

Reminiscences of Ely Neck Road.

By Wilbur F Smith.

The old records tell us that soon after Rodger Ludlow purchased the land for the Norwalk colony, Nathaniel Ely and Richard Webb negotiated with another tribe of Indians further west for the land about the Pampaskeshanke brook, as attested by a deed recorded February, 1651 *

" Brook is passage of the west bounds extending up into the country by marked trees, and the aforesaid land. Bounded on the south by the sea, and on the west by the land of the Mohakes Indians" (Mohakes land ran to the Hudson river)

Fortunately a good description of the purchase, and of its inhabitants has been preserved, and it must have been typical of the whole of southern Connecticut at that time.

"It was a land of magnificent forests of oak, chestnut, walnut, American elm, maple, extending down to the waters edge, the slopes of which, and the plains west and south in olden times yielded good crops of cereals, and the pastures large herds of cattle which were exchanged for merchandise with the masters of vessels trading along the coast"

While clearing the land for their homes and crops the settlers depended largely on the wild animals and birds for food. They occurred in such great numbers it is difficult for us to visualize the scene today.

"In the forest there were moose, deer, turkey, partridge, coon, rabbit, squirrel, mink, wolves** muskrat, beaver, cranes. Pidgeons in such numbers as to cover the sun, geese and ducks in great numbers "

Such was the land through which the Ely Neck Road wound its way to the Cove, and it seems quite sure it received its name through the association of Mr Nathaniel Ely.

Points of land extending into the sea were called 'necks' by the settlers. We have Eaton Neck, and Lyods Neck across the sound, and Long Neck further west, and so the name seems to follow, Ely's Neck road, or road to the Neck.

* See Hurds History of Fairfield County

** October 26, 1667, the Norwalk colony "agrees to pay 20 shillings for each wolve killed"

The road started, so the records say, at "Isaac Hoyt's place" and branched from the 'Stamford trail' at the junction of the Flax Hill road, going south through the present Spring street, up a rather steep hill, and with many curve, up and down dale continued south until opposite the Pampaskeshanke brook, which it paralleled to the Cove.

The Ely Neck road was settled very early, the first houses, a few of which are still standing, were built close to the road, the stones removed used in building fences.

Fine forest trees were left for summer shade, and up to sixty years ago the old road was typical of the country side and highways Wallace Nutting has preserved for us in his matchless photographs.

The first house built may have been that of Noah Smith, scion of a first family, or Joseph Bouton's, grandson of John Bouton, who drew lot # 28 in the settlement, or that of Daniel Hoyt, grandson of Walter, also a first settler, and who drew lot #29 in the settlement.

Daniel Hoyt had a son Daniel 2nd, born May 25, 1759, who volunteered in the war of the revolution, which carries the Hoyt house back to the early days of 1700.

A map in the town clerks office made in 1846 lists the following owned houses at that date.

Lyander Wilcox	B.F. Reed.	J. Bouton
Eben Bouton	George W Smith	D. Taylor
Noah Smith	Daniel Hoyt	J.F. Brooks
A Byxbee	David Hoyt	W.B. Smith
Mrs. Mitchel	Mrs Van Horn	L.H. Hoyt
C. Dake	L. Knapp	Chas. Wilson.

About 1850 a few more houses were built on the street, but they did not materially change its appearance, and an air of age and tranquility brooded over the country side.

Around 1890 the growing city pushed out to the south and new buildings and stores erected, Stauss hill was cut down, side walks laid, new streets cut through the Snowden property,

The 'improvements' completely altered the appearance of the north part of the street, and left but a few glimpses of the old at the south end of the street.

A few people remember enough of the old street to reconstruct a picture that will soon be lost entirely.

At the corner of Mechanic street and Ely ave. of today, stood in those early days, an old farm house, with a "lane" leading to the pasture beyond, closed by a pair of bars, same as used in the country side today. The 'lane' began at the Lexington ave. of today.

Opposite the 'lane' stood a magnificent American Elm left from the old forest. It remained until the rail road was four tracked when it was taken down and the road moved east.

