

HISTORICAL SKETCHES OF SALEM, CONNECTICUT

The town of Salem, Conn., about six by five miles in extent, situated in the extreme western part of New London County, remote from railroads and waterways, is scarcely more populous today, on the eve of its 150th birthday than it was on the first Wednesday of May (5th), 1819, when the town of Salem was incorporated with just over 1,000 people living within its bounds. In 1820, Salem's population was only 1/8th that of the largest town in Conn., New Haven, but from that date its numbers decreased steadily until in 1930 the count reached a low of only 404 people; since then Salem has been flourishing.

Presumably there never were any witches in this particular Salem, except for possibly a toothless old woman giving Witch Meadow, and ultimately the road, its name. It is believed that this town did take its name from Salem, Massachusetts when Colonel Samuel Browne (1669-1731) of that town purchased, in 1718, a considerable number of acres now known as Fairy Lake Farm, originally called Paugwonk lands and pond, after a tribe of Mohegan Indians who had a settlement upon its shores. This beautiful lake, sometimes known as Crooked Pond, is situated among rolling hills which abound in many legends. Opposite Horse Pond, formerly known as Mountain Lake and Beckwith Pond, is a high ledge known as Lover's Leap. It must be understood that the Old Governors Road (now Route 85 with portions relocated) originally passed to the west of Horse Pond, and the highway where it exists today is the result of a considerable land fill operation in the pond below this ledge. Legend reveals that an Indian girl and her white lover who were being pursued by her father, an Indian Chief, spurred the white horse, on which they were escaping, over the ledge and into the pond below. On moonlit nights, the white mane of the horse may be seen floating on the shimmering lake just as the bereaved chieftain saw it as he reached the edge of the cliff.

Early Settlement

The precise time of the first settlement made within the present limits of Salem, which basically consisted of Colchester and Lyme, remains in doubt, but an early history of New London County states that it can be safely asserted that the first land deeds were made in the southern portion of the town. The old boundary line between Lyme and Colchester ran somewhat parallel to Salem's existing southern town line and crossed Route 85 at the junction of Hagen Road, remaining just south of Harris Road to the east.

South Salem (Lyme)

On June 6, 1664, Captain Sannup, a Niantic Sachem, deeded to Matthew Griswold, Sr. and several other men a tract of land eight miles square, lying near the Connecticut River, about 12 or 13 miles up the river. This land was confirmed to them by the Court in May 1686, and contains lands now in the southwest part of Salem.

In April 1669, Chapeto, a kinsman of Uncas, deeded to William Lord an eight-mile square tract within or adjacent to Lyme, known subsequently as Paugwonk lands. Uncas signed the deed with Chapeto and his son Maskoran. A dispute arose over the size of the tract agreed to and appropriated, which wasn't settled until 1720.

Samuel Chester owned a large tract of land, containing several thousand acres in what is now the Chesterfield portion of Montville and a portion of which extended into the southeastern part of Salem. Uncas conveyed this land to him just prior to his death in 1683. From Mr. Chester the name of "Chesterfield" is supposed to be derived.

By 1700 nearly all the lands now comprising the south part of Salem were in the possession of either Matthew Griswold or his son Matthew Griswold, Jr. Between the years 1718-1729 all this land (approx. 6500 acres) had been bought by one man, Colonel Samuel Brown. In 1729, there were three houses and a sawmill in South Salem: (1) the house built for Colonel Browne in 1720 under the superintendence of Capt. Samuel Gilbert, son of a wealthy innkeeper of Hartford and a veteran of Queen Anne's War. Capt. Gilbert operated this residence as possibly Salem's first inn until his death in 1733. The site of this inn is located in the vicinity of Attorney Richard Corkey's home; (2) a small house on the Samuel Peck farm in southwest Salem; and (3) a small house and sawmill on the "Wheatfield Hill" farm in the vicinity of land now owned by Charles Dimmock.

Salem was, even from very early times, a great wheat-growing region. Land to the west of Route 85 and between Salem Four Corners and the junction of Hagen Road and Route 85 was known as Wheatfield Hill farm as early as 1717. The residents of the Col. Browne and Fitch estates sent great quantities of the grain to Boston.

North Salem (Colchester)

On Dec. 9, 1686, Owaneco, Sachem of Mohegan and son of Uncas, confirmed to Daniel Mason of Stonington his title to land given by Uncas to his father, Major John Mason, a famous Indian fighter. This tract contained 500 acres lying west of "a great pond called Massapaug" (Gardiner's Lake) and a mansion house was built by the Masons prior to 1717.

