

The Totoket Historical Society Inc.

**Schools of North Branford
c. 1900-1928**

by
Carrie Doody

October 8, 1970

Digitized
by
Theodore Groom Ph. D.
Chairman, Technology
The Totoket Historical Society

2012-067-001

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The seven pages following that are a transcription of an article by A. Laurretta Plumley which appeared in the New Haven Register on Sunday, December 3, 1933. Ms Plumley wrote a series of articles for The New Haven Register describing little known places of interest in the State of Connecticut. She was a former teacher and had taught in several one-room schoolhouses in New Haven and Middlesex Counties. She was also an author and lecturer on Connecticut history and legends. These were probably included in the original pamphlet because they related to early North Branford schools.

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Northford Historical Society – Teachers' Tea
Oct. 8, 1970

Part of comments by Mrs. Carrie Doody (Mrs. Daniel M.)

In looking through my material about schools, I found in the early days very little about them except that it was required by law that there be schools established for the training of the young.

I did find out however that in 1886, in the annual report of that year, a little bit more was recorded that was definite about our schools, so I've jumped right up to that date. At that time in the First Society, which is now the part that is commonly known as North Branford -- Northford is the second Society, there were several pertinent facts.

In the first society there were three schools: the first up Sea Hill Road, the second where the town hall now is, and the third on Mill Road and it is now the home of Mrs. Strickland, and it is marked, I think, as the third district school.

I found that in the first district, because the youngsters had to work on the farms and so forth, they had 29 weeks of school and the cost of running the school - all services and the teacher's salary - cost \$240. In the third district this one which is now Mrs. Strickland's home, they too were in session 29 weeks. But the cost of that school was only \$231 for the year. The second district school, in the town hall was in session for 34 weeks and it cost the town \$300 to run the school for that length of time. Which meant in the first the first society it cost the town to run three schools for one year - \$771.

In Northford there were four schools one where the little red school house was -- a white schoolhouse was built right near it. This was known as the fourth district and was located between the two centers of Northford and North Branford. There were three others - one at the corner of Foote Hill Road and Village Street, one at the center where William Douglas School is now, and the other one on Middletown Turnpike - For those four schools it cost the town \$983.42. So that in 1886 it cost the \$1,754.42 to run seven schools for one year.

And beside that we had no state supervisor or superintendent of schools in the town: but we had school visitors. The school visitor in this end of town happened to be the Pastor of the Congregational Church. They were supposed to be educated people you know, that would make good judgments. There was one for each end of town. In the town report it says that \$16 was paid to two school visitors for the year.

I was very interested in reading the report that the school visitor from this end of the town made. At that time you know there were no supplies bought for the youngsters. They were using slates and pencils and each child brought his or her own book and it could be a new book, Papa's book, Mama's book or Grandma's. As long as it was geography, it was used for geography. As long as it was grammar it was used for grammar.

So the visitor from this end of town had included in his report. "Old methods are found to be deficient. New and better ones take their place. The world is changing in its political conditions. New Territories are being discovered.

Old errors are being corrected. The world is not what it was fifty years ago. We need therefore textbooks that will give us what we want for use today.”

So teachers, if you have books that are more than five years old, which, the State says you should not have, you will see that back in 1886 they had the same problem, of keeping up to date with events of the world.

I have here a picture that was taken here in Center School in the early 1900's. These were probably all the youngsters that were there. As you were told. I taught in North Branford for one year - 1917-1918.

QUAINT OLD STORIES WOVEN IN WOOF OF NORTHFORD'S HISTORY

Picturesque village, Once Named "Paug," Has Furnished Many Distinguished Men to Community — Ancient Taverns and School Buildings Still Standing

by
A. Laretta Plumley

Those who make their first visit to the village of Northford are impressed by the scenic beauty of the place. Enclosed on all sides by low mountain ranges the setting is perfect for the well kept homes of the residents. The valley still retains much of the quaintness of the days of yore and the colonial atmosphere lost in so many of the rural districts of Connecticut.

This section was first known by the name of "Paug" this being the name called the district by the Indians who lived in Farm River Valley. After the land was purchased from members of the Mattebeseck and Mohegan Tribes the first white settlers called the place Salem, meaning peace, a name that was most fitting to the location. When the present designation "Northford" was taken cannot be determined and the reason for the name is most vague, the only conclusion being that a river, once a fair sized stream, although now only a tiny brook, had to be forded when a journey was made to and from North Branford and it is presumed that the name is a shortened word taken from the phrase "north of the ford." No record can be found when the appellation Salem was replaced by Northford but from public records under the date of December 9, 1751 is found the first occurrence of the name by which the parish has since been known.

