

## The Neighborhood House in Weatogue Part 1: A Community Center with a Special Mission

Simsbury's first social club that could boast of a building for its exclusive use was the Casino, which opened in 1898. It stood in the center of town on Hopmeadow Street where Eno Memorial Hall stands today.<sup>1</sup> Over the next few decades several other community centers opened in buildings in various parts of the town, each with its own distinctive character. The next was the Neighborhood House in the village of Weatogue and its founders had the stated objective of welcoming and including recent immigrants who had settled in town.

The driving force behind the Weatogue Neighborhood House was the Reverend Charles Pitman Croft and his wife Julia Mather Croft. Rev. Croft grew up in Putnam County, New York, graduated from Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, in 1869, and was pastor of the Simsbury Methodist-Episcopal Church when they met. Julia Maria Mather grew up in the Weatogue section of Simsbury. She counted among her ancestors Noah Phelps, Simsbury's Revolutionary War hero of Fort Ticonderoga fame. Her father, William Mather, had been Sheriff of Hartford County. She graduated from the Hartford Female Seminary, founded by Catherine Beecher, and attended the Spingler Institute for Girls in New York. The couple married in 1871 in Simsbury's Congregational Church, where she was a member, but they used the Methodist wedding ceremony.

Since the Methodist Church at that time required its ministers to rotate among parishes every three years, Rev. Croft chose to change denominations in order to stay near Simsbury. He was ordained in the East Avon Congregational Church and served there about two years, then in other Connecticut churches. In the early 1880s he was the pastor of the Congregational Church in Terre Haute, Indiana, for about four years.<sup>2</sup> He resigned in 1884, citing health problems; he is known to have had asthma.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, Julia Mather Croft had inherited from her aunt, Sarah Mather, the Deacon Mather house, which was a short distance south of her childhood home. Upon returning to Weatogue, they lived in that house for the rest of their lives.<sup>4</sup> Rev. Croft was never again the pastor of a church, but he was often called upon to occupy the pulpit in Congregational churches temporarily without a minister and he officiated at numerous weddings, christenings and funerals.

Julia Mather Croft had been born and raised in the three-story house that eventually became the Neighborhood House. By the time the Crofts returned to Simsbury, this residence belonged to Miss Antoinette Randolph Phelps, daughter of Simsbury native Guy Rowland Phelps, the doctor who founded the Connecticut Mutual Life Insurance Company. Miss Phelps lived in Hartford and used the house as a summer home. When Rev. Croft told her of the couple's plans to build a community gathering place, she offered to give the house to Mrs. Croft to be used for that purpose.

The opening of the Neighborhood House, called a "housewarming" by the Crofts, took place on November 7, 1905. A long article in the *Hartford Courant* told of the intense effort expended over a two-month period by the Crofts, the people of the neighborhood, and people from all over the area to transform the building. They removed a chimney and took out partitions on the first floor to create an assembly hall big enough to seat about 100 people. The hall had a piano and an organ. Behind it were two smaller rooms which were to be used as reading rooms or for small social events. They were furnished with rugs and rockers that created a homelike feeling. There was also a well-equipped kitchen and pantry that, according to the reporter, had enough food prepared that evening "to feed a town." The upper floors contained eleven rooms and at least

one had been set aside to accommodate a caretaker in the future. Outside, the lawn had been graded, two bridges constructed over the brook that ran through the grounds and a bell tower erected north of the house.

All manner of gifts had been received, including a check to buy books for a library. The reporter concluded that "the house is now a thing of which any community might be proud."<sup>5</sup> About a year later the Croft's built a 16x28-foot addition that almost doubled the seating capacity of the assembly hall.

In this era before the Internet, television, films and radio broadcasts, people sought and enjoyed live instruction and entertainment from lecturers and performers to an extent that can only be imagined today. People also developed their own amateur talents to entertain each other and they were fond of communal picnics and suppers. The Neighborhood House set out to provide a place for all these activities and more.

