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The Totoket Historical Society, Inc.

HISTORICAL SKETCH OF NORTH BRANFORD

By

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HISTORICAL SKETCH OF NORTH BRANFORD

The early history of North Branford is closely tied in with that of Branford and the New Haven Colony as they were all originally one and the same. On March 30th, 1638 a group of about 250 men, women, and children sailed from Boston under the leadership of Theophilus Eaton, John Davenport and others to establish a colony, now known as New Haven, on Quinnipiac Bay. It was a difficult journey. Severe storms and heavy headwinds slowed the vessels down so much that it required two weeks to make the voyage. Although the people settled in New Haven, they did not actually purchase the land from the Indians until November.

A few days after the purchase of New Haven, an Indian Chieftain, Montowese, son of the powerful sachem of the Mattabesecks, Sowheog, approached Theophilus Eaton and John Davenport of the New Haven Colony and offered to sell them a large tract of land called "Totoket." The colonists agreed, and by giving Montowese "eleven coates made of trucking clothe, and one coate for himselfe of English clothe, made up after the English manner" they acquired more than 130 square miles of land extending eight miles east and five miles west of the Quinnipiac River and ten miles inland from the shore. This piece of Land included what are now the towns of Branford and North Branford. Montowese was also given the right to fish, hunt, kill beaver, and to plant crops along the river if he wished. This arrangement was agreeable to him because he was chieftain of a very small tribe. He had only ten braves at the time of the purchase, so he felt that the white men would serve as a protection to him against the invasions of unfriendly Mohegan Indians from New York. These Indians were constantly coming into the lands of Montowese to take advantage of the excellent hunting and fishing in the area.

The meaning of the word "Totoket" is unclear., Some people say that it means "place of the tidal river" because the tide of the Branford River carried fresh water from the streams in the nearby hills to Long Island Sound and then flowed back salt water from the sea.

Others say that the Indians used the name for the whole area because of the long range of hills running through the region which were called the Totoket Mountains. Whatever the reason, the area was called Totoket until it was finally settled in 1644 after which it was called Branford for a small village near London, England named Brentwood.

By the time that the settlers purchased Totoket in December of 1638 there were already at least two white men living in the district. One, Thomas Mulliner, had claimed a large tract of land on Branford Point for himself, and the other man, Thomas Whitway, had settled in the region known as Bare Plain, near Foxon. Bare Plain is the flat area that runs along Route #80 by the Jerome Harrison School, and the origin of its name is also in doubt. Some people say that it was originally called "Bear Plain" because of the bears to be found in the neighborhood, while others claim, and this is the more logical explanation, that the name derived from the Indian custom of burning over the area each year to make it good hunting ground for deer. Mulliner was persuaded to give up his claim to a large part of his land. He kept for himself only enough land to build a house on, though he later purchased some of his original land back from the colony. He was apparently quite a troublemaker, and there are several records of his having been brought into court in New Haven on various charges. Once he was accused of building fences and planting crops on land that he no longer owned; another time he was accused of breaking the peace; another time he apparently would not stand guard against Indian- attack during church services. On the other hand, Thomas Whitway was an asset to the community and a worth while citizen. He was allowed to keep all his land in the Bare Plain area and for many years worked as an interpreter to the Indians. Upon one occasion at least he was sent to Uncas and his brother Foxon of the Mohegans to bring them to consult with the governor about complaints that they had caused trouble within the limits of Totoket.

On September 3, 1640 the land known as Totoket was given by grant to Samuel Eaton, younger brother of Governor Theophilus Eaton, as a plantation on condition that he would go to England to persuade settlers to come back with him and take up residence in the area. He sailed for England, but was unsuccessful in his mission and never returned to

