

# THE NEWSLETTER

The  
Colebrook Land  
Conservancy



"In Land We Trust"

Volume 19 Number 2, Summer 2009

## NEW LAND

# Deed to Phelps Research Area Transferred to CLC

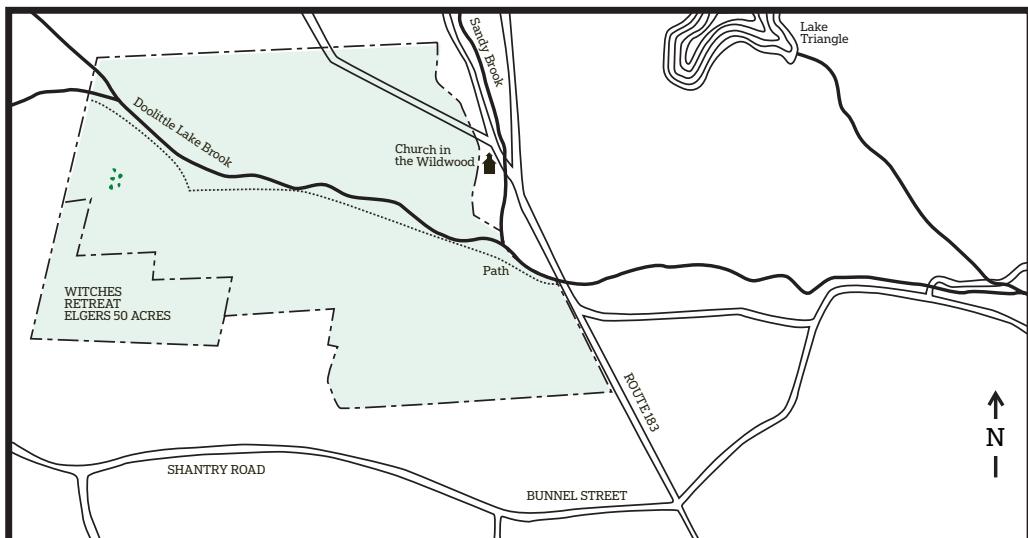
THE PHELPS RESEARCH AREA (PRA) consists of 395 acres in North Colebrook, donated to the Nature Conservancy beginning in 1974, by John and Nancy Blum and their neighbor and noted ecologist, Dr. Frank Egler. An initial assessment in 1977 described the land as "a prime example of unspoiled nature in the northwestern part of Connecticut." The trees included white pine, red oak, ash, beech, sugar maple, hemlock, aspen, red maple, silky willow, and chokecherry. Its location, its large size and diverse habitat of rocky slopes, woodlands, post-agricultural fields, and wetlands, supported birds that prefer undisturbed forest for breeding, such as the broad-winged hawk, pileated woodpecker, yellow-bellied sapsucker, hermit thrush, white-throated sparrow, and several warblers. Over 20 species of reptiles and amphibians were recorded, and 30 species of animals. Past uses of the land have been well documented as well, including a forge along Doolittle Brook, and lumbering of what was considered the last extensive old-growth forest in Connecticut, in 1911.

Also within the bounds of the Phelps Research Area is the

embodiment of much Colonial and Colebrook history .

The first Phelps, William, landed in the New World in 1630, but left the Atlantic Coast for a less crowded place, settling in the rich Connecticut River Valley at Windsor by 1635. At that time this northwestern corner of the colony was claimed by both Hartford and Windsor, and it was not until 1729 that Windsor gained control of what included Colebrook. A group of local Windsor landowners were put in charge of surveying the area and apportioning lots, and by several generations later the

Phelps had managed to amass significant property in several towns. There is a 1732 deed of Josiah Phelps leaving several parcels of land to his son Josiah II, resident of Windsor. Josiah III made the move to Harwinton, but was a major Colebrook



landowner with some 2000 acres of land around Sandy Brook, nearly a tenth of the town in the early 1700's. Finally his son, Arah, moved into Colebrook in 1787 onto the family holdings. He quickly went about the construction of Phelps Tavern.

