

## The Neighborhood House in Weatogue Part 3: After Sixteen Years, the Mission Comes to an End

*At the time the Weatogue Neighborhood House was founded in 1905, the area was experiencing an influx of immigrants from Europe, drawn by hopes of a better life through employment on local tobacco farms and in the safety fuse factories of the Ensign-Bickford Company. At first, the primary focus was welcoming and helping to assimilate these workers, but before long its mission expanded to include projects that reached out to the needy in Hartford and beyond. While the people of the Weatogue section of Simsbury were unquestionably the mainstay of the Neighborhood House, it also attracted supporters from far afield.*

The Neighborhood House in Weatogue had been open just over two years when its members invited representatives from the Salvation Army in Hartford to speak to them. "Strong men were moved to tears when they heard of the suffering and distress the Army workers are endeavoring to relieve and a substantial subscription was made toward the work," the *Hartford Courant* reporter wrote. "A sewing circle was formed among the women and clothes will be made for the deserving poor....Prominent women are taking a deep interest in the movement." Soon it was announced that "Mrs. Davis and Miss Blackman of the Salvation Army will meet the women to the Neighborhood House and all others who may be interested today at 2 o'clock for the purpose of making clothing for the poor."<sup>1</sup> This sewing circle continued meeting once a week for years, occasionally making clothes for Simsbury's needy.<sup>2</sup>

In December 1908 the Red Cross appealed for aid to the victims of the earthquake and tsunami that took about 123,000 lives in Sicily and the Calabria region of southern Italy. For this cause the Neighborhood House raised \$50, which would be about \$1,330 in today's dollars.<sup>3</sup>

The group pledged the same amount in 1910 to Sanford H. Lee, who came to speak to them of behalf of the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute. That school is now Tuskegee University, a private, historically black school founded in 1881 in Alabama by Booker T. Washington. Mr. Lee told them that their donation amounted to a scholarship for a student.<sup>4</sup>

In March 1911 they gave an entertainment to raise money for the people of Bushy Hill who were planning to build a Neighborhood House in that section of Simsbury. The group in Bushy Hill, which had formed in 1910, had been given a building lot south of the schoolhouse by Julius H. Vining.<sup>5</sup>

In May of 1913 the people of the Neighborhood House invited several people from New Britain to speak at their Memorial Day program on the value of training children to be good citizens. The speakers included the Congregational minister Rev. Henry W. Maier, lawyer William C. Hungerford and Miss Mary S. Labaree, agent of the New Britain Charity Organization, who was described as an expert on mission and settlement work.<sup>6</sup>

Helping to support mission work became an important project after Rev. Croft's close friend Rev. William S. Beard became assistant secretary of the board of the Congregational Home Mission Society. These two men had met in 1908 when Rev. Croft served for a while as the acting pastor of the Congregational Church in Willimantic, Connecticut, just before Rev. Beard became its settled pastor. A popular speaker at the Neighborhood House's regular Sunday evening services, on one occasion he brought with him the Grex Club,

an organization of high school boys in the Willimantic church. They were a great hit when they presented the play "The Time of His Life."<sup>7</sup> In 1916 Rev. Beard moved to New York City to work for the Congregational Home Mission Society.

Soon the people of the Neighborhood House made a contribution to the home missions. In one month, thanks to a Grex Club performance of the comedy "The Colonel's Maid," the proceeds from a Harvest Supper and generous contributions by townspeople, particularly Antoinette Eno Wood, they raised over \$480. This was enough to buy a Ford for the missionary at White River, South Dakota, leaving \$100 toward the purchase of a Ford for the missionary at Plentywood, Montana. Rev. F. E. Henry, the missionary from South Dakota, spoke at the Neighborhood House in March 1917.<sup>8</sup>

The entry of the United States into World War I on April 6, 1917, brought changes in the focus and activities of the Weatogue Neighborhood House. A fund-raising entertainment on April 20 and many donations from people throughout the town allowed the members of the House to contribute \$250 to the Red Cross. The entertainment that evening included songs by the students from the Hampton Institute (now Hampton University, a historically black school). These young men had come up from Virginia to work in Alexander T. Pattison's tobacco fields in the Terry's Plain section of town.<sup>9</sup> Much of the usual immigrant labor force had been called back to fight by their home countries on both sides of the conflict in Europe.