OLD SCHOOL SYSTEM

Soon after the district was organized arrangements were made for schools and although the residents were obliged to receive their secondary and college educations out of town a deep interest was taken in the higher branches of learning and many sons and daughters of the parish travelled elsewhere to acquire an education in college and professional schools.

There has always been a large proportion of district and high school teachers who have taught at home and abroad. During the first years of the settlement the town comprised one school district but in the nineteenth century the village was divided into several districts. The teachers selected received a very meager salary,

some as low as one dollar a week and "boarded around." Two terms of school were kept during the year, a Summer term and a Winter term. The Summer term was from April through August and was usually taught by a young woman of the town and attended by the smaller boys and girls of the village. The winter term was in charge of a man when the older boys and girls of the community received their education. The school houses were one room constructions. With seats and desks facing the outer walls. A wood stove was in the center of the room and close by was the master's desk somewhat elevated on a small platform so that he could look down on his charges.

BROOKS ACADEMY

Many times the pastors of the village gave instruction in the higher branches of learning and helped to prepare the boys and girls of the town for secondary schools. There was one private school in Northford conducted by William Brooks. He was an excellent teacher and taught a few of the advanced subjects which were not available in the district schools. Pupils who could not go away to school often took a finishing course in Brook's Academy.

Few parishes in Connecticut and perhaps none of equal population have given to the world so large a number of liberally educated men and women, so goodly a number of emigrant sons, who have served their generations in various fields of labor.

Up to the year 1892, 39 sons of Northford represented the parish in the three leading professions, namely law, medicine and the ministry. Those who followed the legal profession were Noah Linsley, Douglas Fowler, George Hoadley and Gustave Eliot. Diplomas from medical schools were held by Doctors Malachai Foote, William Foote, Salmon Frisbie, Frederick Augur, Steven Todd, Jehel Hoadley, August Williams, Joseph Foote, Jared Linsley, Anson Foote, Elizur Beach, Benjamin F. Harrison and John Linsley. Those who entered the ministry were Reverends Medad Rojers, Lemuel Tyler, Jonathan Maltby, L. Ives Hoadley, Isaac Maltby, Oliver D. Cooke, Eli Maltby, Benjamin S. J. Page, Harvey Linsley, L. S. Hough and Stephen C. Loper. In addition to the above list Mrs. Epaphas Chapman and Mrs. Dwight Baldwin were missionaries, the first among the Indians and the other to the Sandwich Islands. Since that date many others have been trained in like and other professions. Miss Mary Foote, one of the first women to be admitted to the Connecticut Bar, was a daughter of Northford and received her preliminary education in the "Little Red School House" of Northford. Ranking high among those who specialized in teaching is Dr. Clara Smith, Dean of the Mathematics Department of Wellesley College. Others who have been successful in their chosen professions and have honored Northford are Edward Maltby, engineer of note, Noah Linsley, founder of the first free school in a slave state; Catherine Maltby Blaisdell, recent teacher in Peking, China; Rev. Morris Alling,

late secretary of the Federation of Churches of Connecticut and instrumental in building the Community Church at Connecticut State College at Storrs, and Miss Grace Foote who for many years was secretary to a member of the faculty in the University of Rochester. It has been said that, "the village exhibits a scholastic appearance."

ESTABLISH OWN CHURCH

The village of Northford was made up of a group of God fearing people who for several years after the settlement journeyed each Sabbath Day to North Branford for worship. During the Winter months it was almost impossible to make the journey because of the heavy snows and poor roads. In 1734 the General Court of Connecticut granted the people of the village the right to have a separate worship during the months of December, January, February and March annually. Five years later the "Ecclesiastical Society" was formed and in 1745 the Northford Congregational church was organized and a building erected.

The first edifice was built without a steeple but this appendage was added in 1796 and the meeting house was used for 100 years. At the end of that time the building became ill adapted to the use of the congregation and a second structure was built on the site. The first church was torn down and parts of the building were distributed among church members. The doors of the first church of Northford are still in existence being used as doors on a local barn. The second church building was made of stone and stood until destroyed by fire 28 years ago. The present church was erected in 1906.

The Episcopal Society of Northford was formed in 1763 and erected their first house on Maple Avenue, near the present site of the Northford Community Hous. This was replaced by the present church building which stands on a hill off the Middletown Turnpike in 1845.

The first pastor of the Congregational Church was Rev. Warham Williams, who served the parish for nearly 40 years. This pastor was ordained on June 13, 1750. According to the customs of the New England churches of that date a day of fasting and prayer was appointed for this occasion and pastors from nearby communities were invited to preach. Three local church members were appointed to "keep folks out of the building" on that day. Rev. Williams was a graduate of Yale College and shortly after his graduation was elected a tutor. He later served as a Fellow from the time of his early ministry until his death..

