

The Hale Barn's Place in History

The history of what we today refer to as the Hale Barn began in England. The immigrant ancestor of the builder, John North, was born there in 1615 and came to America in 1635. He was one of the first settlers in Farmington, Connecticut, where he married and spent the rest of his life. His son Ebenezer was born in 1703, and located in Torrington, being one of the first settlers there. His son Martin was born in Torrington in December 1735. His son Rufus was born there in 1769, and removed to Colebrook in 1791. Rufus North died June 20, 1841, aged 72 years.

Of the Norths who removed to Western New York, the first was Noah, who lived on what is today 38 Millbrook Road. He was followed by his two nephews, Eben and Lester, who had been brought up on the farm at the intersection of Connecticut Routes 183 and 182.

Several letters of correspondence between the North boys and their parents back in Colebrook are now in the possession of the Colebrook Historical Society. These letters, as well as surviving ledgers from Colebrook and the surrounding towns paint a remarkably detailed description of pioneer life, both here in Colebrook and in the initial stages of the western migration, which would only stop when the Pacific Ocean had been reached.

Today we tend to not dwell on the term "pioneer", unless in broad terms, but stop and think for a moment just what the term implies. Suppose you had lived at the beginning of the nineteenth century and felt the tug of wanderlust. How do you think you would survive once you arrived at the frontier? You could be pretty certain that you would not have any close neighbors, so everything that needed to be accomplished had to be done entirely by you and your wife. Remember that this was several generations prior to the present era, where an attempt at trying to "find yourself" in sunny California, if ending in failure, results in a call back home to the folks, who would see that you had the wherewithal to return home to the warmth and safety of your old room. At the time when the Norths were establishing the then western frontier, failure could, and indeed very likely would end in death.

What then did it take to make a successful pioneer? The answer can be found in the Colebrook documents, and if you stand on the main floor of the cow barn between the hay mows, you can actually see and touch the actual boards and timbers that hold these secrets.

Rufus North built the present barn in 1797. The accompanying house, which served as a tavern for many years, sat where the current dwelling stands, but is a replacement of the original, which burned about 1900. It was an excellent building site, as it encompassed all the land surrounding a crossroads of considerable importance. The east-west road was the Old North Road, created in 1761 by the Connecticut Legislature for the movement of the militia toward the Hudson River Valley during the French and Indian Wars; the north-south road (today's Route 183) was to become the Waterbury River Turnpike in three short years with the advent of the turnpike era in 1801. The location guaranteed steady business for the tavern and the relatively stone free terrain allowed for the formation of a successful farm.

A look at what Colebrook had to offer a citizen at that time would be helpful here. The iron industry had emerged from its infancy and entered its second phase; that of making steel and

more sophisticated items such as scythe blades and blistered steel for making rifle barrels. There were lumber mills, shingle mills, turning mills, fulling mills, cider mills, forges, blacksmith shops and so on. A search of the ledgers kept by the North family shows that they were proficient in framing and constructing barns, houses and mills, which would include the construction of water wheels, which were very sophisticated pieces of equipment; they raised corn, wheat, rye, indigo and flax; they cut trees for wood as well as timber, which they manufactured in their own sawmill; they acted the part of teamsters, hauling goods and equipment for local artisans. The North women were involved in weaving cloth on their loom and did seamstress work; they and the children carded wool and flax (to make linen); rope was made for the church bell, and slings were made for hoisting oxen in order to shoe them. A bovine cannot stand on three legs, as can a horse, and thus have to be led into a heavy frame where slings are placed behind the front legs and in front of the rear legs and then raised off the ground so that their shoes could be worked on. We can add the ability to make these frames and to shoe not only the oxen, but also horses. Other occupations employed by the Norths were coopering (making wooden barrels); making oxbows and bails (handles) for pails, both of which required the knowledge of steaming wood in order to bend it to specific shapes; making coffins, sheering sheep, neutering cattle and practicing the profession of a cobbler.

This is but a partial list, but all of this knowledge was learned at the farm in Colebrook and taken with them when the frontier called.

The younger brother of the North men who pioneered in what is today Alexander, New York was for a while a “Yankee Peddler”, meaning that he was engaged in selling products made back in civilization to far-flung regions of the new and expanding nation. His brother Enos wrote to him advising him not to bring clocks, as they were a drug on the market, and would fetch not more than \$10. He was encouraged however, to bring the iron u-shaped staples that are a component of an ox-bow, but to have them made 3 inches longer than those in use back in New England, as that is what is needed on the frontier. All of these seemingly insignificant details spelled the difference between success and failure to the itinerate peddler.

Letters sent back to Colebrook that still exist, span the years from 1816 to 1827. The pioneering era in New York State was ending by that time, as the Erie Canal was completed in 1825, and a flow of commerce was established between the frontier and the more advanced eastern states. The earliest letter (1816) tells of clearing forest land and the planting of initial crops. Very poor yields were tallied by harvest time due to the frequent spells of frost throughout the growing season. They didn’t know it, but they had experienced what became known as “The year without a summer”, a phenomena brought on by a giant volcanic eruption in what is today Indonesia. The resulting dust cloud covered the entire northern hemisphere and blocked enough sunlight to actually lower the average temperature enough to spell disaster for many crops. As bad as the situation was, they were able to survive and go on to achieve their goal of conquering the wild frontier and establishing a stable society.

Today the Colebrook Land Conservancy owns and maintains the barn and its surrounding acreage as an educational tool and museum serving the community. After having existed as a

farm from the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, what we today call the Hale Barn has a renewed lease on life and bravely faces the 21st century as a window into the past for those interested in our heritage.