

Colebrook Center in 1811 – II

We are continuing with the land descriptions from volume 5 of the Colebrook Land Records, where the several Rockwell brothers, who had moved to Winchester and other locations having a better economic climate than did Colebrook, sold all of their jointly held lands to their brother Reuben, who opted to remain in Colebrook, where he operated his farm and store. In 1811 there was only one store in Colebrook, the building directly behind the present-day Colebrook Store, which wasn't to be built until the following year. For years there was confusion as to the sequence of events surrounding these two stores. To add to the confusion, there are postcards still in existence showing the building covered in woodbine, a local native climbing vine similar to English ivy, where it is identified as "The Woodbine Cottage". There hasn't been any woodbine on that building since the 1920s, and I seriously doubt that there is a living person who remembers it thus covered. Years ago, when there were still people who talked about the buildings in and around the Center, the Woodbine Cottage was usually described as the first store, the one that had been moved back from its original location to make room for the new store. Not exactly; the first store (Woodbine Cottage) was built on the exact spot that it sits on to this day. The reason for this is that the original alignment of the so-called Sandisfield Road (Smith Hill Road and north along Colebrook Road, then up Prock Hill Road and on into Sandisfield) came northward down Smith Hill Road, left across what is now Colebrook Road (CT Rt. 183), passed the store along today's CT Rt. 182-A, then made a 90° right turn behind the first store and proceeded northward, to rejoin present Colebrook Road south of the bridge. This first one-room store opened for business in 1803, and served the community well enough until around 1810 or 11, when the ever-increasing population required a larger facility. For several years both of these stores were operated in tandem, even referred to in the tax ledgers as "the front store and the back store".

The 1811 deed that we are dealing with here describes another of the several units of land that Reuben is purchasing, thus: [In describing the lot just west of the two stores] "Also, part of the meadow, so called,(then follows a series of measurements) to the old causeway, thence on the north side of said causeway in a straight line across the island, so called, to a large rock near the clay pits at the further end of the mud causeway, thence on the middle of said mud causeway to the line of the piece of land above described on which the steel works stands", etc.

To me, at least, this is a fascinating paragraph; Route 182-A was constructed in 1772, at the request of Richard Smith, as a more direct route between the western part of town and his large forge in Robertsville. I have wondered how they went about creating the route across the swamp, which is the remains of an old glacial lake bed. I figured that probably it was initially a corduroy road, and I still believe that that type of construction was the only practical method available to Colebrook residents at that time period. Here they talk of "the old causeway", and a few words further on "the mud causeway". Then there is a straight line from a large rock at the further end of the island to the lot on which the steel works sat. Here is what's going on: the present alignment of CT Rt. 182-A is south of the original, the original causeway that they talk about had to have been about half way between the store and Draper's place (561 Colebrook

Road), because that is the known location of the steel works. Also, the rock on the island is well-known to any Colebrook boy who took part in our old “married men – single men” baseball games in that now long-distant past. It is a fairly large boulder, not very high, but about four feet across, that was right in the middle of right field. The poor right fielder would forget about it during the excitement of the game and when the inevitable fly ball was lofted towards right, he would fade back and find himself sprawled out on top of that cursed stone, with the batter around third and heading unimpeded to home plate before the ball could be retrieved and returned to the infield. Stop along Rockwell Road (CT Rt. 182-A); when you are about 150 yards or so west of the Woodbine Cottage; there is a short section of stone wall on the right side of the road (north side), in the middle of which is a bar way. This is “the island”, being a high spot in the swamp, which used to be a hay lot. Our home plate would have been slightly to your left, with the boulder at the back of the field slightly on the right. The fact that the causeway is described as being in a straight line with the iron works and the large rock at the further end of the island proves that the first causeway was thus positioned. And the clay pits! What clay pits? This is the first mention of clay that I have ever seen or heard about in the town of Colebrook. It doesn't surprise me, because after all, it is an old lake bed, and the glacier certainly left behind all manner of mineral deposits, but clay beds having the potential to be worthwhile to humans in Colebrook Center is unprecedented.

A clue to the use of this clay might be found in David Ransom's book Historical and Architectural Resources Survey, Town of Colebrook, Connecticut, June, 1997. Ransom was the Connecticut Architectural Historian. In his description of 549 Colebrook Road, commonly referred to as “Rockwell Hall”, completed in 1794, he says in part: “In the extensive attached wing on the south side, some of the first story walls are brick, which is an unusual building material in Colebrook”. The aforementioned clay pits are about 100 yards distant from this house. I feel that it is quite possible that the early brick use (mostly chimneys), were of very local origin.

The next part of the deed reads: “Also reserving the steel works and wood house near it with full liberty and right to pass and repass from the highway to said steel works at all times and the use of as much land about said steel works as has been heretofore used for laying wood and every other purpose.

Also one other piece of land on which Reuben's old barn now stands, [present-day Town Hall] bounded west on the highway, north on Timothy Persons and others [the Parsonage and the plot of land that 11 Schoolhouse Road stands on], and east and south on Elijah Rockwell Jr.'s land. [11 Schoolhouse Rd. used to be the old Center School, but it wasn't to be built until 31 years later than this deed].

“Also reserving the right we have heretofore held in the dry goods and iron store near it now occupied by Elijah Rockwell & Co., being $\frac{3}{4}$ of the property of said stores, to have and to hold,” etc., etc.

You will note that there is no mention of the land upon which the Colebrook Inn stands, as it was not to be sold to William Underwood for several more years; Underwood then hired

William Swift to build the inn as a wedding gift for his daughter, who married a man named Seymour, and this is the reason its first name was “The Seymour Inn”.

If the present-day traveler were to be able to pass through Colebrook Center 200 years ago, Rockwell Hall (549 Colebrook Rd.), the two stores, Draper’s (561 Colebrook Rd.) and the Gray Barn and the parsonage on the right would be the only structures he would recognize. The church then would have been where 563 is now located, and the site of the present church was an open lot, used for grazing sheep, probably.

Historic Bytes

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