

— HISTORY —

A 'creaking cart' and some plaintiff cries for mercy

Part one of two

As soon as Windham township became the administrative center of the new county of Windham in 1726, a county jailhouse was built 200 yards or so east of the Windham green. Constructed of sturdy logs, it stood on the north side of Zion's Hill.

The jail measured 31 by 18 feet, and contained two 10 x 6-foot wide cells and a 14 x 12-foot cellar or dungeon.

It was built by a tax of one-half penny levied on every Windham County taxpayer.

Samuel Backus was the jail's first occupant, imprisoned for four years because he spoke vile, ungodly and profane language. Bad language was not tolerated in Colonial Windham, neither was debt. John Ripley was jailed for a year in 1742 for an unpaid debt of £23, and John Fitch served three years for a £50 pound debt.

Betsy Smith is probably the

Windham County jail's most well-known prisoner.

She lived in Windham's Canada Parish next to the Little River, "about two miles southwest of

Windham Village." In June 1743 Smith gave birth to a baby boy, and hid him in the woods to conceal the birth. Her father suspected the crime, and after failing to extract a confession from his daughter, he reported her to the County Sheriff Jabez Huntington. The sheriff organized a search for the baby, and its body was discovered in the Cowatuck Rocks, known today as Clark's Corner, Hampton.

Smith was tried at the Windham County Court in September 1745. She was considered to be "a weak



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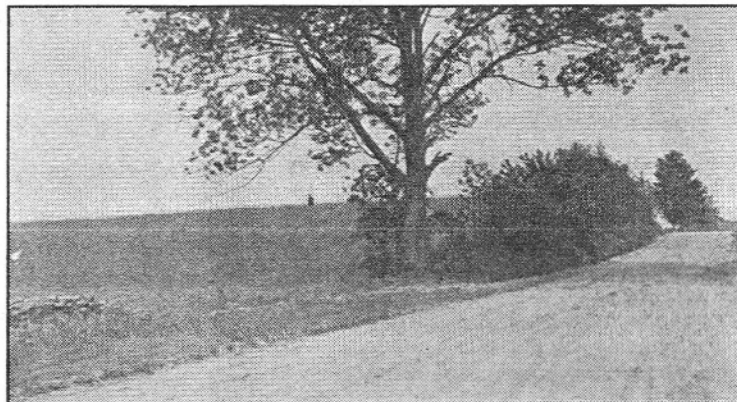
and simple girl, deficient in mental capacity."

Nevertheless, Judge Roger Walcott and the jury showed no mercy. They found Smith guilty of infanticide, and sentenced to hang by her neck until dead.

She was taken from the jail on Dec. 18, 1745, and placed in the back of a cart, where she was forced to sit upon her coffin.

The "creaking cart" made the journey from the Windham County jail to the gallows, which were located on a knoll overlooking the Shetucket River, one mile west of Windham green along the old colonial highway to Lebanon.

The entire route, which is better known today as Plains Road, was lined with spectators who could hear Smith's frantic pleas for mercy. Sheriff Huntington was paid £29, five shillings for conducting Windham County's first execution. Huntington's gallows, coincidentally, were in close prox-



Gallows Hill on Plains Road

imity to where Rochambeau's French troops encamped en route to Yorktown in June 1781.

The Windham County jail was extensively used in the early 1740s to imprison the religious dissenters active during the "Great Awakening." The ruling Congregationalist Church was

horrified by the actions of Baptists, Methodists and Congregational Separates, and instructed the sheriff to arrest them for the heinous crimes of preaching without a license, and demanding religious toleration.

Continued next week

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