About a year later, Neighborhood House members and guests heard Rev. Ernest L. Wismer of Bristol, Connecticut, speak about the conditions he had seen in the combat zone while working for the Y.M.C.A in France.<sup>10</sup> The Neighborhood House also was the designated place for the people of Weatogue to come "to register their pledges to save and purchase War Savings Stamps."<sup>11</sup>

The ladies sewing circle hadn't waited until the United States entered the war. Shortly after hostilities began in Europe, they began to sew garments for the Red Cross to distribute overseas. By November 1914 they were meeting to sew two afternoons a week, either in the home of Carrie Dickenson or Rev. Croft or in the Neighborhood House. The Simsbury branch of the Red Cross furnished the materials.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the extra activity generated by the war, the members of the Neighborhood House decided to host a group of the *New-York Tribune's* Fresh Air Fund children during the summer of 1918. More than fifty children came to Simsbury, especially to Tariffville, for the last two weeks in July, and fourteen of them stayed in the Neighborhood House. All fourteen were girls. The committee appointed to care for them consisted of Carrie Dickenson (Mrs. Eliada Dickenson), Lillian Connor (Mrs. George Connor), Daisy Marks (Mrs. Carlton Marks) and Augusta Roby (Mrs. Frederick Roby). These women were some of the most active members at the time. The *Hartford Courant* reported, in part,

Everyone in the neighborhood helped to feed [the girls], and it was no wonder that hollow cheeks filled out and faces grew round and rosy. They paddled in the brook for hours every day, and they picked wild flowers until the Neighborhood House had bunches of flowers in every nook and corner...."Their greatest delight was in the simplest things that the country child takes as a matter of course," said one of the women who had helped care for them. "They never tired of picking every sort of wildflower that they could find, and the fireflies that flitted over the meadows in the evening were more wonderful to them than all the beautiful electric displays of New York."

The children were nearly all of American birth, ranging in age from 4 to 14 years. The youngest little tot of 4 was accompanied by three older sisters. These four girls belong to a large family, and were probably in more straitened circumstances than any of the other children, and the women of the neighborhood devoted much more time to sewing for them. They were also given shoes, hair ribbons and many articles of clothing. That these girls and their parents were pleased with the results of their stay in the country is evidenced by the fact that their father has written to know if he could find work here.

The article told of little parties arranged for the girls and a picnic at a place called Craig's Mills that the whole



Left: Courtesy of Norman Dagen, Find A Grave website



Right: Courtesy of the Simsbury Historical Society

The photograph on the left was taken of Charles Pitman Croft while he was a student at Wesleyan University, from which he graduated in 1869. The one on the right pictures him as a middle aged man in front of his house in Weatogue, called both Elm-Croft and Elm Cottage, which he and his wife, Julia Mather Croft, furnished with a notable collection of antiques. With his wife, and later as a widower, Rev. Croft did much entertaining in the house and on the grounds, which slope eastward to the Farmington River and the site of their bath house. The central part of the house, at 332 Hopmeadow Street, dates from about 1779.

neighborhood went to, the children taken on an autobus.<sup>13</sup>

Neighborhood House functions drew people to Simsbury from near and far, most of them friends and associates of Rev. Croft and his wife, Julia Mather Croft. As explained in the first part of this series, Julia Croft's cousin Miss Antoinette Phelps of Hartford made the Neighborhood House possible by donating her summer home for its use. This maiden lady had assumed much of the responsibility for raising the three young daughters of Simsbury native Hannah Pettibone Latimer Pierson after Mrs. Pierson died in 1883. These girls are described in newspaper articles and the 1900 Federal census as Miss Phelps' nieces, although her three siblings died young and childless. Two of the Pierson girls lived to adulthood and they enjoyed returning to the house where they had spent summers in their childhood. Mary Caroline Ogden Pierson married in 1889 Horace Bushnell Cheney whose family owned the famed silk mills in Manchester, Connecticut; of the two sisters, she and her husband came most often to the Neighborhood House. Lucy Wilcox Pierson, who in 1904 married New York lawyer George Francis Dominick, also came with her husband and children from their Greenwich, Connecticut, home.

