

Early Dates in Colebrook

The first resident came to town in 1765, but the territory had been laid out, at least on paper, as far back as the early 1730s. The area was traversed by not less than two Native American trails, which the residents of Windsor expanded upon when they came to lay out highways. By 1765, the physical appearance of the landscape had already been greatly altered from that of virgin forest. There are accounts, most of which are accurate, I'm sure, of pioneers moving into North America's virgin forests and hewing out a niche for themselves by killing the huge trees, building a log house and planting crops among the towering dead trees. It didn't happen that way in what is now northeastern Litchfield County. The residents of Windsor and Hartford who had been granted this land were known as proprietors, and along with the title went the responsibility of developing the area. The proprietors sent teams into these hills to get a feel of the lay of the land and to rough out roadways and to girdle the huge trees in areas that they judged would be best suited for dwellings and agriculture in future years when this rocky upland would become necessary for an expanding Connecticut River Valley community to populate.

The Windsor Proprietors kept all their records in a large leather-bound ledger that has survived intact all these years and now resides in the vault in Colebrook Town Hall. This Proprietor's Book, as it is called, begins with the dispensation of lands within the proposed township among the seventy some-odd proprietor landowners, the earliest date being 1729. The earliest mention of the town name occurs in 1732. For several years it was entered as either one word or two, as they placed a dot between the "e" and "b", but eventually the single name prevailed.

Close attention must be paid to the terminology employed in this ledger. When they say someone buys "a plot of land", or "a parcel of land", he purchases untouched woodland, without the fingerprint of man upon the land. If the description reads "a lot of land with appurtenances", it indicates that someone has altered that acreage, either by cutting, or girdling trees, or perhaps has begun the clearing process, possibly building stone walls or some other type of fence. As soon as a structure is built, the terms employed will read: "a plot of land with appurtenances and structures". This means that a barn or some sort of shed has been erected on the land. This was not unusual in the early days when it was important to provide safe haven to their cattle from wolves, bears and mountain lions; the humans could stay at a neighbor's house until they could build their domicile. Once that took place, and the land was put up for sale, the wording would be "a farm of land with buildings and dwelling house thereon standing". By these terms we can interpret the status of the parcel of property we are examining.

One additional bit of terminology needs to be understood when reading the early land records; in many instances the land will be described as being "bounded east and west by highways". What is being referred to here are strips of land 165 feet wide that separate the three-quarter mile wide tiers that were established by the Windsor proprietors when they marked off the future town in preparation for deciding land ownership by individuals. Although they were referred to as "highways", they were never intended as such; rather they served as a means of putting aside an amount of land within the township for future roads. When the first settlers arrived and the actual transportation grid was laid out, these "paper roads" were exchanged for the real

highways. Reuben Rockwell, writing in 1835, estimated that there were 420 acres of roads within Colebrook.

The Proprietor's Book, at least when dealing with the years prior to the first residents, seems to be a compilation of notes from perhaps earlier and smaller compilations that were entered into the large journal. We assume this because the dates are badly out of sequence. What follows are a few entries dealing with early dates in Colebrook; the early use of the term "appurtenances" is quite interesting.

Page 240 – October 7, 1763. The proprietors voted to ask the [Connecticut General] Assembly at New Haven to sell enough land to pay their taxes. They also voted to raise £50 for laying out and clearing roads.

Page 244 contains the description of the Greenwoods Road from Simsbury to Canaan, stating that it must be passable by the 20th day of November 1761. [When they say "Simsbury", they mean what is today Canton, as that town split off from Simsbury later on.]

Page 247 – "Daniel and Mary Bidwell of Hartford sold to Gideon Horton of Springfield, for £21/0/0 [21 pounds] [about 93.00], a piece of land originally laid out to Thomas Ellsworth, late of Windsor, it being parcel number 53, second division. Consists of 1/3 of this lot. It begins at the southeast corner of the parade, 32 chains, 69 links wide." [3,714.5 feet] [The parade was where South Cemetery is located today.] "North partly on the Parade, partly on the 4-rod highway" [66 feet] [Smith Hill Road]. "West on the highway, south on land of Josiah Phelps, with appurtenances." June 9 1764.

Page 249 – On May 30 1764, Horton bought another 1/3 of this lot from Daniel and Deborah Blodget.

Page 252 – Joseph Bigelow sold all his lands in whatever township he owned land with appurtenances. [Did the name "Colebrook" escape him momentarily?] Feb. 21 1753.

Page 254 – James Rockwell of Windsor purchased from Erastus Wolcott 32 acres, it being part of a large lot of land on the right of Joseph Rockwell Sr., late of Windsor. It is bounded east and west on highways, south by land of Samuel Whiteley, north on land of Joseph and Hannah Bidwell – with appurtenances. [Smith Hill] July 16 1764.

Page 264 – I. Barret and Joseph Coe of Durham, sold to Daniel Bissell of Windsor, Colebrook land with appurtenances for £34/3/4 [about \$152.00] [There are several entries about this piece of land, all of which mentions appurtenances.] Oct. 7 1734.

Page 269 Nathaniel Bass bought 50 acres of land in the second division, originally laid out to John More – with appurtenances. July 16 1764.

This is enough to prove that a great deal of work was being expended in Colebrook and the surrounding towns many years prior to the arrival of the first actual resident. An advertisement in the Hartford newspaper in 1744 warned of severe consequences to anyone attempting to remove timber or any wood from the township, indicating that second growth forest was well underway to provide trees small enough to be made into lumber for construction. Presumably they feared that the owners of sawmills in Winchester and Norfolk, towns that were inhabited many years prior to Colebrook, would poach the timber that would be needed for the construction of our first houses and outbuildings.