

Linguistic Phonics *

The study of language presents interesting and satisfying insights into our past. Sometimes the spellings or use of a particular word or phrase can be just as revealing as an artifact that comes to light.

Research in our town record books has revealed the following, which serve as a guide to the accents of those who lived in these hills during colonial times. Remember that it was the Town Clerk who did the writing, and any accents hinted at would have been his alone, but never the less, it is a valid assumption that the majority of his contemporaries would not have spoken much differently. Here are a few selections from Colebrook, Winchester and Norfolk in the 18th century.

Ceare (care), as in “take ceare of the.....”; *Chesenut* (Chestnut tree); *mash* (Marsh); *Magret* (Margaret); *potators* (potatoes); *Sandersfield* (Sandisfield); *Berkhamsted* (Barkhamsted); *parsonally* (personally); *ajineing* (adjoining); *garding* (garden) and *voated* (voted).

The sources of our use of the English language had its roots back in the home country of England. The situation was complicated by the fact that each of the English counties had their own distinct dialect. Certain New England pronunciations and usage derived from the County of Kent were the topic of a speech given in 1885 to the American Antiquarian Society. Here are some that apply locally:

Swath, or *swarth*, the row of grass left on the ground by the scyther; *grub*, meaning food; *bail*, the handle of a pail (and the word pail is used more commonly in New England than “bucket”); *along*, used in the phrase “get along with you”; *bar-way*, a passage way into a field when the bars are removed; *bat*, a large stick; *biddy*, a chicken; *bay*, the space between two beams; *by-gollie*, a mild oath; *botch*, to do something badly; *bolt*, to swallow whole or fast; *bolt-upright*; *booby-hatch*, which originally meant a clumsy carriage; *boozy*, drunk; *brand new*; *buck*, the body of a cart or wagon; *cess*, a tax (the root of our term “cess-pool”); *moonshine*, illicit spirits.

One of my pet peeves is the mispronunciation of the word “northeast”. Weathermen and other mass-media types no doubt will carry the day, but the original pronunciation was that of the New Englanders, or perhaps more specifically, the Nantucket fishermen. They do say “nor’west” and “sou west”, but north is “no’the”, with the long “o” and the soft “th”. Northeast is “no’theast”, pronounced with the same soft “th” (like “mouth” when used as a verb.)

When either north or south is used as an adjective before the noun however, each takes its ordinary dictionary pronunciation, as a “north wind” or “the south shore”. It is only when used without the noun that the long “o” sound in “no’the” and the soft “th” in both words are heard.

Yet the next time a storm comes up the coast, you can rely on all the weather forecasters warning us of the coming “nor-easter”!

- Bob Grigg