

The Totoket Historical Society, Inc.

A Short History of North Branford and Northford

By

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For

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NORTH BRANFORD - IN THE BEGINNING

North Branford was, like most New England towns, formed around the church. Everyone has heard the story of the Pilgrims who founded the first town, setting an example for further settlement. The formation of North Branford is the second chapter in that story.

North Branford was originally part of the town of Branford. When Branford was settled in 1644 by a group of 40 men and their families from Wethersfield, the northern area of Totoket was wilderness. It remained that way until 1679, when there was need for more land because "many of the inhabitants have now children fit and able to look abroad for their livings: and their parents are yet destitute of lands convenient to settle them upon," and the third division took place. It wasn't necessary to divide all the unclaimed land so only the area in the southern portion of what would become North Branford was laid out. It was divided into farm lots, cow pastures, plowing land and common land. On January 5, 1680, the lots were drawn and those who drew farm lots received "one acre in quantity for every twenty shillings estate" each man had. The farm land to be laid out was to begin "by lot next to the school land by Guilford way (the school land was near School Ground Road) at Pine Brook bridge & so to go on with all plantable lands round to the westward ... to Stony River (Farm River) where the lots shall again begin at New Haven line & so go up that river until each man has due proportion of land suitable

both for plowing and mowing."

It was several years before this area was settled. The land would have to be surveyed before a farmer would consider settling there. A man wouldn't want to spend his time and effort clearing land that belonged to some one else. Also, in early Branford or any New England town, the people built their homes in the town center and their fields were located in the outlying area close enough to work every day. At first this arrangement was necessary for protection from the Indians but it also was convenient for social purposes, for church and town meetings as well as proximity to stores and seaports. The church was most important in the lives of people; the town fathers liked to keep a watch on the activities of their fellow townspeople. The farm lands in the third division were located too far away to have a house in the town center and travel to work the fields. The idea of living away from families and friends delayed settlement. Secondly, Branford at this time did not have a permanent minister and with the importance of the church in the lives of the people, this inhibited growth.

Some attempts were made to settle the northern lands. In 1687, one square mile of land in the northwestern corner of Totoket was granted to seven young men with the stipulation that they "do build each man a tenantable house upon the land or improve it within 3 years from the date hereof and if all or any of them fail so to do he or they shall forfeit their proportion which shall return to the town againe." These requirements probably were not fulfilled as there is no record of settlement. That same year, the Rev. Samuel Russell was called to serve as pastor and under his leadership the town began to

prosper. It was now time to settle the northern lands.

In 1692 the lands were surveyed and the young men, sons and grandsons of the first Branford settlers began to clear their land. At first, they would work during the summer months, living in temporary shelters and returning to their homes on the Sabbath for the Sunday meeting, then spending the winter months in town. This arrangement didn't last long and soon they would build permanent homes.

Tradition tells us that Jonathan Rose was the first settler in what would become North Branford. He built his house in Hop Yard Plain just about where Valley Road meets Rt. 139 today in 1698. Other settlers quickly followed suit, building houses on their farm lots near the two ponds (Linsley and Cedar Lakes), on Bare Plain and up near Sibbie's Hill (North street). Old trails were widened to make roads and soon more land was needed. In 1704 the fourth division took place. These lots covered the area of what is now Northford, and settlement along the Farm River occurred.

It was not long before the northern farmers began to think of themselves as a separate community. It was difficult to make the trip to the town center to attend worship services on the Sabbath, especially during the winter. The town agreed to let the northern settlers hire winter preaching, but this arrangement lasted only one winter as they found it difficult to pay a minister and also pay their share of Branford's tax. Requests for the town to pay for winter preaching were turned down, so in 1717, 28 men signed a petition asking to form an ecclesiastical society so they could build their own church and hire a minister. This was a serious step. The General

Assembly required that there be at least 40 or 50 families with a total estate value £4000. The ecclesiastical society, like its English counterpart, the parish, had several secular responsibilities. It levied taxes and supervised the building and maintenance of schools as well as hiring and paying the minister. Branford said it would agree providing certain boundaries were drawn. The North Farmers disagreed with those boundaries as several of the petitioner's farms were not included, so a petition asking "to be a Distinct Society for maintaining the worship of God" was sent to the General Court in Hartford. A committee appointed by the Court reported in October 1717, that there was such a small number of farmers with total estates valued at £1556, they wouldn't be able to support a ministry. The committee recommended that the North Farmers have winter preaching for the next three years with a reduction of their taxes, and then they could apply to the Court again.