This was to be an inclusive organization rather than an exclusive one. In a speech he gave in July 1906, Rev. Croft expressed his feelings about the disparity between the wealthy of the Gilded Age and the working man. He felt that the old Puritan stock was degenerating and he was dismayed to witness "the thousands of young men who are pampered and purposeless and who live in hotels and clubs and have a great difficulty killing time." Laborers, he felt, lived lives of drudgery and they should "have time to read good books, to look at pictures and to go out into God's fields and drink in some sweet thoughts." He counseled his audience,

The great tide of emigration that has been breaking upon our shores has affected every hamlet and town; along with our honored names of Case, and Barber, and Humphrey, and Phelps, and Pettibone, we find written Ericson and Einstein, the Zimmermans and Zabriskis, the Hooleys and the Dooleys. Some countries seem to be good countries to move away from, one other country, at least, a good country to move into. The emigrants are among us and the question everywhere is asked, what are we going to do about it? They are here to stay, and the more important question for us to answer is, how are we to make them peaceable and happy and law abiding citizens under our free government?<sup>6</sup>

In addition to providing education to potential new Americans in schools and churches, Rev. Croft's answer to his own question was to welcome them in a social setting. The idea behind the settlement house and its close relation, the neighborhood house, was not new. It was brought from England to this country by reformers like Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr, who opened their Hull House in Chicago in 1889. Like that well-established institution, the Weatogue Neighborhood House was meant to bring all nationalities and classes of people together for the betterment of all.<sup>7</sup>

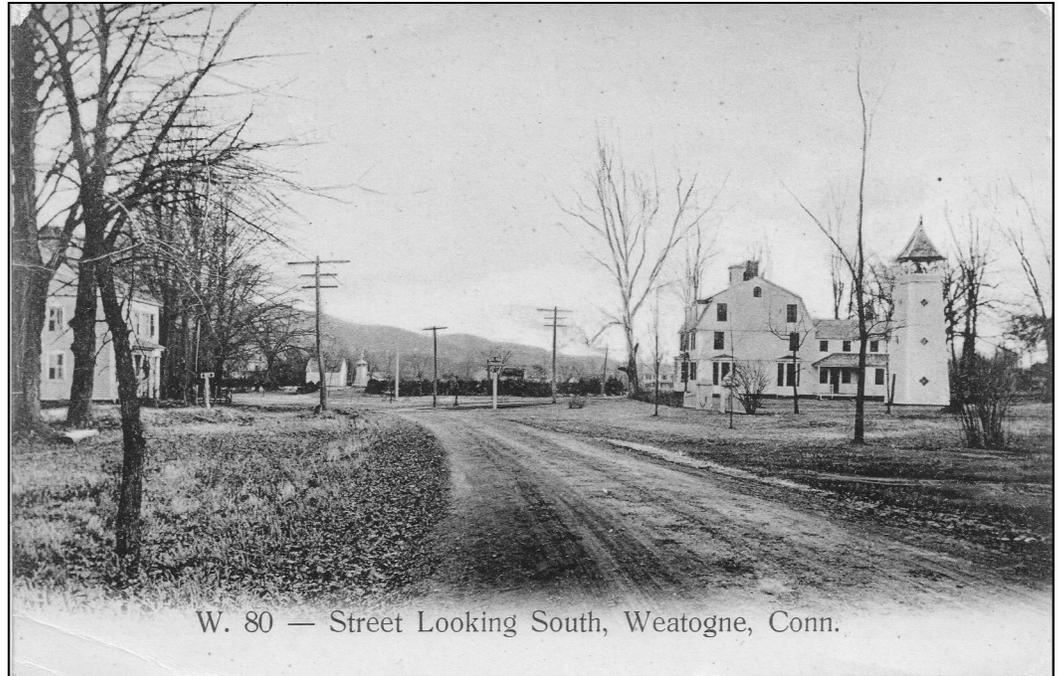
Jobs on tobacco and dairy farms and especially at the Ensign-Bickford Company had attracted immigrants from many countries to this part of Simsbury; the lace mill in the Tariffville section had lured skilled lace makers from England and Scotland. The largest foreign-born population in town recorded in the 1900 U. S. Census were the Irish, many of whom had been here long enough to have their own farms. Besides people from the British Isles, the census lists residents born in France, Switzerland, Sweden, Denmark, Russia, Russia (Poland), Austria (Poland), Germany, Italy, Canada (English), Canada (French), and one each from Hungary and Bermuda. There were two brothers from China and one man whose parents were born in Greece. While quite a few immigrants were farm laborers or factory workers, many were skilled workmen such as carpenters, masons and blacksmiths. Several worked for the two railroads in town and some were teamsters. Wealthy residents, especially those with summer estates, brought with them or hired gardeners, cooks, maids, valets, butlers and coachmen. With the coming of the automobile, the latter were replaced by chauffeurs.

