

History

Sheriff Fitch couldn't hold his tongue

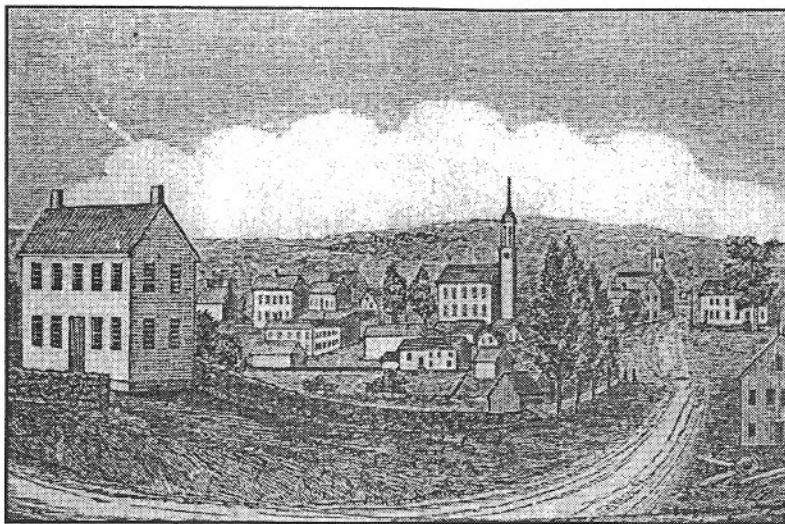
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The house that once stood on the corner of Scotland Road and Ballamahack Road was built in 1763 by Col. Eleazer Fitch, an immensely popular figure in Windham Green who was a hero of the French Indian wars, and the Windham County Sheriff.

However, much to the chagrin of Windhamites, Fitch turned out to be an ardent Tory.

In 1774, Windham's Sheriff Fitch found it impossible to hold his tongue, after witnessing the Revolutionary activities of his fellow Windhamites. He publicly opposed Windham's extensive financial aid to Boston during the coercive acts. Windham's Sons of Liberty responded by declaring a total boycott on anyone who dealt with Fitch. He was under strict surveillance, and the Fitch family was virtually imprisoned in their own house. It was noted that, "nothing but the respect entertained for him personally and on account of his past services prevented his house from being torn down over his head."

Windham's Sons of Liberty for-



Windham village viewed from Zion's Hill in 1826.

bade any miller to grind grain for Fitch, and threatened that any merchant who sold goods to him would be tarred and feathered.

Despite his uncomfortable position, Fitch continued with his duties as sheriff. One of his main responsibilities was the imprisoning of British prisoners of war and Tories in Windham's jail.

Fitch further enraged the locals when he invited the prisoners up to his Zion Hill Mansion house to dine.

He employed them to build a stonewall around his property, a wall that still stands on Route 14 and Ballamahack Road. He responded to his critics that the British prisoners should be

exploited to improve Windham's economy.

Many of the locals agreed, and the prisoners were employed in houses and farms in the town. It is said that the famed figure of Bacchus was carved not in Windham Jail, but in Fitch's cellar by a group of captured British sailors.

When the British sailors escaped, it was assumed that Fitch had made the arrangements, and in September 1776 more than 200 Windhamites signed a petition asking the General Assembly to remove Col. Fitch from the post of sheriff, because he was "constantly associating with the Continental prisoners in Windham County Jail ... and has shown himself averse to the success of American arms."

In December 1776, Capt. Jabez Huntington took Fitch's position as sheriff, "whose principles were far more agreeable to the public, as one not likely to exhibit undue leniency to inimical Tories and prisoners of war."

Nevertheless, Huntington found it increasingly difficult to

house all the prisoners and Tories in the overcrowded Windham Jail.

Fitch was unmoved by all this, and continued to hold meetings with fellow eastern Connecticut Tories, much to the increasing chagrin of everyone in Windham. In September 1778 he was bought to trial at the Windham Superior Court, accused of having "an evil heart and a corrupt and wicked mind."

Fitch was accused of undermining the struggle with the king. Fitch responded by saying that it was a "rascally trick" to confine prisoners of war in the Windham Jail, and that as far as his Sheriff's commission was concerned the court should "wipe their damned arses with it."

Fitch pleaded not guilty to all charges. The jury agreed, and acquitted him, revealing that though the political activists in town despised him, he still maintained a great deal of respect and authority from the wider population.

Continued next week

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