

## Pondtown in Norfolk

A neighborhood is a collection of residences that meld together to form a community within a larger political unit, such as a township. They do not, however, have to be within any given township, as often they consist of parts of two or more towns, in fact state or even national boundaries evaporate in the presence of a neighborhood. A case in point is the old school district in the northeast section of Norfolk known as Pondtown. The name derives from the community near Doolittle and Benedict Ponds, which lie adjacent to the town of Colebrook. The early residents here came in the late 1750s, the first being James Benedict, who came from what is now southern Litchfield County. James set up a lumber and dish mill at the south end of Benedict Pond. His name appears on the list of town residents present at the first town meeting held on “the second Tuesday in December 1758.”

From the very beginning, the topography, or “lay of the land” made it easier to communicate with North Colebrook than to Norfolk Center. One of the Benedict boys, when a young man, took a job with the Rockwells in Colebrook Center making iron shovels at their facility on Center Brook. He walked to and from his place of employment six days a week, a distance of some nine miles round trip.

Other early family names were Hawley, Smith and Orvis. The first Orvis established an iron forge on the outflow from Doolittle Pond, just as it crosses into Colebrook. Soon he took on as a full partner Arah Phelps of North Colebrook. The original road between North Colebrook and the Pondtown section was established on the west side of the brook called “Doolittle Brook” in Norfolk, and “Brummagem Brook” in Colebrook. This road remained in use from 1782 through 1807, when the forge was abandoned because of a slump in the iron industry.

Philo Hawley, son of Elisha and Margaret Orvis Hawley, was born in 1794. He married Alma Wheeler. He was a farmer in Pondtown, Norfolk; he kept a store there, and also traveled in the South selling Seth Thomas clocks. Henrietta Parker lived with Alma while Philo was away. Philo and Alma Wheeler Hawley had 4 sons. One was Austin, another Rev. John Philo, who preached in New Hartford.

Philo married a second time, lived in Louisiana and they had 4 children. Philo died in 1868.

Austin Hawley married Mary Gibson, February, 1845 in Pondtown. They lived in New Marlborough, Mass and in Sandisfield. He became Sandisfield selectman, assessor and State Representative.

Mary Gibson Hawley, who died in 1917, had a son, Lamartine, who married Sarah Gaylord in 1875. Sarah died in 1914. Lamartine then married Almeda Gaylord in 1915. He died in 1916.

Mary Hawley Rhodes was Lamartine’s daughter.

The name Brummagem that is applied to the Colebrook end of this brook is derived from a local dialect spoken by some of the early ironworkers who had been brought here by Phelps

and Orvis from the iron district around Birmingham, England. To this day, when two people from Birmingham speak of their hometown, they will pronounce it Brummagem rather than Birmingham.

Mary Hawley Rhoades, a descendant of those early settlers, has written family memoirs that have survived. One such account deals with making cheese, which the Hawleys made on their farm that sat upon the hill just east of Benedict Pond. In the days before refrigeration, milk couldn't be shipped any distance, as it would spoil rapidly. Consequently the cream was made into butter or cheese. Depending upon the amount of milk, a portion would go into the cheese-making process. Here is how cheese in Norfolk and Colebrook was made in the 1820s according to Mary Rhoades:

“Cheese making took place every day including Sunday. The workroom had a wooden sink with a wooden trough to carry off the whey, which was fed to the pigs. The pails to carry the milk were also wood.” [They didn't realize it at this date, but the wood was essential in the manufacturing of cheese. The bacteria that remained in the wood surfaces, no matter how well scrubbed, would retain enough to make the next batch have the same qualities as all that had gone before. The process is similar to bread-making using a piece of “starter”, as is done with sourdough bread.] “Cheese was usually made from the “full cream”, but if skim milk was used, annatto, a dye made from the seeds of a tropical American tree, was added. The dye cost .50¢ per pound.

Rennet was made from a calf's stomach that had been dried and salted, then soaked in warm water when needed for cheese making. This caused the curds to form, which were cut with a “curd cutter” and placed in a cloth strainer fastened to a rack over a sink into which the whey drained. After the curd was salted, it was placed in a hoop, so called, lined with cheese capping, and pressed in a cheese press. Cheesecloth was cut in circles for the top and bottom of a cheese; as there were no sewing machines, the seam had to be “run up” by hand. When taken from the press, the cheese was capped with a circle of the cheese capping, which was sewed on with an “over and over” stitch.

The cheese had to be turned every day while curing and rubbed with oil to keep insects out. Some of the whey was boiled down to make the oil. Each cheese was sold in its own round box before shipment. Boxes ranged in size from eight and one half to thirteen inches, and cost one and one-half cents per inch. Boxes weighed on average about three pounds each and the average weight of the cheese was twenty-one and one-half pounds with the range from ten pounds to thirty pounds. The price of cheese ranged from fifteen to twenty-five cents per pound.

The cheese season lasted from May to November, inclusive. Cows were dried off in the fall, except a farrow cow was kept so that the family could have milk in the winter.”

Mrs. Rhoades' grandfather purchased cheese from surrounding farms and shipped it to the New York City market. His ledger books indicate that there were some sixteen farms in Norfolk and seven in North Colebrook that produced cheese. Additionally, cheese was purchased from farms in Canaan Valley, New Marlborough and Sandisfield, Massachusetts.

The small schoolhouse at Pondtown was moved there from Beech Hill, Colebrook. This building was originally built by Orrin Oles [whose house and barn still stand at 70 Beech Hill Road.] At times there were as few as nine children attending all eight grades.

The residents of Pondtown went to Norfolk Center to vote, but their church, post office and most of their social contacts were at North Colebrook, located in the Sandy Brook valley.

When the old Baptist meetinghouse in North Colebrook was replaced in 1846 on land leased by Gen. Edward A. Phelps, residents of Pondtown and Beech Hill, across the valley, contributed to a fund for building the church, as well as those living in North Colebrook.

Today there are only five houses between the Church in the Wildwood (the old Baptist church) and Benedict Pond – two in Colebrook and three in Norfolk. Mother Nature has reclaimed most of the former farmland for forest. Like so many locations, if it were not for stonewalls, the casual observer would never guess that what they are looking at was once a dynamic part of the farming community that once bound this section of our towns into a neighborhood.

An interesting history of the Hawleys of Pondtown can be found in the “Lure of the Litchfield Hills”, issues Dec. 1949 and June 1950, written by Mary Hawley Rhoades.