Since the rocks, soils, and topography of Colebrook do not ►

make for easy farming, Sandy Brook, with its 1000 foot drop, became an engine of activity: sawmills, flour mills, a leather tannery, the carding of wool, and a forge were powered by these waters. There were at least a half dozen forges in Colebrook in the 18th and 19th century. Last year we reported on the archeological digs at Smith Forge near Robertsville. There were also forges on Schoolhouse Road, one in the meadow by Woodbine cottage, three owned by the Rockwells, and one by Ezekiel Phelps, the brother of Arah. It was, in fact, nails and hinges from Ezekiel's forge that Arah used in the building of the tavern . The remains of the forge can be found in the Phelps Research Area, as well as several stone walls, foundations holes, and evidence of previous dams. There are also remains of roads.

Arah seems a man of vision and determination, for not only did he construct and open an Inn, but he determined to further trade and transport to other areas of the northwest and to further his own business enterprises. A Norfolk man by the name of Orvis was engaged in some sort of manufacturing along Brummagem Brook before Arah Phelps arrived in Colebrook. Arah became 50=50 partner with Orvis in a forge, and remained so until it stopped functioning in 1807.

Bob Grigg describes: After becoming a partner with Orvis, Phelps requested the Town of Colebrook to build a public highway more or less in a direct route between his home (Phelps tavern) and the forge, but the town refused. In 1791 Arah ran for the office of first selectman and won. The first thing he did was to approve the construction of the road, and it remained an official town road until Arah was voted out of office in 1794 whereupon his successor abandoned it and Arah was left to maintain it himself. The same year of 1794 saw construction of another road, this one approaching from the southwest that connected present day Shantry Road with the original road passing the forge. The purpose of this one was to provide a more direct route from the forge to Colebrook.

The Blums and Dr. Egler wished that the land would be left in its natural state, used only for research and education purposes. In celebration of the transfer of ownership to the Colebrook Land Conservancy, and as a first educational use under our aegis, Joyce Hemmingson will lead a walk there on August 9 at 9am. Park at the Church in the Wildwood and plan on about two hours. No dogs, please. For more information, contact Joyce Hemmingson, 860 379 6425. Rain date will be September 13.

Historical information on the Phelps family taken from Nancy Blum's 1997 book "One Old House" published by the Colebrook Historical Society.—Sukey Wagner



# Hessian Footsteps in Colebrook?

## New Sign Tells of Colebrook History and Value of Preservation

A recently installed sign by the Hale Barn gives us a glimpse into Colebrook's 18th century past and the efforts taken by the citizens and friends of Colebrook to preserve a historic location. Through the generosity, hard work, and talents of volunteers a new brass plaque, mounted on a rough-cut granite post, has been placed in the ground by the Hale barn at the intersection of Routes 183 and 182 (Stillman Hill Road) giving us a glimpse into Colebrook's historic past.

As the new sign tells us, the 18th century barn, now a rarity in Connecticut, was one of Colebrook's last working dairy farms owned and operated by the Hale family.

In 2001 the Conservancy acquired and restored the barn besides purchasing 42 surrounding acres, which are now protected in perpetuity.

The crossroads where the barn sits date from the 1760's, when Stillman Hill Road was built as a segment of the Old North Road for the movement of military troops during the French and Indian War. Later, during the Revolutionary War following the British defeat at Saratoga in October 1777, British and Hessian prisoners were marched south through Colebrook along this very road.

The protected land has significant natural value as it features a diverse landscape of fields, wetlands and forest types lying in the Loon Brook watershed. It also provides habitat for a variety of wildlife, such as deer, porcupines, great horned owls, ravens, ruffed grouse, wild turkeys, Eastern meadowlarks, bobolinks, and amphibians and reptiles.

The newly installed sign also gives the reader directions to a loop trail located on the northern section of the property. The Colebrook Land Conservancy hopes that many will visit this special place, walk the loop trail, and gain a greater appreciation of Colebrook's exceptional heritage. Set your imagination free and you may even hear the footsteps and disgruntled voices of the German and British prisoners of war as they continue their march through Connecticut. —Michael F. Hurd

## LAND USES

# A Beauty or a Beast?

INDUSTRIAL OR “UTILITY SCALE” WIND TURBINES. People who observe them generally either love them or hate them. Some people see them as an important component in reducing our collective carbon footprint and lessening the threat posed by climate change. These advocates often view the large turbines as majestic works of art producing an abundance of clean and renewable energy. Detractors consider them blight on the landscape, possibly creating health hazards for neighbors, and as a danger to migrating birds. Even as this article goes to print, the state of North Carolina is considering a ban of industrial sized wind turbine structures from its scenic western ridgelines, a ban that would, critics charge, put approximately two thirds of the state’s land based wind potential off limits to development. The proposed ban comes shortly after lawmakers created new standards that require the state to obtain at least 12.5% of its electricity needs from renewable energy and efficiency measures by 2021, a glaring contradiction in the eyes of many renewable energy advocates.

