

The Significance of the Gray Barn

This article was written in 2000, when the building of a new town hall was a very hot and controversial topic in town. This article reflects the views of a supporter of the Gray Barn as the choice for the new municipal building. Ultimately, when the proposal was put to a general vote, it passed by a margin of only 6 votes. This re-write was done in 2006, long enough after the completion of the building for a general consensus to be taken as to the advisability of this form of architecture for Colebrook's Town Hall; the overwhelming percentage of town residents are very upbeat about how everything turned out.

There is considerable talk around town these days about the need of a new Town Hall. As likely as not, reference is usually made to the Gray Barn in the same breath. To some, there may not be a clear connection between the two. The decision to incorporate the Gray Barn into the proposed New Town Hall is a complex one; several factors have to be taken into consideration.

To begin with, Federal, State and other sources need to be approached for grant moneys. Currently, more money is available for plans that call for restoration of historic sites and buildings than there is for the construction of new buildings or structures. By incorporating an existing historic structure into new plans, the chances of receiving grant money is increased. Secondly, small rural towns such as Colebrook, when erecting public buildings, particularly when these are to be built within a historic district, seek to create a degree of uniqueness, which will make that town distinct from all other towns, while at the same time meeting the guidelines that have been established by the local Historic District Commission. Salisbury's decision to replace its historic town hall after it was destroyed by arson is a good example of this thinking. Thirdly, the Colebrook Center Historic District consists of a very small number of buildings, something in the order of 20 or thereabouts. Any addition or deletion when dealing with so few structures has a greater impact on the community than it would if the same building were to be erected or removed in a larger community.

The Colebrook Center Historic District was established in 1963. It comprises the environs of a rural, upland village that has remained essentially unchanged since the beginnings of our nation.

Recent research has uncovered the fact that the first dwelling house erected in the Center (and indeed the town), was built in 1765, rather than 1767, as previously stated. This building still exists as the central section of 561 Colebrook Road, and has been used continuously as a residence ever since.

The Gray Barn, 562 Colebrook Road, is located across the road from this building. It was built for Reuben Rockwell, who lived at 561 Colebrook Road, probably in 1842 or 43. The reasoning for this date is as follows: The quality of the framework of this structure exceeds that of any other non-residential building in Colebrook. The first meetinghouse, which incidentally was located next to Rockwell's dwelling house, was replaced by the present structure in 1843. Reuben was one of a three-man committee appointed as the building committee for the new church. The building of an edifice such as a house of worship required the skills of specialists, most likely from outside the environs of farming communities. Having been imported into the community, these specialists were more often than not employed in building other structures, either just

before, or following the completion of the primary structure. I believe that the care that is evidenced in the superior quality of this barn, as well as the accouterments such as the large windlass, still functional, which can be seen on the upper floor, attests to our line of reasoning.

Reuben Rockwell (the elder) died at this same time period, and his will was executed on January 25, 1843. The will ends with this statement: "...being that part of the farm of said Reuben Rockwell, deceased, called *Pisgah Hill*, containing 100 acres, more or less, with barn, etc. standing thereon." This plot of land, containing the Gray Barn, is to this day referred to as the "barn lot".

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The Colebrook Historical Society has had an on going educational involvement with the students at the Colebrook Consolidated School, as well as other invited schools from surrounding communities for many years. The Gray Barn is presented to the students as the only structure dating from the first half of the nineteenth century, or earlier, in the Historic District that was built specifically as a barn. It is not only an example of a barn per se; it is an example of a superbly constructed farm building erected when farming was an important industry in Southern New England prior to the Civil War. We feel that we as a community have been blessed by having such a well balanced authentic historical setting.

Robert Grigg, Town Historian