

Roads of Western Colebrook

North of the Old North Road and west of the Sandisfield Road exists a pattern of “country roads”, as they once were called. As with so many of our roads, they quite often grew much as ice crystals on a pane of glass; short bursts in one direction, then cut off by another having a different agenda and so on. A good example is Bunnell Street. The north end is the oldest, having begun as a private road leading to a lumber mill west of the Rock School, established by a man named Samuel Gowdy in the late 1760s. Gowdy harnessed the waterpower of a small stream that is one of the tributaries of Loon Brook as it makes its way through the swamp and meadows toward Colebrook Center. A dam was built two hundred yards or so north of the road and behind the present house located at 169 Bunnell. The foundations of this industry can still be made out next to the stream and adjacent to Bunnell St. The site suffered the same fate that befalls all stone structures left unattended – the stones are removed by the passing public for projects of their own, leaving behind only those too large or ill shaped to be conveniently carted off.

Gowdy’s road ended just past the mill, which is the underlying cause of the sharp curve on Bunnell as well as the misalignment of Shantry Road.

Even though the road leading to the mill was not exactly a public highway, it didn’t keep others from using it. Three families established themselves south of the end of the road. There were two Simons brothers, William and Hezekiah and David Rockwell who built their homes on their commonly owned driveway probably in 1772. Only one structure remains today, that of David Rockwell, at 135 Bunnell, the Simons’ buildings stood where 139 and 145 Bunnell now stand. They are not, however, the original structures. In the summer of 1780, these three families petitioned the selectmen of the brand-new Town of Colebrook to make their private road a public one and to continue it past their lands so as to connect with the short spur built in 1772 that began in front of the present Center Fire House and ended more or less in front of 72 Bunnell. This was done with modifications at the south end. Why do we know this? 85 Bunnell was built in 1782. The original survey had the road laid out west of the house. The orientation of 85 Bunnell is obviously to the east, facing the present road.

Concurrent with the survey of Bunnell Street were surveys of what was to become Shantry Road, Phelps Road and Pine Road. It was the field notes of the surveyor of these roads that overcame the staggering odds of surviving all these years since the formation of the town that alerted us to the unique spelling “Colnbrook”. My guess is that he was a British surveyor, probably a transient, who was employed by the town to establish official alignments for certain highways.

The need for Phelps Road arose when it was determined that the water potential from Loon Brook as it entered Colebrook from Norfolk was far greater than at Gowdy’s old site. Therefore a dam was constructed near the intersection of Phelps and Pine Roads. This created the body of water known today as Phelps Pond, but originally named Simons Pond. Hezekiah Simons had become partners with Samuel Gowdy, and they in turn became one-half partners with Capt. Samuel Rockwell on the construction of this dam and new mill facility in 1789. From the beginning, the official name of the body of water was Simons Pond.

As timber for lumber mills come from different locations, a network of roads with the mill at the center quite often became established. In this case it is what we today call

Pine Road, which, when established, connected with (modern) Shantry Road, known then as “The new Norfolk Road”. Near the crest of Pine Road, in front of 78 Pine, lies the remains of a stone quarry that more than likely supplied the stone for the mill site, still to be seen along Phelps Road. Phelps Road was continued to the south to eventually connect up with the Old North Road in 1790, completing the network of connecting roads centered on the mill site.

Shantry Road, named for the ancestors of the Lossin family who came to Colebrook in the 1870s, was accepted as a public road in 1780 to fulfill the need for another connecting link with Norfolk. Among the early settlers on this road was Samuel Phillips Jr. His family produced at least two members who made a name for themselves, one being Ammi Phillips, recognized as one of America’s leading folk art portraitists. An example of his art can be seen in the Colebrook Historical Society’s rooms. The other was Halsey Phillips, perhaps a brother to Ammi, who left Colebrook in 1814 for the newly opened lands in northeastern Ohio where he founded the town of Colebrook, Ohio. He wrote a letter back to Colebrook, Connecticut some 70-odd years later which still survives, in which he mentions having seen photos (“views”, he called them) of several places in town, one being 145 Bunnell St. Henry Bass built the present building in 1820, but I thought there was a possibility that the smaller portion could have been the original structure built by Hezekiah Simons. These doubts were dispelled upon reading this letter, as he states that he is so glad to have seen these photos of his old neighbor’s place “as they had been built since he left town,”

In 1794, the activities at the Phelps forge located on Brummagem Brook at the Colebrook-Norfolk town line required better accessibility. This operation began in 1786, when a man named Orvis from Norfolk, and Elijah Phelps from North Colebrook built a puddling forge. They located on top of the two town’s common boundary, producing iron products from then until 1806, when falling prices spelled the demise of most of Colebrook’s forges. This forge did not rely entirely upon pig iron from the blast furnace in Salisbury, but had the capability of extracting iron from the surface ores found locally, hence the name “puddling forge”, the term used to describe the ability of extracting iron from ore.

Initially there was only one road, beginning at what today is Doolittle Drive, that followed the outflow from the pond into Colebrook to its merging with Sandy Brook at the meadows in North Colebrook. This road intersected the Sandisfield Road by the bridge at the south end of the meadows in North Colebrook. This, in all likelihood, was adequate for receiving pig iron from the west, and shipping the finished product into Colebrook and Norfolk, but I suspect that the transportation of local ore presented a problem, with the apparent solution being to create a new road taking a northern tact from the new Norfolk (or Shantry) Road. This is what was done in 1794, when the town “accepted a road from near Samuel Phillips Jr.’s dwelling house and running northerly to Capt. Elijah Phelps’ iron works.” The southern end of this road, which looks like an old lumber road, can be seen today a little past 93 Shantry Road, just east of the flooded area created a few years ago by a colony of beavers.