Of course one’s perspective on these machines can change dramatically depending on how close an industrial sized (over 300 feet tall) turbine structure is located to their hometown or even their neighborhood. Colebrook is currently embroiled in a wind turbine controversy regarding a test site constructed late last year in a residential zoned area on Flagg Hill Road. If after 12-18 months of testing wind currents are deemed strong and consistent enough, developers may seek to construct at least two 300-plus feet tall turbines on the site. And if developers do seek permission to build, it is likely neither the town of Colebrook, nor any other local governing body, will have much to say in the matter outside of a non-binding advocacy role. Lack of local control results because the proposed turbine facility, if built, is projected to generate more than one megawatt of electricity from renewable energy; therefore, the ultimate authority on the question is almost certainly the nine member Energy and Telecommunications board of the Connecticut Siting Council ([www.ct.gov/csc/site](http://www.ct.gov/csc/site)).

The Connecticut Siting Council was established in 1972. Its Energy and Telecommunications board has jurisdiction over the siting of most large power facilities and transmission lines

throughout the state, as well as hazardous waste facilities and telecommunications sites. The body is in part a response to the “Not In My Backyard” community reaction to most subjects of its oversight. The council is largely appointed; the majority by the Governor. Since renewable energy facilities projected to generate more than one megawatt of electrical power fall under the council’s purview, the council may vote to override local zoning rules and regulations to permit their construction, even in a residential zoned area such as Flagg Hill Road. As Derek Phelps, the council’s Executive Director stated for a May 25, 2009 Hartford Courant article on the proposed Colebrook development, “a project that falls under our jurisdiction does not require compliance with local zoning codes. We try to minimize environmental impact to the maximum extent possible, but

there is no local planning and zoning input required of our decisions.” The council generally holds public hearings prior to its decisions, but public sentiment does not necessarily influence its conclusions.

The Colebrook Land Conservancy is concerned with any local land uses that may threaten the unspoiled and rural character of our historic town and pose a danger to wildlife; however, the CLC Board takes no current position regarding the Flagg Hill test site and its related potential wind farm development. This is new territory for many of us, especially in Connecticut, which, in general, is viewed by experts as possessing relatively little commercial wind power potential. But given the current desire (many would say necessity) to exploit all possible renewable energy forms, it is an issue unlikely to

fade quickly, even here. The State of Connecticut funds renewable energy initiatives, including wind power, through the quasi-governmental Clean Energy Fund and many Connecticut towns are pledged to obtain at least 20% of municipal power usage from clean energy sources by as early as 2010. So, is wind power truly feasible in the Northwest Corner of Connecticut? Could we get used to the sight of these gigantic structures on some our hilltops, or perhaps near our towns or even, in a few cases, our neighborhoods? It is something to think about and for which to plan. At least for now, those of us in Colebrook find ourselves on the front line of this local and national debate. —Bill Sampson



**SAVE THE DATE**

**Sunday,  
August 9th**

Joyce Hemmingson will lead a walk at the Phelps Research Center on August 9 at 9am. Park at the Church in the Wildwood and plan on about two hours. No dogs, please. For more information, call 860-379-6425. Rain date will be September 13.

**Sunday,  
October 11th**

Hale Barn Open House on Sunday, October 11, 2009 from 2:00p.m to 4 p.m. Weather permitting, a guided walk on the Hale Property trail will be offered.

*The Colebrook Land Conservancy  
P.O. Box 90 Colebrook, CT 06021*

The Colebrook Land Conservancy Newsletter is produced in the public's interest. Comments and suggestions for articles are welcome.



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## **Comments or Suggestions**

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*If you would like to suggest topics or have questions for the CLC, e-mail us at colebrookland@gmail.com*

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