

Long-lost Schoolhouse Site Discovered

For something like 150 years the exact location of the original South School in Colebrook had been shrouded in mystery. In the 1990s close attention to the wording of certain entries in the selectmen's town meeting ledgers revealed that the original schoolhouse had been located at the intersection of Bricklemaier Road [modern terminology] and Old North Road; but at which corner? No dwelling house had ever been erected there, so it can be argued that it wasn't really anything to get excited about. However, if you happen to be one of those persons who are sticklers about all things historical, this type of situation leaves a hollow feeling in the pit of your stomach; it's like a vacuum – nature doesn't like one.

Colebrook was politically founded in 1779, although there had been settlers living here from 1766 onwards. By the 1770s, the population had grown to the extent that villages began to emerge, and with them came the social requirements of the period; schools, churches, and highways to connect them. We know that initially there were two school districts; The North, referred to as the Sandisfield Road District, today renamed the Rock School, and the South. A hypothetical east-west line was drawn through Colebrook, using Samuel Rockwell's house in Colebrook Center as the mid-point. This was chosen because it was two miles north of the Winchester town line. All children living south of this line went to the South School; everyone north of it went to what is today known as the Rock School.

We know that the two schoolhouses were in place at least by 1779, because the wording in the Town Meeting ledger calling for the placement of notices for the first-ever Colebrook town meeting, held on December 13, 1779, be posted on the doors of the two schools and on the town sign post.

Six years later, in December, 1785, the population in the northeastern part of town had grown to the extent that another school district was required, and the third Colebrook schoolhouse was erected on Beech Hill, on Simons Pond Road, about one half-mile north of its intersection with Beech Hill Road. The population continued to grow, and eleven years later, on October 20, 1796, a School Society was formed to attend to all the requirements of the education of the town's youth.

One of the duties of this society was to determine the exact location of any new school structures. So when the South School burned down in either 1816 or 17, the residents of the South District petitioned the society to "place a stake" for the location of the replacement school. Apparently there was some sort of problem, whether it was political or otherwise, we will probably never know, but the society failed to appoint a committee to determine the location. After this situation dragged on into 1817, the local residents took matters into their own hands and began construction of the new schoolhouse. Had they rebuilt on the old location, we no doubt would never have known about the wrangling that took place within the community, but the new building was being constructed about a quarter of a mile eastward of the Bricklemaier intersection, at what is today 268 Smith Hill Road. The committee, their collective noses badly out of joint, upon viewing the partly-completed schoolhouse, saw the futility in further

discontent, and placed their stake in front of the door, thus discharging their duty and satisfying the local residents.

Actually, the placement at the intersections of Smith Hill Road, Old North Road and Losaw Road made a lot of sense, as the Connecticut legislature had decreed that one square mile of Winchester, centered on Losaw Road, was to be incorporated into the Colebrook South School District. It was for this reason that Losaw Road was much more important during the nineteenth century than it was in later decades.

This frame structure remained in use until 1842, when it was determined that the condition was so deteriorated that it should be replaced. This happened to be during the productive years of the Rowley Brickyard, which incidentally, was located within the South School District, just down the hill about a half mile into Winchester, and it was thus determined that the new schoolhouse should be constructed of brick, the only time this material was to be used in Colebrook schools except for the present-day Colebrook Consolidated School, constructed in 1949.

Once more, this schoolhouse location needs an asterisk next to it: the residents needed to have the use of the old building, and the school grounds were barely large enough to accommodate one building, so the brick replacement was constructed about four feet behind the old building. Once complete, the wooden structure was sold to the highest bidder, which was \$6.00 if it was promptly removed. This was the only time when a replacement building posed a problem, as all the other replacements involved a burned-down structure, and the old foundations were reused.

Nearly 150 years passed, and the original location had been completely forgotten, except for a period of time in the 1870s when the town attempted to abandon several old roads, one of which was what is today known as Bricklemaier, and the description of the road was a connecting road “by the old school site”. This rather nebulous description remained in place until July, 2011, when research into the land distributions in Colebrook Town Land Records (Vol. 1) revealed that a portion of lot #60 in the 5th tier was sold, and the description was: “bounded east and west by highways, north on Eno’s land, and runs to a point at the west end. There is a school house standing, all or part in said land, which I do not own, nor do not now sell the same.”

This places the original site in the front yard of 32 Old North Road, the home of Gil and Gerry Kassel. Gerry is the curator of the Colebrook Historical Society, and it was a pleasure to inform the Kassels that they had “won the Colebrook Lottery”. Needless to say, they were thrilled with this information.

Who said that research into old, quill-written documents is boring?

Historic Bytes

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