

Dates of Concern in Colebrook

There are several instances of dates that apply to various structures or locations in Colebrook that are cause for concern, as they just don't add up. Here are examples, beginning with Colebrook Center:

The earliest date for the oldest dwelling has generally been given as 1767. This is for 561 Colebrook Road, lately owned by James and Shirley Draper. This date was supplied to us by Reuben Rockwell (the first), in his 1835 history of Colebrook. We were led to believe that Samuel Rockwell arrived from Windsor on February 2, 1767 with his wife and family, which included a child in arms. Supposedly there were no structures of any sort in the Center, so where did this family, which only were coming from Windsor, a few townships to the east, set up housekeeping? The answer emerges after extensive research, which shows, by the Proprietor's Book and subsequent Colebrook Land Records that Erastus Wolcott had been approached by the Connecticut General Assembly in October of 1765 and told that if he were to construct an operational sawmill in Colebrook by May 15 next (1766), he would be rewarded with £17 worth of land at the north end of the eighth tier in Colebrook. In their January meeting of 1767, the records indicate that he was in fact issued 60 acres of land bounded on the north by Massachusetts and east by Hartland. In uninhabited, virgin land, a sawmill must be accompanied by a house for the sawyer. In Colebrook, this pattern was repeated one other time, this being 1770 in what is today the Robertsville section, when Richard Smith constructed an eleven-building complex around the large forge building. About a quarter of a mile upstream from the site of the forge was constructed a sawmill and sawyer's house, which supplied the lumber for the other nine structures. In Colebrook Center, one-half of the sawmill and residence that Erastus Wolcott constructed was sold to Samuel Rockwell, who moved in with his family on February 2nd, 1767. One year later Rockwell purchased the remaining half of the domicile from Wolcott, but the sawmill remained a fifty-fifty enterprise between them, as did several subsequent businesses and land acquisitions. They remained business partners until Samuel Rockwell's death in 1794.

Samuel's death in 1794 presents another problem. Having established that he was not the builder or first resident of the first dwelling in the Center, his death, which occurred two years prior to the construction of the front portion of house, means that it was built by his son, Reuben, two years after his death, and he never laid eyes on the dwelling as we see it today. Reuben, who wrote his "History of Colebrook" in 1835, never mentioned Wolcott as a factor in the beginnings of the town, reserving for the family name "Rockwell" the unique honor of being "the first".

Another example of the Rockwells building additional structures soon after acquiring a piece of property involves the Gray Barn, now the Colebrook Town Hall. Reuben (the second) acquired it by his father's will when he died in 1840. The original barn had apparently fallen into disrepair, and three years after the death of the first Reuben, the old barn was torn down and the present structure erected.

Slightly different was the evolution of 549 Colebrook Road, generally referred to as “Rockwell Hall” begun in 1793 by Timothy Rockwell, who died in 1794, whereupon the property went to Martin Rockwell, who had it completed the following year. The fact that the State Architectural Historian commented on the surprising use of brick in part of the interior wall construction, leads one to wonder if perhaps the clay beds mentioned in the Rockwell land deed titles of 1811, which were situated on “The Island”, 200 yards away in back of the Woodbine Cottage, might not have been the source. [Further research has not supported the use of this clay bed for brick-making, but what then was it used for?]

Another example of date confusion concerns the movement of 26 of General Burgoyne’s defeated army who, while being marched from Saratoga, New York to the Boston area and interment, camped one night on the lawn area between the Colebrook Store and 561 Colebrook Road. There is no ambiguity here, but another part of the story of this troop movement through town states that one (or more, depending on your source) of the Hessian troops were buried in the basement of 250 Smith Hill Road. They had supposedly died due to the severe winter weather, when the ground was frozen solid and snow lay deep upon the land, hence the only available unfrozen ground would have been in a cellar. As there were only two houses in town at the time, so the story goes, this one and Rockwell’s in the Center, they were buried here. The problem is that the year was 1777, not 1767, when there were very few houses. Not only that, but the date was October 26. I find it impossible to admit that the weather conditions described in the troop movement could have occurred on such an early date. Even if it had been as bad as described, right down Deer Hill from 250 Smith Hill Road was Richard Smith’s forge, built in 1770, with its huge coal house, store and barns, not to mention the forge itself, one of, if not the largest forge building in North America.

There are unforeseen consequences in carefully researching local history, and that is that once a legend is established, there will forever be a segment of the population who get very angry when their favorite story is discredited, and the old attitude of “kill the messenger” kicks in and the next thing you know there are conversations about how so-and-so doesn’t know what he’s talking about.