Patterns in our Landscape

Seldom is much thought given to the arrangements of the cultural aspects of our surroundings, but the layouts for our towns, roads and land use patterns were not created arbitrarily. Let's begin by looking at our Southern New England villages.

Crossroads villages were laid out when practical, along lines desired by the English colonists. In western New England, Williamstown, Massachusetts, laid out in 1750, has a Main Street with an east-west alignment (present day MS Rt. 2) and intersects North and South Streets, which were laid out in 1761. This is the same year our Old North Road was laid out, and for the same reason: the French and Indian Wars were in full swing, and outposts were necessary to prevent surprise attacks from the threat from the northwest.

The one factor that dictates alignments of roads and agriculture is the topography left to us by the most recent glacial period, which ended some fourteen or fifteen thousand years ago. I believe that it is generally agreed upon that the retreating front face of the glacier that had covered this part of the country crossed the U.S – Canadian border around thirteen thousand years ago. The physical structure underlying the area is the northern Appalachian mountain system, which is in part a result of a collision between North America and Europe/North Africa. This trends north-south in Litchfield County, and as a result is the general direction of our hills and valleys. The glacier, which was as thick as two miles, moved with an undulating motion, much the way water moves, this resulted in the grinding effect of the glacier altering the surface of the base rock. This resulted in gravel deposits, lakes, and rivers that seem to defy the general trend of the land. Examples of this are the southeasterly course of the Connecticut River south of Middletown, which left its ancient original bed that once terminated just east of present-day New Haven, and the large gravel deposits around Goshen (the fair grounds, for instance).

The western lands of Litchfield County are marked by north-south as well as crossroads. Litchfield, the shire town, was settled in 1720 and lies at the imperfect intersection of four compass-named streets oriented on an axis of N13°W, about five degrees west of contemporary magnetic north. North and South Streets are slightly offset and fail to join at the green. Such imperfections are by no means uncommon. The people who laid out townships and property lines often used a compass to obtain results. This often gave problems in later years, as magnetic north is constantly moving, and if there happened to be magnetic ores underground, the needle would give a false reading. For a reason that I have been unable to determine, Norfolk (incorporated in 1758) established its eastern boundary as being 19° east of north. When Colebrook (incorporated in 1779, but laid out in 1760), was surveyed, this Norfolk reading established not only our east and west boundaries, but all of our internal structures as well. Every piece of property was laid out within a certain tier, of which we had eight, meaning that all had that same 19° east of north reading. It would have been better if the original surveyors had used true north, with the North Star, Polaris, as the point of reference.

Hilltop villages became the new settlement template when population migrated out of the broad central valley. Only long, north-south, glacially streamlined hills had the depth of soil and

arable acreage needed for farm settlement; drumlins (small, round-top hills consisting of gravel, sand and rock flour) were too small, and bedrock ridges were too ledgy. A hilltop meetinghouse and village green stood at the center of a radial road-net and farms spread along the ridges and down the slopes. Examples locally are Norfolk, Goshen, West Goshen and Litchfield. The tern "common" is traditional in Massachusetts, but "green" is more usual in Connecticut.

The three-cornered, or wedge green (Colebrook) is probably the most numerous type in New England. They also have precedent in England, particularly in the south, from whence came the settlers of Massachusetts Bay and Connecticut.

The aspect of New England farm fields noticed (and criticized) over the years is their small size. Small fields might mark stages in what the English call piecemeal enclosure, as parcel after parcel was won from the wilderness. Smaller acreage eased the burden of stone removal: stones from the middle of even a five-acre square field would need to be carried more than seventy-five yards to the nearest edge. It is certainly true that it is easier to clear eight one-acre fields than one eight-acre field.

The small field of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries became a liability, particularly after WWII, when surplus military bulldozers became available to bury or remove large boulders and no longer needed stone walls. Walls harbored weeds, brush, briers, bushes and vermin; they wasted ground and cramped cultivation. All this without mentioning that the narrow bar-ways prevented the use of modern machinery such as side delivery rakes.

Changing times meant changing roles for fences. In colonial times, field crops were fenced in while livestock roamed at large. Later, in face of increased human population, tradition slowly evolved, and livestock were penned, with swine usually the last to be allowed to roam free.

In New England the term "Georgian" has come to be diversely applied by students of material culture to a symmetrical style of architecture, to the way in which household trash began to be buried in pits rather than strewn over the yard (circa 1750). This became very evident during the archaeological dig at Smith's Forge in Robertsville. This community of 11 buildings was built in 1770. We uncovered two house sites that sit in undisturbed ground. I mean by that land that although used for growing grain crops and for pasture, never had other structures erected on it. In both cases, trash showed a pattern of having been tossed out of the nearest window. Although it was difficult to discern such patterns in Robertsville, they did exist. Marc Banks, the archaeologist at the site, told us that often the location of front doors and ground floor windows can be accurately determined by the trash pattern. As is often the case, cultural advances such as burying household trash lagged sometimes by several decades in the more rural or isolated areas. Several hundred years from now, archaeologists will need a completely different set of guidelines when attempting to make meaning out of our culture. I wish them luck!

Historic Bytes

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