In June 1699, Owaneco, "in consideration of the love and respect he bore to his friend Nathaniel Foot of Wethersfield, and for promoting and encouraging of sundry persons, who presented a petition to ye General Court in October, last past, for a tract of land for a township...being willing to show his willingness to promote Plantation and in consideration of a sum of money sold to Nathaniel Foot and Samuel Rogers, two of the grantees, all his rights in the land of said Township." A part of this tract is now the north part of Salem.

After the turn of the century, settlement started to take place. Two of the earliest settlers were Joseph Pumery and Ebenezer Coleman, who in 1703 were each appropriated 100 acres by the town, having already established their residence west of the Governor's Road (Rt. 85) and north of the Lyme line. The town gave them the land "for their encouragement to eject Major Palmes or any other person who shall make entrance or improve any land in the bounds of Colchester." Major Palmes was about to sell "his" large parcel of land under the pretense of an Indian grant from Capt. Sannup of which had no validity. The Coleman and Pumery grant was laid out through a survey on Feb. 7, 1706. It wasn't until 1710 that land in North Salem was offered for sale.

In May 1705, "the Gentlemen of Lyme and Colchester summoned John Plumbe of New London to run the dividing line between the towns." Prior to this time, the lands

north of the Lyme line and extending to Colchester Center were the hunting grounds for the Mohegan Indians. From this period forth, the Mohegan became a migratory tribe.

Capt. William Gardiner of South Kingstown, R.I., bought in 1724 the land on the west side of Gardiner's Lake, which had been owned by Mason. Although he owned this land for only six months the lake bears his name today due to the prestige and esteem, which encompassed him. Other names given to the lake in the past are Massapaug, Great Pond, Twenty Mile Pond, and Mason's Pond.

Opposite Rathbun Hill Road on the west side of the Old Colchester Road was situated a 100 acre farm bought in 1726 by Robert Jacklin, a free Negro man from New London, who owned this land for several years and was probably the first man of his race to own land in Salem. Due to the fact that Colonel Samuel Browne only owned 1500 acres in North Salem, a greater portion of acreage was made available. The second largest landowner in 1725 was Colonel Thomas Fitch, a wealthy Boston merchant, who owned over 1,000 acres (300 acres in South Salem). His land holdings contained the northwest quarter of Salem. After his death in 1736 the lands were divided between his sons-in-law, Lt. Governor Andrew Oliver of Boston and William Brattle of Cambridge, both prominent men of their times and Tories. Other large landowners were Joshua Hempstead of New London – 1724; John Dolbeare, a wealthy brazier from Boston – 1720 (who died in 1725 leaving the immense number of 24 children); Capt. Simon Ray of Block Island – 1716.

By the year 1729, there were at least seven houses and a smith shop in North Salem: (1) two mansion houses near Round Hill and a smith shop built for Lt. James Harris around 1727; (2) a small house built by Thomas Jones in 1726 and located on the Music Vale Seminary property; (3) a small house built by Jonathan Cutler in 1706 and situated on the north side of Music Vale Road; (4) a small house built by Nathaniel Foot before 1728 and still standing on Rt. 85, north of Music Vale Road; the former residence of Rev. John Whittlesey (father of Oramel) and more recently the Buron residence; (5) a mansion house built before 1717 by Peter Mason on the west side of Gardiner's Lake; and (6) an immense mansion house built by William Browne (eldest son of Colonel Samuel) during the 1720's on the south side of Music Vale Road near the Governor's Road.

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Gradually Colonel Brown acquired the whole tract of country round about, embracing the whole of South Salem, as we know it today, and amounting to over 8,000 acres. In 1725, land was designated from the towns of Colchester and Lyme to form the parish of New Salem, although many settlers still referred to their parish by its Indian name of "Paugwonk" through the 1700's.

Colonel Samuel Browne was born at Salem, Mass., on Oct. 8, 1669. His father and grandfather were among the wealthiest and most influential citizens of that town, and famed for their benevolence to the poor, and their benefactions to Harvard College. Benjamin Pickman, who wrote in 1793 a sketch of early Salem, called them "the most remarkable family that has ever lived in the town." Col. Browne was said to have been "by far the greatest merchant of his day in Essex County." He lived in what was in those days a style of great magnificence, entertaining in a princely manner. The eldest son, William, after his marriage, lived in regal style at Salem, Conn., by building a magnificent country house, which he named Browne Hall for the family home in

England, but which always bore the name of Browne's Folly. Browne Hall, built probably during the late 1720's was an imposing building, with a front of 80 feet and built in the form of the letter H. The center was a large hall with paneled walls and massive beams surrounded by a circular gallery and surmounted by a dome. The floor was painted in imitation of mosaic. The house was so damaged by the earthquake that destroyed Lisbon in 1755, and which also shook New England, that it was not considered safe and was therefore moved to the foot of the hill, where it stood for many years. The mansion also provided shelter for the Browne Land Agents and stood just north of the Colchester-Lyme line, facing west near the Governor's Road. Nathaniel Hawthorne refers to the house in one of his works.