the colony. Therefore, in 1643, the land was sold to William Swayne and others of the Wethersfield Colony for a sum of twelve or thirteen pounds. In 1644 Mr. Swayne brought a group of settlers to Totoket and the first permanent village was established. With him came many men whose families were to figure prominently in the settling of North Branford, and whose names are still to be found in the town today. These men cleared the land, built houses and began to make a settlement from the wilderness. Although life was difficult in many respects, the early settlers found fish in the rivers, shellfish in the sea, game in the woods, and good land for the planting of crops. It is recorded that Robert Rose, who had come here from Wethersfield with the original settlers, owned 10 cows and 60 horses when there were not more than 10 more cows in the whole township. He was a pious and kindly man, apparently, as it is further recorded that each week he gave the Sunday milking to the poor. As the town of Branford grew people began pushing farther and farther away from the center of town, and it is known that there were at least two houses within the present limits of North Branford by 1680; one built by Captain Jonathan Rose, son of Robert Rose, on Hop Yard Plain near the present Branford line, and the other built by the Benjamin Howd family in Northford off Middletown Turnpike. However, the first organized settling of this area came about on March 4, 1687 when six men, John Rosewell, Samuel Hoadley, Joseph Foot, Josiah Frisbie, William Barker, John Maltbie (Maltby), and Isaac Bartholomew were given one square mile of land in the Bare Plain area on condition that each one build a house and settle on the land within three years. If anyone of them did not live up to this agreement the property could not be held. They fulfilled the conditions and so the settlement that was to become North Branford began, though at that time the district was called the "North Farms." These original settlers were followed in rapid succession by many others and a small town soon flourished. Another land division in the direction of Northford took place in 1703. The date given for the actual settling of the Northford area is usually given as about 1720, but it is known that there were people in the area for quite a few years before this time. The townspeople of Branford used to travel to the Northford regions in the summer and camp along the base of the hills while they planted and harvested crops. With the onset

of cold weather they would return to Branford for the winter. Furthermore, there is a record of at least one house in the area being built in 1680 as we have said before.

Although the population of the "North Farms" grew rapidly, the district was still a part of Branford and the government was one and the same. Taxes were paid to Branford, people attended church there, and the residents felt that life was more difficult than it need be. Because "North Farms" was a part of Branford its people had to make the long and difficult trip to Branford each Sunday for church services. There were no roads. The footpaths were narrow and in bad weather quite treacherous. The Indians of the area were friendly, but there was always, danger from marauding parties of Mohegans , and from wolves, panthers, and bears. If a man wore lucky he might own a horse. Then he could ride with his wife behind him carrying the small children while the older children walked. But many men did not own horses, and their whole families had to walk, carrying their food for the noonday meal. Church services took two hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon, so during the winter months the people had to make the hazardous trip home after dark. Therefore, in 1715, the people of the "North Farms" asked for permission to build their own Meetinghouse (church). Permission was at first refused, but was finally granted in 1724, and the people built a small Meetinghouse (about 45 feet long and 35 feet wide) very close to the place where the North Branford Congregational Church stands today. After the building was dedicated in 1725 the life of the community centered around this area and the people grew farther and farther apart from Branford, although it was not until a hundred years later that the town of North Branford was officially formed.

During the eighteenth century North Branford continued to grow and become a flourishing New England town. Agriculture was the chief occupation. The crops included wheat, corn, flax, grown not only for home use, but for export to the British Isles as well. There were productive apple and cherry orchards and the people made cider and cider brandy from the fruit of these trees. Even bayberries were gathered and exported for the making of candles. During this period many small mills of various kinds were established.

There were several fulling mills for shrinking and cleaning cloth that had been woven by individual people. There were barker mills for the tanning of leather to be made in to shoes, saddles, and harnesses. There was a saw mill which had been established as early as 1697 to cut logs for the inhabitants and to sell them boards for a cost of not more than five shillings a board.

North Branford took an active part in the Revolutionary War. When General Washington issued an appeal from New York asking for more volunteers to supplement his tiny force of 1500 men, the message reached North Branford one Sunday during the morning church service, The Reverend Samuel Eells of the Congregational Church read the message, and at the close of the service asked for volunteers. Sixty men responded to the call and Mr. Eells formed a company which he led as Captain for the duration of the war. In Northford, Colonel William Douglass, who had enlisted in the Army early in war, raised a company of 500 men from New Haven County. He designed a special Leather cap for his company and gave one to each of his volunteers. His outfit became well known the "Douglass leather caps." Not all the men in these companies saw active service, but a good many did and took part in several campaigns in the New York area. Most of the townspeople were ardent patriots during the Revolution, but there were at least four families of Tories, one in North Branford, the Abiathar Camp family, and three in Northford whose names are not known, Mr. Camp escaped to Nova Scotia; the three Northford families were driven out of town, and the lands of all four were confiscated.

