

The Store That Alpha Built

About one mile north of Colebrook Center along Colebrook Road, or Conn. Rt. 183, if you prefer, stands the building known around these parts as "Wheeler's Store".

Alpha Sage built a brick house with Rowley Pond bricks in 1823, and at the same period constructed a store and barn across the road from the house. Alpha's father, Enos, who built and occupied what today is the home of Jon and Sherri Gray on Sandy Brook Road, was an excellent builder and was instrumental in building several dwellings and out buildings in town for his sons, including the store.

Alpha had learned storekeeping by working for Bissell Hinsdale, one of Colebrook's early shopkeepers. The Hinsdale store stood at the intersection of Deer Hill Road and Smith Hill Road. The foundations may still be seen among a small stand of trees in the field alongside the road.

Sage operated his store for some 25 years, when the place was sold to Rollin and Susan Beecher for \$2,500.00. On January 19, 1854, they in turn sold the Alpha Sage place to Urania and Erasmus Callaway.

The Callaways lived in the brick house and operated the store until, on May 7, 1859, they sold it to John S. Wheeler of Colebrook for \$1,900.00. The land title described it as follows: "A piece of property lying on both sides of the highway leading from the Congregational Church to Sandisfield. It contains 10 acres, more or less, with all the buildings thereon standing, said property being known as the 'Sage Place'".

At this point the store took on the name by which it has been known from that day to this. Wheeler turned out to be the right person at the right time to operate the store. This he did while also serving Colebrook as a State Representative, Judge of Probate, Town Clerk and Town Treasurer.

With the coming of the Civil War, some commodities became scarce, while almost all experienced a great increase in price. Throughout the war, Wheeler maintained his stock, as best he could, and served his community. Shortly after the war ended, prices began to fall, and Wheeler soon found himself with an inventory that couldn't be sold for a profit. He continued to re-supply his shelves with products of contemporary prices that allowed him to make a living, but much of his inventory remained on the shelves with price tags prohibitively high.

Things muddled along in this manner until one evening in 1878, when an itinerant wielding a monkey wrench attacked him demanding the contents of the cash drawer. There is some question as to what happened next. Some accounts say that he immediately shut up the store and never entered it again, while other contemporaries say that he continued on for a period of time, although he never again remained open after dark. At any rate, when John Wheeler ceased operations, no one ever again attempted to run the store.

John Wheeler died some 32 years later in 1907, and two years later it was decided to finally clear out the store by holding an auction. Buyers from miles around were confronted with all manner of dry goods, groceries (crackers, etc. and barrels of meat that were taken out in back of the store and dumped into a freshly-dug hole), notions, coppered-toed boots, shoes, hats, etc. What was not sold that day remained in place for another fifty years, when, in 1961, Robert Hallahan purchased the property and

announced That he intended to open an antique shop, with some of the initial stock being surviving objects from the 1909 auction.

Among these items is a supply of various sized paper bags that were recently given to the Colebrook Historical Society by Eddy Gray. These bags are all constructed like envelopes, rather than the foldout bags that we are familiar with. Their sizes are 4x6, 7x9, 8x10 and 9x12 inches. On the front is printed "From **J. S. Wheeler**, dealer in dry goods, groceries, provisions, crockery, hardware, boots, shoes, etc., Colebrook, Conn. The manufacturer of these paper containers made sure that he got as much advertising as his customer, as directly underneath Wheeler's advertisement is a line of bold type stating "**J. P. Pultz & Co.**, Bag makers, Plantsville, Ct."

Located next to the store is a large barn. These two buildings are usually associated with each other, but actually are of much different ages. There was an earlier barn, probably on the same site, but the present one was completed in June of 1883. We know this from a newspaper account bearing the date of June 8 of that year stating that "John Wheeler now has the handsomest weather vane in town sitting atop his new barn." Today there is no weather vane, only a three-foot long wooden pole atop the cupola. It has been that way since I can remember, which goes back more than 60 years. Whether it was stolen, or perhaps sold by one of the twentieth century owners isn't known, but the newspaper account intrigues me; I would like to know just how handsome it really was.

The present owners, Jonathan and Kimberly Crocker, who bought the property from George and Margaret Collins, have had the exteriors of all buildings, from the painted brick house to the three buildings on the opposite side of the road stripped and refinished, something they were in desperate need of. Today the complex presents a pleasing sight to passersby.

The year before the Collins' moved, they presented John Wheeler's store sign to the Historical Society, where it hangs alongside C. F. Stotts' Colebrook Store sign, Cooper's Store sign and the sign that once hung on the Colebrook Inn itself when the front room was, for a time, separated from the rest of the building and used as a store. The entrance for this one room store was where the window facing the post office is now located.

An interesting sidelight to the Wheeler sign can be seen by the result of weathering; the sign has been painted twice, each with different type lettering. Now that the second layer has also been weathered, both can be easily read.

We don't know what plans the Crockers have for the store, if any, but the hope of the long-time residents and those who hold our historical past dear, is that it will continue to grace the spot where it has stood for more than 180 years and continue to do so for many years to come.