

Capt. Wm. Swift, Artist and Mechanic

This biographical sketch was written by Henry Hart Vining, and was acquired recently from his daughter, Florence Vining Thomen, now of East Canaan. I have always used Mr. Vining as my role model for doing Colebrook historical research and in writing the findings. Of the volumes of material authored by him that I have seen, I have never once found one word that was untrue or poorly researched. Facts are constantly being uncovered which he was unaware of, but it is not necessary to check the veracity of any subject he wrote about.

Here then is Henry Hart Vining's account of Colebrook's master builder of the early nineteenth century:

"Capt. William Swift was simply a New England farmer and mechanic of the town of Colebrook; uneducated, unlearned, but filled with a God-given love of the beautiful and with a hand trained and guided only by the loving heart of the true artist, with jack-knife and chisel, carved and breathed into the unsung story of his dreams, in the exquisite carvings and stairways, of lintel and archway, of mantel and moldings he created in the houses he erected."

"Wm. Swift was one of the early settlers of Colebrook, purchasing a farm on the Waterbury River Turnpike from Martin North in 1806. He not only conducted a successful farm, but also carried on the business of a carpenter and skilled mechanic. His artistic nature, combined with his taste for architecture, made him demand from far and near as a master builder."

"In regard to Capt. Wm. Swift, Mr. Elliot B. Bronson, the Winchester historian, had this to say" 'In 1812 he built the store building at Colebrook (now the Colebrook Store), which, with its stately columns and attractive front, even now holds the eye of the passerby. Solomon Rockwell, Esq., of the firm of Rockwell Bros., who was engaged in the manufacture of iron in Colebrook during the closing years of the 18th century, and who removed to Winsted in 1801, engaged Capt. Swift to erect a beautiful colonial residence for his home in 1813 (the home of the Winchester Historical Society today).

'Squire' Isaac Bronson of Winchester Center, delighted with the fine workmanship and artistic carvings to which the captain had given life and being, engaged him in 1817 to complete the carpenter and joiner work upon his colonial mansion, which he had erected the previous year, facing Winchester Green and reproducing there in large measure the exquisite carvings that delight the eye at the historical home.'

"Mr. Bronson, speaking further on his ancestral home, says: 'In Squire Bronson's schedule of specifications for his residence, which he prepared himself, stands the following entry: 'Nov. 1817, agreed with Capt. Swift to employ him and two sons through the carpenter and joiner work of my house at 18 shillings 6 pence per day for the three and to pay him one year after the work is done with interest after the 1st of Jany.' From this memoranda that has come down to us in the Squires own handwriting, we can gain a correct idea of the daily wage of our artist carpenter and his two sons receiving \$3.10 per day for the combined labor, or \$1.00 per day each, and the Capt being given an extra .10¢ for his superior knowledge and artistic mind. This price seemed to be the standard one.

"Once more we quote from Mr. Bronson, in reference to Solomon Rockwell's house: 'As one stands upon its spacious lawn, filled with beautiful trees and foliage, and

studies its fine and dignified architectural lines, which are truly New England colonial, yet bringing to mind the home of the Virginian cavalier, which is given to the eye by the tall and stately fluted Ionian columns that uphold the overhanging gable and protect the handsomely carved portals of its entrance, he is deeply impressed with the beauty of “Solomon’s Temple,” as it was widely known and termed for many years in its early history. Step in with me through its broad and inviting doorway and you pause at once in the entrance hall, held enthralled by the spacious ceilings and the exquisite carvings of wainscot and stairway, of lintel and archway, of mantel and molding; ‘tis the crowning glory of the house. You immediately query, ‘who was the architect, who the designer?’, for truly here is a master builder, with the soul of an artist, with the love of his subject, stands forth in startling light as the exquisite beauty of design and the pureness of its lines grew upon you. You remove your hat with reverence and awe as the wonder grows.’

“On his farm in Colebrook, Capt. Swift erected a small shop near the road, on the left as you enter the driveway to his house. Here he developed another industry - that of manufacturing caskets, as well as farming tools. The caskets sold for \$6.00. Many old four-post bedsteads were turned out in this shop. An advertisement written in chalk upon the side of the shop once read: “7 plows for sale. Wm. Swift.”

“William Swift was born in 1769. He enlisted in the Conn. militia, and was commissioned an ensign in the 35th reg. of the Sixth Brigade in 1804, later being promoted to the rank of Captain.

Capt. Swift was a very religious man and was elected a deacon in the Colebrook Congregational Church in 1830, which office he held for 15 years. It is said of him that, ‘his was not simply a Sabbath piety, but an every day communion with his Father, in prayer, for guidance and inspiration’. By this daily intercourse with his Master and God, which continued increasingly, we are told that two holes were worn in the floor in front of his work bench, where he knelt in daily prayer.”

“He died Sept. 1, 1858, aged 89 years.

His son, William Swift Jr., was born in Goshen, Conn. on May 1, 1800, came to Colebrook with his family in 1806 and lived on the Swift farm on Hart St. (today Millbrook Rd.) all his life; he never married. He died March 21, 1889, aged 89 years. Strangely, he did not embrace the same views on religion as did his father, but was an unbeliever, and the following is on his tombstone, composed by himself:

We think we live, and yet we do not know.

Where we are, when we leave, or where we go.

And so are all, by Mother Nature borne,

They rise, they fall, and to the earth return.”

In the last few years we have identified several other buildings that were built by William Swift: The Colebrook Inn, in 1816, the house at the intersection of Rock Hall Road and Stillman Hill Rd. in 1806 (the first year he was in town) and 474 Smith Hill Rd. next to Cooper Lane, in 1829. It is usually difficult if not impossible to know the name of the builders of early structures, but when this information is known, it makes their history ever so much more interesting. Colebrook is much richer for having had a builder of the magnitude of Capt. William Swift living among us.

