

Robertsville, Connecticut

The village of Robertsville, which makes up the southeast portion of the Town of Colebrook, was named after Clark H. Roberts (1789-1863). In 1832 he built the Greek revival house with the cupola, now owned by Chris and Penny Putnam at 1 Old Forge Road.

His son, Samuel had a chair and cabinet works located across Still River from his house. Rufus Holmes, a Hitchcock Chair trustee, invested in Roberts' shop and it became the Holmes and Roberts shop. In 1839 Lambert Hitchcock and his brother-in-law Arba Alford bought the Holmes and Roberts manufactory for \$1,500.00. It included land, water rights, two sizable wooden buildings with inventory, and all machinery.

Of course the village had existed before the Roberts family name became associated with a part of town; as a matter of fact, it began right across the road from the house Roberts was to build, when Richard Smith had his forge and its ten support buildings erected in 1770, but with the exception of the term "Forge District", there wasn't an official name for the section.

Members of the Roberts family were known for their woodworking abilities; they had had a woodworking mill in operation prior to the beginning of the nineteenth century in which was produced solid-bottomed chairs long before Hitchcock had begun operations in adjacent Barkhamsted (Riverton).

Clark Roberts' first wife, Lydia, was the daughter of Elihu Rockwell, youngest son of Capt. Joseph Rockwell. Joseph lived at the top of what today is known as Deer Hill, at its intersection with Smith Hill Road. Another of Joseph's daughters, Jerusha, became the wife of Jacob Ogden, the manager of Richard Smith's forge.

Clark Roberts did not believe in God, had no use for orthodox religion and never was seen inside a church. He became a persistent thorn in the side of Reverend Erastus Doty, the long time pastor of the Hemlock Baptist Church. Elder Doty and the good brethren had turned their heaviest guns upon him, they preached at him year after year and wrested with him in prayer. "Oh! Lord God Almighty," prayed one of the elders standing in the pulpit of the meetinghouse, his voice trembling with emotion, "take this man and shake him over Hell, but don't be careful not to drop him in." But the more they prayed and argued, the harder and more obstinate he became.

One hot Sunday in July, Elder Doty was in the pulpit. On the way to church he had observed that a large field of rye was spoiling for lack of care, on the farm of Mr. Roberts. After a short prayer he startled his congregation by announcing that his neighbor's grain was spoiling and there would be no service that day, as he was going with as many men as were willing, to help him harvest it. Before the worldly citizen knew what was up, his field was filled with men working upon his rye. Despite his views on churches and churchgoers, it is said that Mr. Roberts was not so ungracious that he did not appreciate this act of kindness on the part of the preacher and the men of the Hemlock Meeting House.

However friendly his feelings, or how grateful he may have been, he still remained unconverted and unrepentant to the very end. He wrote his own epitaph and that of his wife also. No minister or undertaker officiated at his funeral; his remains were drawn to the grave by his own team and lowered to their last resting place by men of his own choosing.

On the monument marking his grave in the Hemlock Burying Ground, (could the church lay claim to a final victory here?) under his name, are these words:

All forms that perish, other forms supply;
By chance we catch the vital spark, and die;
Like bubbles on the sea of matter born,
They rise, they burst, and to the sea return.”

And beneath his wife’s name:

Underneath this stone doth lie
As much virtue as could die,
Which when alive did vigor give
To as much virtue as could live.”

The Hemlock Meeting House was a Baptist church organized in 1805, in the southeast part of Colebrook, in what is today known as the Robertsville section by persons of that denomination residing in Colebrook, Barkhamsted and Winchester, and a meetinghouse was built the same year. This church stood on the northeast corner of the cemetery, which is located at the crest of Hemlock Hill, at the four corners formed by the intersection of Deer Hill Road and Robertsville Road with Connecticut Route 8, or Colebrook River Road. Hemlock Hill can only be visualized by a traveler going along Route 8, especially from north to south, as in reality it is the eastern foot of the prominent upland ascended by Deer Hill Road.

The meetinghouse stood like a sentinel at the crest of this hill and many wonder why it was so named. There seem to be several theories as to its naming. One version said there was a very large tree standing near the building, another that it was built of hemlock lumber, yet another that there was an abundance of hemlock timber in that neighborhood. Other accounts say that the road leading north from the meetinghouse was frequently lined on both sides for half a mile or more with hemlock bark, corded, ready to be drawn to the tanneries.

For nearly half a century this two-story meetinghouse called its people to worship, then as the middle of the nineteenth century approached, it became apparent that a more substantial building was needed, and in 1847 a new church building was erected on the road leading from Robertsville to Riverton. This building is remembered as the home of the Victory Grange. It has recently been purchased, and awaits the next chapter in its history.

In 1853 Lucius Clark, builder of the old Clark House, predecessor of the Park Hotel, which stood across Route 44 from the Northwestern Community College, bought the old Hemlock Meeting House and tore it down and from its timbers erected a building on Main Street, Winsted along the river not too far distant from the YMCA. The Flood of 1955 destroyed this building, along with so many others. The final occupant of this building was Pelkey & Simpson Hardware Company.

Historic Bytes

Bob Grigg