The road bed of Ely ave. of today, and the land east, was covered with a terraced vine yard owned by Lyander Wilcox who lived on the crest of the hill. Wilcox hill was named for him.

Beyond was the Snowden property which extended south to the crest of Stauss' s hill.

Mr Snowden, a man of means, remodeled an old house on the hill, and his daughter who was a missionary returned from the east with strange and interesting objects, freely shown made their place one of much interest.

Their property was covered with a forest of oak and chestnut. Some of the chestnut trees were very large and bore large crops of nuts. Many of them were in bearing up to the time of the introduced blight that destroyed all our chestnut trees.

A barn on the Snowden property was moved across the street, and remodeled, became the home of the Springwood Union Sunday School, long a religious and social center.

The road ran south from here through low ground, unbelievably muddy when the frost come out of the ground in the spring., rising again to a crest known as Staus hill, from the rather excentric man of that name who had a photographic studio of a sort, and tortured those who had their pictures taken by clamping their head in a metal frame to avoid movement.

Part way up the hill grew one of the finest Red Oak trees which bid fair at one time to be called the largest tree of its kind in the country by the American Forestry Asso'.

It is still standing and in fine condition, near one hundred feet high, eighty feet across the branches, and sixteen feet in circumference, and near one hundred years old.

The old folks say "there was more snow in the old days", the scientists say otherwise, but there was snow enough to make bob sledding one of the prime winter sports, and Staus hill was a favorite.

There was keen competition among the owners of the bobs, with contests of speed and distance.

Some had an attachment where a horse could draw the party of merry folks to neighboring town and race the bobs and "try their hill". Accidents happened. There was many an upset or spill on the curves, and one serious accident when a bob ran into a wagon driven by a drunken man who would not get out of the way, killing Herbert Wheeler, and seriously wounding
* Horace Joyce.

March 12--14 1888, was the time of the big snow. Drifts were so high all travel was stoped, even on the rail road, and it was two weeks before a team was able to get down the Ely Neck road. The food situation was acute for a time, and horses were used to carry food on their backs.

Just beyond the Staus place was a small pond set in the woods where the school children tested the first ice.

Black ice that was strong enough hold their weight if one moved fast over the surface was called 'bengy', and the big trick was to slide across without breaking through.

Across the road was the old house of Noah Smith, typical of the period, story and one half, with a sloping roof. He later went to live on one of the islands which was known as Noah Smiths island..

Futher south the road took a sharp dip and was known as Mitchel hill, for Granny Mitchel, who lived alone in the old house among the apple trees.. She was an English woman who had been a lady in waiting when young on the nobility in England.

* Horace Joyce killed - Herbert Wheeler injured

Mrs. Mitchel was a favorite with old and young and they liked to visit with her to hear tales of the old country, and partake of her tea and cakes.

She was an ardent church member, attending St Pauls, in Norwalk, until Trinity was built. At her death she bequeathed to the latter church a silver communion set, one of the church's 'prized possessions'.

An old street in Norwalk was called Chicken street, and a wag said, it was not known whether "it was because of the number of chickens kept there, or stolen there."

The same reasoning could be applied to the name of the short street leading east from the Ely Neck road, and known as Skunks Hollow. Some one may have ran a foul of a 'wood pussy' as skunks were called, or the name might have come from the abundance of skunks cabbage growing there.

Then too, the first people may have liked such names, for Wilton has her Skunk Lane, and Kent Conn. a Skunk Hollow.

South and west, the house of Benjimen Reed was a fine example of the architecture of the period, discribed so well by Dr Nathaniel Bouton. "Facing the long way of the house to the street with the back roof running slanting and low", so low in fact that it could be reached from the ground.. Remodeled, it is still standing.

Futher on was the house of George W Smith, who married the daughter of Daniel Hoyt, and built on a part of the old Hoyt farm. He was a builder and will be remembered for building the first R. & G factory in record time.

Next on the east was the home and farm of Daniel Hoyt, mentioned as probably the first to settle on Ely Neck road.

