

## Paper Making in Colebrook

Ed Simonds (1864-1955) had a wonderful grasp of local history, and wrote extensively in local publications. Here is what he had to say about an important Colebrook industry in the nineteenth century in a 1928 newspaper report:

“The item in the ‘News of Fifty Years Ago’, in last week’s paper concerning the shutting down of the Colebrook Paper Mill, attracted the writer’s attention. Many people of Winsted and vicinity know that there was once a paper mill in Colebrook, but as to its exact location and especially the particulars of its history, comparatively few people of the present generation have much information. The present writer is glad to record the facts about the mill in his possession, as he was familiar with it in his younger days.

This mill is about a mile and a half below North Colebrook on the Sandy Brook, at the first water site privilege below General Phelps’ saw mill. Almost no trace of it remains today except the raceway, which is practically intact, but completely overgrown with brush. There had been a gristmill there operated by a Mr. Currier, father-in-law of the late Orrin Oles. Sometime in the middle years of the last century the mill was converted into a paper mill perhaps by a Mr. Wrinkle, who ran it for a number of years. There was a fire in Civil War times, and Mr. Oles once told the writer that he was employed to rebuild and equip the mill, which he did by day’s work.”

“About 1870 it was burned again when owned by John Bliss, who rebuilt it on a much larger scale than previously. It was built and equipped by carpenters and millwrights from Lee, Massachusetts. The main building was of two stories and really three at the lower end. The machine room ran out toward the brook, and back of this was the boiler house. The equipment consisted of the usual rag room machinery, a great rotary boiler, four engines (two washers and two beaters) and a cylinder machine. Two boilers made steam for the rotary and the machine; but steam engines were never introduced, waterpower, which often failed, being the sole reliance. The product was wrapping paper, manila and other rag stocks being used.

The property changed hands at various times, the late William L. Gilbert owning it for a brief period. Finally in the 1870s it was bought by the Vernons who operated it for a number of years with the late Charles Bidwell as foreman. The mill was frequently shut down owing to low water, the employees and the business suffering in consequence. At length in the fall of 1877, the machinery was sold to the Ward Brothers of Riverton and the site was abandoned.”

“An interesting episode connected with the removal of the machinery was long remembered. The bridges down the brook were not considered safe, and so the huge rotary was hauled up over Beech Hill, down the terrific Colebrook River Mountain, over Woodruff Hill and back into the Sandy Brook valley, and so to Riverton, without crossing a bridge. [Ed forgot the bridge over Chappel Brook at the foot of Beech Hill. It was less than 20 feet in length, however.] Old residents of the region long recalled the long string of oxen employed and it seems doubtful if the Town of Colebrook and the entire circle of towns contiguous to it could furnish today as many yokes as were employed to perform that memorable feat just fifty years ago. [Now, in 2006, it was 129 years ago, and the entire state probably wouldn’t be able to supply an equal number.]

The building stood unused until 1885 when it was bought by a file manufacturer named Baglin who began business there in a small way. But before he was fairly started,

it caught fire and burned to the ground. A dozen or fifteen years ago the water privilege was revived and a powerhouse erected to supply current for a neighboring turning shop. Mr. Oles, then about 90 years old, was employed in rebuilding the dam and had associated with him in the work his son, his grandson and his great grandson.

The great flood of two or three years ago swept away the last vestiges of the dam, and the turning shop has gone also. But there is an attractive summer cottage, probably the powerhouse, which the writer stops to look at every time he passes by, in the funniest of all places in the world; directly over the wheel pit of the old paper mill!”

It is much easier today giving directions than it was prior to the 911 Law that mandated all roads be named and all houses be numbered. Note the rather cumbersome directions Ed Simonds gave for the paper mill; a mile and a half below North Colebrook and the first water site privilege below General Phelps’ sawmill. Believe me, there are very few people using that information today that could even begin to locate the old paper mill site. We can tell you that the location is at No. 3 Campbell Road, just across the bridge that crosses Sandy Brook, and there shouldn’t be any problem.

Actually, there had been a gristmill on the site before the one operated by Orin Oles’ father-in-law. Hiram Sage had built it shortly after he arrived in Colebrook in 1797. It was the site, of course, that made the economic enterprises possible. Just upstream, the banks of Sandy Brook are quite high, and not that far apart, and at the actual site, the old timers had a special name for it; “the watering place”, where the south bank was nearly nonexistent, allowing cattle and horses to safely drink. It also permitted the early pioneers to ford the stream when accessing the Beech Hill area, thus avoiding the need of a bridge with its two stone abutments. In the early years, when there were few people, and mountains of work that had to be done, anything that could be eliminated from their busy schedules was welcomed.

The dam that Orin Oles built with the aid of his family supplied power for the shop that made, among other things, wooden butter presses, several of which can be seen at the Colebrook Historical Society. I still recall my disappointment when I uncovered documents concerning this shop and finding out that the handsome designs carved in those presses were not the work of highly skilled Colebrook craftsmen (as all Colebrook children had been told by matrons in hushed, reverent tones), but were instead the result of sophisticated tooling machines in this shop. The invoices for all the machinery is on file at Town Hall, recorded in our ledgers because they were all purchased with borrowed money, and thus were recorded.

We all owe a debt of gratitude to Ed Simonds for his honest, straight-forward reporting. His writings are quite extensive, and can be recognized even in cases where he either didn’t sign the piece, or used a nom de plume, by his distinctive style. The one criticism that I can make is the lack of detailed descriptions when describing some of the tools or operations that were so common at the time they were written about, but when read about a generation or more later, don’t begin to help the reader understand what is being talked about. Ed was not the only culprit; it was (and still is) a common fallacy for topical writers. One exception, and strangely, it concerns this very paper mill, is a report written by a Center School pupil in the 1870s in which she gives the best description that I have read of the working equipment used in the paper making process.