The Crofts' home, which they first called Elm-Croft and later Elm Cottage, became a veritable country inn for out-of-town people who came to present or attend programs at the Neighborhood House. Foremost among them was Charles Grosvenor Osgood, who became Holmes Professor of Belles Lettres at Princeton. He had been a classmate of Frank Dodge's at Phillips Academy, Andover, in the same class at Yale, and was Frank Dodge's lifelong friend. At Julia Mather Croft's funeral in 1911 Prof. Osgood spoke of meeting her twenty years before and feeling blessed when he became one of the circle of young men that she called "my boys."<sup>14</sup> Over the years he spoke at Neighborhood House meetings on topics he titled "Our Intimate Friends"

and "A Respectable Citizen" and on similar themes. He and his wife always stayed in the Crofts' place with its ancient elms.

By the time of Julia Croft's funeral Frank Dodge was an invalid confined to his lodgings in New York's Plaza Hotel, but he continued to correspond with his friends in Weatogue. For Christmas of 1912 he gave all of the children of the Neighborhood House between the ages of ten and seventeen a deposit of five dollars in the Postal Savings Bank, not to be drawn for five years. This amount would be about \$123 in today's dollars. To the adults he gave a 1913 calendar published by the Women's Christian Association. Previously he had given family bibles and subscriptions to *The Outlook*, a weekly magazine published in New York.<sup>15</sup>

Among the Crofts' personal friends who occasionally came to visit was Frances Foster Perry of Indianapolis, who had been at the McLean Seminary in Simsbury.<sup>16</sup> Her book *Their Hearts' Desire* was published in the fall of 1909. This colorful, lavishly decorated and illustrated gift book was described as "a Christmas tale for children."<sup>17</sup> New Yorker Reinette Lovewell, who wrote short stories for magazines, was Rev. Croft's guest in 1914. Publicity for her program said that Miss Lovewell would speak about the conditions and social problems of country life.<sup>18</sup> As mentioned in the first part of this series, the opera singer, Clara Louise Kellogg, a friend of Julia Croft, came from her country home in New Hartford to give several performances.

Professor E. F. Chandler of Columbia University and his wife spent several days in 1906 with the Crofts. He was the president of the International Chemistry Association and he spoke on "The Mysteries of Plant Life." Others speakers, like Dr. Dorman of the Syrian Protestant College, and Prof. William B. Adams, M.D, a visitor from Syria, were house guests of Rev. D. Stuart Dodge.

The Neighborhood House also welcomed Simsbury's own educators. The Westminster School's classics professor Dr. Josiah Bridge came on a Sunday in May 1907 to preach at the weekly evening service on "The Gospel to the Sick." William L. Cushing, Westminster's founder and headmaster, gave a talk illustrated with stereopticon slides in April 1913 on his European travels, especially Rome, then came back to show his slides of Pompeii. Albert J. Chidester and Earle A. Childs, two principals of Simsbury High School, gave programs, as well as the Superintendent of Schools, Rev. John B. McLean. Mary H. Humphrey told of her 1908 summer in Europe. She had been one of three faculty members at Simsbury High School when it opened in 1903. Miss Humphrey taught English and history that year while Lillian Winslow Smith, Rev. Croft's neighbor and the late Rev. Horace Winslow's granddaughter, taught French, German and science.<sup>19</sup> Both women made teaching a lifelong career. Miss Smith and her mother, Fannie (Mrs. William P. Smith), were ardent supporters of the Neighborhood Club, taking part in skits and entertainments and giving programs.

