Connecticut's Western Boundary

In Colonial times, Connecticut and Massachusetts agreed pretty well on their boundaries, but neither agreed with New York, which was Dutch in origin and laid out in the manorial system. In the 17th century, New York made claims lying far east of the present border – as far as the Connecticut River, while Connecticut laid claim to all the land west of her as far as the "South Sea" (Pacific Ocean). The problem continued even after the Dutch were replaced by the British.

In 1685 Robert Livingston was granted Livingston Manor in New York State, running eastward from the Hudson River above Poughkeepsie. He and his son Philip were aggressive landlords. They enforced their policies with their own constabulary, and they made life miserable for Massachusetts and Connecticut residents by forcibly collecting rents from them, or failing that, burning them out and driving off their cattle.

In 1731 Connecticut ended its differences with New York by a survey that has held good, with small variations, ever since. The survey gave form to a complicated deal whereby Connecticut got the Stamford-Greenwich panhandle – already full of Connecticut settlers – in return for the notch just above it, near Wilton, and for an eastward move of the whole border north of that, by "one mile, three quarters of a mile, twenty rods and five links" (this equals 9,573.3 feet) into land then tentatively judged to be Connecticut territory.

In 1700, King William III of England had signed an agreement that the border should lie 20 miles east of the Hudson River, so in 1731 the surveyors came east twenty miles from the river, then came farther east by the "one mile, three quarters of a mile, twenty rods and five links" and then ran the border straight south, thus taking a slice off Connecticut that was supposed to equal the panhandle minus the notch. It made and still makes, an odd-looking line, but it was accepted and has worked.

Massachusetts was slow to follow suit, though; not until 1787 did she make her New York agreement. Even then the line was unsound geographically. Boston Corners, the angle of the Massachusetts border, lay almost two miles west of Connecticut's angle – because of the slice taken off the latter state; and besides, it was down on the lowlands to the Riga Plateau's west, cut off by a steep escarpment from the rest of Massachusetts itself. Massachusetts peace officers couldn't get into it easily, and they were also together with their colleagues of New York and Connecticut, unsure of their jurisdiction in the complexities of the borders. The corner was a virtual no man's land, where miscreants could play a game of prisoner's base – they called it "dodging the line." Murderers, counterfeiters and others are said to have dodged the line there for long periods of time. Massachusetts ended the anomaly in 1853 by ceding a triangle at the corner to New York, but the lawless atmosphere prevailed there up to that moment. On October 12, 1853, an illegal bare-knuckled fight was held at Boston Corners between John Morrissey and Yankee Sullivan. It was an age when fights often took place on rafts and other hard-to-police bits of territory, and Boston Corners filled the bill.

The physical attributes of this geographical region are quite fascinating. The Taconic plateau, also known as the Mount Riga plateau, is the highest area within the state. The highest elevation in Connecticut, 2,380 feet, is located on the south face of Mt. Frissel. The summit of Frissel is located just north of the Connecticut border, reaching 2,453 feet. The highest peak within the state is the summit of Bear Mountain, at 2,316 feet. This averages out to be approximately 1,100 feet above the adjacent valley floor. These valley floors consist of marine sediments called marble. Marble is the result of compressing and heating limestone.

When I was attending Clark University, one of the leading institutions of higher learning in the field of geography and geology in the country at the time, it was believed that these valleys in northwestern Connecticut, dominated by the one followed by the Housatonic River, were the result of simple erosion, with the softer limestones dissolving more rapidly than the igneous shiests and gneisses. Since the 1980s, it has been discovered that the topography has a much more dramatic origin, one that to my knowledge is unique in the world. Apparently what happened was that there had been an ancient shallow sea located partially where northwestern Connecticut exists today. Powerful tectonic forces, probably associated with the collision of present-day Europe and Africa with the land mass that was to evolve into North America, caused a block of hard, igneous rock to be physically shoved westward over the limestone, where it came to rest. We now know that if a core could be extracted from say the summit of Mt. Riga, at some point it would enter the zone of limestone. It is not known how deep this layer is, although west of the Hudson River, the sedimentary material exceeds 13,000 feet.

Canaan Mountain also falls into this category of hard, ancient rocks being shoved over limestone; note the depth of the quarry on lower Road, which is located at the north base of Canaan Mountain.

I don’t know how far east this layer of limestone extends, but it definitely is under West Norfolk, as the dug well at the house at the intersection of Ashpohtag Road and CT Rt. 44 meets a layer of limestone at around 27 feet.

Historic Bytes

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