

The Totoket Historical Society, Inc.

The Town of North Branford--Just A Glimpse

by

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THE TOWN OF NORTH BRANFORD--JUST A GLIMPSE

Manhattan was purchased from the Indians for sixty guilders in 1626 by the Dutch who were fur traders. At that time, a breakdown of the medieval system of landholdings brought widespread discontent to seventeenth-century England. Much tillable land was being transferred to sheep farming with enclosed fields, and the accustomed way of raising food supplies was limited. Thus, discontent grew.

Adrian Block, and others, had established fur trading posts along the shores of Long Island Sound. One was in what is now called Branford Harbor, and the spot still carries the name of Dutch Wharf. Thousands of beaver skins were brought in with other pelts each year by the Indians. The English, who had gone to Holland for religious freedom, knew of this and the word got back to old England. The Dutch West India Company was thriving.

The London Company, with its wealthy members, was in a position to finance settlements in America. John Winthrop, a wealthy Puritan, dominated the Boston settlement, and Theophilus Eaton, a rich London merchant, backed the settlement at New Haven. He brought with him fifty families, and found the Quinnipiac Indians to be friendly, but they were raided often by the Mohegans from the West and Pequots from the East.

In the spring of 1618, Eaton purchased the original tract of land for New Haven Colony, but by November the colony was enlarged by 130 square miles. This second purchase was made from Montowese, a chief of the Mattabeseck Indians who valued their protection from the raiders, for eleven coats of trucking cloth and one fine coat for the chief. This purchase later became East Haven, Branford, North Branford, North Haven, Wallingford, Cheshire, Hamden, Woodbridge, and parts of Orange and Meriden. On June 4, 1639, the famous Planters' Covenant was signed in which they pledged the "settling of civil government according to God." This meant that only church members could vote.

The next year, the General Court in New Haven made a grant of Totoket to Samuel Eaton, brother of Theophilus who was the governor of New Haven Colony. He went to England to procure settlers, but was influenced to remain there as a preacher. A few settlers sailed from New Haven to what is now Branford, and others migrated over land into what is now North Branford, but few had any desire

to leave New Haven, and the settlement of Totoket, as it was then called, seemed doomed.

However, discord had developed in Wethersfield over the privilege of voting and holding office by men who were not church members. William Swayne and others came to New Haven to discuss the matter with Eaton. They agreed with the Planters' Covenant and so a happy solution was found for two problems. Totoket was granted to Mr. Swayne and his followers for between twelve and thirteen pounds, and they agreed to settle it and join in one jurisdiction with New Haven. The boundaries of Totoket were those of the present towns of Branford and North Branford which, of course, includes Northford.

The Wethersfield settlers who believed as Mr. Swayne did, started out in the spring of 1644 for this new home. Some came over land, driving their cattle, while others came down the Connecticut River and along the Sound. As Branford Harbor was the only fine one between New Haven and New London, these men who, had left the Massachusetts coast to settle in Wethersfield, no doubt saw the opportunity of continuing their interests in commerce.

This new settlement followed the pattern of early Puritan settlements with its laws drawn from the Old Testament. Justice, not mercy, was the rule, and the ground where the present Baptist Church is located on the Branford Green was known as "Whipping Post Hill" for there the pillory, stocks, and whipping post were located.

Gradually the name of Branford, taken from Brentford in England, replaced the name of Totoket. John Sherman, great grandfather of Roger Sherman, a signer of the Declaration of Independence was their first minister and consequently their real leader. Ship building flourished and soon goods and passengers from Branford were going to other colonial ports. Then sloops were built for the West Indies trade and Branford had its first negro slaves as well as its indentured servants. Early records tell us that the slaves and praying Indians were seated together in the gallery of the church. Schools were of interest then as well as now. Dame schools were kept in private homes and part of the town room was used as a school. The law of the colony required every town to maintain a common school. In 1699 this town was fined five pounds for not doing so. As the Branford ships sailed far and near, new settlers were attracted to the town. The little cabins of the settlers were replaced by permanent homes and as early as 1651 we find a record of the beginning of industry. The town entered into an agreement with John Nash to do the blacksmith work for the town. Gabriel Linsley contracted to weave a thousand

yards of cloth each year for seven years for the town, in return for a land grant, and in 1658 an iron smelting furnace was built at Furnace Pond, now Lake Saltonstall.