Members of the Wellesley Club of Hartford arrived by train in May 1907 and 1913 when Lillian Smith arranged to have her alma mater's group hold its annual meetings in the Neighborhood House. Rain prevented a scheduled walk in 1913, the *Hartford Courant* reported, so instead "[a] pleasant feature of the day was provided when Rev. Charles P. Croft invited the members to visit his home and look at his antiques."<sup>20</sup>

As a member of the minister's club in this area, Rev. Croft generally hosted one of their monthly functions each year. His luncheon in June of 1914 brought ministers and their wives from the three Congregational churches in Hartford and churches in New Britain, Farmington, Bristol, Terryville, New Haven, Waterbury, Watertown and Willimantic. Former pastors of Simsbury's Congregational church Oliver H. Bronson of New Haven and Charles E. Stowe of New York attended. The clergymen mingled with Rev. Croft's friends Senator George P. McLean and his Juliette, who were briefly back at their home in Simsbury from Washington, D. C.; also Simsbury townspeople Antoinette Eno Wood, W. Woods Chandler and his wife Kathryn, and Joseph R. Ensign of the Ensign-Bickford Company and his wife Mary, both of whom took pleasure in participating in Neighborhood House musical entertainments. The sisters Mary Pierson Cheney of South Manchester and Lucy Pierson Dominick of Greenwich came with their husbands. Rev. Croft's attorney

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## Rev. Croft's Close Association with the Dodge Family

In the fall of 1884, Rev. D. Stuart Dodge engaged Rev. Charles Pitman Croft and his wife, Julia, to come to Columbia, South Carolina, for the winter to help him with his family of four sons.<sup>1</sup> The Crofts had no children of their own and Rev. Croft had recently resigned as the pastor of a Congregational Church in Terre Haute, Indiana. Rev. Dodge had been a widower for four years and his oldest child, his only daughter and her mother's namesake, Ellen Ada Phelps Dodge, had succumbed to illness in India in November 1883 while on a honeymoon trip around the world. Rev. Dodge, who knew the Crofts from summers spent in Simsbury, sought their help with Walter, 15, Francis, 12, Guy, 10, and Clarence, 7. Thus began an association that grew to include many more responsibilities for Rev. Croft and eventually ripened into a sincere friendship between the two men.

For as long as they lived, the Crofts continued to be a part of Rev. Dodge's sons' lives. Sometime prior to Walter's entering Yale in the fall of 1887, Rev. Croft was recruited to take him and Francis to Europe. This was hardly the first trip abroad for the teenagers. Walter had been born in Beirut while his father was teaching at the Syrian Protestant College (now American University of Beirut). The youngest boy, Clarence, was born during the family's sojourn in the Sandwich Islands (now Hawaii).<sup>2</sup> On this trip abroad, the boys with Rev. Croft toured England, France and Italy and spent the winter in a villa in San Remo, Italy.<sup>3</sup>

The Crofts would have welcomed to Simsbury the new Mrs. Dodge, Elizabeth Scott Boyd, whom Rev. Dodge married on September 25, 1885, in Albany, New York, with her minister father performing the ceremony.<sup>4</sup> She was known in Asheville, North Carolina, for her deep interest "in the Christian and industrial training of the youth of the South" and her support of the school for the young people of the mountains that became the Asheville Normal and Collegiate Institute (later Asheville Normal and Teachers College).<sup>5</sup> Sadly, after their wedding she lived only three years. Later Rev. Dodge accepted the presidency of the Presbyterian Home Mission Board, a position which he held from 1899 to 1915, and he erected on the Institute's campus the Elizabeth Boyd Memorial Chapel.<sup>6</sup>

After returning to live in Weatogue permanently, Rev. Croft began to buy, renovate and then rent or sell historic houses in the area. For example, he once owned 295 Hopmeadow, built about 1760 by Thomas Case; 327 Hopmeadow Street, built before 1730 by Jonathan Humphrey; and 4 Hartford Road, the former Pettibone Tavern (now Abigail's Grille and Wine Bar), built in 1801 by Jonathan Pettibone.<sup>7</sup> His interest in and experience with local properties dovetailed nicely with the Dodge men's need for an overseer for their country estates while they were in New York City during the winter months or traveling abroad. Rev. D. Stuart Dodge, his son Walter Phelps Dodge and his brother Norman White Dodge all relied on Rev. Croft to be their general manager. Arthur Murray Dodge's widow, Josephine Jewell Dodge, also employed him for special projects, as when in 1902 she decided to grow four acres of tobacco under cloth.<sup>8</sup>