During the years that the Neighborhood House was in operation, the Ensign-Bickford Company greatly increased its stock of company housing.<sup>8</sup> It built the single-family houses in Pine Hill, a wooded area west of Hopmeadow Street south of the fuse factory, which harbored an enclave of Polish natives. An Italian colony spread along West Street and the northern end of Bushy Hill Road.<sup>9</sup> The Neighborhood House had

The Neighborhood House, on the right, was built as a private home about 100 years before it became a local gathering place in 1905.

Shown here in its original location, it was moved about 200 feet north in 1910. Notice the dirt highway that is now Routes 10 & 202, the railroad tracks, and the Civil War monument.

A fire in 1932 destroyed the third floor and the roof was replaced with a simple peaked roof. The building stands at 33 Canal Street.



W. 80 — Street Looking South, Weatogue, Conn.

*Postcard of the Neighborhood House and Bell Tower about 1908 Courtesy of Richard E. Curtiss*

been open just over a year when this article appeared in the *Hartford Courant*,

#### SOLVING THE PROBLEM

##### How Simsbury Assimilates Its Foreign Population

The Neighborhood House at Weatogue, Rev. C. P. Croft, host, was filled last Tuesday evening with representatives of at least six nationalities. The affair was a "get together" social for the purpose of making certain newcomers, most of whom cannot speak English, feel at home in their adopted mother country.

Nearly fifty Poles were present, a dozen Italians, half a dozen Scotchmen, with real burrs in their mouths, and other groups, French, German, English, Irish, American. One of the best gramophones in the country served to break whatever ice was not melted by Mr. Croft's general welcome which was interpreted by Frank Zablocki in Polish. Mr. Zablocki also interpreted the remarks of Rev. O. H. Bronson and Rev. W. F. Sheldon. [A] mandolin and guitar duet by Weatogue young ladies completed the American portion of the program, except for a couple of taking banjo songs by a pseudo colored gentleman. Then followed a polyglot hour. Each group of guests contributed to the entertainment. A weird duet by Polish girls was followed at intervals by a solo, a trio with violin and a patriotic declamation by other Polish youths and girls. Two French girls with a violin accompaniment were recalled until for weariness they could not respond. A German mother sang a German mother's song. A young Italian won repeated triumphs with his accordion and another sunny youth sang sweetly and bashfully.

Two Scotchmen delighted everybody with their songs, especially "Annie Laurie" and "Bonnie Doon," without alloy. The program concluded with "The Star Spangled Banner" which was not easy for the Americans themselves to sing. After the program refreshments were served and dancing enjoyed until midnight. All the dancing was good, that by the Poles especially so.

An increasing number of Simsbury people are coming to believe that Mr. Croft is pointing the right way to solve some of the million and more problems, who have come to America within twelve months, problems under the question, "Aliens or Americans?"<sup>10</sup>

The ministers mentioned in the news article were Rev. Oliver H. Bronson, pastor of Simsbury's Congregational church, and Rev. Warren F. Sheldon, pastor of the Methodist church. Various ministers from

these and other churches in the area took part in the non-denominational Christian services held on most Sunday evenings and other events in the House.

### **Moving and Reopening the Neighborhood House**

When the Neighborhood House first opened in November 1905, the *Hartford Courant* reporter quipped that it was “located a stone's throw from the Weatogue Station of the Northampton Division [of the New York, New Haven & Hartford railroad] and so close to the tracks that a few inches more would have made it necessary to sidetrack the building whenever a train passed. In one sense the house had the right of way, for it was built before a railroad was even thought of.”<sup>11</sup>

Back in 1850 railroad tracks had been laid through Simsbury for the Canal Line that originated in New Haven and eventually stretched to Northampton, Massachusetts, roughly along the path of the defunct Farmington Canal. This railroad soon became part of the NY, NH & Hartford. In Weatogue the tracks crossed the Simsbury-Avon highway (now Routes 10 & 202) three times. These three grade crossings proved perilous for both the highway traffic and the trains. For example, in June 1906 the *Hartford Courant* published this news item,

C. P. Case's meat cart driven by Matthew Hummel, was struck by the 8:11 a.m. passenger train on the Northampton Division of the New York, New Haven & Hartford Railroad this morning at the crossing near the Neighborhood House in Weatogue. The driver jumped and was not injured. The engine struck the cart squarely, turning it over, but the horses were not injured. This is a bad crossing, as trains cannot be seen until one is almost upon the track.<sup>12</sup>

In the spring of 1910, the state railroad commission ruled that the railroad must eliminate the three grade crossings by rerouting a section of the highway and constructing a highway bridge over the tracks near the Neighborhood House. To facilitate this project, land had to be condemned. The 1808 Austin Phelps house, owned by Mrs. William P. Smith (née Fannie Winslow), was torn down and the Neighborhood House was moved northward some 200 feet from the tracks and put on the other side of the road then called "the Canton Road" and now called Canal Street.

