendents would be running out of additional land, and so work parties were sent into the rocky, hilly and largely unexplored reaches of our area to make preparations for the pioneers that would follow in coming years. The huge trees that made up the virgin forest were of no use to people who considered themselves primarily farmers. There were no roads to transport timber, and the bowls of these trees were several feet thick, their size making them unusable even if they could be brought to a sawmill. Their answer was to girdle the trees in areas judged to be prime locations for living or agricultural purposes, causing them to die. About 10 years later, these trees would topple over, creating open space for second growth trees to develop into usable timber. Advertisements taken out in the Hartford newspaper in 1744 warning residents of all surrounding towns to stay out of the bounds of Colebrook, and warning of consequences for the illegal taking of trees or timber, prove this policy.

Unlike many other sections of Connecticut, there were no indigenous Native Americans living in these hills. The region was used for hunting and fishing, but contained no permanent villages. Presumably there were native paths or trails traversing the region, as the residents of the Connecticut River Valley and those along the coastline of Long Island Sound were known to have traded with the Indians in what is now New York State. As the New England and New York tribes were normally enemies, but needed each other for trade, such as shells for wampum from the northern shore of Long Island Sound and for chert and other high quality weapons-making material to be found in New York, they had declared the flat lands in Canaan to be sanctuary lands where all would be safe from attack or harm while exchanging the needed goods. This policy required well-established trails, and one look at a map of the region clearly indicate that the routes followed by the Old North Road from New Hartford to Canaan and what was known as Highway Number Three branching off from that road in southeastern Colebrook and proceeding along Smith Hill Road to Colebrook Center, then north along Connecticut Route 183 to North Colebrook, then up Prock Hill and on into Sandisfield, where the Native Americans had well-established cleared lands used for hunting, make it quite obvious that these first Colonial highways followed a pre-existing transportation network.

It was the threat of invasion by the French and Indians from Canada down the Hudson River Valley that prompted the Colonial Legislature to order these so-called highways to be made passable by troops and militia. On May 1 1756, a committee was appointed "to run a line around Colebrook and erect proper monuments and lay out a highway six rods [99 feet] in width

northwardly through the said town as near the middle as they shall judge most convenient for ye accommodating traveler and the inhabitants that may thereafter settle in said town.”

Once these two military roads were in place, the other necessary roads within the township were laid out and made passable, most of them prior to 1770. For a couple of years, the men of Colebrook and Barkhamsted didn't do much beside make roads and bridges. The General Assembly was forced to suspend tax payments by these two towns due to the fact that no one was gainfully employed at any other jobs. You might think that it was a relief to be free from taxation, but the General Assembly also suspended their right to vote and to take part in the governing process until they could pay their fair share.

The first economic endeavor in Colebrook was the construction of a sawmill by Erastus Wolcott, brother of Oliver, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence for the State of Connecticut. This mill, in operation by May 1766, was constructed just downstream from the bridge at the Center where Loon Meadow Brook flows under Conn. Route 183 and emerges at the other side with the name of Center Brook. Wolcott constructed his house at the top of a little rise just south of the mill site. The structure still stands and has been in continuous use since 1766; it is the low, central portion of Jim Draper's home at 561 Colebrook Road.

While lumber mills were first, and continued to be a part of Colebrook's economic life from that year to the present day, Iron and steel were destined to play the most prominent and historic role. Iron was indispensable in colonial America. Each family needed shovels, axes, hoes, scythe blades, nails, hinges and a myriad of other objects. As the largest iron ore deposits then known in North America were a mere 23 miles west of Colebrook in Salisbury, it was only natural that forges should spring up along streams fairly close to the source of this iron. Vast quantities of charcoal were needed to separate the iron from the ore, and to further refine the raw iron into usable purified iron called merchant bar. Charcoal manufacturing became a big business overnight, and before long the landscape, once covered with a majestic forest of virgin timber, became a completely denuded clear-cut wasteland. Well, perhaps not completely a wasteland, there were areas here and there that had been converted into farm land, but the removal of the forest caused accelerated erosion, and the bulk of our native soil washed down our streams to end up in Long Island Sound. Over the centuries, this process of clear-cutting our forest was repeated two or three more times. Not until the end of the first quarter of the twentieth century did we begin to view the forest as a primary and essential part of the fabric that holds the world together.

Colebrook in the Eighteenth Century, Part II

Iron was first discovered in Salisbury in 1732. Prior to that time, much of the iron products were derived from bog iron, found near the ocean, usually in marshy areas. This iron was difficult to mine, and had a low yield, so the discovery of large deposits of hematite ore was of immense importance. Blast furnaces were constructed in Salisbury and Kent producing large amounts of raw iron called pig iron. These oblong chunks of metal, weighing about 75 pounds each, and full of impurities, were taken to forges, where they were heated white hot and pounded into long flat bars, which removed the bits of contaminating limestone, charcoal and stone.

