

Celebration To Mark Colchester's 275th Anniversary

By ODETT BENTLEY
COLCHESTER — The Connecticut Colony General Court at Hartford granted permission for settlement of a new "plantation," later named Colchester Oct. 13, 1698, in the old Mohegan hunting grounds.

The court confirmed the boundaries of the new town the following May and the proprietors purchased the land from the Mohegans. Nathaniel Foote of Wethersfield acted as their agent.

The boundaries remain essentially the same as they were set up 275 years ago, except that the southern end of Colchester extended as far as what is now Music Vale Road in Salem and the northern boundary took in part of Marlborough to the Four Corners.

This land purchase led to one of the longest and most costly law suits in Connecticut's history. The Indians claimed that Oueneco, son of Uncus, the chief, had set up claims to the vast territory known as the Mohegan Hunting Grounds, had been filled with rum and cheated out of the land with a payment of only five or six shillings.

Connecticut appealed, but a review commission granted in 1706 was never used. Interest in the controversy dwindled.

Then a General Court committee in 1721 assigned the hunting grounds to Colchester. The decision was ratified by the Connecticut government. Thus matters stood for 30 years.

In early Colchester, division of land was done by lot, which among the settlers was construed as leaving the judgment to God, doubtless relieving the town fathers of much embarrassment.

Land grants were almost always made with the condition that "he come and settle among us with all convenient speed." If a man given an allotment of land failed to move to Colchester, his allotment was withdrawn and given to someone else.

Although the General Assembly considered its title to the lands concerned "legal beyond a doubt," it wished to avoid trouble with the Indians. A committee was appointed to obtain a quit claim upon reasonable terms.

The effort failed and a complaint was made to England against the colony for extortion from the natives. A commission was appointed to look into the matter. The court decreed that the Colchester land should be returned to the Indians in August 1705.

Then, in January 1742, the king authorized a court to settle the controversy between the Colony of Connecticut and the Mohegan Indians.

It decreed that the Indians had been given enough land on which to live between Norwich and New London and that land granted to the plantations had been purchased legally by the proprietors.

The Indians again appealed to the crown and the case was finally tried and settled in England. The decision, announced in Hartford in February 1767, was in favor of the colony.

Special efforts were made to attract men of especially valuable occupations: The tanner, the saw or grist mill operator or the blacksmith.

The first town street probably was what is now Old Hebron Road and Broadway, with an extension down South Main Street.

Most of the earliest home lots seem to have centered in this area and the first meeting house was on Old Hebron Road. The settlement first was attached to the New London County, until 1708, when it was made part of Hartford County. In 1704, it became a permanent

Celebration Of Anniversary

Continued from Preceding Page

hired in 1707 "to keep school for two or three months," and the school house was completed in 1711. By 1716, a new school house was erected where Old Bacon Academy now stands, and a year later, the town had grown enough to warrant two more new schools.

Residents were granted "the liberty to embody themselves into church estate" by the General Court in 1703. The Rev. John Bulkeley, an original town proprietor, was the pastor.

A new meeting house was finished in 1715 in the general area of the Colchester Federated Church, the last of four buildings to house its congregation. The meeting house and a church built in 1771 were torn down.

Two distinct parishes were set off from the original society during the pastorate of Rev. Bulkeley who died June 10, 1731.

The "southerly farmers" (Salem) organized the New Salem Society in 1727.

Residents of the western portion of the town also petitioned the General Court to be made a distinct society in 1728. Permission was granted for the third society, known as the West Society of Colchester, later shortened to Westchester.

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1824: Forming of the Borough

COLCHESTER — From the beginning community life centered around the First Society meeting house. Which also became the center of commerce, surrounded on all sides by prosperous farms.

Under the leadership of Dr. John R. Watrous it was decided to form the Borough of Colchester an independent political entity within the town. Watrous was the first warden.

The borough was incorporated in 1824 because the needs of town residents and merchants

differed from those of the farmers who did not live close to each other.

Created by the General Assembly, the borough which is still in existence, is governed by a Board of Warden and Burgesses, which is empowered to make laws.