After three years, the intrepid North Farmers informed the town fathers that they wanted to be a separate Parish. The town did not respond favorably until 1722 when they agreed that "the town be helpful in purchasing of a ministers Lot & building of a meeting house & ministers House". Again, dispute over the boundaries arose and the North Farmers drew up a petition to submit to the General Assembly in 1724. Before the petition was sent, however, the town leaders offered at a meeting on May 12th, to "build another meeting house Jointly & Settle another minister & maintain Each of them by one Rate."

Immediately a site for the meeting house was chosen, "the place near Samuel Harrison's on ye knoll on the west side of the river between the pathes," the site of the present North Branford

congregational Church. At a meeting held on June 23, 1724, the dimensions of the meeting house were decided on. It would be 45 feet by 35 feet. A committee of five men, Isaac Foote, Lieutenant Rose, John Harrison, Daniel Barker and Josiah Rogers, were chosen to oversee its building. Work started immediately, the timber was purchased for £150 and the frame was erected. The Reverend Samuel Russell went up to offer a prayer at its erection when an unfortunate accident occurred. One of the heavy upright beams fell from its position into the midst of the people, but Providence was watching and no one was hurt.

Cooperation between the two communities was shortlived because the town did not reimburse the building committee for the timbers. It seemed that the residents in southern Branford had changed their minds about paying for a meeting house for the northern farmers, so they revoked and recalled the power given to the building committee to oversee the matter and forbade them to proceed. Thus, the committeemen had no alternative but to take the matter to the Court.

The General Court appointed a committee to investigate the matter and two recommendations were made. One, that Branford "Levy a Rate upon the Inhabitants of sd. Town in General amounting to the Sume of one hundred and fifty pounds Current mony to be Improved for the Defraying of the Charg allredy expended by the erecting of A begun New meeting House in the Northerly part of sd. Town." Secondly, the committee recommended that the town of Branford should be divided into two parishes. The Assembly approved both these recommendations and named the boundaries of the new Society. The Second and North Society of Branford was formed, and North Branford had its beginning.

The Third Society of Branford - Northford

The town of North Branford today, consists of two separate communities, each with its own center, churches, post office and library. The reason for this lies in the early history of the town's development. In a previous article published in the Citizen, you read how The Second Society of Branford was established in 1724 and a meeting house was built to serve as a focal point for all the activities of the community. It wasn't long before there would be a Third Society in the northermost part of Branford, the area then called Paug.

In October of 1727, the Rev. Jonathan Merrick accepted the call to serve as the minister to the Second Society of Branford and the church was organized. With a new meeting house and a minister, more settlers were attracted to North Farms and by 1731 most of the area was settled as far north as the Wallingford and Durham lines.

It was a long trip for those settlers in the northernmost area of Paug to attend Sunday Meeting. This journey, which takes less than 15 minutes by car today, was a different story 250 years ago. Besides the difference in the mode of transportation, the geography of the town has to be considered; Great Hill or Totoket Mountain divided the north from the south just as it does now. In 1734, the farmers of Paug

requested the privilege of winter preaching. The General Assembly granted the request and allowed the petitioners a reduction on their portion of the minister's rate.

In 1743, they requested the right to establish their own Society. This request was rejected; members of the Second Society objected to the loss of members and revenue, and there was doubt that there were enough families to support a separate Society. The Paug farmers had the solution. In May, a group of forty-one men submitted a petition to the General Assembly asking permission to establish a new Society in Branford because the location of their homes was "verry Remoate from the place of publick worship" and they were not able "in a Steadie way to attend the worship of God." The new Society would include "a part of the Second parrish Of Branford, a part of the first parrish in Walingford, and a Small part of the third parish in Guilford."

This was not well-recieved by the three parishes mentioned. A letter from the inhabitants of north Guilford protested that it was "hard and unreasonable that any part of so small and poor a Society should be taken off and set to another which is now or in a little time likly to be biger than we are no more at present." Further investigation by the appointed committee showed the townspeople of Wallingford were also "Vehemently Opposed", and the leaders of the Second Society continued to make their arguments known, so no action was taken. That idea had to be abandoned.

On March 2, 1744, a meeting was held at the home of Samuel Bartholomew and it was voted to "petition for the Bounds of a sositaty in Branford." This was presented to the General Assembly in May, and

a. committee was chosen to investigate the matter. A detailed report was submitted in October. The committee had found that there were fifty families living in the northern section of Branford with an estate value of £2807, and the community had "Two publick plots... designed for the Use of a Parish, when there shall be one there; One containing 100 Acres for a Parsonage; the other 40 Acres for a School." It recommended that parish priviledges be granted and set up the boundaries for the proposed Society.