The first record that we have concerning the importation of iron bars into Colebrook is a teamster's bill for a little over one half ton of iron pigs delivered to the Rockwell site at Colebrook Center in March of 1768. We have no clue as to what use this iron was put to, and except for another receipt for a like amount imported in the fall of 1768, no other mention can be found concerning Rockwell iron until twenty years later. The Rockwells constructed two forges just downstream from the present site of Conn. Route 183 in 1788, and a few years later a

specialized structure called a reverberating furnace further downstream near the bridge leading to Mt. Pisgah Road.

After the War of Independence, there was an economic depression, especially in metals, and by 1803, we see that all the Rockwell iron and steel enterprises had left town, drawn to Winsted, where a more reliable source of water existed. They focused on specialty items such as scythe blades to get themselves past the difficult economic slump.

All industry did not cease with the demise of the iron works. The cascade formed by the eastward flow of Center Brook continued to supply power for sawmills, a large tannery and a fulling mill. Fulling mills were of primary importance in the early years. Flax grew readily in our soil and climate, and the fibers within the stalk were removed by combing them with a paddle-like device full of sharp nails. The result was then spun into yarn, which in turn was woven into a soft, tannish-colored cloth. The role of the fulling process was to condition these fibers in order for them to absorb dyes evenly, as the untreated raw fibers yielded a blotchy end result. The main ingredient in the fulling process is a type of very fine clay called "fuller's earth". There are deposits of this clay in the Connecticut River Valley, laid down under the waters of a huge glacial lake that existed there in glacial times, some 15,000 years ago.

With the exception of blacksmith shops, the iron industry either died a quiet death, or else moved to more advantageous locations such as Winsted. What took its place to provide employment were forest products such as charcoal and lumber, dairying for butter and cheese as well as beef, sheep for wool and mutton and pigs for pork. Many, if not most farms were mainly self-sufficient. By this I mean that they had one to five cows, two or three horses and most likely a yoke of oxen. Coupled with this would be a garden for the family's vegetables and an orchard containing apples, pears, peaches and plums. Excess produce, especially among the fruits, would bring in a small amount of cash, but hopefully enough to pay the taxes at the end of the year. Specialty crops such as maple syrup, maple sugar and blueberries also brought in small amounts of cash.

Other types of small industry that made their appearance along our streams in addition to the lumber mills were paper mills, gristmills, cider mills and small shops for manufacturing such items as chairs, coffee mills, and clock cases. We even boasted a hat shop for several years. The building still stands on Center Street, and now houses George Bodycoat's woodworking shop.

By the 1840's, the nation's industry began to show signs of the mighty machine it was to become, and Colebrook and her surrounding towns reflected this trend. Colebrook's claim to fame in manufacturing was based upon two industries – cotton and chairs.

The Sawyer Brothers cotton mill was in operation from 1840 until 1890. It was by far the largest employer Colebrook ever had - at times employing 200, but with an average of about 100. There were many "factory houses", most of which were on the east side of the river, across the bridge located next to the factory building itself. Prior to 1840, Charles Sawyer erected a gristmill at this site, a few hundred yards south of the Massachusetts border. In 1840 his brother Henry built the cotton mill at the same site, utilizing the in-place dam along with the riparian water rights already in the family.

As the modern cotton industry spread outward from England to the Continent and to the United States, the skills required automatically attracted a more intelligent segment of the workforce, thus perpetuating the higher salary rate over manufacturing jobs. Because of this, the cotton industry was able to attract skilled workers from diverse geographical locations.

The reasons for the industry establishing itself in the Northeast were several. In addition to plentiful waterpower, climatic conditions were of primary importance when determining the location of cotton spinning. Humidity is important, as some dampness is essential to make the fibers cling, but excessive moisture is a disadvantage. This was the primary reason cotton mills weren't built in the Deep South where the cotton was grown. Another factor that was important

in the establishment of the cotton industry was the disadvantages of other sources of employment, such as bad climate for agriculture, declining productivity of the soil and the shifting of animal husbandry from one region to another. Combinations of these factors prevent the absorption of population into agricultural pursuits and make the now excess population readily available to an industrial based economy contained within the confines of large factory buildings.

As to the demise and eventual abandonment of the Colebrook River cotton mill, it fell victim to adverse transportation and evolving technology. The railroad came to and stopped in Winsted, nine miles short of the factory. As all the raw materials and all finished products had to be shipped by horse-drawn wagons over this distance, it rapidly became cost inefficient.

The world production of cotton underwent major changes in the years prior to the twentieth century, led for the most part by the U.S. with the introduction of laborsaving devices and improvement of the looms, causing thousands of workable old looms to be scrapped. Thus the work force was reduced and older and smaller mills, no longer able to compete, were abandoned.