

Rowley Bricks

For close to 80 years, from 1806 until 1884, one site supplied most of the bricks used in these parts. Today the location can be found on Smith Hill, just south of the Colebrook town line. The name of the pond remains the same as it always was – Rowley Pond. The large white house with its barn opposite was built by Lieut. John Wright in 1770. According to a paper published by the Winchester Historical Society, Samuel Rowley, Jr., who came to Winchester from Torrington in 1806, had a son named Calvin, who is credited with beginning the brick operation that same year. The clay deposit here is most extensive, lying about 18 inches below the surface. Excavations 15 feet below the surface have not reached the lower limits. Clay is a result of glaciation, being the very fine particles of ground-up rock, which precipitate out of suspension in waters impounded by huge ice dams. Those of us living in northwestern Connecticut live in a land sculpted by the last phases of what geologists refer to as the Wisconsin Glaciation, which locally commenced about 85,000 years ago, reached a peak 20 – 25,000 years before the present, and began to retreat 18,000 years ago. In all probability, the depths this glacial ice reached was in the vicinity of one to two miles. By 11,000 to 13,000 years ago, Paleo-Indian tribes were hunting along the front edges of the retreating glacier in the lower elevations of what would someday be known as Connecticut. These dates are based upon a Paleo tool discovered in Colebrook in 2007. Prior to that, we felt that the earliest possible date for habitation would have been perhaps 6,000 years, with the possibility that even this might be pushing the upper limits.

The final withdrawal of an ice sheet leaves the country covered with lakes, marshes, bogs, badly disturbed drainage lines, as well as valleys and channelways temporarily used to carry off the abundant water. Some of the lakes fill rock basins scoured out by the ice, but probably most of them are due to the blocking of valleys by glacial deposits. These are all in addition to the temporary marginal lakes that were held in by the ice itself. The term “marginal lake” describes the result of an advancing glacier as it interrupts the usual course of drainage, causing rivers to be blocked or turned from their courses. Don’t be misled by the elevation of the land today; anywhere clay is to be found, there was once a quiet lake that slowly accumulated the fine particles held in suspension. An example of the same process can be seen today in regions still under the influence of glaciers, such as the Canadian Rockies. You don’t have to go there – look at photos of the mountain lakes. Some are green, others have a blue tint. This is the result of the size of the particles held in suspension. The smaller the particles, the bluer the water; the larger the particles, the greener the water. A bottle of these waters if taken home and placed on a shelf will sometimes retain its color for years. Eventually, however, whatever is there will precipitate out and form a layer of clay at the bottom of the container.

What is referred to as common clay can be found in all the states in the northeast. Around these parts, it consists of combinations of quartz, feldspar, silica and small amounts of iron. Varying amounts of iron will color the clay either yellow or red. The clays at Rowley’s yield red bricks.

The process used by the Rowleys involved a round pit dug in the ground into which was thrown an amount of raw clay along with some water. Oxen were then driven around and around until the stiff clay became like putty. Three men could mold 2,000

bricks a day. There were two locations of brick kilns; one at the southern edge of the pond, the other on the east side of what is today Gaylord Road about half way between Smith Hill Road and the Colebrook town line. Edwin Rowley fired the last run of 50,000 bricks in 1884.

Uniformity in the manufacture of bricks has been controlled in this country since colonial times. The book of laws published in 1768 by the Connecticut Colonial Legislature has this to say:

“The lengths of all bricks, made within this colony, shall be full 9 inches, their breadth 4½ inches and their thickness 2½ inches. The upper side of every mold used to make bricks in, or that side on which they are struck, shall be shod, or plaited with iron. And whosoever shall put to sale any bricks that are not made according to this act, shall forfeit all such bricks, or the full value thereof; one half to the complainer, and the other half to the treasury of the county wherein the offense is committed.”

Enos North has entries in his ledger concerning the transportation of Rowley’s bricks. [Charged to Joseph Hurlbut] “June, 1827, carting 2,550 bricks to Norfolk from Rowley’s - - \$7.65. November 3, 1827 - - 400 bricks, carting from Rowley’s, \$1.20.” Again, in 1836, he charges Wm. Swift “\$44.09 for carting bricks from Rowley’s.” Although the number isn’t mentioned, it has to be quite large. Perhaps someday we will discover that William Swift built a brick house somewhere in either Colebrook or Winchester in 1836, and we can prove the source of his building material.

Colebrook’s South Schoolhouse, at the intersection of Smith Hill Road and Old North Road, survives today as the brick portion of 264 Smith Hill Road. It was built as a result of a school society meeting held on Sept. 20, 1846, which determined that the old wooden building, which had been built in 1817, was in a condition thought to be beyond repair. A committee “placed a stake”, as they said, at a site five feet north of the existing school building, and Rowley’s bricks fashioned Colebrook’s only brick district schoolhouse. Declining population in Colebrook caused the closing of many of the old one-room schoolhouses, and in July 1923, the South District Schoolhouse was sold.