The period of the War for Independence marked an important transition in the life of New Salem. Sympathy with the patriot cause was strong with most everyone except the large landowner, and approximately two dozen men from the parish enlisted, some of who took part in the Lexington alarm. Before long it was discovered that Col. William Browne, grandson and heir of Colonel Samuel, was persisting in his loyalties to the mother country (England). Consequently, as a Tory, he left Salem forever in October 1774, and took refuge in Boston, and in 1776, when the British evacuated that city; he sailed with his son for England. His wife and daughter later joined him. Colonel Brown was appointed Governor of Bermuda in 1780, but finally returned to England, where he died in 1802. John Adams, the second President, said of him, "Society made of him a refugee; a Tory, I verily believe he never was."

The confiscation of the Browne estates, which were declared, forfeited to the State of Conn. On Feb 1, 1779, was naturally followed by their dispersal into a considerable number of small farms.

The parish of New Salem was divided in 1769, and the southeastern portion was set off as a part of Chesterfield Parish. Then in 1786, New London North Parish, with the eastern part of Salem Parish and a part of Chesterfield Parish, was made the town of Montville.

Old Roads

The main road leading north-south through the center of Salem, being the most direct route between New London and Hartford, was an old Indian trail used by the early settlers and known as "the Country Road" from New London to Colchester, John Winthrop, Jr., while he served as Governor in Hartford between 1657-76, undoubtedly used this trail during the winter months to visit his mansion in New London when the Conn. River was navigable because of ice. Another Governor, Gurdon Saltonstall, also residing in New London, had the road formally laid out starting in 1716 (but not completed until 1740); thus it became known as "The Governor's Road." The original road prior to 1800 veered to the west of the existing highway south of the Town Clerk, Mary Beebe's home, and connected with Pratt Road, then off to the south on Hagen Road, and west on the Hamburg Road (Rt. 82) to Shingle Mill Road, which took the road around the west shore of Horse Pond passing near Capt. Gilbert's Inn and then back to the existing road south of the pond. As it approached the southern town line the old road veered to the east following an old abandoned extension of Beckwith Road where it entered Montville. The Hartford and New London Turnpike Company, which received

the right to operate the road from the Conn. Assembly in Oct. 1800, immediately commenced building an improved road as Rt. 85 travels today.

The main road leading east west through the center of Salem was the Norwich and Essex Turnpike laid out in 1827. As it attempted to straighten portions of the old winding roads, new roads were created across Harris Road and from Music Vale to Hagen Roads, thereby establishing Salem Four Corners. To the west, Darling Road was straightened by White Birch Road as the coaches proceeded through Lyme to Hamburg and beyond to Ely's Ferry, which transported the carriages across the Conn. River at Essex to the Lower Post Road.

The following dates of old town roads are listed below for roads that have shown little or no change from their original layout: Buckley Hill and Way Road – 1780; Witter Road – 1787; Rathbun Hill Road – before 1769; Old Colchester Road (north portion) – 1721; Heilwield Road – 1716 (previously and old Indian trail called “Chosechacomuck”); Round Hill Road – shortly after 1733; Old Cross Road thru Harris and Music Vale Roads – 1743; Music Vale Road (altered to present location) – 1764; West Road (known as Lyme Road) – 1716; Gungy Road, Darling Road, Rt. 82 east to Hagen Road – 1724; Darling Road (s.w. portion) – 1763; Old New London – 1770.

The western portion of the North Cross Highway left West Road opposite Mill Lane Road and connected with Cherry Tree Road before 1720. The remaining portion of road from Witch Meadow to the Governor's Road wasn't laid out as a highway until 1760, due to a long controversy with the landowner, Colonel Brattle. The eastern portion starting at the Governor's Road, around 1750, proceeded on Rattlesnake Ledge Road, up over Cockle Hill and through a district known as “Wales.” In 1757 the road connected with the Old Colchester Road near the present Colchester line. The northern portion of the highway was discontinued in 1852.

