

Tales of the Greenwoods

The Old North Road has had much written about it, but there was, and is, a seemingly endless supply of historical background liberally intermixed with anecdotes that apply to this venerable old highway. Here are some that have been rescued from the pages of *The Connecticut Magazine* from more than 100 years ago:

After the wrangling and debate died down over whether to build the westward road here or there, and who would build it, and who would pay for it and so forth, a road was finally made passable from Hartford over Talcott Mountain and on westward as far as New Hartford.

Travel on the road was largely by horseback. Wagons and carriages began to be used about 1760, but only the roughest carts could stand the jolting of the new road, and saddle and pillion were easier for travel. [The word pillion describes a pad, or secondary seat directly behind the saddle. These were quite common in the colonial period, as a family seldom had the means to own more than one riding horse; consequently, it was not at all uncommon to see a horseman, his wife, and possibly a child or two all astride one horse. Horses were trained to carry more than one passenger in those days. On the other hand, there were not many overweight pioneers riding about these hills, so the horse's lot was not as bad as might first be thought.]

Ox carts and ox sleds were common, and journeys of hundreds of miles were not infrequently made in these slow and plodding conveyances.

An interesting sidelight upon the state of settlement in the Greenwoods at the time is noted in a petition given to the legislature by the inhabitants of Farmington, Simsbury and New Hartford on the completion of the road in 1764. The committee reminds their representatives "It is now become one of ye Greatest Roads in ye Government & wyl still be of great service if proper Care is taken to keep this road in good repair and finish it thro-out. We therefore humbly request your Honors to take this matter into your Consideration & to Order & appoint a committee to take proper Care of the above said Road that it be kept in good Repair thro ye Towns not inhabited – that is ye Towns of Barkhamsted, Winchester & Colebrook & that this be done at the expense of ye Proprietors of said Townships,"

This petition was denied, but another to the same end was passed two years later. The road had by that time become too important to neglect.

One of the biggest problems facing the committees appointed to keep the Old North Road open to traffic was the falling of the huge trees that once comprised the virgin forest. These trees had been girdled years before so that they would die and make room for new growth, which would be more useful to the pioneers. When they fell across the road however, they presented the ultimate in obstacles. A fallen giant six or more feet thick and stretching 120 feet along the ground that can only be cut up wielding an axe or using the cumbersome saws of the day must have been a most daunting task., and yet it was one that became quite commonplace.

This was the situation when Colebrook and Barkhamsted welcomed their first inhabitants. The shipbuilders of Hartford and Windsor sought the tallest and straightest trees for masts; forges were erected on the swift-flowing streams; sawmills and gristmills were started. During the Revolution the iron industry, centered in what was to become northern Litchfield County, was kept busy making cannon, anchors and other necessities

of frontier life. The following appeal to the stay-at-home patriots met with a ready response:

NOTICE

“All gentlemen, farmers and others, well wishers of the grand cause of liberty, that will repair to Salisbury and cut wood for the furnace will not only render a substantial service to their country, but shall receive the great price of two shillings and six pence [about .80 cents] lawful money, for each cord they cut and stack and may, if they choose, receive a part of their pay in salt, sugar and molasses to be paid by the managers at said forge,”

The following notice in the *Hartford Courant* furnishes an interesting sidelight upon the scarcity of “hard money” at the time. It was placed there by Colebrook resident Jacob Ogden, manager of the forge in Robertsville.

FORGE AT COLEBROOK

Mar. 6, 1780

“Wanted to employ immediately men to cut wood, to manufacture Iron and Steel at this place for which they shall receive their pay as fast as they cut and settle their accounts, either in Bar Iron, Plough Iron or Edge Tool Steel: I will give one hundred of iron for cutting and splitting 15 cords of wood, they finding themselves with provisions, ax and blanket; provisions may be had of me as cheap as they were before the war.

JACOB OGDEN

The value of the road for military purposes was once more proven during the Revolution. In April 1775 various bands of local farmers marched to Hartford en route to Lexington. In reverse direction passed sixteen men sent from Hartford to the reinforcement of Washington’s army and the capture of Crown Point and Ticonderoga. Ethan Allen himself passed over this road. He had a well deserved reputation as a man who not only knew every swear word in the book, but never shrank from using them; he also was what we would call today a “freethinker”, and seldom could be found in the vicinity of a church, especially on a Sunday. In those days, this was a misdemeanor for which he would have been liable for a fine. There was an office of Grand Juror, one of whose duties it was to enforce these Sabbath laws, which also included staying off the highways during daylight hours. During the war, Allen was riding along the Old North Road on Wallens Hill in Winchester one Sunday. As he was passing Grand Juror John Balcomb’s house, Balcomb emerged and grabbed Allen’s horse by his bridle and attempted to arrest Allen as a Sabbath breaker. Allen drew his sword, and holding it above Balcomb’s head, said something to the effect that if he didn’t immediately release that bridle, he would cut his head off. Balcomb prudently scampered back into his house.

This John Balcomb, by the way, was the great, great grandfather of Colebrook’s Ben Balcomb, one of the men involved in the murder of Barnice White in 1850. Ben was convicted, and died in state prison in 1861, after having served ten years of his life sentence.

After the war there arose a demand for a better highway link with Hartford and the outside world. In 1799 the Talcott Mountain and Greenwoods Turnpike companies were chartered and a new road was quickly put through. It eventually became today’s U.S. Route 44.