Cultural Patterns in Colonial New England

Internal migration (moving out of your village, but remaining within the colony) was very low in New England before 1780, in many cases lower than 10%. The statistics kept referred mainly to mature male adults. Young people were more mobile, partly due to the custom of "sending out" children. (This custom continued into the 20th century, as my father, born in 1904 in Hingham, Mass., was sent out and raised in his maternal grandmother's house, where she and a couple of his great aunts lived without a "man of the family".)

Women also moved more often than men because patterns of settlement after marriage tended to be patriarchal.

These patterns of migration and settlement helped to create a special system of association in New England. The vital factors were the comparative immobility of the mature population and the density of town life in this region.

A special language of belonging was carried to Massachusetts from the east of England; it appeared in words such as "townsman" and "town-born", which were common in East Anglia during the 17th century, and also because part of the social vocabulary of New England. On the night of the Boston Massacre, for example, a cry went through the streets of the city, "Town-born, turn out!"

There were strong resentments against outsiders. Rivalries between towns were so intense that they sometimes led to violence in the 17th century. One such clash occurred between the Connecticut towns of Stamford and Greenwich over disputed boundary lines. Another quarrel between New London and nearby towns over a meadow ended in a nasty fight when the farmers of those communities attacked each other with scythes. A conflict over land between the towns of Windsor and Enfield led to a pitched battle in which 100 men were said to be "fiercely engaged in resolute combat." New England towns were units of passionate identity. Many took on a character and even a personality of their own, and have maintained it through many generations.

The New England town, for all its solidarity against external threats, was not a unitary structure. The most important unit of daily association was not the town itself, but the neighborhood – a small cluster of houses inhabited by families who, over time, were increasingly related to one another. From an early date in the 17th century, these rural neighborhoods appeared on the settlement maps of most New England towns. Even the isolated homesteads of "outliers" tended to be bunched loosely together on a stretch of road, with long unbuilt distances between them.

Neighborhoods were not defined by just a cluster of dwellings within a town, but could cross adjacent town lines, and in some cases across state boundaries. A case in point is the neighborhood in northeastern Norfolk known in the 19th century as Pondtown. The name derives from the community near Doolittle and Benedict Ponds, which lie adjacent to the Town of Colebrook on the east and Sandisfield on the north. There was a school district in Norfolk by that name, as well as the name of the cemetery.

These three towns, consisting of parts of three townships, two states and two counties had great cohesiveness in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The first Baptist elder, Rufus Babcock, came initially to Sandisfield, where he soon gathered a following in all three towns. Apparently there were more members in Colebrook than the sister towns, and he was promised a meetinghouse and parsonage if he would settle there. This was done, and as far as we can tell, never caused any kind of problem. In the 1820s, when James French bought property on Prock Hill in Colebrook, it was his neighbor, Daniel Sears of Sandisfield to whom he turned for every kind of assistance. This is itemized in the article entitled "Creating a Farm on Prock Hill in the 1830s".

From Norfolk's point of view, the topography, or "lay of the land" made it easier to communicate with North Colebrook and Sandisfield than with Norfolk center. One of the sons of the first inhabitant lived out his life in the Pondtown district with the exception of a period in his youth when he had a job with the Rockwell Brothers of Colebrook Center, where he made iron shovels.