The early borough government was concerned with the regulation of "markets and nuisances within the borough."

It had the power to levy taxes (borough residents pay taxes to the town as well) and to lay out

new highways, streets and public walks.

History shows little village improvement during the borough's 25 years, although several unsuccessful attempts were made to get control and lay out Center Green as it is today.

By 1830, Colchester's fame as an educational center diminished because other academies sprung up in other sections of the state and nation.

The number of tuition pupils lessened and the academy's efficiency declined.

Colchester was in a slump. But not for long.

Company Founded

Nathaniel Hayward founded the Hayward Rubber Co. here in 1847. Untold prosperity followed.

Until then, there had been only small industries, besides the early grist and saw mills.

Hayward, a young livery stable owner in Boston, became interested in the manufacture of Indian Rubber in 1834 when he saw President Andrew Jackson wearing a suit of waterproof clothes given by a manufacturer of rubber-coated cloth.

Hayward, with his partner, Henry Burr, had opened a rubber shoe factory in Lisbon, Conn. in 1844. It was so successful that they were soon looking around for a place to expand.

Burr was married to a daughter of the prominent Isham family of Colchester. Mrs. Burr wanted to return to her native town.

Economics played no part in the selecting Colchester for the new plant site. The choice was based on a woman's whim.

At that time, Colchester had no transportation facilities whatever. It was about 20 miles from any water way. Railroads were in their infancy. The cost of trucking over these 20 miles of country roads would add substantially to the cost of the finished product.

Firm Thrived

Nevertheless, the firm thrived. From a capital investment of \$100,000, it grew, through capitalization of profits, to \$500,000 and an annual output of \$2 million. The payroll was some \$300,000 or more yearly.

Early in the company's history, it became necessary to import workers and a tremendous influx of Irish immigrants resulted. A Roman Catholic church became a necessity.

Although the population of the town increased by about 1,000, Colchester remained an independent community and lived mostly on the products of its soil.

All kinds of religious, social, cultural, musical, educational, athletic and recreational activities flourished.

Hayward was never the traditional paternalistic mill owner, but he played, on a minor scale, the role of the 19th-century philanthropist.

From 1852 to 1879, the office of borough warden was held by key men in the rubber mill, beginning with Hayward himself. There is no evidence of undue influence on local politics, however.

The Civil War found the company in a splendid position to reap the benefits of government contracts. Gov. William A. Buckingham, also served as the firm's secretary-treasurer, a situation which apparently was not considered a conflict of interest at the time.

Colchester sent 205 soldiers to the front besides contributing a considerable number to the quota of adjoining towns.

Moving Force

The rubber company undoubtedly was the moving force behind the incorporation of the Colchester Railway Co. in 1876. William H. Hayward, Nathaniel's son, was its first president.

To take care of the large volume of business being transacted in town, the Colchester Savings Bank was formed in 1874. It prospered during the life of the rubber plant, its deposits reaching a total of \$300,000.

The high price of rubber and unfair trading practices began to plague the local firm which had to shut down for periods of time during the 1880s.

The rubber plant closed its doors as usual in 1893, ostensibly for the Christmas holidays, never to open again. The U.S. Rubber Co. bought the mill outright and transferred elsewhere.

A local newspaper wrote, "The borough of Colchester is dead, killed by the rubber trust, and the town from which it takes its name is dying by inches from the gangrene of the fatal wound inflicted upon it by the same ruthless monster..."

Modern historian Barbara Brown writes, "Thus the public, with its innate dislike and distrust of big business, blamed the totally innocent 'rubber trust,' little realizing that the end would have come anyway. In its weakened financial condition, the company would never have survived the panic of 1893, one of the worst business crises of American economic history."

"Colchester having risen to dizzy heights, was due for a fall, and the fall was a hard one. Then and ever since, it has had to pay the price for a moment of glory which was based on poor economic planning."

