

Hartland 170 Years Ago

“Hartland is an elevated township, 22 miles from Hartford, bounded north by the Massachusetts line, east by Granby, west by Colebrook and south by Barkhamsted, and is about 7 miles in length and 5 in breadth. This town is hilly and mountainous, being embraced within the extensive range of granite in this part of the state. From its elevated situation it is cold and frosty, and the soil rather sterile, producing but little grain; it however affords tolerable grazing. The making of butter and cheese, beef and pork, and pasturing of cattle are the principal kinds of business done in the town. The farmers in the east of this to the Connecticut River have been in the practice of sending their growing or young cattle and sheep into this and other grazing towns, to be kept during several months in the spring and summer.”

“The town is divided into two parts, one called East, the other West Hartland, in each of which is a Congregational church; there is also a Methodist church in the limits of the town. The town is centrally divided by the East Branch of the Farmington River, on which are several small tracts of alluvial, and excellent mill seats. The deep ravine, or valley through which this stream passes is called Hartland Hollow, and is characterized by bold, rough and picturesque scenery.”

“Hartland is one of the towns sold by the State to the inhabitants of Hartford and Windsor. The first proprietors’ meeting was holden in Hartford in 1733. The first person who lived in the town was John Kendall, who being in debt, fled from Granby and to get out of the way of his creditors, located himself in Hartland Hollow, on the west bank of the branch of the Farmington River; here he made himself a hut with slabs which floated down the stream from Granville, Mass. – this was in 1753. While here Kendall’s wife bore a pair of twin daughters, the first white children born in the town. Kendall stayed in the town about one year. In 1755, Simon Baxter came to this town. He was considered a person of suspicious character. In the Revolution he joined the army of Burgoyne, and finally died at Halifax.”

“Hartland was incorporated as a town in 1761, at which time it belonged to Litchfield County. In 1768, the Rev. Sterling Graves was ordained, being the first minister in the town. He was ordained in the open air, on a knoll about a mile south of the present Congregational church in East Hartland. The first meetinghouse was erected in 1770. In West Hartland, the first minister was the Rev. Nathaniel Gaylord, who settled there about 1782. Mr. Gaylord is still living, and preaches occasionally.”

The author then inserted the following news clipping to end his written account of Hartland:

“Hartland, Litchfield County, Jan. 19, 1796

There is now living in this town, one Mr. Jonas Wilder, in the 97th year of his age, and is a steady, industrious man, seldom losing one day a month by reason of infirmity and old age; he was one of the first settlers in said town, and has in this town lived near 36 years; he was then the oldest person that ever lived in said town and ever since has been, and still remains, the oldest person by several years. He has had two wives and both of one name, both Christian and maiden, the last of which he hath lived with about 65 years; he has had 12 children and never lost one; his eldest child is now in the 73rd year of his age, the youngest in his 47th. His sons, though but seven in number, have sustained the following honorable offices, beside town and society offices one Colonel,

one Major, one Captain, two Lieutenants, three Justices of the Peace, three Representatives and three Deacons.”

“His posterity [descendants] was numbered in 1773, and found to be 232, of which he had lost only 16, and how many hath increased since then is unknown, as two lived near Boston, two at Upper Coos [northern New Hampshire], and three at Genesee [central New York].” This was taken from the Connecticut Courant.

The Barkhamsted Reservoir today separates West from East Hartland, as it has for the past eighty years or so. Its creation caused much stress between those two entities, as now they were almost completely separated except for a narrow strip that Connecticut Route 20 now traverses. For several years there was enough rancor between east and west that they petitioned the state legislature to allow them to become separate towns. This was always denied them, partly because neither was large enough to fulfill the requirements defining a township in Connecticut.

Town meetings, which alternated between the two regions were defined by the populace of one on the right side of the room, the other on the left, separated by an empty no mans land. It was all but impossible to appropriate and dispense monies, as the jealousies of one faction denied funding to the other. For example in the case of highway funding, essential equipment such as a road grader could not be purchased because each side thought that the machine would be used more in the other fellows section than in theirs; the consequence being that for well into the 1940s the only way a road could be graded was to have a tractor drag a heavy log behind it with a long chain attached to one end and a short chain at the other, thus allowing the log to act as a substitute grader blade. Most, if not all town roads were gravel at this time; the exceptions being the State maintained roads such as Connecticut Route 20.

Whether the absence of a natural connector such as Hartland Hollow could have avoided this situation, I do not know, but some of the old timers there felt that it was so, even though the Hollow was a fairly narrow valley with steep sides, it did have connecting roads joining East to West Hartland and the feeling of animosity did not seem to be present prior to the flooding of the Hollow. The surge of population that came into the upland area embracing Hartland, Colebrook, Barkhamsted and other surrounding towns following the end of World War II finally brought a degree of normalcy.