

COVENTRY, Connecticut

By Stephanie Summers

Some 20 miles east of Hartford lies Coventry, a place Native Americans called Wangumbaug, meaning “crooked pond,” after the shape of the then-300-acre lake within its bounds. The town is probably best known as the birthplace of America’s young Revolutionary War hero Nathan Hale, who when captured as a spy against the British and facing the gallows said, “I regret that I have but one life to lose for my country.”

But its claims to history are much more varied. From the Civil War to the onset of the Great Depression, its strategic waterways fed one of the highest concentrations of mills in New England, with, at the peak, 16 plants built along the Mill Brook. To this day, South Coventry Village retains its authenticity, interrupted by two small, modern-day commercial retail buildings.

Used primarily by the Mohegans as a hunting ground with no signs of settlement, the land was given in a will to a group of white settlers in 1675 by Joshua, third son of the sachem Uncas. Sixteen white families, mostly from Hartford and Northampton, Mass., settled the area in 1709. It was named for Coventry, England, in 1711 and incorporated a year later. A church and grist mill were established in short order.

In 2010 the U.S. Census estimated Coventry’s population at 12,428 in an area of 38.4 square miles within Tolland County. During the Revolution, the town was of a considerable size, with 2,032 white and 24 black residents.

The town divided itself into two societies of sorts, connected to the two early churches. The North Parish farmers called themselves the “woods” people and maintained ties to the Second Congregational Church and life along the Boston Turnpike, now Route 44. Their work and education was connected to Manchester and Rockville. The southern residents called themselves the “village” people and were oriented to the First Congregational Church, the railroad depots, the lower Windham Turnpike and the lake. Their occupational and educational orientation was to Willimantic.

The people of Coventry were dairy and vegetable farmers, preachers, early scholars of Yale and Harvard, doctors, legislators, judges, mill workers, shopkeepers and patent holders.

Early Years

The first orders of business in the new town were education and the soul. Settlers voted in 1728 to build the first school near the meetinghouse. Joseph Meacham (1686-1752) was selected as the first pastor of the First Congregational Church. He stayed for 40 years. His wife, Esther Williams of Deerfield, Mass., was captured at age 12 in a raid on that settlement and lived with her Native American captors for two years.

In 1811, there were only 29 church members, eight of them women. But a series of revivals under the Rev. Chauncy Booth (1783-1851) soon added close to 300 members. The First Church society suffered a split in 1848 but reunited in 1866.

The North Coventry Parish was incorporated in 1740, but a site dispute delayed finishing the church. It was erected in 1847 on the North Village green.

Coventry was the birthplace of Lorenzo Dow (1777-1834), the famous revivalist preacher who traveled through this country and England and Ireland. Dubbed “Crazy

Dow” for his methods of luring crowds to his camp meetings, he was arguably the best traveled and most widely known man of his time in America.

Evenso, a Methodist church was not established in town until 1822. Baptismal candidates were immersed in the lake. Church members met in the schoolhouse until public opposition forced them out. They met in a house and an old store until interest waned. A church was not built until 1867.

Harlan Page (1791-1834) organized the first Sunday school in Coventry and persuaded many in his travels to convert to the Baptist faith.

Catholic families worshipped in homes and then in the Methodist Church until they built St. Mary’s Catholic Church in 1877 on School Street. It was destroyed by fire in 1993 and later rebuilt on Main Street.

The first birth recorded in town records was Hannah, daughter of Thomas Davis, born in 1706. The first recorded death was that of Margaret Rust, daughter of Nathaniel Rust, in 1718.

Early leaders included Jesse Root (1736-1822), who was a delegate to the Continental Congress, 1778-1783, chief justice of Connecticut, 1796-1807, a member of the Hartford County Bar and who, in 1818, opened the Constitutional Convention.

Craftsmen included John Potwine, silversmith, Joseph Badger, miniaturist-portraitist, and Daniel Burnap (1759-1838), clockmaker credited with creating among the best of the period’s eight-day clocks, the “glimpse” flash mechanism for the Point Judith light in Rhode Island and the tower clock in the South Hadley, Mass., meeting house. He taught noted apprentice Eli Terry, shelf clock manufacturer.

Coventry Village

Unlike most New England mill towns, dominated by either one manufacturer or one kind of product, there was no industrial kingpin in Coventry and the plants produced paper, wool, silk, cotton, woolen hats, glass flasks, inkwells, cartridges, windmills, wagons, fishing line, cider, cardboard boxes and many other products.

