

The Rockwell Spring

Colebrook's most famous spring lies just south of Colebrook Center, on the hill between Route 183 and Smith Hill Road. In all likelihood it was discovered by the first committee assigned to explore these forested hills in the mid 1700s. Water was the most essential commodity to the early settler, and if he couldn't build along a stream, then a spring was utilized. If no surface water was available, then a well was dug. Ground water can't be accessed everywhere, and more than one attempt had to be made sometimes before a well producing sufficient water was built.

The Rockwell Spring is situated some 3,000 feet south of the Colebrook Store at an elevation of about 200 feet higher than the Center. Its first owner was Samuel Rockwell, who came to Colebrook in 1767. He had an aqueduct constructed (a buried wooden pipe) in 1785 or 1786. This consisted of three-foot long segments that were bored out by means of a two-inch auger. They were tapered at one end so that a tight fit could be made merely by tapping one section into the next. This system was in place until 1823, when it was replaced. Three or four segments of this pipe survive today in the Colebrook Historical Society's rooms.

The Rockwells replaced the wood with the most up-to-date technology of the day. They brought in an expert who specialized in making this new product. Mr. Ward was his name, and he was set up in the basement of the Parsonage where he formed large sheets of lead into pipes. These were one inch in diameter and laid from the spring down the hill and into each and every house in the village as well as the stores, the inn and the Center School. There they remained in use for the next 125 years or so. Not until the 1950s was this water supply replaced by deep driven wells.

The water that went to the Center School was actually the run off from the Parsonage, so there were times, especially in the Fall or during dry spells, that the drinking fountain was dry and we had to resort to a pail with a dipper in it that the students filled from the spring-house belonging to the Carrington family.

From the time that records began to be kept, the spring has averaged 12 quarts per minute. During the 8 years that I spent at the Center School, I can only recall three or four times when we had to resort to the Carrington spring.

The rights to, and ownership of this spring has always been a matter of the greatest importance, as witnessed by any land record dealing with a dwelling located in Colebrook Center. The deeds are full of phrases such as "one-twelfth interest in said aqueduct", or "7/48 in said aqueduct". An elaborate schedule existed allocating the 12 quarts that flowed from the spring each minute: Reuben Rockwell, 4 quarts per minute; (he was the only person on the list who had cattle, so presumably had need for more than the others.) Ralph Emerson (Rockwell Hall, west of the Green), 2 1/4 quarts per minute; Colebrook Store, 1 1/4 quarts per minute; the Colebrook Inn, 1 quart per minute; Sarah & Katherine Carrington, 1 quart per minute.

During the 1890s, concern for the physical setting of the spring arose when extensive logging threatened to damage the site or lessen the purity of the water, so members of the Rockwell family established an 8 1/2 acre park-like setting surrounding the spring site with a narrow corridor leading down off the hill and into Colebrook Center. This last to assure that no plow or other agricultural endeavor would molest the buried lead pipe.

With today's knowledge of the problems lead can cause in humans and animals, it seems surprising that no such symptoms have come to light concerning the residents of Colebrook Center over such a prolonged time span. Even with a flow of 12 quarts per minute, the very distance of more than 3,000 feet required that the water remained in contact with the lead pipe for a prolonged time. Perhaps those of us with parents who shuddered at the thought of a shared water dipper, were better off than they realized during those times of drought than during "normal" times!

Historic Bytes

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