The move, which was paid for by the railroad, gave the Crofts and their friend and ardent supporter, the Rev. Dr. D. Stuart Dodge, the opportunity to place the building on a higher foundation and to dig a deeper cellar. Apparently Rev. Dodge paid for the concrete cellar, with its bowling alley and shuffle boards, since a news article reporting on these new features said, “It is the desire of Dr. Dodge to spare no expense in making this the model institution of its kind on the country.”<sup>13</sup>

The people of Weatogue, their guests and well-wishers celebrated the reopening of the Neighborhood House on October 18 with their annual Harvest Supper, when, beginning at 6:30 in the evening, 235 people were served on long tables set up in the new basement. People came from all around. “Butler’s orchestra from New Hartford was present and the five musicians kept things lively until 11:30. They kindly donated their services,” the paper reported.<sup>14</sup>

### **Weekly and Annual Events and Special Programs**

In addition to the very popular Harvest Supper in the fall, every holiday was celebrated in turn. One Valentine Social was called a “box party” because each woman brought a box full of refreshments to share with her valentine. This party in 1910 attracted young people from all over Simsbury, Avon and Farmington; some came in sleighs, making up “a merry company.”<sup>15</sup>

In addition to this box party, the entertainment committees twice used other themes popular at that time, the “Poverty Social” and the “Pound Social.” People attending the first dressed in rags and tatters and were fined if their dress was too fine. For the latter, people brought wrapped packages weighing a pound each. The packages, with unidentified contents, were auctioned to raise money for whatever cause the

Neighborhood House committees were supporting, and over the years they supported many. The activities during socials like these were a mix of charades, recitations, readings, tableaux or a short play. Many times choral groups sang. There was usually music, either instrumental or provided by the gramophone. Often dancing was included, but there was never an event exclusively devoted to dancing, like a cotillion or prom.

The Washington Supper in February became another annual event. When Simsbury's Abigail Phelps Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) was organized in 1893, Julia Mather Croft served as its first regent. So it was natural for the people of the Neighborhood House to adopt the DAR's custom of celebrating Washington's birthday. Describing the Washington Supper in 1910, the *Farmington Valley Herald* reporter remarked, "[It] never is at the Neighborhood House 'eat and run' but leisurely 'sup with us' and then a social hour with any diversion that may be suggested."

With the number of living Civil War veterans dwindling, Memorial Day was a major holiday throughout the town. For years Rev. Croft gathered the Grand Army veterans, their wives and widows at the Neighborhood House for a reception where all could greet them, and at noon he treated them to a dinner featuring steak and strawberry shortcake. Twelve veterans came in 1909. About 1:00 o'clock they all proceeded to the Soldiers' Monument, located only a block south, for brief addresses by the veterans or relatives who spoke for them. Speeches were followed by patriotic band music.

In 1907 automobiles provided by Rev. Dr. Dodge, head of the Ensign-Bickford Company Ralph H. Ensign, former governor George P. McLean, Harry Ellsworth, Edward Brockett and Scoville J. Hamilton took the veterans to Tariffville, then to the Casino in the center of town for another ceremony. Afterward, people went across the street to Simsbury Cemetery to place flowers on soldiers' graves.

There was no Memorial Day observance at the Neighborhood House in 1911 because Julia Mather Croft died early that morning. After this, the Weatogue celebration on this day was a bit less festive.

The Congregational and Methodist churches had Children's Day each June and the Neighborhood House always had a program that evening where the children recited and sang. The Fourth of July brought a lawn social, sometimes with fireworks. The usual Harvest Supper heralded the end of summer.

Christmas was an especially big occasion. In 1912, the *Hartford Courant* reported, in part,

The ladies of the house met in the morning and with the aid of the men prepared the tables, trimmed the hall very attractively and made everything ready for the Christmas dinner at 1 o'clock. Sixty-four people sat down to a most bountiful and delicious dinner, consisting of turkey, chicken pie, scalloped oysters, sparerib of pork, celery, potatoes, turnips, cranberry sauce, pies, cake, coffee and fruit. All stood at their positions at the table while "Praise God From Whom all Blessings Flow," was sung. The twenty-third psalm was repeated and the Lord's Prayer.