Religious Activities

In 1725, the General Assembly allowed the town to levy a tax of one penny an acre on all unimproved land for the support of the church. In 1726, Lt. Harris deeded in trust a tract of land containing 2 acres for a meetinghouse, burying ground, and training field. This was located on the north side of Music Vale Road, west of a colonial home now owned by Mrs. William Leiserson. As other settlers came, they felt the need of a meetinghouse “for ye public worship of God, in ye new parish partly in Colchester and partly in Lyme commonly called New Salem.”

Ecclesiastical Society of New Salem

In the year 1728, a church was built on this land and Lt. Harris called it “a Presbyterian meeting house.” Church affairs did not prosper in Salem. In 1739, the society was allowed to levy a penny tax for the support of the ministry. From the following entry of Feb. 4, 1742, in the diary of Joshua Hempstead of New London, we learn the name of the Salem minister: “Mr. Lovit is the minister of New Salem and his rate is 13 shillings, 4 pence for the last year of taxing (he informs me).” In May of year, on complaint of the people, the tax was abated to one-half penny. For the next four years the parish was without a minister. This church was either burnt or destroyed, possibly

before 1763, when a new church was built on the north corner of Witch Meadow Road and the Governor's Road, through a grant of 15 rods of land by Asa Jones. Two churches were built on this site. The last was taken down in 1838 and these timbers were used to build the present Congregational Church on the Town Green. In 1890, the Ecclesiastical Society was disbanded and the Congregational Society was organized.

Baptist Society

The first Baptist Church was built in 1751. Josiah Gates deeded 7 ½ acres of land and a dwelling house to Ichabod Allen of New London, with the understanding that he settle as Minister of said congregation. This church stood on the west side of the Old Colchester Road near the top of the hill a short distance north of Heilwield Corner (Rt. 354 and Witter Roads) Here was located the Baptist meeting house, which remained until 1846 when a new church was erected farther down the road to the south. This church is still standing and retains the name of the early community (the Paugwonk Baptist Church).

Methodist Society

The first Methodist Church was erected on Meeting House Hill opposite the house located on the site of Music Vale Seminary. This church fell into disrepair and inactivity and was bought by Mr. Herrick, a blacksmith, in 1871, after he came to Salem from Norwich. The church was moved in 1878 to recently purchased land fronting on the Governor's Road and south of Witch Meadow Road. Although the structure is now gone, Mr. Herrick did operate the building for many years as a blacksmith shop.

The second Methodist Organization, known as the Captain David Seaman's Chapel, was built July 17, 1881, with ten members under the Reverend Henry Brown. This structure, located on Pratt Road, was used for many years as a Grange Hall until it burned midway through the 20th century.

Episcopal Society

The Episcopal Society of Salem was organized in 1829. When a new Episcopal Church was erected on Church St. in Norwich, the old church edifice, which had been built in 1749, was no longer needed, and was sold in 1830 to the Episcopal Society of Salem. During the following year the structure was moved from Norwich to the Salem Green. This society after a time declined, and in 1843 the old building, then almost a hundred years old, was sold to the town of Salem for \$500.00, table and stove included. The spire, tower and pews were removed, and the building became a Town Hall. The Episcopal Society was allowed the privilege of meeting there occasionally for public worship for the next 10 years. We may justly be proud of this 220-year-old building.

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Finally, in 1819, all the land belonging to the old Salem Parish, including a part of Montville (formerly New London North Parish) on the east was incorporated as the

town of Salem. During this period Salem was a thriving farm community in which blacksmith shops, gristmills, and sawmills were kept busy. Salem was well known for its taverns, among them the Stickland Tavern (now the Avery home on Rt. 85), the Dolbeare Tavern (torn down), operated by Samuel Dolbeare after 1772 and reached via Clark Lane, and the old Bland Tavern (now the home of Mr. and Mrs. George Gadbois), both located on the Norwich Turnpike Road. The latter had its days of activity during the War of 1812 and at a later date it had the honor of accommodating as overnight guests, President Andrew Jackson and his staff who were on their way from Norwich to New Haven. Before leaving, the General addressed a throng of Salemites from a high balcony on the front of the tavern, which has since been removed.

