

Houses and Early Home Life of Colebrook

What follows is a compilation written in the early 1930s by Henry Hart Vining, a former Colebrook resident who wrote extensively about local history prior to the second half of the twentieth century, and to whom all of us who appreciate accurate histories owe a vote of gratitude. The Hart family (his mother's side) lived on what was referred to as Hart Street until a visiting summer guest of an important Colebrook family thought that "Millbrook Road" had a nicer ring to it, and the powers that were in those days saw to it that the name was applied, and there it remains to this day, with hardly a soul left that knew, or cared that a bit of true history had been replaced by a whim.

"Some of the earliest houses in Colebrook were built of logs, but these soon gave way to the frame house, as sawmills were built and lumber could be obtained. Some of these first houses were of plank construction, that is, the sides were of two-inch plank, spiked perpendicularly to the heavy framework, with either clapboards or shingles on the outside. There was little studding used on the inside and the partitions were often of one-inch boards carried from floor to ceiling, with a paneled base. In the center of the house was a chimney with many flues, being about twelve feet square at the foundation.

The typical house was of two stories, with two rooms on each floor, with the chimney between. On one side of the chimney was the stairway leading to the second floor. The roof was covered with hand-rived shingles, known to last fifty to seventy-five years. The interior was often left unfinished. Across the center of each room from chimney to wall was a huge beam parallel with the front of the house. This beam was called a 'summer tree', and was either left as it was, rough hewed, or boxed.

As the family increased and money became more plentiful, the house was enlarged by extending the roof at the rear to the level of the first story, thus giving space for several more rooms, with a loft above. The middle room was usually the kitchen with a large fireplace and brick oven. On one end of the kitchen was the pantry, or buttery, as it was called. On the other end was a bedroom.

This type of house was called a lean-to, or saltbox, from its resemblance to the salt-box always hanging from the kitchen wall.

The style of house found in Colebrook in those early days was more apt to be the story and a half than the saltbox. The full two stories became the most common after the town became more settled and prosperous.

The Adin Wakefield house on Hart Street [today number 78 Millbrook Road] is a good example of those early days story and a half type. On the front were two rooms with a small hall in the center, with a door opening into each room. The front door was flanked by small sidelights over the door. The house faces west; on the south side was a doorway similar to the one at the front, opening into a little hall which led to the kitchen, located in the middle of the back, flanked by a small bedroom on the southeast corner. The stairs leading to the second floor were next to the buttery, with the cellar stairs underneath. This kitchen had a fine fireplace and brick oven. Each of the front rooms had a fireplace. On the east, or back side of the kitchen, was a door, which led into the back, or summer kitchen, where a well existed in one corner. This ell also contained a woodshed beyond the summer kitchen, with stone steps leading up into the loom-room, a small building at the end of the ell.

The upstairs was all one room except for a rough plank-partitioned room on the south side, called the 'Bridal Chamber'. This chamber was fitted up for one of the Wakefield boys when he brought home his bride.

This house was remodeled about 1908, and much of its charm was lost.

Other houses of similar type were the Martin North and Peter Corbin houses [today, the Corbin location is 12 Millbrook Road, with North being Corbin's next door neighbor to the south.] and the Martin Phelps house. [Today, 3 Pinney Street].

The food of these early settlers was very plain, but usually plentiful. Breakfast often consisted of bean-porridge, made of salt meat and beans, sometimes seasoned with herbs. Dinner was the main meal of the day and was always served at noon. Meat, the principal item of the meal, was generally some kind of game; venison, wild turkey, pigeon, of which there was a great abundance, various small game and occasionally bear steaks. Vegetables were scarce or non-existent for the first few years, but as land was cleared, gardens soon were planted and helped greatly in varying the diet. Indian meal pudding was a great stand-by and was greatly relished when eaten with maple sugar.

Supper was chiefly leftovers from dinner, with berries, which became very plentiful after the original forest was removed, supplying an extra treat. Corn bread was eaten a great deal, and after gristmills were erected, wheat flour was ground and made excellent brown bread. In season, the good wife made sorrel pies and wonderful berry pies.

In the first few years, furniture was mostly home made, but as the wagon took the place of the saddle, cherry desks, highboys, chests and chairs were added to the household. The high post bedstead was a necessity, with its heavy curtains drawn tightly to shut out the drafts.

When new comers arrived, the entire neighborhood turned out to help them raise their house; this was a great occasion. The men came early in the morning with their tools, and the women came later with pots of beans, stews, doughnuts, pies and huge loaves of bread. Milk, and always cider were furnished to quench the thirst of the hard working men. If the men became a little jolly as the day progressed, it only added to the enjoyment of the occasion."