The town continued to increase in prosperity and several newcomers were tradesmen. William Bartholomew appears to have been the first resident physician. George Baldwin was a blacksmith, and John Collins was a shoemaker. Samuel Russell and others built a saw mill.

In 1700, eleven ministers met in the house of Reverend Samuel Russell and agreed to give books toward the library of a college. This was the meager beginning of Yale College.

Early in the 18th century, the northern portion of the town began to be somewhat thickly settled by their standards, and a little community centered about Sibbie's Hill which is a little north of the present North Branford Green. The North Farmers appealed to the General Court in 1717, and were allowed to have a minister of their own for the four winter months. Each year they kept their minister for a little longer period of time, and in 1725 they were building their own meeting house. As the extreme northern portion of the town was becoming thickly settled, they, too, desired a church of their own. They were joined by outlying families from Guilford and Wallingford, and their first meeting house was built in 1746.

During the years from 1700 to 1750 Branford's commercial prosperity probably exceeded that of New Haven. A sizable fleet of ships engaged in coastal trade while more and more engaged in the trade with the West Indies. Some of the captains were from our area and many of the residents furnished cargo for these ships wheat, corn, rye, flaxseed, dried apples and bayberries, and manufactured goods.

Water power was being used throughout the town. Blacksmith shops, saw and grist mills were needed, while specialty shops brought the dreams of the ingenious to fruition. Tanneries made leather for saddles, harness and shoes. Some of the small industries had only one or two persons working in them . Cider mills were also used.

Progress was interrupted by wars. In the Intercolonial Wars Branford was called upon for men and money. Nine men were present from this town at the attack on Montreal. In the French and Indian War, from 1756 to 176), many of our men served in the Third Continental Regiment.

During the Revolutionary War, Branford was represented in all phases. The Town unanimously approved the action of the Continental Congress, sent provisions to Boston, built a galley, "The New Defense" with two eighteen pound cannon, two twelve pound cannon several six and four pounders. After serving for some time as a coast guard ship, she was captured by the British and twenty of her crew died in the British prison ships in New York harbor. Many men from here were active in the defense of their country and their names appear as majors, captains, and lieutenants, Foot, Harrison, Maltby, Rogers, and Col. William Douglas who recruited a regiment of 500, known as the "Leather Caps".

Transportation was difficult. Even the King's Highway at the close of the Revolutionary War was merely a wide path cut through the woods in many places. Bridges were poor or non-existent, and travelers in the early coaches and carriages carried axe, saw, and shovel. It was the custom to ford a stream where it was shallow, often following a path made by the Indians.

Coaches might start at three in the morning and not stop until ten at night. The passengers stayed at inns and we have several such houses in North Branford, where they told or listened to news, left and took mail, and made friends with the families of the inn keepers.

War, as always, took its toll, not only the lives of our fighting men, but the general economy as well. The West Indies trade was sharply cut by the blockade, thus the income of many was reduced to nothing. As the Continental Currency became more and more worthless, the cost of everything went up. One man it is reported, paid \$2,000 in this currency for a suit. Many very self-sufficient and respectable families had to seek assistance after the war.

With the establishment of a new form of government, and the inauguration of Washington as president in 1789, living began to be more normal, and people began to thrive.

As in many places, the War of 1812 was not too popular, and I have found no outstanding example of heroism by one of our citizens in that war. However, living conditions improved, population and homes increased, education was extended and in 1820 Branford Academy was built. Young men from this area attended. Pupils were charged \$2.00 per term and reading, writing, arithmetic, history, geography, grammar, natural philosophy, chemistry, rhetoric, algebra, geometry, book-keeping and navigation were taught by the schoolmaster. Small one room schools were built where needed throughout the town.