Norman White Dodge was the last of the family to build a summer place in Simsbury. He had been in charge of the Phelps-Dodge Company's lumbering operations in Georgia and is still remembered there for the nondenominational church he built for the lumber mill workers on St. Simons Island. The church, with its tall windows of old English art glass still stands.<sup>9</sup>

He built a home he called Nassahegan in the Bushy Hill section of Simsbury that had the most up-to-date features of all the Dodge homes.<sup>10</sup> The main house had twenty-eight rooms, plus three bathrooms and was heated by hot water. It had electric lighting and running water made possible by a generator and pumping plant, according to a description in a 1907 issue of the magazine *Country Life in America*. The 167-acre estate also had two cottages, one with twelve rooms and the other with five and a stable with electricity and ten rooms on the second floor for servants.

In Norman Dodge's personal life, by the time he joined his older brother in Simsbury he had been

widowed twice, losing two young brides within two years of their marriage to him. His second wife, Emma, died in 1881, shortly after giving birth to a son, Marcellus Hartley Dodge. The boy was named for Emma's father, Marcellus Hartley, who had been sent to Europe during the Civil War by President Lincoln and Secretary of State Stanton to purchase arms and ammunition for the Union. Among other financial undertakings, Hartley eventually controlled the Remington Arms Company in Ilion, New York, and the Union Metallic Cartridge Company in Bridgeport, Connecticut (which later combined under the name Remington UMC). A noted philanthropist, he supported many of the same causes that interested the Dodge family.

With Norman Dodge so busy with the Phelps-Dodge lumber business in Georgia, his small son was raised by his Hartley grandparents and his aunt Helen Hartley (later Mrs. George Walker Jenkins). Since the Hartleys' New York home was at 232 Madison Avenue, the boy was just a few steps away from his Dodge grandparents. In his twenties, Marcellus Hartley Dodge would inherit control of his Hartley grandfather's companies. He would also be a significant presence in the later years of Rev. Croft's life and an indirect influence on the Weatogue Neighborhood House.

Upon his graduation from Columbia College in 1903, Marcellus Hartley Dodge and his aunt, Helen Hartley Jenkins, gave the school \$350,000 (more than \$9 million in today's dollars) to erect a much-needed dormitory, donated in memory of Marcellus Hartley. In August of that year, the recently graduated young man, his aunt and one of her two daughters came to call on Rev. and Mrs. Croft. The outcome of that visit was the trip that the young man, Rev. Croft and Professor Frederick P. Kopple of Columbia embarked upon in February 1904. They spent about four months touring Egypt, the Holy Land, and other places. Upon his return, Rev. Croft gave a talk on Egypt illustrated with stereopticon slides at the Congregational Church. A few months later, at the newly opened Weatogue Neighborhood House, his subject was Corinth, Greece.

Shortly after returning from abroad, Marcellus Dodge and his aunt Helen Jenkins purchased a 200-acre property in Convent, New Jersey, about four miles south of her home in Morristown. They named it Hartley House Farm and began to make the historic house and outbuildings into a summer camp for the disadvantaged New York City children whose families were served by the Hartley Settlement House, which the late Marcellus Hartley had established in 1897.<sup>11</sup> A decade later, Marcellus Dodge would call upon Rev. Croft for help with this project, which sometimes took the good Reverend to New Jersey for months at a time and away from the Neighborhood House.

