

Colnbrook

Until the fall of 2001, the origin of our town name was not thought to hold many mysteries. True, there appeared to be more than one “Colebrook” on the map of England, represented by several different spellings, which cast some doubt as to which one really was our “parent”. Our reasoning went like this: the majority of the inhabitants of Windsor had come from the Boston area after arriving in the new world from the English counties of Devon, Somerset and Dorset. On a map of Great Britain, look at the peninsula at the southwest directly south of Wales. This peninsula consists of these three counties plus Cornwall, located at the very end. In the center of Devon you will see the town of Colebrooke; this became our number one probability. However, Colebrook Connecticut has an extensive history involving the iron industry; not only that, but the Phelps family had employed ironworkers from the Birmingham England area. This assumption is reinforced by the name of Brummagem Brook, flowing out of Doolittle Pond in Norfolk that supplied the power to operate the water wheel at their forge. Brummagem is the dialectal name for Birmingham England when spoken privately amongst Birmingham natives. Thirty-five miles northwest of Birmingham is the town of Coalbrookdale, also an iron-working community; thus it too was deemed a possibility for the origin of our town name.

Colebrook residents consisted of three categories; those who opted for Colebrooke, those for Coalbrookdale, and (probably) the largest segment of all who couldn't have cared less! Then, on September 20, 2001, George Wilber, our first selectman, received a letter from his counterpart in a town in England named Colnbrook; he thought that it might be mutually beneficial to our two “sister” towns to get to know each other!

George asked for my input on the matter, and my initial reaction was to sit tight and review the issue. To tell the truth, I had never heard of Colnbrook, England. Phonically, “coal” and “cole” are identical, and while a researcher might seek variations in their endings, no one ever thought the letter after the “l” might hold new information.

Notice that I said that I had never heard of that spelling applied to an English town; what rang a bell in my mind was that I had seen that spelling, and remembered making a note to myself in a margin reading “that is an ‘n’”. Do you think that I could find that entry? Certainly not immediately; the better part of two days were spent in that search – it became a matter of proving to myself that my mind hadn't slipped as badly as I feared it had! Finally, there it was, I had copied a scrap of paper containing field notes written by the surveyor who had surveyed several roads in town between the years 1793 and 1797. In each of five entries he had written “Colnbrook”. His handwriting is very legible, but there are no other specimens around that I know of. In the days prior to dictionaries, not only was a person's handwriting distinctive, but the spellings also acted as a fingerprint. (For example, this fellow spelled the tree “Chestnut” correctly, when virtually every writer in this area misspelled it “Chessenut”.)

It turns out that the town of Colnbrook is adjacent to the western boundary of the city of London, more than 200 miles distant from the town of Colebrooke in Devon. My natural assumption in cases such as this is to go with prior reasoning, after all, a lot of dedicated and competent people have given thought to matters such as these, and it hardly seems likely that this possible connection could have been overlooked.

In this case, all the information at my disposal needed to be reviewed with the possibility in mind that perhaps new light could be shed on an issue we had come to take for granted. My background being what it is, the first thing I consulted was maps of England. These, along with the histories of the Puritans who came here between the years 1630 –1641 and their subsequent relocations within New England, seem to tell, or at least hold forth a possibility of another source for the name of Colebrook, Conn.

Beginning with the maps, we see in the county of Devon towns named Torrington, Colebrooke, Hartland and Plymouth. Records state that the ship “*Mary and John*” sailed March 20, 1630 from Plymouth, Devon with 40 families, among the names of those who would eventually come to Colebrook were Clapp and Drake from Dorset; Gaylord, Gillett, Pinney, Pomeroy, Rockwell and Wolcott from Somerset; George Phelps and William Phelps from Dorset. The year 1630 saw some 150 persons emigrating from Dorset, Somerset and Devon. No wonder many generations later we scanned the maps of those three counties for clues as to the origins of our town names; nor were we disappointed, for there, dead center in the county of Devon was the little town of Colebrooke. Bearing in mind that in no case (to my knowledge) do the towns of origin of the emigrants appear on the lists of passengers, but only the county, the dilemma facing researchers can be daunting.

However, we have to dig deeper if we are to arrive at a reasonable conclusion, and here is where maps come to the rescue. We find that in the vicinity of London three prominent town names in Litchfield County. Ten miles due north of London is the town of Berkhamsted; adjacent to the city limits of the capitol is the town of Colnbrook, and 40 miles to the southwest is the town of Litchfield, which in turn is only 15 miles due north of Winchester. I don’t see how our predecessors, without positive knowledge about our towns of origin could have dismissed out of hand the possibility (probability?) of a source closer to London. Colnbrook occupies a prominent position on the table of possibilities for me, and hopefully a little more digging will uncover more evidence that will better clarify the situation.

At this juncture, I see the proposal on the part of the town council of Colnbrook England to establish closer relationships with our community, especially between our schools as a very exciting one. We received two calendars from 2000 and 2001 consisting of beautiful photos taken in their community. We look forward to furthering our relationship with great anticipation.

Historic Bytes

Bob Grigg