Rev. Williams was followed by Rev. Matthew Noyes, who remained pastor of the church for 44 years. He too was a Fellow of Yale College, a very brilliant man and known throughout Connecticut as "one of the wealthiest clergymen in the State" during his lifetime.

BELOVED PASTOR

Rev. Noyes was a great lover of nature and often would go out into the woods and fields to write his sermons. While at work he would carve in the stones. One of these stones was located when a new roadbed was being constructed through Northford. And the church people had it moved to the church yard and erected to his memory. The inscription cut on the stone by Rev. Noyes was -- "MN-1791"

Rev. Andrew Law introduced the study of church music in the village during his residence here and since the middle of the nineteenth century those he taught and their descendants have been employed at home and abroad teaching. Among the teachers most noted among those lines were Rev. Lemuel Tyler, Dr. Augustus Williams, General Isaac Maltby, Levi Fowler, Salmon Fowler and Benjamin Johnson. In more recent years noted music teachers include Miss Mary Maltby who was supervisor of music in the schools of Brooklyn, NY and Mrs. Grace Donovan, a singer and teacher of voice in New Haven. There has always been a little band of vocal and instrumental teachers in the village.

1812 HIGHWAY BUILT

In 1812 the Turnpike Company was organized by several individuals in and about New Haven and a highway was built from New Haven to Middletown through the village. Following the construction of this improved roadway a stage coach route was run from Hartford to New Haven. Along the road were toll gates, one where Sunrise tavern now stands, another four miles from there in the home of Amos Harrison, and a third in Durham Center. Sums of money were collected from all who passed along the highway and those taxes were used to keep the roadbed in good condition and to repay the company for their investments. John Todd was the keeper of the gate at Sunrise tavern and it is said he slept with one eye open for he never missed a fare. An amusing story is told of two Chapman sisters who once passed his station. Mr. Todd swung back the gate and allowed them to pass through. Stopping, they asked the price of the toll. "Well" said Mr. Todd, "it is a shilling for a man and a horse."

"Go on Betsey." said Miss Angie Chapman, "We're two girls and a mare." And hitting the beast a slap with the whip they trotted on their way. However we are told Mr. Todd collected full fare on their return home.

Where the Wallingford Road branches from the Middletown Turnpike there are three old fashioned houses which were inns during the days of the stage coaches. The corner is known as Three Tavern corner. Here were stables for 60 horses and stage coach drivers changed their steeds in each direction. One dark night when the coach was coming through from Hartford, a lady got aboard in Durham. The only passenger in the coach at the time was a travelling man noted for his "winning ways." By the time the stage coach had reached Three Tavern Corner in Northford the gentleman and the lady traveller were very chummy. The

driver stopped here to change his horses. The stable boy from the inn came out to assist and raising his lantern, the light fell upon the face of the lady which was resting comfortably on the shoulder of the gentleman and it was black. The man left the coach and travelled the rest of the way to New Haven on the seat with the driver. He never again passed through Northford.

HOUSES PAINTED RED

The first houses of Northford were painted red or were left a natural color and soon turned grey from exposure to the weather. During the middle part of the nineteenth century three, two and one half story frame buildings were erected in northeastern part of Northford by Henry Eliot, Gustave Eliot and Charles Fowler, and these buildings were painted white. This was the first white paint to be brought into the village and the section was called White Hollow, a name still used to designate this part of the town. For many years a lime kiln was operated by the Eliots in White Hollow and today may still be seen the ruins of the place although great trees have grown up through the kiln

During the "gold rush" to California Charles Fowler and his family packed up all their worldly goods in a covered wagon and left for the west coast. They never returned to Northford.

Bands of Gypsies often strayed through the village. One dark, cold night in the early Fall of 1850 a local housewife answered a knock at her door. She found standing on her stoop a little girl about 12 years of age. A voice from out of the darkness said, "Kind lady, take this little one. Treat her as your own. I will promise to provide for her care."

Upon questioning the child she told of being stolen by a band of Gypsies when she was very small and taken to their encampment where she was compelled to work hard for them. This night a man had entered the camp and seeing that she was ill treated had taken her away. She grew into a beautiful woman and was a blessing to her foster parents. Each year money was received to provide for her care but who her benefactor was has never been known.

OLD TIME AMUSEMENTS

Children and youths today with their many amusements and means of entertainment find it hard to believe that the sports of former years could bring such fond memories to the older people. Skating, coasting, candy pulls, husking bees in the Fall, barn dances, spelling matches, an occasional surprise party and the singing school concerts made up the list of activities which brought pleasure and recreation to the villagers. Sunday was a "Holy Day" and following the long church services in the morning a very quiet afternoon was spent at home.

