Some Facts Concerning Corliss Mountain

After traveling along Sandy Brook Road from Conn. Route 8 in Robertsville about one mile, the observant traveler will notice on the right two trails ascending the upland known since the 1860s as Corliss Mountain.

These trails were originally constructed as access roads to the upland between Sandy Brook on the south and Beech Hill Road on the north, and prior to the Civil War served a small community of some seven or eight houses scattered along the upland. When they leave Sandy Brook Road they are only a few feet apart. Today only Corliss Mountain Road on the left is easily visible to the traveler, the other is Scovil Road.

Ascending Scovil Road, the first several hundred yards are quite steep. As the land begins to level off, the road bends to your right, stays more or less straight for a short distance, and then makes a left bend. This is the spot where several stone monuments can be seen to your right, marking the site of Reuben Scovil's barn. Here the road forks, with Scovil Road continuing up the mountain, going generally north, the other going east, and if followed to its end, would emerge on Route 8, about where the access road is to the dam. It is not advisable to do this however, as the decent is very steep and difficult to follow.

Going back to the point where the roads diverge at Scovil's barn, a few hundred yards east will be found a few rocks delineating the spot Henry Manassa's shack stood, using a large glacial erratic as the northwest wall. Careful digging here uncovers small amounts of charcoal. It is not at all unlikely that Colebrook residents burned it down during or just after his murder trial in 1851. Although Manassa was eventually cleared of the charge of murder in the Barnice White case and released from prison after sixteen years behind bars, many residents of Colebrook always believed that because he was an Indian, he must have had something to do with White's death and subsequently refused him entrance back in town after his release from prison.

A quarter of a mile east of Manassa's house site sat the Wilcox house. This is probably the site of the earliest dwelling on the mountain. Wilcox allegedly carried the lumber for his house up the mountain from Colebrook River on his back and with the use of a cow and a bull yoked together. He planted several apple trees, a few of which survived as large old ruins as late as the 1920's. There is no clearly defined cellar hole here, leading to the belief that this house was a log cabin.

Returning to the barn site again and ascending the mountain a few hundred yards, you will discover on your left the foundation of Julius Scovil's dwelling located just southeast of a large ledge which must have protected it from the fierce north winds of Autumn and Winter. Use caution at this site – there is an open well here some ten or fifteen feet deep. The site must have been an attractive one when the house was built in the 1840's when all the forest had been clear-cut, creating a spectacular view. Walk along the base of the stone ledge past the cellar hole and see if you can't visualize yourself standing in a vegetable garden. I'm reasonable sure that is the use Scovil made of the spot.

Julius Scovil was Reuben's father. A land title deed of 1848 mentions this house. A couple of hundred yards past Julius' on the right-hand side of the road is a cellar hole marking the site of the dwelling house of Philo and Hiram Bidwell, who built it in 1844. Officially Scovil Road ends here, but connecting trails continue on which eventually tie in with Corliss Road, a half-mile or so to the northwest. Near the junction with Corliss Road are a series of small ponds known as “The Pleiades” created at the direction of Helen Binney Kitchel for a water habitat along the stream that drains the large sphagnum swamp to the north.

There are two house sites on Corliss Road. The southernmost, which sits adjacent to “Happy’s Pines”, was owned and occupied by John B. Corliss and his son, Sam. The house site sits on an embankment above the road, held in place by a stone wall.

Mrs. Kitchel named the stand of White Pines “Happy’s Pines” for her daughter, who was known by her nickname of “Happy”. This stand had survived the lumberman’s axe because the Harrison Lumber Company of Branford, Connecticut, who had cutting rights prior to Mrs. Kitchel’s acquiring the property, had never seen a nicer stand of White Pine, and couldn’t bring themselves to cut them. This stand has taken on additional meaning since the Cathedral Pines in Cornwall were destroyed by a tornado. Although not as extensive in area as the Cathedral Pines, Happy’s Pines nevertheless are nearly as large and stately. The now destroyed Cathedral Pines were estimated to have been several hundred years old, and it would seem that these trees, although not as old, nevertheless are probably around 160 years (2011). Lay down amidst these giants and look straight up, and you will experience a sensation you probably never felt before. It does for all the World seem as though you are in a cathedral whose roof is considerably more than one hundred feet above you.

One hundred and fifty yards or so to the north the road ends. Here the furthest habitation on the road stood on the south side of the large sphagnum swamp. This farm was built by Erastus Doty Jr. in 1850, and occupied by Josiah M. Balcom. Erastus died soon after completing this farm and various owners followed. The place was abandoned and sat for years alone at the end of the road. The house did not survive, but in the early years of the twentieth century, Parks Holcomb Sr. dismantled the barn and reassembled it for the McClaves at their property in north Colebrook.

The swamp is named from the type of moss that proliferates in it. Apparently created by melting water cascading from the retreating glaciers, the depression gouged out of bedrock has continued to fill up with dead vegetation for the past several thousand years and now consists of peat moss created in the oxygen-depleted waters. The water is tea colored as a result of the tannin from Hemlock bark. An island emerges in the center of this swamp covered with trees larger than their counterparts on the surrounding shores. This is probably because of the difficulty in crossing the sphagnum. It is a trip that should not be attempted except in the winter when there is a thick cover of ice. I would venture an educated guess that the peat contains more than one preserved remains of careless animals.

One species of tree that grows here is the Black Tupelo, or Pepperidge Tree. This specie is near its northern limit, and rarely occurs around here, especially as large as these. During Colonial times when spices were difficult if not impossible to acquire, the fruit of the Tupelo was used as a substitute for black pepper, hence the name “Pepperidge”. It also has a growth pattern unlike any other tree growing in these parts. The annual growth rings are entwined, much like the way strands of DNA are portrayed. Consequently, it cannot be split, a fact some unwary woodsmen have no doubt discovered when the splitting axe went flying after coming in contact with the log. The only use that I have ever heard that this wood can be used for is bungs for wooden barrels. They can be firmly pounded into place without fear of splitting.