At the time of the Revolutionary War many of the prosperous land owners of North Branford were the owners of slaves, It is recorded that there were between forty and fifty Negroes in town at the time. However, President Stiles of Yale and the Reverend Samuel Eells had both spoken out strongly against the practice of slavery , so most of the people in town had freed their slaves long before slavery was generally abolished in Connecticut. Several slaves were given their freedom because of their courage and service during the Revolution. One such man was Gad Asher who acted as the servant of General Greene

during the war. Another was a slave called Dick, who was owned by Dr. Linsley of Northford. When the men of Northford left to fight the British who had been reported to have landed in New Haven, Dick assumed responsibility for the women and children left in the town and led them to his house for safety. For this deed he was given his freedom and a parcel of land in Northford.

Education was not neglected in the early days of North Branford, Shortly after the town was given permission to build its first Meeting- house the town fathers began to interest themselves in the education of the children. In 1732 the first piece of land was given for a school, and in 1736 it was voted that a school be established. In the following years several schools were built in the districts of North Branford and Northford. To be sure, these were elementary schools only, and no provision was made for higher education, but so great was the interest that quite a few of the pupils were inspired to continue their educations elsewhere, and some went on to college in New Haven. During this period the schools were not controlled by the town or by Boards of Education as they are today, but rather were under the direction of the church.

After the Revolutionary War the town continued to grow. As the people became more prosperous they began to wish to break ties with Branford and to become a separate town with their own local government. In 1799 the first appeal was made to the Connecticut General Assembly to allow them to form a separate town, but it was denied. During the early part of the nineteenth century, however, two Important roads were built through North Branford , One, connecting New Haven with the important seaports of Essex and Old Saybrook, passed through North Branford proper, and the other, connecting New Haven and Middletown, passed through Northford. Because of these roads, activity in the town increased and more people moved into the area; when the people again petitioned the State to allow them to form their own town, permission was granted. Thus was formally started the Town of North Branford as we know it today--one town with two distinct areas, North Branford and Northford, but one town with a single local government.

During the first part of the nineteenth century the town continued to grow and develop its farming as well as its industries. To the crops which had been formerly exported were added beef and milk. Many small factories were started. Among their products, which were made for export as well as local use, were buttons, wooden spoons, axe handles, leather harnesses and saddles, lumber and timber for shipbuilding, potash, combs, tinware, nails, pins, and coconut dippers. However, it became increasingly difficult to import raw materials in sufficient quantities for these manufactured items and to export the finished product economically. Water power for certain types of manufacturing was also limited, and as a result, many of the small factories either closed down or moved away to other towns. The development of North Branford as an industrial center stopped. This was common in Connecticut during the last part of the century. Like many other small inland towns, North Branford actually decreased in population from 1025 in 1880 to 825 in 1890.

North Branford sent only a small number of men to the Civil War, but many of these fought with great gallantry in some of its bloodiest battles. After the war the town raised money for a monument in memory of the soldiers who had fought in the Civil War on the side of the Union. To North Branford belongs the honor of being the first community in the land to erect and dedicate such a memorial.

During the early years of the twentieth century North Branford continued as a small rural community. In 1914, however, the New Haven Trap Rock Company began operations here and developed along the ridge of the Totoket Mountains what is believed to be the largest single face trap rock quarry in the world. Here, huge slabs of basalt, or trap rock, are taken from the ground and made into crushed stone for road beds. Trap rock is a very hard rock that was formed during the violent volcanic eruptions that took place in this region about 2,000,000 years ago, during the dinosaur age. This new industry brought opportunity for employment and many new residents into the area. Later, the New Haven Water Co. came to North Branford, In 1933 it completed the building of a large reservoir, Lake Gaillard, just beyond the center of town between the Totoket Mountains and Sea Hill. This

reservoir, the largest in the New Haven Water system , covers 1150 acres and has a capacity of almost 16 billion (16,000,000,000) gallons of water. Other small, businesses have come to North Branford to start operations here; many small retail stores have opened in the vicinity; many people have moved here to buy homes and settle down, even though their work is in New Haven. Thus after a period of inactivity, North Branford has again become a thriving community. The population has grown from 825 in 1890 to an official census of 6771 in 1960, and an unofficial count of over 10,000 people in 1966.

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Atwater Memorial Library, May, 1966

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