Of crucial advantage were the three rivers and numerous streams and brooks that flow through town and could feed water-powered enterprises. Most mills sprung up along the 2½-mile-long Mill Brook, which started from a natural source at Lake Wangumbaug and ended at the Willimantic River.

In addition, economic and demographic factors were in place for a switch from farming to industry. Post-Revolutionary War freedom created a population explosion that yielded a young and eager working class. Individuality and a so-called Yankee Ingenuity made risk-taking possible. Goods were scarce during the British import ban during the War of 1812. And the Market Panic of 1819 precipitated a decade of decline for rural New Englanders, as farm prices fell by half.

At its peak in 1870, the mill businesses comprised more than 50 buildings, made \$16 million in revenues in today’s money and employed about 400 people. Activity was augmented when the New London, Willimantic and Palmer Line came through the South Coventry railroad depot about 1850, along with the 1909 advent of the Main Street trolley, which would carry passengers as far as Willimantic for 10 cents a ride, and onward to Norwich.

The expansion drew women into the work force and, of course, held the common risk of injury, as late 19th century memoirist Orra Parker Phelps recounts in “When I was a Girl in the Martin Box”:

“Uncle Freeman worked as a carpenter at the mill at this time. The middle finger of his right hand was off at the second joint. When Annie and I asked about it, he said he saw a hole in the machinery for which he could see no reason. Stuck in his ruler but that told him nothing. Stuck in his finger and left it there!” (p.123)

This industrial period also led to invention. Business and community leader John Boynton (1793-1863) was issued his first patent for a textile-carding machine in 1811 and built his mill in 1815. Addison Kingsbury (1835-1914), known as a New England leader in box manufacturing, started the Kingsbury Box and Printing Co. in 1868. He expanded to four other locations in Connecticut and Massachusetts and invented several machines that improved the making of paper boxes.

In 1813 the Coventry Glass Works was opened on the corner of Route 44 and North River Road. It produced pocket bottles, medicine containers and collectible whiskey flasks decorated with railroad scenes and busts of George Washington, Andrew Jackson and Lafayette. The Connecticut Museum of Glass now stands on the site.

The vital industrial life contributed to Coventry’s rich architecture, with dozens of homes on the National Register of Historic Places representing styles that include Colonial, Post and Beam, Saltbox, Queen Anne and Italianate. Many examples still stand on Route 44, along Main Street (Route 31) throughout the town, and on Wall Street in the village.

The Bidwell Tavern, Booth and Dimock Library and Coventry Country Store, all in the village on Main Street, are historic meeting places.

The South Coventry Historic District was added to the national registry in 1991.

The Lake

Now called Coventry Lake, the spring-fed Wangumbaug is the largest lake in Northeastern Connecticut covering about 400 acres. It was a hunting and fishing resource in Colonial times, and, as the town was settled, became the site of several early farms. It was a powerful water source for the industrial period in the 19th century. And finally, in the early 1900s, its beauty and recreational powers drew vacationers, cottage residents and even an Actor’s Colony of mostly vaudevillians sidelined by the advent of radio and movies in the ’20s and ’30s. It’s been a recreational venue ever since.

Celebrations would be held at Lakeside Park, with rides, boat trips and dances at the pavilion. The trolley opening ceremony in 1909 was marred when the pavilion dance floor caved in from the stress of the crowd. “Sixteen persons were injured, more or less seriously,” the *Willimantic Daily Chronicle* reported.

A casino was built on the site and, in the 1930s and ’40s, large crowds would vibrate to the big band tunes of Sammy Kaye and Jimmy Dorsey. The Catholic Church owned the casino for a time and held bingo games there.

In the 1920s, vaudevillians Bill and Mabel Loeser bought land on which they sold lots and built rental cottages. As the word spread, more and more entertainers came to Coventry Lake from the big cities to vacation and even settle in what was known as the Actor’s Colony, now Gerald Park. A trio of showmen staged a Gay Nineties act as an annual fundraiser to develop the roads in the area.

Times of war

At the time the first school was built, in 1728, two military companies were formed. They trained across from the home of Jeremiah Ripley, a continental commissary who kept a military provisioning depot on Ripley Hill, and also at the training ground near the lake.