After dinner the gentlemen gathered in the basement and smoked their pipes and spun their Christmas yarns. The children played games out of doors. The "women-folks cleared off the tables," and gathered the remnants on one table in the dining room, anticipating another hunger at 6 o'clock.

Later, after the leftovers were eaten—and for the fun of it people had to eat them with their hands—the children gave a program in the assembly hall.

This part of the program was exceedingly interesting, partly because of the very excellent preparation of the children, and partly because of so many children of foreign parents taking part in the exercises. It was frequently remarked during the exercises when so many of these bright Italian and Polish children joined with our own children and were fully equal in ability to them, that "this is solving the question that now so disturbs our country." Let the children come together and the parents also, and freely mingle, and see what satisfactory results follow. These foreign children were remembered on the Christmas tree equally with our own children.

The Neighborhood House represents the democracy of religion; it stands for good all round community life. Rev. Otis Moore was present and gave a few words, while Mrs. Moore sang some carols to the delight of all present. Visitors were present from Hartford and towns about. The ladies who had charge of the dinner and entertainment deserve great credit.<sup>16</sup>

This idea of “the democracy of religion,” or religious tolerance, was one of the aspects of the Weatogue community center that earned it plaudits around the country. An article published in 1911 in Louisville, Kentucky, in *The Weekly Market Grower’s Journal* and reprinted as far away as the *Pacific Northwest* magazine in Portland, Oregon, called it “a model of this kind of community service.” It said, in part,

[The Neighborhood House] is connected with no one church and is in no sense connected with the churches for financial support, but it is upholding in an admirable work the Christian ideals in a rural community. Sunday evening there is always a religious service. No particular form of worship is used. The meetings vary according to subject and occasion, and the aim is to bring something fresh, vital and interesting to the listeners. All subjects that will interest and help community life are used. Strict Protestants, staunch Catholics and people interested in no church mingle together freely in all meetings, secular and religious.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to these holiday programs, there were cultural events; some of them were fundraisers. Rev. Croft took care of maintaining the building, but money was needed for the cost of some programs and other operating expenses and for worthy causes that the neighborhood chose to support. In addition to the Sunday evening meetings, there was one event almost every week and sometimes more. A committee of women prepared a supper with entertainment every other week, charging ten cents a person or perhaps fifty cents if it was a fundraiser.

Musical programs and plays, especially comedies, seemed to be the most popular cultural events. Opera diva Clara Louise Kellogg, a friend of Mrs. Croft’s who had retired to New Hartford, gave several concerts, accompanied on the piano by Westminster School’s music professor W. Woods Chandler. Nine-year-old child prodigy pianist Olcott Vail of South Manchester, Connecticut, drew a large audience. Music and singing groups from Granby, Suffield and all around came to perform, as well as in-house talent who could be called upon to play instruments or sing. Joseph R. Ensign, son of Ralph H. Ensign, and his wife Mary sang solos the same evening that featured a quartet by Simsbury’s Messrs. Potter, Ellsworth, Case and Humphrey.



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1. For a history of the Casino, see pages 163-164 of John E. Ellsworth's *Simsbury: Being a Brief Historical Sketch of Ancient and Modern Simsbury, 1642-1935*, published in 1935 by the Simsbury Committee for the Tercentenary.
2. For genealogical background and additional information about the Crofts, see the section “Rev. Charles Pitman Croft, 1844-1921,” in the Fall 2006 issue of this publication.
3. Obituary of Rev. Charles Pitman Croft, *Hartford Courant*, November 16, 1921, 16. He died at age 77.
4. For information on this house, built sometime after October 1779, see pages 224-227 in the manuscript “Old Homes of Simsbury,” compiled in 1936 by Abigail Eno Ellsworth. The house stands at 332 Hopmeadow Street.
5. *Hartford Courant*, November 6, 1905, 1; November 8, 1905, 13.
6. Rev. Croft spoke in Canton, Connecticut, during the celebration of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the incorporation of that town. The text of his lengthy speech is on page 11 of the July 19, 1906 issue of the *Hartford Courant*.
7. The Weatogue Neighborhood House (1905) and the Hartford Social Settlement (1895) were the two institutions listed for Connecticut in *The New Encyclopedia of Social Reform: Including all Social-Reform Movements and Activities, and the*

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## Simsbury Free Library Updates

Fair Alice McCormick has donated a remarkable collection of Eno family items. They include seven daguerreotypes of Amos R. Eno and his wife, Lucy Jane (Phelps) Eno, and their children and one of the Elisha Phelps house. There are also marriage, travel and military documents. Several newspaper clippings and other items pertaining to William Walter Phelps are included. The trustees and staff extend their heartfelt thanks to Mrs. McCormick and also to Jackson F. Eno who delivered her donation.

