

North Family Letters

The family name North was a very prominent one in Colebrook during the 18th and 19th centuries. There were two main locations for their homesteads in town; one was at the intersection of Colebrook Road and Stillman Hill Roads, today referred to as the Mason Hale Farm. The second was situated at the site of 51 Millbrook Road, about one half mile south of the Conn. Rt. 183 intersection.

Some of the ledgers kept by these families are in the possession of the Colebrook Historical Society, as well as some personal letters. The ledgers we will delve into another time; today we will cover three letters that have significant historical value, not just in regards to Colebrook, but the nation as well.

As we all know, many of the sons and daughters of the pioneers who initially settled in these un-incorporated lands, left to move westward, forging the new nation as they progressed. In some cases, the locations where they settled after leaving these hills are known to us, but many just seem to vanish when they passed over the western horizon. It's not that we couldn't locate a geographical area where each family settled, rather a disinterest on the part of those who remained behind. Obviously, their friends and relatives back home knew where they had gone, and letters went back and forth, but over time the information was lost. I believe that this aspect of our historical heritage has been sadly neglected, and with a little digging, a wealth of fascinating information can emerge.

Where, for example, did Seth Hurd, the original pioneer on Beech Hill, go when he left here in 1806? He and his family (excepting the two oldest girls, who married two Mills brothers, and remained here) relocated to the Connecticut-owned northeast corner of the State of Ohio, where some of his descendants remain to this day.

Where did some of the Sage boys go when they left the house now owned by Jon and Sherri Gray on 23 Sandy Brook Road? There were hard times here during and following the War of 1812, and at least two of the boys staked out claims in Jefferson County, New York, in the Watertown area. We have a very touching letter from Elias Sage to his brother back in Colebrook, written in 1824, when he was dying, and he says his farewells.

The letters from the North boys to their parents on Colebrook are even more informative than the others, primarily because of the detailed information they supplied. There are three letters, all written from Alexander, New York. (This is in Genesee County, seven miles south of Batavia, and 23 miles south of the Erie Canal.) Enos North writes in July 1824 back to Lester North, and another Lester in Alexander writes back to his parents, Mr. & Mrs. Rufus North in Colebrook in Feb. 1825 and again in May 1829.

The dates here are critical; this is the exact time that the Erie Canal was completed, as a matter of fact, in his detailed description of the rates and the types of cargo the canal carries, he never refers to it other than "the canal". The opening of this canal was one of the most significant economic and political events in American history. It would appear that those who lived near it, even though they would immediately derive economic benefits from it, did not yet realize just what an important landmark event they were observing. One of the purposes of these letters was to inform Joel North (a brother, I think) of the type of merchandise that he would make the most profit from when he next visits out that way. It is well known that New Englanders, and those from Connecticut in

particular, were noted for their prowess as peddlers and traveling salesmen. Here is an excellent way to know what to pack in your satchel next year; have a contact in the distant area that is targeted. An example here is the advice to Joel to bring metal staples used for ox yokes that are two inches longer than the type used in Colebrook. He is warned not to bring clocks, as the area is saturated, and they only sell for \$10 - \$12, rather bring steel axes (most likely from Rockwell and Boyd's in Winsted). Another major change in the thinking of anyone who was a merchant or peddler shows up in the description of the canal; those back here are assured that it is not necessary to send someone to accompany their merchandise on the long trip to western New York, as goods consigned to the agents of the canal in Albany were perfectly safe and secure, and would arrive in any designated port along the way exactly the way they had been shipped. Today we hardly give a second thought when sending a package by any of the several carriers available to us, but what happened with the Erie Canal was a truly landmark event.

They are engaged in real pioneering here at this time, as they describe cutting the forest and burning it to make clearings for fields where wheat is the first crop, after which there will be grass for fodder. Peaches are also mentioned as a cash crop.

The problems all citizens of the country had with the flood of counterfeit and worthless paper money is addressed, with mention made to a \$10 bill which he enclosed, as he had no use for money, as he said, and that his parents could probably trade it for goods worth \$4 and change if they took it to "John", from whom he had obtained it, and who apparently lived back in Connecticut.

Another aspect of our historic past is covered in great depth; this was the result of a question from his parents concerning the health of his town, as well as his own health. What he says is quite shocking, really. By his detailed (and accurate) accounts, it turns out that malaria is ravaging the countryside out there. They dread the coming of warm weather, which brings on "the ague". Enos has the disease, and the future for him does not hold forth much promise. It appears that by 1829, the date of the last letter, he can no longer operate his farm, and he seems to be facing ruination. I don't at this time know the outcome, as there are no further letters in our possession from him, or ones concerning those in Alexander.

His description of the problems there are remarkably similar to what we had happen in Colebrook Center in 1794, when two of the Rockwells died, many citizens became ill, and the iron facilities were removed to Winsted. When the dam was removed and the water left the meadows, the problem solved itself. Perhaps the environment for the disease-carrying mosquitoes, once removed, restored a healthier neighborhood. I have never seen this particular hypothesis applied to colonial Colebrook, but malaria was firmly established in Connecticut from 1650 onward, and therefore does not represent a stretch by any means.

Historic Bytes
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