

House Fires Have Always Been With Us

Hardly a day passes while doing research on the historical background of Colebrook that evidence is uncovered about some building, be it a residence, farm or commercial, either having been destroyed by fire, or that the present building is a replacement for one that had burned.

In 2001, a campaign was undertaken by the Colebrook Land Conservancy to acquire part of the old Mason Hale Farm, located at the intersection of Conn. Routes 183 and 182, one mile south of Colebrook Center. There has been a dwelling and farm buildings at this location from the 18th century to the present, although the previous house burned about 1900 and was replaced by the house now standing at 3 Stillman Hill Road. The original building had been built and occupied by the North family in 1797, and was used in part as a tavern. This was because what is today Stillman Hill was then part of The Old North Road, and as such would have had a reasonably high volume of traffic. The barn, restored by its present owners, the Colebrook Land Conservancy, has been stripped of more recent additions, and now appears as it did when it was built three years before the turn of the nineteenth century.

In 2002, the Conservancy was also able to acquire the small piece of property diagonally across the intersection from the barn, and if you will notice, there is a stone foundation in the middle of the field. This also is the result of a fire, this one arson, which occurred on December 13, 1986.

Another fire that must have been devastating at the time was the total destruction of the Sawyer Cotton Mill in Colebrook River on June 8th, 1856. The newspaper account at the time reads: "The cotton factory at Colebrook River with the grist mill attached, took fire and burned to the ground. The fire broke out in the picker room and would have been subdued by the force pump had not the gear broken just in the minute of need. The loss was heavy. The buildings belonged to H. S. Sawyer, and the machinery to the Smiths of New Hartford."

[As an aside, it is frustrating when current accounts use terms that often prove to be impossible for future readers to comprehend. If you do much research, you will find this to be more prevalent than you would expect; I feel the same about those people who take photos and then never identify them, assuming that "everyone knows who this person is!"]

The facility was immediately rebuilt, the result being that the buildings that we all have seen in the old photos turn out to be the replacements of the original, built in 1840. I have never seen any photos of the cotton mill prior to the fire, although it is entirely possible that some exist. As always, if any readers have additional information concerning any of these articles, the Colebrook Historical Society would be most happy to hear from you.

The Peter Corbin house, at 12 Millbrook Rd., built by returning Revolutionary veteran Peter Corbin in the 1770s, burned in 1905, and was replaced by the present structure, which however, underwent major remodeling and enlarging in the 1990s.

Public buildings did not escape the all-consuming flames; the South School, originally built in 1779 at the intersection of Bricklemaier Rd. and the Old North Rd., burned in 1816, and was replaced in 1817 about a quarter of a mile east of the original site at the intersection of the Old North Rd. and Smith Hill Rd. It was to be the second of

three schools bearing the name "South School". Eventually this building became in need of major restoration, and the decision was made to replace it with the brick structure that survives today as a portion of 262 Smith Hill Rd.

The Forge School in the Robertsville district burned in 1904, and was replaced with a structure that the building committee decreed should be "22x33 feet outside measurement, with 10 foot ceilings, the wood house to be 12x19 feet." It was these dimensions, especially the ceiling height, which allowed the Forge Fire Company to utilize the building as their first firehouse when the school was abandoned in 1949.

Some buildings that burned never were replaced. An example was the building in North Colebrook that served as a store and Post office during the 19th and early 20th centuries. This structure stood almost directly opposite from the Church in the Wildwood, between Conn. Rt. 183 and Sandy Brook. It burned on Jan. 5th, 1948.

The rear portion of the Phelps Tavern burned on Sept. 14th, 1942, but the main building was spared by heroic efforts on the part of the town residents.

Some old, unused buildings that have been allowed to deteriorate are occasionally used as training exercises for the fire department. One such case was the abandoned Carrington store, located about where the driveway is for 16 Schoolhouse Rd. Others that come to mind was the house at the corner of Beech Hill Rd. and Moses Rd., a building on the north side of the summit of Stillman Hill, the cabin next to the lower bridge on Sandy Brook and the barn on the property of Masser el Shouf Park at the intersection of U.S. Rt. 44 and Rock Hall Rd.

Another and less known factor in house burning that was common practice in Colonial times was the practice of burning one's old dwelling when a new, larger one was to be built, or when a pioneering family decided that it was time to pull up stakes and move on to some new location. The purpose was to obtain the nails with which the structure was held together. These were a scarce and valuable item, and comprised a major part of the expense of the next house. Miss Eleanor Gilfoy, a descendant of the Corbin family, gave a sample of such nails dating back to the Colonial period to the Society.

Probably the worst case of arson in Colebrook occurred in the late 1920s when the misguided son of one of the landowners burned all six houses and all but two barns on Simons Pond Road from the Massachusetts line to the intersection of Cobb City Road. Not one of these buildings was ever rebuilt, and the road itself is barely passable even with four wheeled vehicles. This was due primarily to land values locally. Woodland could be purchased for \$1.00 per acre, with good fields bringing perhaps \$10.00, if you were lucky enough to find someone willing to pay that much. The cheapest option for the poor dirt farmer, faced with such a decision, was to simply walk away and begin all over again in a more promising environment.

This is an extreme example of what can result from mindless acts of destruction. In this case, it changed the character of land use and demography for all time in what had been a recognizable neighborhood since the 1780s.

Historic Bytes
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