Then at a meeting of the General Assembly of the State of Connecticut held in Hartford on the first Wednesday of May, 1831, details were formulated for the care and upkeep of roads, schools, town lines, for the care of the poor, and for one representative to the State Legislature in order that the town of Branford might be properly divided, for a petition was on file showing that "said town is conveniently situated to be divided into two distinct towns, and that the interests and feelings of the inhabitants of the first society and of the other two Societies in said town have become so diverse as to render a separation expedient". Favorable action was taken and the town of North Branford became incorporated.

The first town meeting was held at the Congregational Meeting House in the First District on the second Monday of June 1831. Benjamin Page Esq. was elected the first Town Clerk and Treasurer. Jesse Linsley, Samuel Bartholomew and Elizur Harrison were the first Selectmen. The boundary line of the new town was placed on record on July 9, 1831. Because of the time consumed in travel and the fact that town meetings were held in the day time and attended by men who had to leave their work it was voted that the meetings would be held alternately in each society.

The next year it was voted that Jerome Harrison should collect the tax of three cents on a dollar of taxable property to pay the expense of the new road from North Branford to Moose Hill in Guilford, and that if he collected the same and paid it into the town treasury by the first day of June 1832 he was to be allowed two percent as fees for collecting. Later it was recorded that \$522.37 was received by the town so his pay would have been \$10.94 for the several months work.

In 1840 the population of the town was 1,016 persons; inhabitants were called to labor on the highways and the twelve and a half cents for a team per hour. A doctor's bill to an estate for visits medicine and attendance from December 1841 to December 1843 was \$47.00. On October 2, 1843 it was voted that the town furnish materials for building a bridge provided that the inhabitants in that vicinity would erect it without further expense to the town. On October 4, 1847 the Selectmen were authorized to make alterations in the road near the burying ground in Northford provided it be done without expense to the town. The next year it was voted at the annual town meeting that all horses, cattle, mules, sheep, swine and geese be restrained from going at large on the commons and highways in this town.

In 1850 four dollars was allowed an estate for a coffin. From notes of a pastor who served, evidently as the town's welfare department just prior to the Civil war one learns that a family with three children was destitute. The husband was "no good". They were given \$1.00 a week order for goods. A two year old died and was

buried in the free ground of a cemetery but the sexton was paid \$1.50 for digging the grave. Also, Mrs. G's husband had gone off with another woman and left her with six children. She was allowed some coal and \$1.00 a week. From the records of the Town Treasurer we also learn that the town became richer by \$15.68 from the sale of a pauper's clothes, but that it also spent \$51.60 for the board of a man for a period of 24 weeks at the rate of \$2.15 per week. Funeral expenses for an indigent woman cost the town \$9.31.

On September 17, 1851 a meeting was held in Northford to consider the building of a new school house in the Eastern School District. Having built a school house and having no use for the old one it was voted on February 9, 1852 to sell it at Auction together with its contents. The house was "bid off" for the sum of \$19.50, the stove, pipe and andirons for \$1.37, movable benches for \$.64 and chair for \$.07. Because the Building Committee, William Maltby, Philander Cook and Thilus Todd charged nothing for many services, the cost of the new school was as follows: For land purchased for the site, \$75.00; Underpinning to schoolhouse and laying the same, \$10.00; Schoolhouse above foundation walls, \$320.00; Stove pipe and zinc \$12.00; Recording two deeds, \$.33; Services rendered by Building Committee, \$35.121/2. The total cost of the new grounds and building was \$465.151/2.

The Estimated Budget for the North Branford Schools for the year 1966-1967 was \$1,433,043.00. In conformity to a statute of the State of Connecticut concerning education, the sum of \$188.72 for the support of the common schools had been raised by taxation in the town of North Branford as approved on June 30, 1854.

