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— HISTORY —

# The first county jail a haven for dissenters

Part two of two

The first Windham County Jail was built on Zion Hill in Windham in 1726. It was enlarged in 1743 by the addition of a new story to accommodate religious dissenters, imprisoned for "preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ."

Inspired by Great Awakening preaching, the dissenters were alarmed at the increasing power of the Congregational Church. In 1744, the church and town authorities ordered Sheriff Jabez Huntington to arrest one of the county's leading religious dissenters. Elisha Paine was detained after a meeting in Benjamin Cleveland's house at Scotland, and locked in the Windham County Jail.

Paine's controversial arrest and imprisonment made him a martyr for regional dissenters and Separates. They gathered at the jail calling for Paine's freedom, and to prevent a riot Sheriff Huntington allowed North Windham's Joshua Abbe to erect a stage in the prison yard whereupon Paine could preach over the 10-foot high prison stockade, to the Baptists, Quakers, Shakers, Methodists and Ranters gathering

in the county town.

Huntington continued to detain all Separates on trumped up charges, such as resisting arrest or disturbing the peace. Joshua Abbe and Benajah Douglas of Canterbury were arrested at Abbe's North Windham home on July 9, 1747, for interfering in the apprehension of Separates.

Abbe and Douglas were imprisoned in the Windham County Jail and sentenced to six months hard labor.

So many Separates were imprisoned that by 1753, Windham County's officials were forced to demolish the original jail and build a larger one.

The Separates made repeated appeals to the Connecticut General Assembly to free imprisoned preachers and allow religions other than Congregationalism to be practiced. All pleas were rejected, until 1756 when an appeal was made to King George II. He subsequently instructed reluctant



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Connecticut Gov. Thomas Fitch to introduce a religious Toleration Act. However, by the late 1750s most of the Separatist churches had dwindled away.

A generation later during the Revolution, the Windham jail was used to house British prisoners of war and debtors.

The country was hit by inflation during the war, and the paper money issued by the Continental Congress became worthless, resulting in an increase in the number of debtors, particularly across Windham County. Because debt continued to carry a prison sentence, the 1756 county jail was increased in size in 1782.

When peace was established, the jail housed a wide range of offenders. "Ann," a 12-year-old slave owned by the Clark family of Pomfret, was the first prisoner to serve a life sentence in the Windham County jail. In 1795, after being "moved by the Devil," she cut 5-year-old Martha Clark's throat.

Ann had the letter "M" for murderer branded on her forehead, and received 39 lashes before being deposited in the jail.

In 1805, the jail housed Samuel Freeman of Ashford, who was later hung on Gallows Hill for

killing his common law Indian wife, and throwing her body into a local lake.

Windham County's second jail was used for 67 years, until the county seat was removed to Brooklyn in 1820. Legend has it that the building then became the "Old Jail Tavern." Nathan Brownell, of Rhode Island eventually remodeled the old jail building into a shoe-making factory.

It was abandoned and remained

vacant for many years.

Legend maintains that the building was haunted by the troubled spirits of those who had spent their last hours in the prison, before being carted away to Gallows Hill.

The jail building survived until 1946, when it burned down. It stood on the site occupied today by the fifth house up from the post office, on the north side of the Zion Hill Road.



Windham Center Green, 1827, seven years after the jail was moved to Brooklyn.