Between the years of 1835 and 1876, Salem rose to national prominence as a cultural center for music under the genius of Oramel Whittlesey and Music Vale Seminary. As young boys, Oramel and his two brothers persuaded their father to buy them a piano, and for this they each practiced judiciously two hours a day, working in shifts. Once each week, after they had finished their day's work, they drove to New London for piano lessons; leaving Salem at eight p.m., they arrived at New London at eleven-thirty. Their lessons of one hour each were finished at two-thirty a.m., and they drove back to Salem, arriving at five-thirty am; just in time to start the day's chores. Oramel was greatly respected by the farmers in the community and was at different times justice of the peace, judge of probate, postmaster, and senator. Immediately after his marriage at Salem in 1826, he moved to Buffalo and with his two brothers began the manufacture of pianos, which were made of rosewood and mahogany. All the finer workmanship, such as the sawing of the ivories and the inlaying of mother-of-pearl letters and ornamentations, was done entirely by hand, the work of the three brothers. In 1833, Oramel Whittlesey and his brothers returned to their old home in Salem where they continued the manufacture of pianos. Later Henry Whittlesey built a small factory next to his residence north of Smuckler's Garage on the east side of the Governor's Road. The brothers, however, carried on the work, as something more constructive became the ambition of Oramel. Oramel's reputation as a musician was becoming widely known. In 1835, he established Mr. Whittlesey's Music School, later known as Music Vale Seminary and Normal Academy of Music. It was the first normal school of music in the United States authorized to confer degrees. In those days when colleges for women were unknown, every gentlewoman was expected to give creditable performance on the harp, piano or guitar. Salem soon became a cultural center. Young ladies came from all parts of the United States, Canada and the West Indies, and soon the student body grew to an average of eighty during the year, with its peak being one hundred pupils. The pupils were taught voice culture and there were lessons on the organ, harp, and guitar as well as piano, and Professor Whittlesey along with some well-known musicians as instructors, maintained the strictest discipline. The graduates of Music Vale were among the most accomplished musical artists of their day. Special Concord coaches were ordered hung on the best leather springs with luxurious appointment and painted a royal blue. Horses were perfectly matched, while the coachmen and footmen were all six-footers, descendants of the Colonel Browne slaves, and every one of them stood at attention and saluted when addressed. The coaches were one extravagance,

but the elaborate musicals and operas (some composed by Whittlesey) staged in the great auditorium of MusicVale were even more ambitious and expensive undertakings. The hall itself, designed by a New York architect, with its frescoed walls and ceilings, elaborate boxes at the sides of the stage and a gallery at the rear, far exceeded in detail the appointments any concert hall of the prosperous cities of New London or Norwich. The curtains, one with a painting of Music Vale, and another with a likeness of the Arch of Titus with the Tiber in the distance, were a source of wonder to many visitors. Prominent persons gathered from far distant places to attend the spectacular performances and to talk for months afterward of the amazing lighting and sound effects. "Real thunder" crashed when stage hands rolled iron balls across white oak boards in the wings, and lightning flashed from lighted blasting powder strung out on a tin plate. A reporter for a New York newspaper who saw one performance, wrote in October 1855:"When we were ushered into the reception hall filled with such a splendid array of beauty, grace and loveliness we could scarcely imagine that it was all real, but our minds reverted to the stories in the Arabian Nights Tales, and we were half inclined to believe the whole a dream. We might as well attempt to describe on paper the beauties of the rainbow as to give a description of the entertainment. There was not a poor singer among them, and what was really surprising was the admirable discipline under which they performed. We left the hall gratified with what we had heard and fascinated with what we had seen." During the performance of an opera in 1868, some blasting powder got out of control and fired the seminary. A larger, more luxuriously equipped building was immediately erected with a tower at the center, topped with a harp as a weathervane, but the disaster of the Civil War in the South was already making inroads on the seminary's enrollment. Oramel Whittlesey died in 1876; his daughters carried on the school for only a few years longer. Another fire, in 1897, destroyed the vacant structure and left Music Vale a memory. In the earlier part of this century, it was common to see motorists with license plates from distant places stop and search for some tangible evidence of Music Vale. Sometimes delicate old ladies would walk slowly through the long grass, pausing and listening – listening for the faint music of their past.

Salem gradually returned to its role as an agricultural community. During the early 1900's Fairy Lake Farm, consisting of twenty-eight hundred acres, was the pride of the locality by pioneering rural hydroelectric power and marketing its produce throughout the region.

Today, Salem's only links with the past are approximately forty old homes and buildings, all well over one hundred years old, and dating as early as 1728. Our town is expected to grow substantially during the last quarter of this century; it is my hope that some of these structures will be preserved and possibly restored, so that they might endure the ages as a reminder of our heritage.

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by: David Hazard Wordell