

Colebrook's Historical Town Documents

The transfer of materials from the old town offices in the former Colebrook Inn to the new facility in the "Gray Barn" was an exhausting undertaking. For many years documents, files, lists, maps and countless other objects and items have been accumulating in what is essentially one half of the first floor of the old 1816 building.

If anyone needed a graphic illustration of the term "bursting at the seams", they merely had to visit the Colebrook Town Hall. A large part of the problem were items mandated by the State of Connecticut to be preserved for various periods of time, some in perpetuity. Indeed, it was the State that applied the pressure on the citizens of the town to come up with a modern facility or face sanctions that none would have wished to contemplate.

Some categories of material do not by law need to be kept forever – tax rate books, for example. Others, such as the original land records, once they are duplicated by modern methods are not required to be kept and maintained by the town. To even think of discarding these (to me) priceless documents, which in Colebrook's case date back to 1732, is a sacrilege. In our case, there is no need to worry, as arrangements are being made for these priceless originals to be transferred to the Colebrook Historical Society, and as that entity is expanding into the old town offices space, the volumes will not leave the vault in which they have resided since the Town Hall was relocated there in 1953.

As important as these volumes are, the treasure trove did not end there. One metal cabinet yielded scores of documents dealing with tax rate books. A pretty dry subject, you well might imagine, but there is information in them that can be electrifying when interpreted. The earliest tax volume thus far seen is 1809, and as the entire collection has not yet been gone through, there might be even older editions. The potential of what these books have to say about the tax structure on the Old Forge in Robertsville is going to prove quite interesting. So is a study of the spread of Marino sheep in Colebrook.

This episode in local animal husbandry is historically significant, not just for the local economy, but for the nation as a whole. Marino sheep were developed on the Iberian Peninsula, home to Spain and Portugal, in the Middle Ages, and to remove one from there was a capital offense. The earliest known date that they were successfully smuggled out was in 1765, when a few were taken to Saxony, now part of Germany. They were taken to Hungary in 1775, France in 1776, and in 1802 the first Marinos known to have left pure descendants were taken to the United States, and in 1809-1810 an importation of 4,000 Marino sheep was made. The American ambassador to Spain at that time was a man from southern Vermont, and it was to that area these sheep came. From there they were dispersed throughout New England. We do know that several hundred came to Colebrook, a statistic that probably indicates some sort of connection with the ambassador from Vermont and a Colebrook resident.

Marino wool consists of fibers five times finer than a human hair, and it is estimated that of the 1,000 some-odd breeds of sheep in the world, Marinos supply one third of the wool worldwide. The superior quality of this wool was acknowledged from the beginning, as our tax records show that in 1789 one pound of wool was valued in Colebrook at one shilling six pence (.37 cents), but in 1809 a local man was convicted of

stealing three pounds of Marino wool and as a consequence, had to pay a fine of \$7.00. As fines were triple the value of the goods stolen or damaged in those days, we can estimate the true value at .43 cents per pound, which is quite a significant price increase over “regular” wool.

Apparently the town encouraged farmers to raise this new breed of sheep, as the 1812 tax list (the earliest we had prior to this present windfall) indicates that each farmer was not only exempt from paying taxes on sheep, they were actually given a tax credit of .75 cents for each sheep. There seems to have been a limit of 20 sheep however, as not one farmer in Colebrook exceeded that number. This in the days when the Phelps farm in North Colebrook had over 200 sheep on their property.

This information is given here to indicate the kinds of important information that can be gleaned from an old, dry tax book.

Another fascinating aspect of these early tax books is the fact that they sometimes use a Hartford newspaper as a cover. Apparently the folio without any cover was cheaper than one with, and in at least two instances (1809 and 1812) a complete newspaper was sewn onto a coverless volume. These Hartford newspapers consisted of four pages approximately 16 inches high, just the height of the folio. Needless to say, the entire contents of these papers make for fascinating reading. In the 1812 “cover” appears the declaration of war against Great Britain, signed by president Madison. In the 1809 cover there is a front-page tale of piracy on the high seas that occurred off the coast of Nova Scotia in which several members of the crew died and the captain jumped for his life into the ocean. Apparently the mutineers were eventually overpowered and the ship was sailed into Boston, where it was when the account was written.

As I stood in the middle of the vault surrounded by people busily emptying out the stored volumes to be relocated in the new Town Hall, Town Clerk Joyce Nelson reminded me that there would be plenty of time to read every word at a later date after she had itemized and released the unwanted material to the Colebrook Historical Society, in the meantime, would I do one of two things – move out of the way or help.

Coincidentally, the June edition of Smithsonian Magazine arrived, and in it there is an account of the discovery of a volume that recently turned up in the subbasement of the U.S. Capitol entitled “Senators Compensation and Mileage”. This was the long-lost official payroll and expense register for the Senate’s first 90 years. It was accompanied by 59 successor volumes of ledgers, books not as dramatic as the first because they cover later, better-documented times. The text of the article goes on to say “To historians, its raw data promise a lode of information and insights to be coaxed and tweaked, teased and winked from its pages.”

The volumes uncovered in Colebrook’s documents vault will be just as important to our region as will be this volume discovered in Washington for the entire nation.

There will be lots of midnight oil burned by historians in the coming months both in Washington and in Colebrook!