Sharon Jelinek has donated her recently published book *New England to Iowa: Abstracts of Purdy, Haskins, Berry Families*. We appreciate this addition to our genealogical collection.

Alexandra Geitz has worked diligently to make finding aids for our archives. We were very pleased to have her services as a summer intern. This semester Ms. Geitz is completing her studies at Simmons College in Boston for a Master of Science in Archives and a Master of Arts in History.

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The regulars at the House enjoyed staging plays with names like “The Peak Sisters” and “Bachelor’s Romance.” Because of Rev. Croft’s friendship with the pastor of Willimantic’s Congregational Church, Rev. William S. Beard, that church’s thespian group, the Grex Club, gave many performances. Local people did readings; one evening a group gave an illustrated reading of poems by Longfellow and another evening they did selected readings from Dickens’ works.

Before World War I curtailed travel, people gave talks about their trips abroad, most often illustrated by stereopticon slides. Newcomer to Simsbury and Russian wolfhound breeder, Joseph B. Thomas Jr. gave a talk titled “Country Life in Russia” and came back another year to speak about Persia. In 1908 Miss Mary Humphrey and Joseph Ensign each told of their summer trips around Europe and Mr. Ensign came back in 1913 to show slides of his auto trip through the Austrian Tyrol. Henry E. Ellsworth, called “Harry” in the newspapers of the day, talked about his six weeks in England during the winter of 1910-11. Englishman Charles G. Baker and his American wife Edith moved to Weatogue to take up poultry farming, but he had been an engineer in mines in Mexico, so they were recruited to tell about life there. The next year another mining engineer, Frank Smith, came up from Mexico to visit his father, Ensign-Bickford Company foreman Reuben Smith, and he gave a talk on “Mexican Life.” These were a few speakers among many.

By Mary Jane Springman

*One of the most important elements in success of the Neighborhood House was the network of friends and colleagues cultivated by Rev. and Mrs. Croft. The second part of this article will tell of these friends of the project, especially Rev. Dr. D. Stuart Dodge and his extended family, as well as of the Neighborhood House people’s involvement in the events and needs of the world outside Simsbury.*

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*Economic, Industrial, and Sociological Facts and Statistics of All Countries and All Social Subjects*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, William D. P. Bliss, Editor-in-Chief (New York & London: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1910).

8. Lucas A. Karmazinas, *Historic and Architectural Resources Inventory for the Town of Simsbury, Connecticut* (Simsbury: Connecticut Commission on Culture & Tourism and the Town of Simsbury, 2010), 37-38, 54, 57-60.
9. *Ibid.*; *Hartford Courant*, October 17, 1915, 2.
10. *Hartford Courant*, January 17, 1907, 11.
11. *Hartford Courant*, November 8, 1905, 13.
12. *Hartford Courant*, June 7, 1906, 12.
13. *Farmington Valley Herald*, August 19, 1910, 5.
14. *Farmington Valley Herald*, October 21, 1910, 5.
15. *Farmington Valley Herald*, February 18, 1910, 3; February 25, 1910, 3.
16. *Hartford Courant*, December 28, 1912, 7.
17. *The Weekly Market Grower's Journal*, vol. 8, March 11, 1911, 221.

## Simsbury Free Library Programs



The library is pleased to be hosting the Gingerbread House competition for Simsbury Celebrates! again this year. The entries and winners will be on display and open for viewing on:

Monday, November 24, 3:00 –5:00 p.m.

Tuesday, November 25, 11 a.m. –5:00 p.m.

Wednesday, November 26, 3:00– 5:00 p.m.

Saturday, November 29, 4:00-7:00 p.m. during Simsbury Celebrates!

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## Genealogy Programs

**Genealogy Roadshow**—Saturday, December 13 and December 27: 10 a.m.—2:00 p.m.

Diane LeMay will try to solve any genealogy research problems patrons bring to her.

**French-Canadian Research Talk**—Saturday, January 24, 2015, 11:00 a.m.

Diane LeMay will provide you with French vocabulary and a list of general repositories in New England that focus on French-Canadian research. Bring any documents that need translating.

*Genealogy programs are free to members and \$5 for non-members.*

See the insert for the Irish genealogy program and the Book Club and Movie schedules.

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