Exodus

"The Hayward Rubber Co. lasted as long as it did because it got in on the ground floor of a booming pioneer industry, but in the competitive world of the 20th-century business, it was doomed to failure," she concludes.

An exodus of the rubber workers came after the closing of the mill. The 1900 U.S. census shows a population drop of about 1,000.

A leather shoe factory, established to take the place of the rubber mill, soon failed. Then the canning factory, the creamery and the bank wound up their affairs and became ancient history.

The 200th anniversary of the founding of the town saw Colchester at its lowest ebb.

In 1908, the entire plant of the Hayward Rubber Co. on Mill Street, was burned to the ground by a fire of mysterious origin.

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Colchester's 275th Anniversary

Celebration Calendar

July 26

Celebration eve kickoff, balloon fair, Tri-Towne Shopping Plaza, 7 p.m.

July 27

Period costumes fashion show, Colchester Federated Church, 8 p.m.

Square dancing, Bacon Academy gym, 8 p.m.

July 28

Doll carriage and tricycle parade, Center Green, 10 a.m.

Track and field day, Bacon Academy field, noon.

Heritage Ball with Bobby Kaye and his orchestra, main tent on Center Green, 9 p.m.

Auction of first 10 Historical Society commemorative coins minted, during ball, 10 p.m.

July 29

Pancake breakfast, main tent on Green, 7 a.m.

Anniversary road race, Center Green, 2 p.m.

Moodus Drum and Fife

Corps, Center Green, 3 p.m.

Country and Western Night with Frankie Knick and His Country Knights, main tent on Green, 7 p.m.

July 30

Baseball Game, Sam Slavkin Field, Old Hebron Road, 6 p.m.

July 31

Game Night — continuous bingo, main tent on Green, 8 p.m.

Aug. 1

Baseball game, Central School, 6 p.m.

Ecumenical services, main tent on Green, 7 p.m.

Open talent night, main tent on Green, 8:30 p.m.

Aug. 2:

Hub Ford Open, Chantclair Gold Course, 6 a.m.

State lottery drawing, main tent on Green, 10 a.m.

"The Happening" with music by the Flat Rocks, main tent on Green, 8 p.m.

Aug 3

Hub Ford Open, Chanti-

clair Gold Course, 6 a.m.

Beerfest, main tent, 4 p.m.

Nathan Hale Ancient Fifes and Drums, Center Green, 7:30 p.m.

Aug. 4

Hub Ford Open, Chantclair Golf Course, 6 a.m.

Auction, Center Green, 10 a.m.

Parade, Center Green, 2 p.m.; followed by "19th Century" balloon ascension on the green.

Chicken barbecue, Federated Church, 4 p.m.

Beerfest, main tent, on green, 4 p.m.

Aug 5

Hub Ford Open, Chantclair Golf Course, 6 a.m.

Babe Ruth League raffle, main tent, on green, 2 p.m.

Beard contest, main tent, on green, 3 p.m.

Beerfest, main tent, on green, 4 p.m.

Hub Ford Open Awards, main tent on Green, 9:30 p.m.

CONNECTICUT

A Party 300 Years In The Making

By **TRACY GORDON FOX**
Courant Staff Writer

COLCHESTER — The biggest bash in the town's 300-year history culminated over the weekend with a gala ball, a mammoth parade and an immense fireworks display that lit up the rural night sky.

In the 300 years since Colchester was incorporated, it has been home to immigrants who worked on farms, in industry and resorts. During the past six months, that rich history has been relived through tours of historic buildings and sites, a Civil War re-enactment and a colonial fashion show.

This weekend, the town came together to party, enjoying the kind of celebration that only comes around every few centuries.

"It was just magnificent. The streets were lined with people. It chokes you up," said First Selectwoman Jenny Contois, who wore a multicolored colonial dress and a Victorian straw hat, as she rode in the parade on a white Victorian horse and carriage used in the filming of the movie "Amistad."

Along with state Attorney General Richard Blumenthal and other political dignitaries, a family from Colchester, England, joined the festivities.

