

Colebrook's Old Schoolhouses *

There has always been an active interest in Colebrook schoolhouses and their fates. The first thing any researcher must keep in mind when dealing with old buildings, especially town owned ones such as schools, is that they quite often succumb to various acts of nature, whether it be old age or fire. In the past, when a school burned down, it was immediately rebuilt, usually on the same site. Record keeping in the old days left a great deal to be desired, and it seems that more often than not nobody bothered to make an official entry in a town ledger. The various components of town government were apt to be jealous of one another; consequently, the School Society kept their books, the selectmen kept theirs, the Ecclesiastical Society theirs, and so on. There was no central repository for these documents, such as afforded in modern times by town halls and fireproof vaults. What usually happened was that the out-going clerk or secretary handed over the book(s) he was currently working on, in addition to its predecessors, to his successor. Two hundred twenty some-odd years of keeping records under conditions such as these in private homes having un-lined chimneys, was not conducive to a high rate of survival. The leading cause for the replacement of original houses is fire.

As far as Colebrook's schoolhouses are concerned, we are fortunate (literally) that many school records survived. Much of what we have concerning our schools in the Historical Society was missing for more than half a century in Town Hall, and others survived because people such as George and Mary Gray and Robert and Joann Deming found and presented journals and documents to us. Some of the stories of survival are enough to make your hair turn gray. George Gray Sr., while sorting refuse left at our old recycling location back in the 60s or 70s, happened to see the corner of an old document peeking out from under a pile of debris, and upon pulling it out, found himself face-to-face with hard bound volumes of various school districts, mostly from the early 19th century. The odds for survival under conditions such as these are very low. We wonder what percentage of our past has actually come down to us in usable form.

Now for the schools themselves: The oldest, known today as the Rock School, dates from 1779. The main factor in allowing us to be fairly certain of its originality is the lumber to be seen in the floorboards. The position of the colonial style wooden benches are still discernable along each side of the classroom, also, these boards have upwards of 60 growth rings per inch, a sure indication of virgin forest. By the time the 19th century rolled around, buildings were being constructed with second-growth timber, which was much easier to cut, transport and saw into lumber than the huge, heavy trees of the original forest. These trees had much wider growth rings, as they grew much faster in the more open, sun-filled land formerly covered by the primeval forest.

The other original school, the South, initially located at the intersection of today's Bricklemaier and Old North Roads, burned about 1815 or 1816 and was replaced in 1817 at the intersection of the Old North Road and Smith Hill Road. This building lasted until 1846, when it was replaced by the brick building, now the front portion of 262 Smith Hill Road.

The third schoolhouse was the Beech Hill School, first built in 1785. This was located at the convergence of three roads, the only survivor of which is today's Simons Pond Road. The site is about a half mile north of Beech Hill Road. This burned at least

once, was replaced, and then removed to Sandy Brook Road after it ceased to be used in 1911. Today it is a component of 141 Sandy Brook Road.

The date of building for the first Forge District School still eludes us at this writing. The earliest school document that we have begins on April 18, 1834 and ends on July 20, 1866. In this, the very first entry proves that there was already a schoolhouse standing in the Forge District, as it states that the meeting was held “at the Forge District Schoolhouse.” The notes from the second meeting also hold a tantalizing bit of information: “Voted to alter location of the schoolhouse.”

The replacement building was contracted out for the princely sum of \$167.00 and the old building was sold for \$26.00. On December 4, 1834 their ledger reads: “The meeting was held at the new schoolhouse.” This building served until 1866, when it was replaced at the same site by a new building. In 1904 it burned to the ground and was immediately replaced by the building that still stands next to the ex church building that served as the headquarters for the Victory Grange. After it ceased to be used as a school, it became the home of the Forge District Fire Department for fifty years. At this writing, it awaits the next chapter in its history.

The Southwest District schoolhouse is located on Millbrook Road and is the first house on the right after crossing Pinney Street on the way to Route 44. It acquired its first building in 1810. This building was replaced at least once, and the present-day survivor, part of 129 Millbrook Road, was used until 1901, when dwindling enrollment forced its closing and the remaining students were transported to Winsted.

The building housing the old West School (originally named “Porter’s District”), authorized by the School Society in 1796, was not built until 1811. This building still exists in essentially its original form as 124 Stillman Hill Road, at the intersection of Phelps Road.

The Center School District dates from 1805, but we know nothing about the early building, although there is nothing to indicate that it was located other than where the present building now stands at the bottom of Schoolhouse Road. The first building lasted until 1839, when the voters elected to build a new schoolhouse. This two-storied building remained until 1882, when a conventional one-room schoolhouse that served in that capacity until an addition was applied in 1916, making it into a two-room schoolhouse, replaced it. It remained so until the new Consolidated School opened in 1949. The town sold the building to Dr. Luchs, who used it as his office until his retirement. Today it is a private home located at 11 Schoolhouse Road.

The North School District’s first building was erected in 1823, and was located directly across from the intersection of McClave Road and Prock Hill Road. After it ceased to be a schoolhouse in 1916, it was moved to its present location at 50 Prock Hill Road, where it now serves as the center portion of the existing building.

The River District was completely eliminated by the creation of Colebrook River Lake, and nothing remains of the old two-story schoolhouse.

This leaves two remaining school districts; the Mountain District, in operation from 1827 until 1857, that never had a building of its own, relying instead on private homes, and the Sandy Brook District, whose schoolhouse stood on the right-hand side of Sandy Brook Road just west of the first bridge after leaving Conn. Route 8. The building was used from 1857 until 1905, when the remaining students were transferred to the Forge School. The building did not survive.