

## The Great Hartford Water Grab

I believe it would be safe to say that there is not one Colebrook resident who is old enough to remember the commotion that was caused by the Metropolitan District Commission's acquiring the land in and around Colebrook River, that doesn't to this day have very strong feelings about the outcome. I was in grade school/high school during this period, and while not old enough to have had anything to say about the matter, nevertheless remember the heated arguments my folks and indeed all Colebrook citizens were embroiled in over what was universally referred to as "the Land Grab".

In the files of the Colebrook Historical Society I came across an ad taken out by the Colebrook Taxpayers Association that appeared in the *Winsted Evening Citizen* on April 3, 1947. It will serve to remind our oldsters of the greatest upheaval ever to befall this town and to introduce younger and newer residents to the events leading up to the building of the dams that forever drowned or caused to be abandoned nearly one third of the Town of Colebrook. Here is the entire text of this information ad:

"COLEBROOK vs. HARTFORD WATER GRAB: Here is some background material everybody should know":

"The Water Bureau asked for a meeting in Colebrook to 'explain' Bill No. 416, on Thursday, March 27. Our representatives called the meeting. Mr. Eddy, the Hartford representative, and the pro-bureau element got an unexpectedly violent barrage of opposition. So violent that a call for a regular town meeting was indicted for a showdown vote. A wave of taxpayer revolt plus organization of a protest mass meeting finally produced the call for this Saturday's town meeting."

"At the Thursday meeting Lester W. Schaefer, the town's attorney, managed, after prolonged and relentless questioning, to drag from Mr. Eddy the reluctant admission that, when and if the exigency arose, the Water Bureau would try to take over the Sandy Brook area and its tributaries. Asked if the Water Bureau would give us a contract agreeing never to invade this area, Mr. Eddy replied, and we quote: 'Such a contract would be worthless because we could employ condemnation proceedings later on.'

When Mr. Goodwin, Chairman of the Water Bureau, was asked for such a contract several weeks ago, he flatly refused."

"What happened next? Last Tuesday (April Fool's Day, remember!) Mr. Goodwin, when told that our meeting would undoubtedly vote overwhelmingly against the Water Bureau bill, made our representatives, Smith and Pruyn, this offer: He had a 'contract' typed out, which provided against any further invasion of our Sandy Brook area. This in consideration of the taxpayers voting in favor of the Hartford Water Bureau Bill."

"Now an array of legal talent informs us that such a 'forbearance, or negative' contract, (promising NOT to do something), is a very weak sister, a feeble protection against any legal battle to nullify it, if and when the Water Bureau elects to try and take us over. They add that it is doubtful if a municipal corporation like the Water Board can make such a contract. Also such a contract would ignore the interest of our people in the Colebrook River section, and would mean we'd literally be selling them down the river, just as brutally as would the Hartford Water Bureau. The Water Bureau says they are fairly sure their bill will pass. Have they their political henchmen solidly lined up, that

they openly boast of success? And if so sure, why offer us a 'contract' they know is worthless? (Mr. Eddy's statement.)"

"Even if such a contract held water for a time, the Water Bureau is powerful enough to eventually breach it, even if they have to take it to the Supreme Court of the U.S. Assuming by some miracle the Water Bureau assurances and promises (spurious as a tin dime, hollow as a toy balloon) held for a time, their eventual successors would not necessarily hold themselves bound to their predecessor's ideas. Be prepared for the following strategy by the Water Bureau at next Saturday's meeting: An attempt will be made to split (divide and conquer) the meeting by (A) Presenting the Water Bureau 'contract'; (B) Attempting to postpone the vote while 'we think it over,' until another town meeting, later on; (C) Arguing that, if the Water Grab bill is passed, and we DON'T accept this contract NOW, then we will have nothing to trade with later on. (Note that this is a tacit admission the Water Bureau WILL try to take us over... 'later on.'"

So there you are, fellow taxpayers. The chips are down. Go to the meeting this Saturday, in the basement of the Colebrook Center Congregational Church at 8 p. m. Defeat the Water Bureau element in its effort to put over any 'postponed' meeting, to 'think over' this contract-bribe, delayed-action trick. There has been enough of this sort of funny business already. Resort to such sabotage proves the desperation of the Hartford Water Bureau, because the one thing they are in terror of is Colebrook's vote against the bill. So go to this meeting and vote NO!"

We all know what the outcome of all this was, of course, we and the surrounding towns voted "no", but we were a small minority among all of the larger cities and towns in Connecticut, and the road to building the Colebrook River dams was wide open.

The major concern here was not the false hope that somehow the residents of "The River" would not have to move; that was a foregone conclusion, the real fear (and it really was a real fear), was that other dams were in the pipeline. This policy, if implemented, would have fragmented Colebrook and Norfolk, and who is to say whether or not it would have stopped there.

The Water Bureau's M.O. was to have their employees buy up all property in one of their target areas that might go on the market. They would then live there until such time that the bureau had enough land tied up so as to be able to take the rest by eminent domain. At this point the employees would sign over the property to their employer. They had already started this process on Sandy Brook, where the Army Corps of Engineers had plans to place a dam on the lower reaches of Sandy Brook about where 334 is presently located. The property where the thin edge of the wedge was applied was at 108 Sandy Brook, an abandoned dwelling, with the roof beginning to cave in. Wilfred Carpenter, who happened to be a land surveyor in the employ of the Water Bureau, purchased this in either 1946 or '47. It was crystal clear to the concerned citizens of Colebrook just what was going on here. Eventually the Water Bureau decided to abandon plans for further development in town, partly due to the continuing resistance concerning Colebrook River, and the public repudiation of several of their major premises, one being that water from the West Branch was slated as drinking water for the greater Hartford area. This argument was used to take over The River, but they never intended to implement the policy, due to the prohibitive cost of the necessary tunnel connecting Colebrook River with the Barkhamsted Reservoir.

The price of freedom is constant vigilance on the part of informed citizens.