Greg and Jane McCausland had visited Colchester several times before, and decided to come back for the 300th anniversary. They made their formal debut at the ball, after attending some local cocktail parties, and were given a hardcover book that details the town's 300 years.

Colchester is 10 times larger than its sister city in Connecticut, but the McCauslands have come to feel at home here.

"I think it's brilliant," Jane McCausland said of the town. "This part of the state is so nice."

They watched as marching bands, color guards, firetrucks, bagpipe groups and 25 floats marched down the 2-mile parade route, celebrating history.

Among the floats were a towering, three-tiered birthday cake, replicas of historical buildings and churches, and one called "How Times Have Changed." This float carried an outhouse and a spinning wheel on one side, with an exercise bicycle and a computer terminal on the other.

"Such a change. When I was a kid, we didn't have electricity," said Catherine Korostek, who has lived in Colchester all her 77 years and watched from the town green as the parade wound along South Main Street.

Lauren Chmielecki, who marched in the town's high school band with her twin sister, Kelly, felt the historical significance of the day.

Please see **COLCHESTER**, Page A4

Colchester Celebrates Its 300th Birthday

Continued from Page A3

"It hit me watching all the people dressed up in old costumes," she said.

"It was like the whole town was there," said Kelly. "It was the only time in our lifetime we're ever going to have this parade. Not everyone has a tricentennial."

The weekend's festivities began Saturday night, when the gymnasium of Bacon Academy, the town's high school, was transformed into an elegant ballroom, complete with a bell-shaped chandelier made of tiny lights hanging from the ceiling.

The bleachers in the gym were concealed by white curtains and the lights were dimmed, except for the flashing lights on the ballroom dance floor, where guests, young and old, moved to a live band.

Tables were adorned with bouquets of white roses, and each guest received a blue and silver box of chocolates. Most guests arrived in elegant ball gowns or tuxedos; others dressed in colonial-era clothing, wearing mop hats and even George Washington-style wigs.

The party ended Sunday night at the town's parks and recreation field, with a 30-minute fireworks display that included a dazzling 10-minute finale. About 15,000 people turned out to say happy birthday to Colchester.

TOWN NEWS

4th S

4+5
THURSDAY
JULY 2, 1998
SECTION

B

History Lives In Tended Cemeteries

By MARK SPENCER
Courant Correspondent

COLCHESTER — At 81 years old, Israel Liverant has a ready answer for those who ask if he's lived in town all his life.

"Not yet."

The answer is appropriate for a man who has an abiding interest in Colchester's history and the people who lived — and died

— here. As the town celebrates its 300th anniversary, interest is growing in some of the most visible reminders of those who have gone before: Colchester's historic

cemeteries.

Liverant, who became the first president of the local historical society 40 years ago, said preserving the cemeteries and learning about them is important.

"If you disregard your past, you don't have much future," he said.

COLCHESTER'S

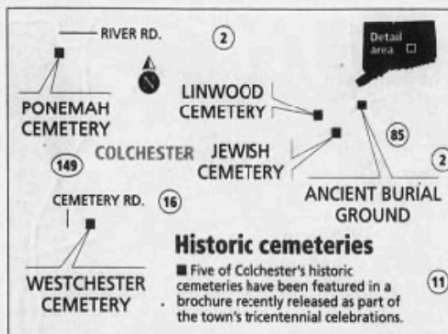


COLCHESTER

"It's important to remember the 'then' people. Those were the people who built what we now enjoy."

Those people may have been prominent or wealthy with names still remembered today, such as Pierpont Bacon, who was one of the town's founders and donated money for the original Bacon Academy. He is buried in the Ancient Burial Grounds, located next to the Colchester Federated Church, across from the town green.

But they also may have been



The Hartford Courant

people with little or no social standing at the time whose names were soon forgotten despite what they did for the town, such as slaves who labored to build the

prestigious Bacon Academy.

Many of them also were buried at the Ancient Burial Grounds, which dates back to the early 1700s. The graves of about 70 such

individuals — slaves, Indians and poor whites — were discovered in the cemetery in 1996 by local historian Abraham Abdul Haqq.