Marcellus Dodge soon took control of his late grandfather Hartley's businesses, which often brought him to the Union Metallic Cartridge factory in Bridgeport. He sometimes stayed with the Crofts and in 1907, shortly after the announcement of his engagement to Ethel Geraldine "Gerry" Rockefeller, he brought his fiancée along for a visit.<sup>12</sup> She was the daughter of William and Almira Rockefeller and niece of John D. Rockefeller. They were married in her parents' home on Fifth Avenue in New York on April 18, 1907, in a quiet ceremony with the bride wearing no jewels out of respect for the groom's father's recent death. Several publications reported that they were the wealthiest newlyweds in the country.<sup>13</sup>

The *Farmington Valley Herald* reported in September 1908, "Rev. Mr. Croft...paid a visit to his friend Marcellus Hartley Dodge at Tarrytown-on-Hudson, and christened his boy Marcellus Hartley Dodge, Jr., at the home of William Rockefeller, father of Mrs. Dodge."<sup>14</sup>

As already mentioned, the Dodge family depended on Rev. Croft to manage their properties in Simsbury. Not only did he have to secure the houses while they were away, but in the case of Rev. Dodge's estate, Bellehurst, he had to supervise the employees who tended the dairy herd, creamery and horses. When a fire that started near the Stratton Brook railroad station and spread almost to the Weatogue post office burned more than 1,000 acres of forest in 1899, it was Rev. Croft the reporters interviewed about the Dodges' losses and the loss of his own famous stand of arbutus, the sweetly scented flower that people gathered in abundance each spring.<sup>15</sup>

All was not business, however. When Rev. Dodge discovered the joys of automobile touring in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he often took Rev. Croft along. One journey around New England and New York State in 1903 in a chauffeur-driven Peerless car was the subject of an article in the weekly magazine *Automobile Topics*. They covered over 1,000 miles during that trip and made multiple shorter excursions. "Dr. Dodge is an enthusiastic automobilist, and goes on long tours, testing not only his machine, but the endurance of his friends. The machine and the friends generally come home well knocked out, but the doctor returns smilingly triumphant and eager for something more difficult," the *Hartford Courant* reported of this Doctor of Divinity.<sup>16</sup>

Time passed and situations changed. Rev. Dodge's son Francis' health deteriorated to the point where he was unable to come out from New York, where he resided in a suite in the new Plaza Hotel, so Rev. Croft helped him divest himself of his Weatogue properties. Norman Dodge put his country place up for sale using a New York real estate firm in 1905, two years before he died. Walter Phelps Dodge began to spend years at a time in England, where he practiced law and wrote books, so his grand house, The Grange, sat empty. Rev. Dodge developed incapacitating rheumatism which caused him to remain in his residence in New York. The summer of 1912 was the last that he spent at Bellehurst. Soon Rev. Croft would be charged with overseeing the selling The Grange, Bellehurst and Nassahegan by a Hartford real estate firm and disposing of all their contents. (Marcellus Dodge had taken his late father's property out of the hands of the New York firm and named Rev. Croft as his agent.)<sup>17</sup>

By January 1915, the Connecticut School for Imbeciles, which wanted to move from Lakeville, held an option on The Grange, Bellehurst and Nassahegan. The state-run institution eventually abandoned its plan to relocate, but the option triggered the need to empty the houses and barns of all furnishings and equipment. During the next two years, Rev. Croft held private sales and a number of auctions. The auctions featured luncheons of food prepared and sold by the women of the Weatogue Neighborhood House.

Walter Phelps Dodge made a brief trip from London in January 1915 to tend to business in New York and stayed with Rev. Croft when he came out to see about his Grange. Incidentally, Dodge embarked the 30<sup>th</sup> of the month in New York bound for England on the *RMS Lusitania*.<sup>18</sup> On its next return trip to England, the ship would be sunk by a German U-boat. Marcellus and Geraldine Dodge also stayed with Rev. Dodge on their increasingly frequent trips to town. Rev. Croft had the help of his live-in housekeeper, Deborah Bushnell McCann, who had begun working for the Crofts while Julia Croft was still alive. He also employed outside help, particularly Henry Genlot, who lived in Weatogue and had emigrated from France.

