

Colebrook's First Cider Mill

Quite often the municipal historian of a town will be asked a question that results in unexpected returns. Such a situation arose recently when I was asked by someone associated with Camp Jewell, the North Colebrook "Y" facility, to supply information about an old mill site on their property along the upper reaches of Viets Brook shortly after that stream enters Connecticut. I am familiar with this site, as it is known as "site # 1" in a brochure about Colebrook mill sites published some years ago by the Colebrook Historical Society, where it is listed as a lumber mill site. I had never questioned anything about that particular location, as Nancy Blum was the source of the information that made up the text in that pamphlet, and no one questioned Nancy. There was something gnawing away about the physical aspects of that mill site in the back of my brain, however, and that was brought about by the foundation stones,

There are numerous saw mill foundations scattered along the banks of Colebrook's rivers and streams, and every one of them are built with very large foundation stones, whereas this site along side of Viets Brook utilized granite posts, the tallest being nearly fourteen feet tall. Something told me that the vibrations generated by a working saw mill wouldn't last long on those posts. However, at the time I wasn't concerned with that particular site, figuring that there would be plenty of time to research it further when the time came. Well, some fifteen years later the time had arrived, and I figured it would be a simple task to identify the early land owners and find out by the tax records when it was built, and the identifying trail sign could be placed. Imagine my surprise when I failed to find one word about any lumber mills having been constructed on this land! I began in the 1760s and searched through 1856, after which I knew there couldn't have been a saw mill anywhere along that stretch of Viets Brook. Next came a search of every land owner, beginning with the Windsor Proprietors in 1760. This eventually led to an entry stating that Joseph Bidwell had purchased 24 acres of land at this location from David Viets [for whom the brook is named] on July 9, 1779, and he retained possession of this property until he sold it to his son, Asa, on December 23, 1799. The wording in the deed reads as follows: "...a piece of land in the 2nd tier with a dwelling house and barn and cyder mill standing on the same."

So there it was; the structure wasn't a saw mill, it was a cider mill. Now another interesting aspect arises: While it is true that vast amounts of cider were consumed by the locals throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, locally it wasn't produced until the end of the eighteenth century here in these Berkshire foothills. This fact is based on the writings of Reuben Rockwell (the first), where he states (in 1835) that the early settlers did not have any luck in raising apple trees on the newly-cleared land. This information rings true, as the first plantings of not just fruit trees, but of a long list of food plants, were brought over from England. The climate and soil types in the mother country were vastly different from the conditions and soil here in these uplands. It took somewhat over a century for the settlers to come up with types of plants (apples in this case) that would be productive locally. In 1796 the Westfield Seek-No-

Farther was developed, which eventually became one of the most sought-after cider apples in these parts.

Taking the known date of development for the Westfield, Mass. apple, and realizing that there were no doubt other types that we don't have exact dates for that were also beginning to produce, it is more than likely that cider was starting to be made locally at least by the last decade of the eighteenth century. If it weren't for the fact that Joseph Bidwell specifically mentioned the cider mill that was on the land that he had sold to his son, we would never have known of its existence, as cider mills weren't taxed, as were saw mills, and thus remain invisible unless mentioned in a land transaction such as the one here. As I have now searched land records specifically looking for mention of cider mills, even though I know of several owners of such mills, I can find no mention of the location of a cider mill in Colebrook up until 1806. It is for this reason that I will refer to this Viets Brook cider mill as Colebrook's oldest until something proves otherwise.



Bidwell's cider mill site, 1790s.