It is difficult at this day to visualize a self sustaining farm in that section, yet from the proceeds of his land he brought up a large family, and was considered well off, and a picture of the farm is worth preserving.

The house was two stories high with sloping roof and a hugh stone chimney. The fire place was large enough to take a five foot log, which furnished the heat, and had two ovens built into the sides. Andirons, and a swinging crane to hold pots over the fire, was typical.

Daniel Hoyt acquired large land holdings, some in mowing meadows, cultivated fields, orchards and pasture lands. He and Joseph Bouton owned most of the land south to Witch Lane, and one visiting the old cemetery in Witch Lane will only Hoyt and Bouton on the stones there.

Back of the Hoyt house was a large barn for the cattle, and deep 'bays' for the hay, a favorite place to play when it rained. The bravest boys would jump from the hugh cross timbers into the the hay.

Beyond the barn was the orchard, with apples that are mostly a memory now, crowdded out by new varieties, but they were considered choice then.

Big yellow Pipins, Spitzenburgs, Sheep Nose, Methodist, Snow, Sweet Russet, the mere telling make me wish to roam again that old orchard and sample the Spitzenburgs after the first frost.

At the edge of the orchard was two immense glacier boulders brough^t down in the ice age, and towering over them old chestnut trees yeilding big crops of nuts.

Many will remember the row of sugar maple trees along the road planted by Daniel Hoyt, and giving welcome shade in summer,

When the sap started to run in the spring they would tap the maple trees by boring a hole in the trunk and inserting a 'spout' made from a piece of elder with the pith pushed out, and the sap was boiled and made into syrup and maple sugar.

Three generations of Daniel Hoyt's lived in the old house, and the writer was shown a secret trap door in the floor of the cellar where the women and children, with their valuables, could hide when tidings told of raids by Gen Tryon's men.

In Hurds history we read: Sunday morning, July 22, 1781, a company of British soldiers landed on the west side of the Pampaskeshanke and with a few disaffected persons went to the parish church at Middlesex * for the purpose of taking prisoners.

The men were not at service, so the British hid until afternoon service when they subounded the church and all were taken prisoners.. There were tied in couples and marched down to the boats and taken to Long Island and confined in the Provost prison for several weeks."

Daniel Hoyt 2nd, volunteered in Captain Jabez Gregory's company, Col. Meads division, and after the war served in the Coast Guard.

David Hoyt, son of Daniel Hoyt, took over part of his fathers farm futher south, and his house still stands very much as it did over one hundred years ago.

David Hoyt will be long remembered for his Yankee character and grit, manageing and engaging in all the activities of a consoderable farm after becoming entirely blind.

He would harness the horse, milk the cows, work with the men at haying, always claiming the place on the wagon of loading the hay, and was a David Harum at shrewd bargaining.

The Lyman Knapp place is another old house futher south on the east. An old deed says on December 15, 1843, Jonas Enquest and Margaret Enquest did sell to Lyman Knapp four acres, bounded on the north, east and south by land of Joseph Bouton, and on the west by the Ely Neck road.

It faced the long way to the street, and in good condition is occupied by a grandson of Lyman Knapp.

Joining the Lyman Knapp house on the south, was the home of Joseph Bouton. It was typical of the period, spanting roof, story and one half. It was surrounded by a fine orchard, with meadows and barns.

Joseph Bouton was a decendant of John Bouton, a first settler. The house has passed into other hands, but still stands in good repair.

Opposite the old Bouton place an old road would west to join Witch Lane. When the railroad was built in 1848 the road was abandoned, but the stone fences enclosing the road still can be seen as far as the tracks.

Futher south was the home of David Taylor, who married, Caroline Hoyt, daughter of Daniel Hoyt, 3rd, and they came into possession of part of the Hoyt lands.

Of particular interest to the youth of the day was part known as the Wood Pasture, a tract of open grazing lands, surrounded by rough wooded hills.

The pasture was entered from the Ely Neck road by a lane which led down a rather steep hill and crossed the Pampaskeshanke brook over a walled stone bridge.

* Brookside

Beyond the brook lay pasture lands where blackberries grew , and along the fences butternut trees gave nuts for the winter.

