

Dialects

The study of language presents interesting and satisfying insights into our past. Sometimes the spellings or use of a particular word or phrase can be just as revealing as an artifact that comes to light.

Research in our town record books has revealed the following, which serve as a guide to the accents of those who lived in these hills during colonial times. Remember that it was the Town Clerk who did the writing, and any accents hinted at would have been his alone, but nevertheless, it is a valid assumption that the majority of his contemporaries would not have spoken much differently. Here are a few selections from Colebrook, Winchester and Norfolk in the 18th century:

Ceare (care), as in “take ceare of the ----”; Chesenu (Chestnut tree); mash (marsh); Magret (Margaret); potators (potatoes); Sandersfield (Sandisfield); Berkhamsted (Barkhamsted); parsonally (personally); ajineing (adjoining); garding (garden).

The sources of our use of the English language had roots back in the home country of England. The situation was complicated by the fact that each of the English counties had their own distinct dialect. New England pronunciations and usage derived largely from the County of Kent, which became the topic of a speech given in 1885 to the American Antiquarian Society by professor Hoar of Clark University. Here are some that apply locally:

Swath, or swarth, the row of grass left on the ground by the scythe; grub, meaning food; bail, the handle of a pail; along, used in the phrase “get along with you”; bar-way, the passage way into a field when the bars are removed; bat, a large stick; biddy, a chicken; bay, the space between two beams; by-gollie, a mild oath; botch, to do something badly; bolt, to swallow whole or fast; bolt-upright, booby-hatch, which originally meant a clumsy carriage; boozy, drunk; brand new; buck, the body of a cart or wagon; cess, a tax (the root of our term “cess-pool”); moonshine, illicit spirits.

One of my pet peeves is the mispronunciation of the word “Northeast”. Weathermen and other mass-media types no doubt will carry the day, but the original pronunciation was that of the New Englanders, or perhaps more specifically, the Nantucket fishermen. They do say “nor’west”, and “sou’west”, but north is “no’th” with the long “o” and the soft “th”. Northeast is “no’theast”, pronounced with the same soft “th” (like “mouth” when used as a verb.)

When either north or south is used as an adjective before the noun however, each takes its ordinary dictionary pronunciation, as a “north wind” or “the south shore”. It is only when used without the noun that the long “o” sound in “no’th” and the soft “th” in both words are heard. Yet the next time a storm comes up the coast, you can rely on all the weather forecasters warning us of the coming “nor-easter”.

Another example of a general mispronunciation is the name of the largest city in Florida. It will probably come as a revelation to the vast number of readers that native Floridians prior to the coming of radio in the late teens and early twenties, always pronounced it “Mi am-uh”, with the accent on the middle syllable. My paternal grandfather lived there at that time and owned

three bakeries in the city. He said that the radio announcers on the early stations were all from the north, and somehow got into the habit of mispronouncing it, and none of the natives were about to talk to them, let alone correct them. I can't swear to the last part being exactly true, but the rest is correct. Once in a great while I will hear a person who has a long-time Florida background pronounce it "Mi am-uh", so the correct version lives on.