

Historical Inaccuracies

It is a cloudy Sunday morning in late winter, and I am going over several old newspaper accounts that were saved by members of the Phelps family of North Colebrook that were recently donated to the Colebrook Historical Society. I did not intend to read their entire contents, as I don't expect to find information previously unknown in a newspaper article, particularly one in the *Winsted Evening Citizen*. However, in scanning the first few paragraphs, inconsistency after inconsistency jumped off the page, and I began to do a slow burn thinking about all the misinformation that gets printed for unsuspecting readers to fill their heads with. Any reputable researcher will make every effort to publish accurate accounts, and if something isn't quite right, it isn't published, or if it does get printed, a note is appended telling of the writer's concern for a possible inaccuracy. Let me lead you through this particular undated article. (That's another thing that gets my goat – people who go to all the trouble of removing an article from a newspaper, or preserving a photo, and not putting a date on it, or identify the scene in the photo.)

The title reads: “North Colebrook Inn Interesting Subject of Story”. The very first paragraph reads in part: “Before the Revolutionary War [fought between the years 1776 through 1783, when the Treaty of Paris ended hostilities] stage coaches running between Hartford and Albany stopped to change horses at A. Phelps' inn on the Old North Road in North Colebrook”. Arah Phelps, a native of Harwinton, after being mustered out of the Continental Army, as a 26 year-old, came to Colebrook, where he bought a parcel of land and had the building that was to become known as the Phelps' Inn built in 1787. [Wait, it gets better.] “While the Phelps Inn was not an overnight stop, sometimes delays made it necessary for travelers to remain a few hours, and they whiled away the time dancing in the ballroom with the flames from the two fireplaces at opposite ends of the long apartment throwing shadows on the beautiful pine walls.” Let's take a look at what was written here. For one thing, passengers who were delayed “a few hours” would hardly have been in the mood to dance, and even if they were, who is going to provide the music? There had to be a fiddler at the very minimum, and as there is no written history of Arah having been a musician, it is unlikely that a dance could have been cooked up on the spur of the moment. [Unless they want us to believe the Victrola had been invented slightly earlier than history records.] Coach travel over the rough trails that went under the name of “highways”, was not the sort of transportation that prompted travelers to put on their dancing shoes and entertain themselves with the strangers who made up the passenger list on that particular trip. The “apartment”, mentioned was in fact a ballroom and general meeting room, not intended for general living, so I question the use of that word. The inn was on the Sandisfield Road, not the Old North Road.

Paragraph two begins: “A. Phelps Inn was built by Captain Arah Phelps in 1773. [Where in the world did this date come from? Arah, who was born in 1761, was only 12 years old! Phelps bought from a man named Joseph Seymour, the third settler in the area that was to become the Town of Colebrook, and who had, in 1766, built the first dwelling on the bank of Sandy Brook on the meadow as you travel north. The original alignment of the road was along the bank of the stream; the present alignment through the middle of the fields came later. As previously stated, Arah came to town in 1787, and he came as an ex-private from the Continental Army, the title “Captain” came in 1793, after he had

served in the State militia for a number of years.] The reporter goes on to say “It was operated as a tavern before, during and after the Revolutionary War. Never since Captain Phelps hung out his sign has it been out of the Phelps family.” The last part is true, and remained so until after the deaths of John and Nancy Phelps Blum. As this is written in early 2006, the property is for sale, and there is an “under contract” sign hanging out front, so I imagine before the year is out, there will be a second owner since 1787.

The third paragraph reads in part: “Carrington Phelps, now in his 89th year, lives across the road in the homestead, built in 1833 by General Edward A. Phelps, son of Captain Arah.” [Close, but not exact. Arah had this house built for his son, Edward, shortly after Edward’s marriage to Elizabeth Strong Carrington (no relation to the Carringtons of Colebrook Center).

The very next sentence reads: “Up the road is another colonial house, formerly the Jap Pinney Inn, built by Pinney to compete with the Phelps Inn.” It certainly wasn’t a colonial Inn, as the road itself (Route 183 north of the bridge) wasn’t constructed until 1794. It was, however, intended to siphon off customers from the Phelps Inn, because the new road bypassed the original alignment up Prock Hill. When the turnpike era came to North Colebrook in 1801, through traffic was diverted onto the route now covered by Conn. Rt. 183, so the southbound traffic arrived at the Pinney Inn 150 yards before reaching the Phelps Inn, immediately on the opposite side of Sandy Brook.

Then follows a list of the furnishings, which seems to be accurate, however, immediately after that is a paragraph stating: “Captain Arah Phelps and his brother came over from England on the *Mary and John*, a ship that followed soon after the Mayflower, and settled in Windsor. Later they went to Colebrook, where Capt. Phelps built a log cabin as his first home. It goes on in this vein, but let’s stop here and pull apart what has just been written. First of all, the first Phelps was William, who was born in Tewkesbury, England in 1599, Arah didn’t come along until 1761, the fifth generation in America. The way the reporter wrote this, one would think that all this happened to Arah and his father and they no sooner stepped off the ship before deciding to leave Massachusetts Bay and move to Connecticut, where Arah soon tired of life in the valley and came to Colebrook to fell one of the ancient trees from the primeval forest and make a home for himself. The fact of the matter is that Arah, after purchasing the land and dwelling house of Joseph Seymour, moved in and proceeded to build a sawmill at the lower end of the meadows. This mill remained in operation well into the twentieth century. Arah is recorded as stating his sawmill was his most valuable asset, worth more to him than any other of his many possessions. The materials for the 1787 inn came from this mill, and neither he, nor any of his descendants ever lived in a log cabin.

Although undated, in the text it is mentioned that many visitors toured the inn during the tercentennial year just passed, which would place the time shortly after 1935. Mention is made of the original sign that Arah had hanging outside the Inn. This sign was subsequently donated to the Connecticut Historical Society. The English lion appears on one side, the American eagle on the other. Souvenir items purchased there bear these images, so a piece of Colebrook lore can be brought home in the form of a coffee mug if you desire, and you can drink a toast to better reporting and closer attention to the facts.