More than 116 men rallied in Coventry to answer the Lexington Alarm.

Local graves show the sacrifices made in the French and Indian War, War of 1812, and those afterward. In his return march from Yorktown in 1782, Count de Rochambeau recorded that he spent the night at Kimball's Tavern in Coventry. Washington recorded a similar entry when he "breakfasted at one Brigham's in Coventry," a site that later served the Underground Railroad.

Coventry businesses often supported the war effort. Deacon Richard Hale, the father of the young war hero, banned his family from using wool from their farm, saving it to make into blankets and clothing for the Revolutionary troops.

The Civil War prompted the owners of Loomis and Mason Hook and Eye Manufacturers to enter a new venture: the Mason Cartridge Factory. Another munitions shop run by Crittendon & Tibbals is credited with being the only manufacturer able at the time to shift to metallic center fire cartridges. And the Burkamp Mill made parachute cords until it burned down in 1942, during World War II.

Stories of slavery crop up in town history. The Jesse Root Homestead, on Route 31 near Ripley Hill Road, was reportedly built by slaves in 1732. Slave quarters are located in the basement and, according to legend, one of the slaves is buried beneath the floor. Jesse Root, a town leader and state court justice, reported owning three slaves in the 1790 census. Some rough woolen goods from the mills were believed to have clothed slaves.

An excerpt from Orra Phelps' memoir reflects a late 1800s attitude. Although she recalls being in awe of their black domestic who escaped the South to work in the North, she also notes coming upon her brother in the icehouse praying for their pregnant mother: "Dear God, send us a baby, please make it a boy, and please make it white." (P. 51-52)

Coventry is a place that honors its war dead, with monuments to those who fought in World War II and Korea, and to French soldiers who fought under Rochambeau, died of smallpox and are buried in Coventry.

In 2008, a memorial was dedicated on Veterans Memorial Green, the original training ground, to the 612 Vietnam War dead from the state. The dedication culminated the efforts of one Coventry woman, Jean Risley, who was inspired by local schoolchildren and their project to compile stories of the veterans into a book. Risley's brother was one of the 612.

Modern times

Since its industrial heyday, commercial growth in Coventry has been slow. Many citizens hold fast to its rural and historic bearing, a mission incorporated in town planning documents. The push and pull of economic growth and the past was manifested in a 2009 dispute, when a Walgreens pharmacy was proposed for a site on a farm in the North Village, across from an existing CVS. Crowds showed up at public hearings to speak

against it. In the end, the project proceeded, the old North family farm was torn down, and the Walgreens, with modifications to match the neighborhood, stands at the junction of Routes 31 and 44.

In another controversy, voters rejected a plan to build sidewalks on Main Street, that would have connected the town office and school complex to the village. The town manager had applied for federal grant money, which was approved for the project. But the stated opposition was fear that the town would lose more of its rural appeal. In 2010 a scaled-back sidewalk project, falling short of connecting the town offices and schools to downtown, was being built with federal stimulus money.

The top tax-paying companies on the 2009 grand list were Connecticut Light & Power, three residential developers – 14 Grant Hill Road, White Mountain Coventry and CIL – and Coventry Self-Storage. A 2009 town audit showed the largest employers were the town itself, Highland Park Market, Pelletier Builders, CVS, Sabrina Pools and Dunkin' Donuts.

Entrepreneurial successes echo the rural mission. The Coventry Farmers Market, held Sundays on the grounds of the Nathan Hale Homestead, is considered one of the biggest in the state, based on crowd sizes and the number of local vendors. A Coventry dairy farmer and a consortium of others in eastern Connecticut made headlines in 2005 when they marketed their milk, available in grocery stores under the label “The Farmer’s Cow.”

Adelma Grenier Simmons (1903-1996) developed herbal gardening into a popular hobby, showcasing her Caprilands farm on Silver Street. By the 1950s, hundreds attended her lectures, read her books and dined at her farmhouse restaurant, where meals included unique herbal tastings and edible flowers.

Two volunteer fire departments serve the town as does a police department, distinctive for its full-time local staff, a departure from most rural towns that are protected by state troopers or local constables. Coventry High School, Capt. Nathan Hale Middle School, George H. Robertson Intermediate School and Coventry Grammar School serve the students.

Besides its longer-term local residents, Coventry is home to professionals and students who commute to the Hartford area and the nearby University of Connecticut in Storrs.

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