Then came the Civil War. Fort Sumter was taken, and Lincoln called for 75,000 men to serve for three months to bring the South back into the Union. Connecticut's quota was one regiment and in less than three weeks, fifty-four companies, or five times the quota had offered their services. A bounty was paid to each volunteer who enlisted before a draft, and before the first draft was made (there were three) North Branford had received \$2,768.74 so we can know the prompt response to that call. The state paid \$6.00 a month to the wife of the soldier, and \$2.00 for each of not more than two children under fourteen years of age. We had approximately fifty veterans in the army and navy, several of whom never returned.

After the war, wages were from \$3.00 to \$15.00 a week. Farming and manufacturing were carried on, and along the river in Northford ingenious residents were inventing and manufacturing buttons, combs, pins, hooks and eyes,

and cocoanut dippers, and throughout the town where water power was available there were axe handle factories, saw and grist mills, and blacksmith shops. Then came steam, gasoline and then electricity for movable power, and railroads for transportation. But not to North Branford. Industry perished and North Branford became a farming community.

A few men from North Branford served in the Spanish American War, but the entire state of Connecticut had only about 3,400 men in actual combat. And so another century came to a close.

In 1910 women voters made their first appearance at the polls in the fall election. Until about this time most of the residents had names of English origin and were the descendants of early settlers. As a result of the great immigration which took place, several farms were purchased by members of other ethnic groups and North Branford's farming changed. Market gardening competed with the self-sustaining and dairy farms, and so-called money crops included vegetables, berries and fruits.

The New Haven Trap Rock Quarry was established in 1914 and began operations in 1915. This created a new industry and a new source of revenue in the town. It also brought more new citizens of European background and Catholic faith.

As public transportation is essential to the establishment of public services and industry, it appeared to many that the ground-work had been laid for industrial growth. The old Essex turnpike had been resurfaced and was known as the Foxon Road. The Shore Line Electric Railway was carrying passengers and freight from Saybrook to New Haven. Passenger service was on an hourly schedule and freight daily. Then came a series of accidents and the terrible wreck in North Branford, and the route was abandoned.

North Branford had its full quota in the 66,000 men and officers which Connecticut sent in World War I and did its share to help Connecticut lead every other state in the buying of Liberty Bonds. Women took men's jobs in the fields and shops, and children had home gardens, or raised animals and poultry for food. Junior Red Cross groups were formed in the schools where teachers were paid \$400 a year for their services.

As the formation of Totoket Mountain with its basalt brought the Quarry to North Branford, so did Sandy Hollow lure the New Haven Water Company. In 1925 they commenced work on a large dam and reservoir. The sites of many fine old homes between Sibbie's Hill and Sea Hill were flooded and Lake Gaillard now fills the

valley. Dinosaur footprints and a section of the old Rose House taken from this area may be seen at the Peabody Museum and the Yale Art Gallery in New Haven.

This general period cannot be passed without mentioning the civic assistance given by the New Haven Trap Rock Company. Mr. Alexander McKernan, superintendent of the plant, took a personal interest in the welfare of his workers and their families. The North Branford Athletic Club was formed and a club house with a playing field was built on their property under the direction of the company executives. He, with the assistance of Earle Colter Sr. and Frank Haslett organized the North Branford Fife and Drum Corp. Through his generosity, they had the best instructors, and in competition at the World's Fair in New York were designated World Champions.

The Crash of 1929 affected the lives of many people in North Branford. Automobiles had made it possible for sons who did not like farming to get work in nearby factories or business establishments, or go beyond the town limits to follow their interests through advanced education. Depression closed the doors to many commercial houses. Others who had their own private businesses lost them. Bank accounts were used up, and farmers who had purchased machinery on time were unable to meet the payments. Some families went on relief and the North Branford Relief Committee came into being.

During the Connecticut Tercentenary years, North Branford and Northford, daughters of the mother town of Branford, took an active part, for it also marked three hundred years of struggle and growth in our town. A newspaper photographer who covered the state remarked that although the cities put on lavish parades, none were more authentic than North Branford's.

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