Haqq, working with a group of middle school children, found the simply marked graves under inches of dirt and grass, victims of neglect and erosion on the hillside cemetery.

The Rev. Erica Wimberly, pastor of the Colchester Federated Church, said it is valuable to remember the role played by all of Colchester's ancestors.

"In a very concrete way, it keeps us honest about who we are as a community, what mistakes we've made and what we've done well," she said. "It's only from that honesty that truly significant change can be made."

Concern for local historic cemeteries got a boost in the early 1990s, when a relative of John Bulkeley,

Please see HISTORY, Page B5

Schedule of events

■ Colchester will be celebrating its tricentennial with a series of events that concludes with a grand ball, parade and fireworks on the weekend of Oct. 10 and 11. Here is a list of upcoming events:

Sunday, July 5: There will be a family day on the town green from noon to 8 p.m., during which old-fashioned games will be played, including baseball and croquet. There will also be a doll carriage/tricycle parade and two concerts.

Saturday, July 25: The Historical Society Craft Show and Muster takes place on the town green. There is a \$2 admission to the craft show; the muster is free.

Saturday, Aug. 8: There will be a history tour from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., followed by a Founder's Day ceremony at 2:30 p.m. at the Ancient Burial Grounds. A dinner and dance for Bacon Academy alumni is scheduled at 5 p.m. at the Ramada Inn in Norwich. Tickets are \$30.

Sunday, Aug. 9: A Fun Road Race will start at 2 p.m., from the old Bacon Academy to the new Bacon Academy. Prior to the race, there will be an art exhibit at 11 a.m. on the town green, with artwork by Colchester students. A concert on the town green follows at 6 p.m.

Sunday, Aug. 23: Colchester celebrates its heritage at 6 p.m. on the town green. The festival includes music, a brief historical narrative, dances and skits. The rain location is the new Bacon Academy.

Sunday, Aug. 30: The Roberts Brothers Circus will perform from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. at the recreation complex. Advance tickets are \$6 for adults, \$4 for children. At the gate, tickets will cost \$8 for adults and \$5 for children.

Sunday, Sept. 13: A vintage fashion show and luncheon is scheduled at the St. Andrew's Church on Norwich Avenue. Models will range from children to senior citizens and will wear clothing from colonial times to present. The luncheon costs \$6 per person, and reservations are required. Call 537-3911.

Saturday, Oct. 10: A grand ball will be held in the gym of the new Bacon Academy. Guests may wear clothing from the colonial era or modern times. Dinner will be served and there will be a live band. The price will be announced.

Sunday, Oct. 11: A tricentennial parade will be held at 1 p.m., featuring fife and drum corps, marching bands, bagpipe bands, horse and carriages and antique cars. After the parade, there will be a farm market/country store on the town green and demonstrations by the Mohegan Indians.

At dusk, a fireworks show will take place at the parks and recreation field off Hebron Avenue. The rain date is Oct. 12.

History

Continued from Page B1

the town's first minister, visited the Ancient Burial Grounds and was dismayed at its condition. The cemetery had become overgrown with knee-high grass, poison ivy and fallen branches.

A letter from Peter Bulkeley to the local paper and his \$5,000 contribution prompted a renovation project. The Colchester Historical Society, local businesses and individuals also donated money to clean the cemetery, replace the weed-covered chain-link fence with a stone post and wooden-rail fence and purchase a wrought-iron gate, which will be dedicated in August.

"The town got to work and rolled up its sleeves," Liverant said. "It's beautiful now."

The town also formed a cemetery tours committee, which recently released a brochure containing maps and information about the Ancient Burial Grounds and Linwood, Westchester, Ponemah and the Jewish cemeteries. Volunteers with the group conducted tours and did gravestone rubbings in May.

Sylvina von Plachecki said additional tours may be scheduled if there is enough interest. The brochure is available in the town clerk's office at town hall, 127 Norwich Ave.

The brochure includes the history of the cemeteries and a short glossary of the meaning of various images than can be found on gravestones.