

The Colebrook Store's Place in the Community

There is great concern these days in Colebrook as to the future of the Colebrook Store. At the time of this writing (summer 2008), the store has been closed since July 6, 2007. It is now owned by a bank, which would like to sell it for \$275,000. That is a pretty steep price for a general store in need of upkeep and TLC, not to mention a contamination problem left over from the days when there were gasoline pumps out front.

The tank had developed a leak and had contaminated the well located across the road that supplied water to the town hall and Center Fire Dept. When the State widened Conn. Rt. 183 in 1971, it placed the tank under state property, and therefore it could no longer be used or replaced. It was determined by three State agencies (Health, EPA and Fire Marshall's office) that the tank be emptied, flushed and filled with concrete. This was done to the satisfaction of all three agencies in 1971. At the time, the plume of contamination that had ruined the town well was still in place, and was expected to remain for some time, but periodic monitoring established that it seems to be stationary. The State felt that it did not constitute a problem. The State of Connecticut did not, however, keep its records, and now, in the twenty-first century, cannot supply documents to the bank or prospective purchasers giving a clean bill of health.

I suppose it is a sign of the times for a small business to fold up in the face of competition by super chains located just down the road, so to speak. The case of businesses located in small, isolated communities presents an especially troublesome problem, and that is the cultural role that these establishments play in their community. By definition, such a store or other type of business does far more than sell the goods displayed on their shelves.

Communities such as Winchester Center or Norfolk have clearly defined centers of population and are easily recognized as such whether there are places of business or not. Population wise, Norfolk has a much more clearly defined center than does Colebrook, having a library, the Yale School of Music, the green with its statuary and fountain, lined with attractive homes adjacent to the church with its cultural center building and the Norfolk Historical Society. Winchester Center, while not having a general store, is nevertheless immediately identified as a community by the well-kept homes around and near a beautiful green and hosting a fire department, Grange Hall, church and historic school museum all within sight of each other.

Colebrook, on the other hand, while having the expected white church next to its green, a town hall building, Post office, Community and Senior Center, historical society in the Seymour Inn and a handful of colonial and early nineteenth century homes, has no public gathering center where convenient items can be purchased. The occasional motorist, passing through the Center, has no reason to slow down, let alone stop and have a closer look at a community that has a lot more to offer than they would have guessed.

The Colebrook Store, built for the Rockwells by William Swift in 1812, was the oldest continuously operated general store in the state for 195 years. For the first 88 years, from 1812 until 1900, ownership remained with the Rockwell family, even though the surname might be Hoyt, Bass or Smith, all of whom married Rockwell women.

The growth of the town during the early years of the nineteenth century created a need for a store larger than the one built in 1803, today located immediately behind the yellow, pillared store. This original store, referred to locally as the "Woodbine Cottage"

(it was covered with that vine during the 1920's and 30's), always sat upon the same foundation as it does today. It was not moved there when the 1812 store was constructed, as has been erroneously reported in the past. The reason for this is that the original road system had what is known today as Smith Hill Road making a ninety-degree left turn at its intersection with the main road (Conn. Rt. 183) and proceeding westward along present Conn. Rt. 182-A just far enough to make another ninety-degree right turn at the west side of the first store. (The present alignment of Conn. Rt. 183 through the Center was a later development.) The 1812 tax list contains only one store in the entire town, and that was owned by Martin and Solomon Rockwell and described as a one story, one room structure. The present store didn't appear on the tax list until the following year, when both buildings were referred to as "the front store and the back store".

In 1898 Reuben Rockwell, then the owner of both stores, died and in his will left the front store to his relative Gertrude Smith. As Reuben lived adjacent to both stores, by leaving the front store only to a new owner, the building in the rear remained as a part of his home estate. At this time the property lines for the store were established as being four feet out from the north and west walls of the building. This caused a major problem some years later when a ten-foot wide addition was tacked onto the north side. (The old Post Office) That situation was finally resolved when the owner of the encroached property changed the description of the store's land as being the land it sits upon.

The last ownership represents the eighteenth ownership in the last 102 years, if my addition is correct.

We all know what items we can expect to find in the store these days, so I won't attempt to describe the contents today, but perhaps it would be interesting to see a selection of various transactions made in that very store in 1889, when it truly was a "General Store". These entries were made by Ed Simons when he was a 25 year-old clerk there, working for Reuben Rockwell. The variety of goods and the volume is quite remarkable, I think.

Some farming items were: 15 lbs. of lime, .30 cents; 100 lbs. seed potatoes, \$2.10; 3,000 lbs. Hill & Drill fertilizer, \$49.50; 3,000 lbs. of potato fertilizer, \$57.00; 2,000 lbs. corn fertilizer, \$38.00; half a bushel of salt, .35 cents; 56 lbs. hay salt, .45 cents; one pkg. lettuce seed, .05 cents.

Food and grocery items were represented by six and a quarter lbs. of lake trout, .74 cents; 1 bottle of beer, .20 cents; 1 can of lunch beef, .25 cents; one half lb. figs, .08 cents; 1 barrel of Pillsbury's Best flour, \$6.50; 1 bottle of butter color, .25 cents. (This was added to butter made during the winter months when the cattle were deprived of a balanced diet and the butter became nearly white. Sometimes carrots were fed during wintertime to give the butter what was referred to as "June color".)

Also: Eggs bought at .20 cents per dozen and sold for .30 cents; one-half barrel of split herring, \$4.75; one oz. Jamaican ginger, .10 cents; 1 lb. Coffee, .35 cents; 1 lb. Black Oolong tea, .70 cents; 5 sticks of candy, .05 cents (Their candy came from Atkins' Candy Kitchen, an establishment I'm sure many of you well remember, and the place where Christmas Candy was invented, by the way.) In addition there were the usual canned fruits, vegetables and meats, just as today.

Many types of grain were sold in volume: 400 lbs. Cattle feed, \$4.20; 600 lbs. Oats, \$7.50; 200 lbs. corn, \$1.90; 1,000 lbs meal, \$9.50.

Clothing and the materials to make clothing were readily available; 2 yards of shirting, .12 cents; 10 yards of denim, \$1.60; 4 yards of calico, .28 cents; 4 yards of gingham, .40 cents; 1 pr. overshoes, .60 cents; 2 pair of ladies rubbers, .80 cents; 1 pair child's rubbers, .25 cents; 1 pair of overalls, .70 cents, etc.

As an example of their broad definition of "general store", there is even an entry that reads: "use of horse, \$1.50".

Such were the services a general store provided in the nineteenth century, not to mention warming hands and feet on cold winter days, gathering and dispensing local gossip and news and who knows how many political debates. What role remains for such gathering places in the twenty-first century remains to be seen, but from what I can see, their future is both cloudy and troubled.

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