

I have decided to insert this piece between the articles on Colebrook's economic history. It is, after all, a subject closely associated with not only Winsted, but the region as a whole.

Connecticut Charter and John Boyd

Taped to the inside cover of the Colebrook Historical Society's copy of John Boyd's "Annals of Winchester Conn." is a newspaper clipping from *The Winsted Evening Citizen* for February 17, 1903. I think it makes interesting reading.

"While Postmaster Glynn was in the capitol at Hartford recently, he learned a historical fact from State librarian George Godard that is of especial interest to the residents of this town. While in conversation with Mr. Godard, Mr. Glynn referred to the late John Boyd, former secretary of state, as having been a life long resident of this town. 'Why', said Mr. Godard, 'he is the man who was responsible for the preservation of the charter, which Connecticut got from King Charles II'. Mr. Godard then told how it had been discovered recently that it was Mr. Boyd who had preserved the original charter instead of the duplicate as had been supposed for about 75 years.

In the Colonial records of Connecticut it is stated how that in 1817 or 1818, while Mr. Boyd was preparing for college at the Hartford Grammar School, he boarded in the family of Rev. Dr. Flint of the South Church.

Coming in one day from school, he noticed on the workstand of Mrs. Bissell, the doctor's mother-in-law, a dingy piece of parchment, covered on one side with black letter manuscript. In answer to his inquiries, Mrs. Bissell told him that having occasion for some pasteboard, her friend and neighbor, Mrs. Wyllys had sent her this. Mr. Boyd proposed to procure her a piece of pasteboard in exchange for the parchment, to which Mrs. Bissell consented. It was not, however, until six or eight years had elapsed when Mr. Boyd examined the parchment with care, when he learned for the first time what he thought (and was generally thought), until recently, was a duplicate of the charter."

"The Colonial Record, Vol. iv, published in 1868, says: 'The original charter, which now hangs in the secretary's office at Hartford, is engraved on three skins. The duplicate was written on two. So much of the duplicate as remains being about three-fourths of the second skin, is now in the library of the Connecticut Historical Society, where it was placed by the Hon. John Boyd, late secretary of state.'

Not long ago, however, search was made through the records in London, and it was found that five pounds was the fee paid for drafting the original charter and 20 shillings [one pound] for the duplicate. Examination of the documents showed that 20 shillings was written (probably a memoriam) on the supposed original charter and five pounds on the supposed duplicate so that now it is certain that the one saved by Mr. Boyd was the original and the one that hung for years in the secretary's office and has recently been hung in the state library is the duplicate.

The Mrs. Wyllys spoken of was related to the former secretary of state by that name and the parchment was probably found in his effects. Every schoolboy will remember that Connecticut had the most liberal charter of all the colonies and how the younger Winthrop obtained it from King Charles II because he proved Charles I's friendship for his father by showing a ring that the king had given his father. Connecticut lived under this charter until 1818, 42 years after the Declaration of Independence."

It was this same John Boyd who authored “The Annals of Winchester Conn.”, published in 1873. Winsted and Winchester are fortunate indeed to have had such a capable man as one of their own.

John Boyd was born to a family skilled in iron and steel manufacturing, principally scythes. This farm implement, once so important, is hardly ever seen nowadays, and the proper method of using it seems to be a lost art, judging from the gyrations of modern practitioners.

The first establishment in this country for making scythes using trip hammers and geared grinding stones was located in Bridgewater, Mass. during or perhaps just after the Revolutionary War. The second scythe shop was built near the west bank of the Hudson River near the town of Newburg, New York. Benjamin Jenkins, from Bridgewater, was employed as foreman, and James Boyd was an apprentice in the works. These two men became brothers-in-law and in 1792 came to Winsted and erected the third such establishment in the country. It is said that they chose Winsted because it was more or less in between Bridgewater and Newburg, and thus wouldn't infringe on the other's territory. At any rate, it was a move that was to prove extremely beneficial to Winsted and the surrounding towns.

The location of this initial scythe work in Winsted was just down stream from the Gilbert Clock works at the foot of Wallens Hill where the Winsted Manufacturing Co. once stood. It still was manufacturing scythe blades when I was young, as I remember my father saying that theirs was the best product on the market. It was the only scythe blade he ever bought. Somewhere during the late forties or early fifties, when the market for their product was nearing the vanishing point, they ceased operations, and we had to purchase a foreign product, made in Sweden. The blade was twice as wide as our local product had been, and weighed considerably less. This new blade took and kept a sharp edge, but the balance was peculiar, and the lack of weight forced the scyther to expend much more energy than he was accustomed to. Gasoline powered cutting tools mercifully replaced these “new and improved” scythes.

All told, there were at least five scythe shops in Winsted at one time or another, all off shoots from the original built by Jenkins and Boyd in 1792. Throughout the nineteenth century, Winsted was a major supplier of Scythe blades, and according to John Boyd's “Annals” most of the improvements made in their manufacture were Winsted inventions. In the 1870's and 1880's, Winsted was turning out a quarter of a million blades a year.

Of course, once a product is manufactured, it must be sold, and this supplied another profession that New Englanders were famous for – the peddler, or traveling salesman. A half a century ago, Amy Baxter, a schoolteacher in Colebrook River who had married Gilbert Baxter, wrote her reminiscences, and in them she tells of her husband traveling around the country selling scythe blades. He had the best luck selling along the banks of the St. Lawrence River, and went back over that route year after year. This was in the 1890's.

How much easier it is for historians to function when they have the benefit of accurate, complete information of the type supplied by John Boyd. Of course, in his particular case, this multi-talented man was a valuable asset to his community, his state and his country on several fronts; he was a truly remarkable man.

Historic Bytes