

Ownership of Land

We are constantly getting out the old ledgers and town documents as questions come in asking about genealogy, marriages or land ownership, and as a result come across interesting, and sometimes funny items that probably would have gone unseen. Colebrook is currently transcribing the first six land title ledgers and entering them into our town computer to enable researchers to have access to readable and understandable texts. These earliest of our land record volumes (of which we are now up to 93 or so), were all written with quill pens. Actually, I should say that we are working with seven volumes, as the oldest is called The Proprietor's Book; which is the ledger of the Windsor proprietors who were the land owners in that town who had been given the lands that they were to develop from the last remaining virgin lands in the Colony of Connecticut. This volume, consisting of several hundred pages, reaches back to meetings that were held by Windsor residents as early as 1725, although the actual name "Colebrook" didn't appear until 1732. There is not a great deal of usable information in the early pages of this volume, as the first road (read that as "path"), wasn't constructed at the request of the Colonial Legislature until the authorization of "Highway Number One", or as it is better known "The Old North Road". As a consequence, most entries refer to a certain number of acres, valued at so many pounds (£), but give no clue as to the geographical location. The information is valuable for the content of family names and where they came from. As the years pass, and the land assignments become more specific and a map of sorts was created, entries begin reading such as "Aaron Griswold, of Windsor, is the owner of plot number 73 in each of the three divisions" From that point on we can readily identify any specific piece of property in town and follow its ownership throughout the years as it is sold, bequeathed, swapped and subdivided.

If you were to wonder just how far back in history one would have to go in order to reach year one, so to speak, here is the sequence for our corner of the world:

Continental America was not discovered by Columbus, but by John Cabot, who like Columbus was an Italian and a native of Genoa. Little is known of the life of Cabot other than he was born at Genoa, became a citizen of Venice, and later, about 1490, of Bristol, England; that he was a seaman and merchant, and that, next to the Norsemen, was the first white man known to have made a voyage to North America.

For ages there had been a belief in England, known to legend and song, that there were unknown lands, far beyond the stormy western sea. When the news reached England that Columbus, whose brother had unsuccessfully sought for aid from the English king, had succeeded in his great voyage, King Henry VII felt that the prize which might have been his had slipped through his fingers. So when John Cabot applied to him for a permit to seek western lands, it was immediately granted. The grant bore the date March 5, 1496, and was issued to John Cabot and his three sons Lewis, Sebastian and Sancto; but for some unknown reason the expedition did not sail for over a year. The start is said to have been made on May 2, 1497, in a

single vessel, the *Matthew*, the crew consisting of eighteen men. They landed June 24 on the coast of Breton Island, or possibly Newfoundland or Labrador.

In August, Cabot was again back in Bristol, and it was reported that he had drifted three hundred leagues (a British league is three miles) along the coasts of the new lands, but this today seems doubtful, as it seems that it would have taken more time to have explored very far southward. He made a second voyage in 1498 and followed the coastline as far south as Cape Hatteras, and possibly Florida, returning to England in late autumn.

The Cabot discoveries created a furor in England, but it was short-lived; the voyages had brought no gold, and interest in the subject soon died away. Many years later the world came to know that a new continent had been found, and England laid claim to the whole of North America on the basis of the Cabot discoveries.

It was to be another century before colonists were placed upon the shores of what was to become the United States, with the first permanent colony in New England being that of Massachusetts Bay in 1620. They were in possession of a royal charter, granting them development rights to the crown lands based upon John Cabot's discoveries. This was soon followed by royal charters for the colonies of New Haven and Connecticut; the Connecticut one being famous for king Charles II's emissary, Sir Edmund Andros' attempt to seize and return it to its rightful owner, the reigning monarch of Great Britain.

From that time onward, the charter was in the continued possession of the Colony, and eventually the State of Connecticut, with the head of state being the governor. The officials in Massachusetts Bay and Connecticut knew that Andros was on his way, and they knew that his intention was to take possession of not only the charter, but also all lands within the colony that had not yet been proportioned out as townships. As the only lands falling in this category in our state was basically the northwest corner along the Massachusetts border, our governor authorized the land owners of the towns of Windsor and Hartford to take formal possession of this block of land, with the now towns of Canaan and Norfolk falling under the jurisdiction of the governor and his cabinet.

Thus it was that in the first third of the eighteenth century a committee of land owners in Windsor were directed and empowered by the General Assembly of the Colony of Connecticut to lay out roads and proportion out the land within the confines of Colebrook, Barkhamsted, Torrington and one half of Harwinton and to acquire these acres by means of a lottery containing the number of plots of land within each township. From that time forward, each landowner held what we call a clear title to his particular piece of his town.

Those of you who have title to a plot of local land can now appreciate the fact that the origin of your title stretches back to March 5, 1496. On the other hand, if you happen to be Native American, I suppose it will leave a bitter taste in your mouth.

Historic Bytes

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