

Colebrook's Non-involvement With the Railroads

Every few months someone will seek out one of us who know something about local history and let us know that they have heard about the railroad era in these parts, but one bit of information has so far eluded them – where exactly was Colebrook Station located? And so, for the umpteenth time, you try to gently break the news that Colebrook never had a railroad, and Colebrook Station existed, all right, but in Winchester! The amazing thing to me is how many times this information is met with either resistance, or once in a while with downright hostility. “What do you mean, there never was a railroad in Colebrook, I’ve seen photos of the station as well as the tracks!”

Yes, I’ve seen those same photos, but if you will be patient and listen, I’ll tell you about our town’s involvement with the iron horse:

The Naugatuck Railroad, chartered in 1845, was completed to Winsted in September 1849. A footnote on page 148 of *Steelways of New England* states: “A quaint instance of industrial specialization is found in the prospectus of the road, where we read that in the Town of Colebrook, just to the north of Winsted, the principle businesses are five large tanneries and eleven mills for sawing clock cases, coffee-mill boards and hemlock stuff. Go and look at Colebrook now, and see the changes.” (For the worse; what they actually did was to quote a line of Shelly’s that describes man’s ever-changing endeavors.)

Actually, the economic outlook in town wasn’t quite as bleak as the authors of this promotional literature made it out to be; nine years later, the Colebrook assessor’s book lists the five tanneries and eleven mills still in operation. However, any manufacturing town that is by-passed by the state-of-the-art transportation of its day (in this case, the railroad), will never become competitive, and will in fact be relegated to the role of a backwater community.

The first transportation system in Colebrook was the military roads (more than likely following previously established Native American trails). They were created by the Colonial legislature to facilitate the rapid deployment of troops toward Albany and the upper Hudson River Valley to head off a perceived (and very real) threat by France and her Indian allies to attack the English colonies to their south. This threat was past by 1765, and from that date forward, roads were utilized primarily by civilians. These served us well, giving access to the surrounding communities. During Colonial times, residents of rural towns seldom traveled far from home. They were basically self-sufficient; money was a very scarce commodity, and the barter system that they used did not work well if products had to be transported over the crude trails that masqueraded as highways in those times.

The next phase of our highways is known as the era of the turnpike, which began around here in 1799, and continued for the next 50 years. In these parts, the investors in the turnpike enterprise never made much money (if at all), so that when the railroad era was ushered in during the 1840s, it spelled the demise of the turnpikes. It was at this point that Colebrook began to suffer economically by not having an up to date link to the world. An analogy can be made between those times and today with our computers and the so-called information highway. Imagine a business today that does not own a computer, but instead relied upon one of its employees periodically taking documents down the road to the nearest computer, fax and email terminal.

In Colebrook's case, it was not necessarily a matter of losing existing businesses; it was a matter of the right commercial atmosphere not being able to establish itself. As a consequence, when the second rail system came through the area some 30 years after the first, Colebrook offered no inducement to the railroad moguls to include us in any way. The closest tracks are about one mile distant from our southwest corner. The modern traveler, turning off from Rt. 44 onto Danbury Quarter Road will pass, after two or three hundred yards, the site, on the left, of a milk stop once known as "Colebrook Station".

The Connecticut Western Railroad, which had broken ground in Winsted in 1869, and completed to Canaan in 1871, established a series of small stations that were primarily intended as points to pick up milk cans and return the empties to the local dairy farms. Some of these hardly deserved the name "station", as was the case with Colebrook Station, which consisted of a three-sided shed containing a floor constructed at the same height as the floor of the freight car. The occasional passenger could have sought shelter from the elements under the roof and among the freight.

The flat economy of the area is reflected by the fact that the Connecticut Western filed for bankruptcy in 1880. The following year, it was reorganized as the Hartford and Connecticut Western Railway Co. In 1889, a newly formed company named The Central New England and Western Railroad Co., leased the H&CWR, but sold out to the Philadelphia, Reading and New England Railroad in 1892. In 1898, this road went into receivership, to emerge later as the Central New England RR. In 1927, the CNERR became incorporated into the New York, New Haven and Hartford empire. All tracks were abandoned along this line in 1931 or '32.

As to the existing photos showing an old tollgate with railroad tracks in the foreground usually labeled "Mill Brook Station", this was located about one quarter of a mile east of the intersection of Rt. 44 and the Danbury Quarter Rd. along the abandoned road once known as the Greenwoods Turnpike, now behind the dry dam.

The reason we have gone into such detail here is because it points up the marginal aspect of the local economy. At various times, the little station at the east end of the Danbury Quarter Road was named either "Colebrook Station" or "Lawrence Station", reflecting the fact that the Lawrence farm on Pinney St., the present home of Ellen Fredsall, was the best and largest dairy farm, as well as lumber mill in the region.

There exists another confusing misunderstanding about a railroad in Colebrook, one that is mentioned in conjunction with Colebrook River. This was caused by a fraudulent scheme to bilk investors. The stated plan was to construct a track between New Hartford and Lee, Mass. A roadbed was actually built on the level valley floor along the east side of the Farmington River, although no ties or tracks were laid. The gorge that holds the two dams would have been so expensive to traverse that a legitimate railroad company would never have considered it, and the stretch north of New Boston presented an equally daunting task. As late as 1910, someone attempted to rally interest in a trolley line along this same terrain. How many travelers they expected to serve is something that eludes anyone who considers the topic. At any rate, as we now know, the era of the auto was just beginning to dominate our transportation network. Just as well that no rail systems ever came to Colebrook.