The rocky,forested hill side at the end of the pasture was the home of a mythical great snake,that was very real to all the young folks, and many stories told of its great size.

One evening, so the story went, when the boy went to bring home the cows,he found them huddled in a far corner and was unable to drive them out. With help,the cows were forced across a certain place when they broke into a run and raced all the way home,nor would they go to that part of the pasture again.

It was believed they were frightened by the monster snake.

At another time, a man going to the pasture and approached the great hickory tree that grew near the bridge,saw what he took to be a large limb fallen from the tree and lying across the lane , and " as big around as my leg"

When the limb slowly crawled across and disappeared,he was was so surprised and frightened he forgot to use the gun he carried.

The big snake was never killed,but the stories about it was a part of the traditions of the old street.

On the west side of the hill was an exposed slanting ledge ,polished smooth by the glaciers of the ice age,and it was considered quite a feat to be able to climb to the top and slide down,though disastrous to boys clothes.

Hurd tells us the Pmapaskeshanke brook was at the time of the settlement," a sparkling brook starting in Indian woods, running south through Fox Hollow,through the Wild to empty in the Cove".

Sixty years ago it retained enough of its charm to be the delight of the small boy. North of Wood Pasture lane it wound its way through an alder and maple swamp,home of numerous muskrats,traped in season for their fur.

South of the lane it would its way over and around rocks ,making small waterfalls and quiet pools, where the largest bull frogs dove it at your approach, and spotted turtles,known as "pepers" made their home, and were supposed to give the spring calls we know are made by the hyla frogs.

Along its banks were always found the first spring flowers ,adder tongue,hepatica's,anemones,branes foot,,hellebore and the lowly sknuks cabbage.

Every boy knew the path by the brook to the early bow apple tree in David Taylor's orchard.

The Ward B Smith house,though not one of the oldest,was the show house of the lower street. Ward Smith was a decendant of Eliakim Smith, a first settler. He was in the trucking business in New York city, and built here for a country home. When his horses feet got sore from the hard city streets,he would ship them to the farm,take off their shoes and turn them loose, where the soft damp ground would make them right again.

Ward Smith moved the Obelisk ,called Cleopatra's Needle, to its site in Central Park.

Two more old houses,one of which still stands,was just south of the Smith house. Wm.Hallock lived in one,and was in the oyster business,and a point of rocks in the Village Creek where he kept his boats is still known as Hallock's rocks.

The Byxbee place was opposite.Both were low, with slanting roofs,typical of the first homes.

On the hill beyond lived Captain Thomas Saunders, who owned and sailed the sixteen ton sloop Matamoras, built to carry cargo and passengers between New York and Boston.

Capt. Saunders sailed the Long Island Sound for years and when his boats usefulness was over sailed her to her last anchorage in the Ware creek.

A later generation knew her as the 'old wreck', and in the fall she was a favorite place to fish for Frost fish.

A fine grove of hickory trees stood where the oil tanks are today, and although Ely ave of today, ends officially at its junction with Wilson road, the old Ely Neck road continued on along the Pampaskeshanke to the Cove, and the Neck.

This then is the country of which Hurd writes when he says, "I never visit the country buttoned on the sea without re-living my boyhood days.

As the sun sinks behind the hills, and shadows lengthen to fantastic forms, phantoms were ever whispering,

Here are the graves of the Sachem and the braves
over which he ruled, whose spirits for over two
hundred years made this place their abode."

A few are living who remember those first days on the old Ely Neck Road, and heard from their elders of the toil of clearing the land, of the menace of Indians, and the stirring days of the Revolutionary war, and roamed at will over all the country, and where enough of the first forests remained to make it a beautiful part of America.

They, and those who read the story of the first days will unite with historian Hurd in saying "this is hallowed land", made so by the courageous man and women who won it from the forest and left the imprint of their rugged ^{character} on the land and their descendants.

Wilbur F Smith
South Norwalk, Conn.
September, 1943.

Note. Wilbur F Smith was the grandson of
Daniel Hoyt 3rd.