

French Family's Local History, The

This family has been deeply involved in local happenings for as long as Europeans have inhabited these hills. Two members of the Mayflower Company who came to Plymouth in 1620, Richard Warren and Thomas Rogers represent the family. They, like many other families, remained in Massachusetts for several generations before fanning out into other parts of the New World. The local branch came to our area from Taunton, Mass., which is located some 20 miles west of Plymouth.

That fact by itself is not so remarkable, but in the early stages of the Richard Smith Forge archaeological undertaking, Walt Landgraf came into some interesting information about the Taunton branch of the French family. A William French, born in Taunton in 1740, came to Hartland in the 1760s and indications are that he was the builder of Richard Smith's forge in Robertsville, built in 1770. When the history of the earliest attempts at iron making in Mass. is consulted, several family names are prominent, among them Cobb, Williams, Hewit and Deane. All of these names appear in the French family genealogy.

Coincidentally, as the Robertsville forge investigation was getting underway, we were contacted by William C. French from Maine, the grandson of Correll French, a former Colebrook inhabitant, who had information about the "French Place" at the east end of Lake Marguerite in Sandisfield.

My terminology "French Place" refers to what is today a cellar hole on a promontory east of the lake. This body of water was named Simons Pond after the original pioneer to the location, Eli Simons, who built his home there in the 1760s. Correll French, while living in Colebrook River, bought the old 200 acre Simons place and used it, primarily in the warmer months, until selling it to S. Wood McClave in December, 1904. Shortly thereafter the McClaves renamed the body of water Lake Marguerite, after their eldest daughter.

This house site is located on an abandoned north-south road with the name "Beech Hill Road". This is a little disconcerting for Colebrook people, especially those living on the upland known as Beech Hill. In Sandisfield, the name implies that the road leads to Colebrook's Beech Hill, while in Colebrook, the road is Simons Pond Road, because that is where it leads to.

Correll French's grandson knew of the old place as I did; an abandoned farmstead being overtaken by vine and forest. He took several black-and-white photos during a visit in the late 1920s that look similar to the ones I took twenty years later. Whereas I have only my pictures, Mr. French is the owner of a large brief case full of French family genealogy, maps and photos, all of which he most generously made available to the Colebrook Historical Society. One of these was a genealogy of the French family going back prior to the coming of the Pilgrims; another was a hand-drawn map of southwestern Hartland in 1790, with small areas of Colebrook and Barkhamsted (Riverton is referred to as "The Forks").

The very day that I met with William French, I was contacted by Walt Landgraf by telephone, and the first words out of his mouth were "What do you know about the French family who used to live in Robertsville and Colebrook River?" Walt had just received

information from Boston that a William French from Taunton, Mass. was most likely the actual builder of Richard Smith's forge in Robertsville in 1770, and that additionally he probably had extensive knowledge of the infant iron industry as practiced in eastern Massachusetts Bay Colony. This information came from our research partner David Ingram, who among other things is a past president of the Massachusetts Historical Society and past president of the Harvard Business School. Mr. Ingram spends much of his time doing research and has uncovered volumes of information concerning the iron and steel industry in southern New England, in particular Litchfield County, Conn.

The Reverend Hollis French wrote articles in the old "*Lure of the Litchfield Hills*", and is still remembered by some of our oldest readers. For many years Rev. French lived in Robertsville and taught in the Old Forge School. His home was 17 Old Forge Road, nearest to the new concrete bridge, whose predecessor bore the name "French Bridge". The house site is only three or four hundred yards from the site of the forge. It was his grandfather Correll who had a five-acre farm in Colebrook River and the two hundred acre one on Beech Hill Road in Sandisfield. One article Hollis French wrote for the Taunton, Mass. newspaper shortly before he passed on in 1967 was about Taunton families that had migrated to Hartland, Barkhamsted and Colebrook around 1770. I will include the list of names appearing in this article, as some of them still exist locally, and we would like to hear from you if you have family lore concerning the Colonial and Revolutionary Periods. The list reads: Andrews, Burt, Cadwell, Covell, Cobb, Crane, Dean(e), Fox, French, Fuller, Gilbert, Hall, Hatch, Hewitt, Hoskins, Jones, King, Leonard, Padelford, Read, Seymour, Smith, Stephens, White and Williams.

One of the great frustrations in doing research into the early families in the southeastern section of Colebrook is the fact that Richard Smith purchased the entire section, consisting of some 285 acres. His workers built their houses on Smith's land, and as a consequence, do not appear on town land records. It wasn't until after the Revolutionary War was over that the large block of land began to be broken up and individual owner's names appeared.



The French place.