There are still many in the village who recall these pleasures of their younger days. A great joy remembered by one is "riding the logs to the saw," when she was a tiny tot. She would visit her grandfather's sawmill and with an

uncle to watch her would sit on the great logs as they were slowly carried on the saw table toward the great perpendicular saw which would cut them into lumber. Just before the part of the log she was sitting on reached the sharp teeth, she was rescued by her uncle. Today she tells the story and still thrills in the joys of the past.

Custom made garments were unknown in the village of Northford during the nineteenth century. At the time the families employed shoemakers, dressmakers and tailors to come into the house and cloth the family once a year. Dress shoes were made to match the ladies' gowns from cloth materials with leather soles. Each man in the family had a pair of high leather boots made for him when he became 21 and these boots often lasted a lifetime. When the girls of the family reached the age of 16 the maternal grandmothers always presented them a black silk dress "of the very latest fashion." Many of these gowns have been handed down to the present generation and are carefully kept as heirlooms.

VILLAGE CHARACTERS

When the village was first settled many of the families owned slaves. There was never any trading of slaves in the village and before the Revolutionary War. "Dick Negro," one of the last blackmen to be enslaved, was freed by his master and given a plot of land on Totoket Mountain for a farm and a home. The "Dick Lot" is one of the scenic places of the village and although the house has tumbled in ruins the old cellar hole marks the dwelling place of the old colored man. A tombstone in the old Northford Cemetery marks his last resting place with these words engraved upon it: "Richard, a gentleman of color."

John Peter Johnson lived in a little house in the woods by himself. He was a miserly sort of creature and vowed that he would never leave a bit of his goods to anyone on earth after he passed away. One day he was taken dreadfully ill and was sure he was about to die. Gathering his belongings he set fire to the building and perished in the flames.

It is interesting to know that when the white men bought land from the Indians in this section they were allowed all the property which they could cut a path around from dawn to sunset for a small trinket. This path must be wide enough for a person to walk through. One farm bought in this way was the Roger Homestead Land on Middletown Turnpike. On this place were born five generations and a member of the last family still lives on the property. This is the only place in Northford which has remained in the family of the descendants of those who first bought the property from the Indians.

CHILD MURDERED

The one sad tale of the village is the gruesome murder of little Emily Cooper. This little girl lived with her grandma and her uncle Leander on Foote Hill. The last day of the summer school in August, 1849 she started over the hill to school,

carrying a little lunch box and a bouquet of flowers for her teacher. The Summer insects chirped gaily in the grasses by the road and the tiny yellow canaries and broken sparrows sang joyfully in the tree tops. She was very happy this morning and as she skipped along she sang a song in keeping with the birds. Her grandmother sat on the porch and watched the little one on her way. When Emily reached the top of the hill she turned and waved her hand to her grandmother and then ran out of sight.

She had gone but a short distance when she met her uncle. He was an ugly looking creature but had always been kind to his little niece so when he told her about a pretty rare flower and that he would show her where it grew, she followed him fearlessly into the woods. Here he murdered her. Later returning to his home he tried to murder his mother. Her cries for help attracted a group of men who were building a stone wall about the old Northford Cemetery. They gave aid to the woman but she died in a few hours from her injuries. When it was discovered that Emily had not arrived at school that morning a search was made for her and they found her in the woods, still holding in one hand her little lunch box and in the other her bouquet of flowers. Several hours later the man was found.

He had tried to commit suicide and was suffering from loss of blood. However he recovered and was kept for a year in New Haven jail, later being hung for murder. During his days of confinement he repented of his sins. He was buried among the slaves in Potter's Field of the old Northford Cemetery and a white marble slab with the following epitaph marks his resting place: "This is a faithful notice worthy of all exception. Christ Jesus came into this world to save sinners of whom I am chief."

FAMOUS BLIZZARD

The noted Connecticut Blizzard of 1888 was kind to the village of Northford and although the residents were snowed in for several days and all activities in the village were obliged to cease, no great damage was done no one died in the storm.

Northford also escaped a visit from the deadly tornado of August 1878 although they felt the effects of the great gale to some extent. However during the storm it is reported to local authorities that fish were blown from Community Lake into the water of Paug Pond, a distance of several miles.

Many changes have come to the village since the first whiteman built his home in this region and the Indians roamed the valley. Modernity has captured the town and the district has accepted the improvements and changes of the times in a most gracious manner. However the setting of the village is unchanged and most of the first dwellings of the town still stand in their original home lots, erect and sturdy, silent witnesses of the generations who have steadily passed their doors and monuments of those who once lived here and made the valley an outstanding community in Connecticut.