

Prock Hill Road Update

Prock Hill Road, in the northwest corner of Colebrook, began a new life in the summer of 2000. At that time the town had received a request from a landowner who had recently purchased a piece of property on Prock Hill, right on the Massachusetts line. The property did not border on a public highway however, and there was no way to access the property. The original road past this property, through dwindling usage, was discontinued in 1878, and over the decades had been overgrown with what had turned into a mature forest. The old road alignment ran along this property owner's eastern boundary, and thus the request to re-establish the road. You would think that this should be an open and shut case, but there is a complicated set of factors that occurred between 1878 and 2000.

Let's go back to the beginning and trace the history of this particular road: its first name was "Highway Number 3", and the Colonial Legislature required its construction in 1763 to facilitate troop movements from the populated Connecticut River Valley and coastal regions toward Albany and the upper Hudson River Valley during the French and Indian Wars. In Colebrook, it began at the present intersection of Smith Hill Road and Old North Road and proceeded northward along what is today Smith Hill Road, through the Center, north along CT Rt. 183 to North Colebrook, then up Prock Hill Road past YMCA Camp Jewell and straight on into Massachusetts. The route was never used for its original intent, as the French and Indian War ended in 1765, the same year the General Assembly accepted the newly constructed highway. The very year of its completion the seeds of change were sewn; remember that it was laid out through completely uninhabited forest for the express purpose of providing the most direct route for foot soldiers, which meant basically that it went in as straight a line as was possible, without any thought for the comfort of the foot soldiers. The first settlers immediately began to clamor for realignments to make their life easier, and thus in 1797 we see the construction of what is now CT Rt. 183 from the bridge by the Church in the Wildwood up Sandy Brook and into Norfolk and on into Massachusetts – a much more gradual and easier to travel route than the original. From that time onwards the original Prock Hill Road began to decline in use until the voters of Colebrook ordered it closed and abandoned in 1878.

The Colebrook Land Records contains an interesting bit of information dated October 8, 1785 which refers to the Sandisfield Road (Prock Hill Road) as a "parth" (path), hardly terminology you would expect for a main thoroughfare. That fact brings into question the importance of the Phelps Tavern situated at the foot of Prock Hill; remember that in 1785 it was 12 years before another highway was to be constructed through North Colebrook. By all the accounts that I have seen, this tavern was of primary importance; horses were changed here and it was a most popular meeting place, serving all the travelers along that thoroughfare. My question is: what passengers – where were they all going? That terminology referring to the road as a "path" is also repeated in another land transaction ten years later dated November 6, 1795, when a landowner asks for clarification as to his right to access the new alignment.

With these bits of information at hand, it is hardly likely that when the Town Of Colebrook abandoned it in 1878, very few travelers were inconvenienced.

Now we will address the question of the town's responsibility for the possible restoration of these long-abandoned roads. I believe it was the clear intent of the voters that once a highway was abandoned, it was never again to be the responsibility of the town to have anything to do with it. This policy was maintained until about 1952, when town officials were approached by a Torrington resident who wanted to purchase a large piece of property centered on the long-abandoned road once named Cobb City Road, which connected McClave Road on the west with Simons Pond Road on the east. His problem was that without an access road, the development would not be possible. A deal was struck between this gentleman and the Selectmen (but without the knowledge of the voters) whereby the town would restore the abandoned road in return for favorable discounts on heavy machinery, which just happened to be the business of the prospective developer. As far as I can determine, this hardly raised any ripples of concern on the part of Colebrook residents, and as it turned out, it probably wasn't such a bad idea for that particular road to be restored. However, it did establish a dangerous precedent: now the Town was legally required to restore any abandoned road, regardless of how long it had been dormant, at the request of a landowner who wished to build on it.

The next case concerning this type of highway construction occurred in about 1980 or 81, when owners of a plot of land on another road abandoned in the 1870s requested that a 400-foot long road be constructed to their proposed house site. That set the taxpayers back \$40,000. This was followed in 2000 by the previously mentioned Prock Hill Road. I saw George Wilber, then Colebrook's first selectman, pouring over a set of maps one day in June of that year. When asked what he was looking at, he replied that the area was Prock Hill, and the Town had been notified by the attorney for a landowner who had recently purchased a piece of property on the north line of Colebrook that the town must have a passable road to that property over the abandoned section of highway before August of 2000, or else face fines per day until such land was accessible by public road.

Around 2010 a survey was taken of all the abandoned roads in Colebrook, and the result was rather un-nerving; they showed up in abundance. The Town huddled with the Town Attorney and a law was drawn up clarifying the intent of the original voter's wishes concerning the Town's responsibilities in respect to these abandoned highways. In the future the way is no longer wide open for the restoration of these old abandoned roads at public expense.

Historic Bytes
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