

Items from an 1809 Newspaper

The Colebrook Historical Society has an extensive collection of early Colebrook documents, once the property of the Town, and thus kept in the old town vault. When the new town hall was finished in 2003, a large number of documents were not required by state law to be retained by the town; thus the historical society fell heir to the lot, and they remained where they were had been, as the society now owned the old vault.

In the early days of our Republic, paper was very expensive, and the ledgers that were required for town functions such as births, marriages and deaths, tax lists, selectmen's meetings, voting lists, etc. amounted to a considerable sum of tax dollars. One way to save on expenses was to purchase ledgers without covers. When brought into town, someone's wife would take a recent newspaper and sew it to the folio, where it served as a permanent cover. The newspapers of the first decade of the nineteenth century were almost exactly the size of the ledgers, and consisted of one sheet of paper, folded in half, then in half again. This yielded a cover consisting of two sheets at the front and back. Paper then was made without the use of sulfuric acid, the component that causes modern newsprint to yellow and disintegrate in a short time.

The oldest such cover/newspaper that Colebrook has is on the tax list for the year 1809, and we have found the contents of this "cover" of the Hartford paper of October 12 to contain a great deal of important history that was taking place at this time; the United States was in the 26th year of independence, Napoleon was in his 13th year as a force to be reckoned with on the continent, tensions were nearing the breaking point between Great Britain and the United States over questions concerning freedom of the seas, and the year before the United States had barred further importation of slaves.

Among the articles about land and sea battles between France and her allies and Great Britain and her allies appeared in this account of an act of violence that took place off the northeastern coast of North America:

"PIRACY AND MURDER! The following circular has been forwarded by the Collector of Boston, to the collectors of the respective ports in the United States. Boston, Sept. 27, 1809. Sir – This will be forwarded to you by the collector of the Port of Boston; the purpose is to request of you that, should the vessel henceforth described enter any port, or come into your neighborhood, she may be detained, the persons on board taken into custody, and immediate information forwarded to me, or to Gen. Dearborn; the said vessel having been forcibly taken possession of by the persons below described, two of the crew killed and the captain compelled to leap into the sea. I am, sir, your most obed't servant. W. S. SKINNER

Schooner *Three Sisters*, a remarkable high stern schooner, no cabin windows; has a yellow streak fore and aft; from the break of the quarterdeck to the stern, a white streak; no moldings round the stern, but painted yellow in imitation of moldings. She is registered in Halifax, owned by Messrs. Jona. & John Tremain, burthen [unintelligible]; John Stairs, master.

She has her clearance from Gaspé, or Percé in the Province of Lower Canada, signed by Hugh O'Hara, Deputy Collector.

The people left on board were, Edward Jordan, a man about thirty-eight years of age, dark complexion, black hair, and has a very black beard, of an innocent appearance. John Kelly, mate, about twenty-two or three years of age, five feet three or four inches high, very much pitted by the small pox, will probably pass as master of the vessel. Edward Jordan has his wife and four children on board, one of the four a boy about eight or nine years of age, and the oldest girl very much disfigured by a burn on her back and her right arm.

The above act of piracy and murder was committed on the 12th, on the eastern coast of Nova Scotia, and within two days sail of Halifax, where the vessel was bound. In an unguarded moment, while the Capt. and one of the hands were in the cabin, the above mentioned Jordan, having first corrupted the mate, Kelly, and secured the arms, discharged a pistol down the skylight at the captain, which wounded him and killed the man who was with him. The Captain then ran on deck just in time to see the last stroke given to his only remaining man, who fell dead on the deck. He was then fallen upon by Jordan & his wife, and another pistol attempted to be fired at him, which failed, and in the struggle was thrown overboard – Kelly at this time was charging another pistol, which the captain observing, while engaged with Jordan & wife, by great exertion disengaged himself, and seizing the hatch, threw it over and jumped upon it. As it blew very hard, he was soon clear of the vessel, and after remaining in the water about three hours, was providentially fallen in with the schooner *Eliza*, of Hingham, Capt. Stoddard, who took him up when nearly exterminated by cold and literally insensible.”

I have given this account partly because I found it interesting and partly because Richard Smith, the builder and owner of the forge in Robertsville, had some of his personal possessions captured on Long Island Sound by pirates when he was attempting to return to Connecticut at the close of the War of Independence in 1783. Travel on the high seas in those days was not very safe.

Smith's case was different from the above mentioned act of piracy in that a Connecticut resident and ship owner had a license granted by the Continental Congress to raid enemy (British) shipping and capture them on the high seas. This meant that any potential enemy ship had to be more than three miles from shore. There was a fine line separating a “privateer” (one holding papers authorizing him to capture enemy vessels) and a “pirate”, who was acting on his own judgment and in his own interests outside the international law of the sea. Smith's vessel was only about two miles off the Connecticut coast when it was captured. Armed ships were sent by Gov. Trumbull to recapture Smith's ship and the resulting chase and court case is the subject of another paper in the papers of Richard Smith and his Connecticut iron industry.