

Feb. 16, 2006

Battles of Hither Place rage on in Windham

Part three of three

To celebrate the 200th anniversary of Windham's incorporation as a town in 1692, the Willimantic Journal's editor, Thomas Snell Weaver, wrote a series of articles that discussed the community's early history.

His articles revealed that one of the most contentious issues in those formative years was where to build a congregational meeting house, one that would conveniently serve all.

Those inhabitants living in Windham's southeastern section, known as the Hither Place, wanted it erected at the "Crotch," or in the Natchaug River's loop next to the present-day Bricktop Road. However, those residing in the town's northern section, or at the "Ponde Place," wanted it built at a location that today is near to the junctions of Routes 195 and 89 and Center Street in Mansfield.

The heated debate over where to locate the meeting house raged on throughout the years 1696 and 1697. Hither Place's residents had the support of their minister, Samuel Whiting, who lived among them. He wanted the church built near his house and suggested to the town selectmen and freemen that the Ponde Place residents should hire their own minister.

Furthermore, Whiting and his supporters believed that those at the Ponde Place should consider breaking away to form a new town. However, the Hither Place was home to Windham's wealthiest and most influential citizens. Feeling isolated, the "Ponde Placers" initially resisted a break.

At the end of 1697, the Hither and Ponde Placers formed a committee for the last time to decide the location of Windham's congregational meeting house.

After more intense discussions, the committeemen chose to build the church in the town's geographical center. This placed it in Windham's north end, to the delight of the Ponde Placers. The town fathers subsequently drew plans to build a 35-foot-long, 24-foot-wide, 12-foot-high meeting-house, but those living at Hither Place refused to comply with the committee's December 1697 decision to build it in the town's north end at Ponde Place.

Early in 1699, Windham's selectmen voted to form an investigating committee that would report to Connecticut's General

Court in May, so that august body could decide where to build the church. Failing that they could give Ponde Placers the permission to form a new town.



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The investigating committee reported its findings on March 16, 1699, that there should be two churches built, one in the town's southeastern section and one in the northern section. Accordingly, Whiting should conduct services for the first six months of the year at Ponde Place and for the remainder of the year at the Hither Place.

Whiting wanted to stay in the Hither Place and on Jan. 30, 1700, he donated a plot of land for a "meeting house plot or common" that is today the location of the Windham Green.

Until the South Society built a meetinghouse at the Hither Place, those living there worshiped at the Dingley House, a mile north of the Green. Connecticut's General Court officially divided Windham into two separate societies in October 1701, enabling Whiting to hold services at a private house at Ponde Place, ostensibly for six months of the year.

Having two meetinghouses in Windham was highly inconvenient for all and in May 1702, Joshua Hall, representing those living in the Ponde township, asked the General Court for permission to separate from the Hither Place.

He cited "the great difficulties and hazards that the inhabitants of the north end of Windham were exposed to by reason of their being settled so remote from the south part of said town and because of the deep and dangerous river lying between."

A year later, in May 1703, the General Court finally gave Windham's North Society permission to break away and form a new town called Mansfield, which was comprised of 24,000 1-acre allotments, and 41 square miles.

A part of that original territory is now included in the town of Chaplin. Moreover, as Weaver noted in his 1892 articles, the same problems would recur in Windham, leading to the break-away of the Scotland parish 35 years earlier in 1857.

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