This created much dissension among the people of the proposed Society. One group of 14 men led by Samuel Barnes objected to being included in the bounds because they were close enough to attend services at the meetinghouse and had even built "Sabbath-day houses" near it. (A sabbath-day house was a small one room house where a family would gather between services on a Sunday to rest and warm up, and have a meal. At that time, Sunday meeting lasted all day, with a two or three hour service in the morning and another in the afternoon.) A second group of 14 men led by Timothy Hoadly wanted to join with the southeast inhabitants of Wallingford to create a "larger and more able Society." The Wallingford people were interested in joining with their Branford neighbors, but only if the meetinghouse would be located "at the Line betwene Branford and Wallonford at a plase Called Cooks hill." This location was too far north to please the Branford people. And furthermore the men of the Second Society still objected to "the North part of the Parrish being a distinct Society." With all these conflicts, it was no wonder that the General Assembly denied the petition.

By the following May, the northern inhabitants had resolved some

of their differences. The Hoadley group decided that they could support
Society without the aid of the Wallingford people, but the Barnes
group still objected to being included in the proposed Third Society.
Taking into consideration the increased support, (and probably
exasperated with the whole matter) the General Assembly voted in May
1745 that the northern residents of Branford be granted the Privilege
"to become a Distinct Ecclesiastical Society with full power to form
themselves into a body in Church Estate and with all the other powers
and privileges with other Parrishes within this Colony have." The
boundaries were to be those proposed in 1744, as follows:

"North by Wallingford, West by New Haven [now North Haven], south by
the North Side of Hezakiah Rogers his land [at the south line of
Totoket Park], to the Road, [Forest Road] and then to Jacob Carter's
South line, so far as that goes, from thence by the Ridge of the Hill
[Totoket Mountain] ... to the Brow of the Hill to an Highway, thence
Southerly by sd Highway to the Head of Widow Hoadley's Farm, thence
Easterly to the Guilford Line, and so running with the Guilford Line to
Wallingford Line."

Thus, the Third Society of Branford was established and named
Salem.

The history of Northford and how the meeting house was built will be
continued in the next issue of the Citizen.

Written by Janet S. Gregan. This article is based on manuscripts in
the files of the Totoket Historical Society, Inc. especially "The
History of Northern Branford" by Sharman Mabry Tait; and the book,

"The History of North Branford and Northford" by Herbert C. Miller,
M.D.

THE THIRD SOCIETY - NORTHFORD. Part 2

One month after Salem, as the new Third Society of Branford was called, was established, twenty-seven of the inhabitants extended an invitation to the people in southeastern Wallingford to join them. Nine families led by Aaron Cook responded and in October, sent a petition to the General Assembly requesting membership in the new Society, stating that the "Wallingford first Parrish was large, rich and very well able to spare" them.

The southern residents of Salem opposed this. It would mean that the meetinghouse would be built even further away and "the Remedy be worse than the Disease." They would rather be re-annexed to the Second Society. The General Assembly agreed and the petition was denied. By April of 1746, these differences had been resolved and a new petition was submitted stating "the Matters heretofore Alledged as Impediments in our Way are removed and the Inhabitants of the New Erected Society have manifested a Willingness to have us included." As there was no objection at this time, the petition was granted and "the Memorialists and Estates be sett off and annexed to said Ecclesiastical Society in Northern part of Branford," thus enlarging the boundaries of the town.

There was still disagreement about where to build the

meetinghouse and the members of the Third Society sought the aid of the General Assembly to determine the location. A committee was appointed to investigate the matter and presented their report in October of 1746, recommending that the meetinghouse be located "about Twenty Rods Northward of Mr. Samuel Bartholomew's in sd. Society, on the westward side of the Path in the Highway, the Sills of the Meeting House to inclose a Walnut Straddle there standing, with a heap of stones about it, and marked."

The meetinghouse was built soon after, a few feet south of the present day Northford Congregational Church, its location determining the center of the community. In 1750, the church was organized and the Rev. Warham Williams accepted the call to be pastor.

That same year, the name of the Third Society of Branford was changed to Northford probably because there was another Salem in the Connecticut colony. There are two explanations for why the name of Northford was selected. One is that the Meeting House and the village center were located north of the ford in the Farm River (where the river crosses Forest Road); and the other is that Northford is a contraction of north North Branford.

Thus, the two communities, the Second and North Society of Branford, eventually called North Branford, and the Third Society, Northford, each developed their own center. Eighty-one years later, they would join to be incorporated as a town, North Branford.

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