

Historical Inaccuracies

I am constantly reminded of “facts” that I and all the children of Colebrook were told by the adults of our youth. Some, of course, were accurate, whether written or oral, but the fact remains that some just weren’t so. I have been thinking about exposing the false ones for quite some time, but have recently come across a note that I had made in my notebooks while writing about another subject. There they usually lie, completely out of order and not likely to be seen for a long time. Here then is a list of such subjects, completely at random, but with a common denominator of having been told as the gospel truth.

The park in Winsted at the intersection of CT Rt. 8 and Main Street is surrounded by a handsome fence consisting of stone posts connected with iron rods. This fence was completely replaced in 2009 by new posts, as the originals had become victims of the ravages of time. The original four-foot high posts had been quarried in the brownstone quarries in Portland, Connecticut. I liked that fence, and mourned the loss of one post after another through the years by being hit by cars or snowplows or vandals. Some of the two-inch square iron rods became bent, and were removed by the city workers, but rarely replaced. The new posts are man-made rather than quarried, but they are well constructed and no doubt will serve Winsted for many years to come.

Now the reason for this discussion: I had always been told that those posts were hand quarried during the period of the American Revolution, and that the iron rods had been forged in Colebrook. The posts had indeed been hand tooled, as the chisel marks were quite distinct. I never questioned anything that I had heard about this fence until I began doing in-depth research into our common historical background. The first tip-off was the iron rods; there was no possibility that they could have originated during the late colonial or Federal period due to the scarcity of the metal and the fact that for quite a while iron and steel was used as currency due to the scarcity (and worthlessness) of Continental Currency. So for awhile that problem was placed on the back burner of “things to work on in the future”.

In reading “Boyd’s Annals” a short time ago, I came across the following information: North Main Street originally ran through the center of what now constitutes that park. The present road was constructed in 1858 and the original discontinued. The Civil War statue, constructed several years after that war, sits where the original highway would have been.

So much for the East End Park’s fence, and while we are on the subject of local iron, let’s straighten out some “facts” about that.

Richard Smith’s forge, constructed in 1770 on Still River in Colebrook, produced iron and steel products all during the war and didn’t cease operations until 1811. Its very location was a point of controversy, as three different locations were pointed out to us as the “real” site of the fabled forge. Finally, in the late 1990s, the actual site was revealed as being adjacent to the Old Creamery Road Bridge on the up-stream side. Then came the question of just what exactly did they make there needed to be addressed. Two of the most visible products constructed of iron during the War of Independence were the large chain links that spanned the Hudson River to

thwart the British Navy from ascending that river. As one of these links hung on Mr. Stotts' back wall in the Colebrook Store, we were told that that venerable object had been made right here in Robertsville, as had the rest of the 1,300-foot chain we had read about in our history books. (Surely Washington would have come to an ignominious defeat at the hands of the British had it not been for Colebrook's contribution!) The truth of the matter is that not one single link in either of the two chains that spanned the Hudson was made in Connecticut. The actual origins were Ticonderoga, New York, Ancrom, New York, and a site in northern New Jersey that today lies within the boundaries of New York due to a later boundary change.

Along with the hanging chain link in the Colebrook Store was a "three-pounder" cannon ball (it actually weighs $3\frac{3}{4}$ pounds) that had been found by school children during a scrap drive during World War II at the site of Smith's forge on the banks of Still River. Naturally, this artifact was held up to the youth of Colebrook who were told in hushed, reverent tones that this was an example of how indispensable our town had been during the War of Independence. This very cannonball had been forged with the intention of defeating the British army and navy, and it was done right here in Colebrook!

This is heavy stuff for grade schoolers, and we were actually very proud of our heritage, and looked upon those items with nothing short of reverence. What was the actual origin of that iron orb? We don't know, and probably never will, but what we do know is that this cannonball, along with several score of its brothers, was purchased by the operators of the Robertsville Forge after the Revolutionary War to be used as scrap. Apparently recycling had early origins locally. There was an economic depression in The Colonies following the end of the war in 1783, and locally manufactured iron products became all but worthless; it was cheaper to purchase iron and steel from Sweden, Germany or Russia, consequently many of the local forges shut their doors for good by the time the nineteenth century rolled around.

What the Robertsville forge did manufacture was far more important to the success of the outcome of the war than common iron products; it made small amounts of steel – among the first, if not the first steel to be manufactured in North America. Why is steel of such inestimable value? Without steel bits, no cannon could be made workable after being formed at the blast furnaces. The iron cannon barrels had to be bored out to certain specified diameters, and this required the much harder steel. This information was not uncovered until around the turn of the twenty-first century.

Of lesser significance historically are the many brick buildings in and around Winsted. Many brick factory buildings used to be in town, some were removed by the '55 flood, while others have survived until today. To those who were uninformed about such things, if the question arose as to the origin of all those bricks, the usual explanation was either Rowley's Brick Yard or some other local source. Actually, the vast majority of the building brick in Winsted was brought here by the railroad, with the source being the Mack Brickyard in Windsor. If all those bricks had come from Rowley's, then Rowley Pond would be a lot bigger than it is.