

Colebrook, Tasmania Continued

Our contact with Colebrook “down under” continues. Both towns are building a photographic and text portfolio on each other, courtesy of the wonders of email and the ability to instantly send and receive photos.

One thing that I notice in our correspondence points up the differences between our governmental organization differences is their lack of documentary evidence. To be honest, it is difficult to compare the two political entities. Colebrook Connecticut is organized as a township consisting of multiple villages or communities. The township is in turn part of a collection of towns called a county, and the counties make up the state. Here is the reply I received asking how their political system is set up:

“Colebrook is under the control of the Southern Midlands Council which includes [and here she describes a geographic region some 30 miles by 20 miles with Colebrook about in the center]. The council is run by a mayor and deputy mayor and 7 councilors. One councilor does have land in the Colebrook area, but that is our closest representative. The others are all available if problems arise, etc. The council is responsible for the planning of the towns and minor roads. The State Government sees to the maintenance of the major roads and bridges.

We have a town hall and a Colebrook History Room that was built in 1961.”

What is apparent here is that they don’t seem to have land records such as we do. In Colebrook Connecticut, we can tell exactly when any piece of property changed hands, and in the case of our major structures, we also have a pretty good idea as to who built them and when. This doesn’t seem to be the case in Tasmania, although it is possible that these records do exist in a distant administrative town that the person we are in contact is unaware of. Everything we need for in-depth research can be acquired in the vault in Town Hall, or in the files of the Colebrook Historical Society. Just over the state line in Sandisfield, Mass., the town hall does not contain land records for their town; rather these records are stored in Great Barrington. This is fortunate for Sandisfield, as their town hall has burned down (twice, I think), and all their records would have been lost. I mention this because in almost every case, the text accompanying the photos from Tasmania is vague as to dates, and some of the vital statistics are quotes from local newspapers.

Colebrook, or Jerusalem, as it was initially named, was a penal colony. There were probably scores of such communities scattered around all the Australian states, as England exported shiploads of convicted felons there.

Recently Ethel Millard gave the historical society some old Winsted and Hartford newspapers, and in one of them is the following account:

The Hartford Weekly Times, June 4, 1853. “Escape of Irish Exiles From Van Diemen’s land. Baltimore, May 27, the editor of the ‘Catholic Mirror’ says he has received authentic information that Patrick O’Donohue, and another one of the Irish exiles, had escaped from Van Diemen’s Land, and will shortly arrive at one of the Atlantic ports. Their manner of escape is not known, but it is probable they got on board of some American ship trading to Australia.” [The name changed to Tasmania in 1853.]

It is interesting how Australia came to be used as a dumping ground for British criminals. Originally, they sent them to North America, but the successful War of Independence put an end to that. The voyages of Captain Cook along the east coast of

Australia provided an opportunity to send convicted felons to that far-off land, and soon boatload after boatload arrived. By 1835, the convict population was such that potential honorable immigrants began to avoid Australia. The biggest problem with the prisoners was that they tended to be kept in and around the larger population centers, where it was becoming increasingly more difficult to maintain control. Once a convict escaped, he could blend into the general population fairly easily. These large towns were all on the mainland, whereas Tasmania, the smallest state, had only two centers of any size, and they were quite small. Most communities, such as Colebrook, were tiny outposts scattered over the island. By 1840, the British government decided to send all convicts to Van Diemen's Land, thus effectively making the entire island one vast colonial prison. The main principal of the new system was one of probation; these probation stations, as they were called, were intended to instill habits of industry and subordination; they were provided with supervisors and religious instructors. The idea was to establish several stages that a convict could progress through, culminating with freedom. The plan looked good on paper, but it was a dismal failure, mostly brought on by the overwhelming cascade of new arrivals. The average number of convicts in Tasmania in any given year was 30,000, and this when there were only 37,000 free settlers.

Colebrook, or Jerusalem, as it was then called, was one of these probation stations, set up in the hinterlands to provide a means to rehabilitate convicts. One convict named Martin Cash, escaped from Jerusalem, and lived to write his memoirs, now part of their historical papers. Here is his story:

“After working in a chain gang at Jerusalem under brutal conditions and finally being placed in solitary confinement for feigning illness (as part of a plan to escape), Cash succeeded in escaping over a stockade twelve feet high.”

He then described what happened in the following terms: “My readers will be pleased to recollect that I have been immured in a dark cell for the last three days on one pound of brown bread per diem and an unlimited supply of aqua pura. It will be unnecessary therefore to say that I had an excellent appetite, but unfortunately had nothing wherewith to satisfy it. I remained, however, in my place of concealment until 11 o'clock that night, when, sallying out on a quest of adventures, I espied a mill, which caused me to think that if I could not find a loaf, I might at least find the raw material, and acting upon this supposition, I broke into the dwelling house where I found all that I required in the victualling department, and feeling the want of supplies on this as on other occasions, I packed up a quantity of tea and sugar with other necessary appurtenances and had scarcely got clear of the premises before the lights began to move briskly inside, and presently a man mounted on horseback rode off swiftly in the direction of Jerusalem.

I then struck off through the bush with Campbell Town as a landmark [45 miles to the north], and on getting about eight miles in that direction I halted, not daring to show myself during the day, as I was still dressed in prison clothing. I wiled away the time in trying to divest myself of the leg irons. Having provided myself with two stones and resting the rings that encircled my legs on one of them, with the other I beat the ring into an oval form, and reversing it I again brought it to its former shape, and after persevering in this practice for the space of an hour, I had the satisfaction to see them give way at the rivets, leaving me free once more from this degrading badge of infamy. Observing the utmost precaution, I continued on my journey.” [This is the end of the account.]

Historic Bytes

Bob Grigg