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History

Eleazer Fitch: Loyal to the crown to the end

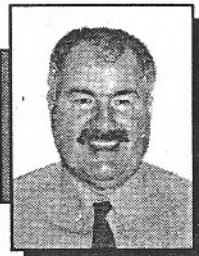
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A tragic fire destroyed one of Windham's most historic houses in April 1923. The fire took the life of three-year-old Mildred Rood, and also ended a history that had begun 160 years before when the mansion on Zion's Hill was built by Col. Eleazer Fitch (1726-96).

Men of education, wealth and high social standing in Colonial America, such as Eleazer Fitch, were expected to serve the community in which they lived by holding public offices, a system known as "deference democracy."

Fitch was appointed Windham's surveyor of highways in 1749 and 1751, and tything man in 1750 and 1752. He was elected sheriff of Windham County in December 1752, a position Fitch would hold until 1776.

In 1754, the crown summoned



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Fitch to command a Colonial Connecticut regiment during the French-Indian War. Col. Fitch's Fourth Connecticut Regiment played an instrumental role in the English capture of Fort Ticonderoga in 1759.

A biography of Eleazer Fitch, published in 1863, noted that he "enjoyed all those advantages of culture common among the wealthy and refined of his day. He possessed eminent social qualities; was an accomplished musician and a splendid singer.

He attained military distinction, so highly prized in those days having fairly won his honors at Ticonderoga and on other hard-fought fields in the French war."

Fitch returned to Windham after three years service. Not only enriched by his exploits against the French, he gained further income after 1761 by contracting to supply Connecticut's troops with food and clothing as the struggle continued.

He decided to build a magnificent mansion on Zion's Hill. It was completed and ready for occupation in 1763. Fitch had won the reputation of being "the handsomest man in the American army." It was recalled that his presence was "dignified and imposing" and that he had "aristocratic tastes and habits."

His daughters were "accomplished and beautiful," and his

home was considered to be "the seat of a refined hospitality and social cheer such as the 'first families' and highest dignitaries in the state were accustomed to enjoy."

The Fitch mansion also became renown as the social and cultural center of eastern Connecticut.

Col. Fitch also represented Windham in the Connecticut General Assembly in 1761, 1763 and 1764. His great wealth buffered him against financial disaster when a mercantile partnership with the Trumbulls of Lebanon failed. He also lost a virtual fortune through his extensive land speculations during the Susquehanna affair, where Connecticut laid claim to portions of northeast Pennsylvania.

Fitch's popularity began to decline in 1765, when he refused to join in opposition against the

British government's Stamp Acts and Townshend Taxes. Windham was a hotbed of revolutionary fervor, but Windham's Sons of Liberty were reluctant to tar and feather such a significant figure.

Furthermore, he was related by marriage to the town's leading lawyer and revolutionary, Eliphalet Dyer.

Windhamites fondly hoped that their hero and sheriff would denounce the king. He was strongly urged to do so by Eliphalet Dyer, and his friend and former business partner Gov. Jonathan Trumbull. It was even rumored that George Washington personally asked him to accept a commission in the Continental Army. But Fitch was too proud of his commission in the British Army, and remained loyal to King George.

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