With World War I raging in Europe, the Remington Arms Company and Union Metallic Cartridge Company, both headed by Marcellus Dodge, merged and expanded their Bridgeport factories. A feature article in the *New York Times* in 1916 declared, "Twelve million dollars spent in less than a year have brought into being what will probably be the greatest small arms and ammunition plant in the world."<sup>19</sup> Miss Sarah "Sadie" Marks, who had been the secretary of the Neighborhood House board for eight years, had left in October 1915 for a job in the Bridgeport plant. The *Farmington Valley Herald* reported that "her duties will be general welfare and research work among the women they employ."<sup>20</sup> The people of the Neighborhood House threw her a farewell supper and Miss Leontine Dickenson was appointed secretary.<sup>21</sup>

Concern about the disposition of his late father's property and their own estate in New Jersey brought Marcellus and Geraldine Dodge to Weatogue often to stay with Rev. Croft. One year Geraldine Dodge helped him welcome the members of the Abigail Phelps Chapter DAR to the event he gave annually in memory of his wife Julia Mather Croft, who had been the chapter's first regent.<sup>22</sup> Sometimes they all went off to football games at Yale and once they took a drive along the newly-developed scenic Mohawk Trail in Massachusetts. Rev. Croft, in turn, spent months at a time in New Jersey. In July 1916, the *Hartford Courant* reported,

## Rev. Mr. Croft Returns

Rev. Charles P. Croft who has been spending most of the past year at Convent, N. J., has returned to Weatogue and opened his house, Elm cottage for the summer. Mrs. Marcellus Hartley Dodge of New York, and son, Hartley, have been guests of Mr. Croft in his Weatogue home the past week. Mr. Croft has been much interested in the work on Mr. Dodge's country estate in Convent, N. J., and has spent most of his time the past year between the estate and the munition plants in Bridgeport. Mr. Croft spoke last Sunday evening at the meeting in the [N]eighborhood House, and expects to lead the meetings for a few Sunday evenings. He is much gratified at the way the people of the neighborhood have taken up the work and conducted the meetings and carried on the social activities during his absence.

With the three Dodge estates still unsold in the spring of 1917, Rev. Croft offered all the tillable land on them, almost 200 acres, all the farm equipment and four tenements for workers, to the state government to produce crops during the war. It was decided to grow fifty acres of corn and potatoes. He also offered the Neighborhood House to be used as a convalescent hospital for soldiers or some such thing. This did not materialize, but the people of the Neighborhood House put much effort into raising money for the Red Cross.

Miss Ethel Walker bought Rev. Dr. D. Stuart Dodge's estate in May 1917 and began the process of establishing her boarding school for girls there. In July of that year, her sister Evangeline (Mrs. Charles Andrews) bought the Norman White Dodge property and donated it to the school. In 1919, the Cluett family of Troy, New York, donated the Walter Phelps Dodge property to the school in memory of their daughter Emily, a student at the school who had died in the influenza pandemic that followed the war. This completed Rev. Croft's responsibilities as manager of his Dodge friends' properties in Simsbury. In 1933, some twelve years after Rev. Croft's death, Bellehurst and Nassahegan burned down, a suspected case of arson, and in 1969 the school demolished The Grange.

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1. *Hartford Courant*, November 26, 1884, 3; November 16, 1921, 16.
  2. *The Friend*, vol. 91, no. 2, February 1922, 30 (Google books); 1910 US Census.
  3. *Hartford Courant*, November 16, 1921, 16.
  4. *New York Evening Post*, September 29, 1885. (Typed extract found on Ancestry.com).
  5. *Presbyterian Banner*, vol. 89, 1902, 891; Samuel Tyndale Wilson (New York: Presbyterian Home Missions, 1906), 136, 143; [ncpedia.org/asheville-normal-and-collegiate-ins](http://ncpedia.org/asheville-normal-and-collegiate-ins).
  6. *Ibid.*
  7. Abigail Eno Ellsworth, comp., *A Record of the History of Some of the Old Homes of Simsbury*, an unpublished study done in 1935 by the Abigail Phelps Chapter, DAR. See pages 233, 239, 245.
  8. *Hartford Courant*, July 30, 1902, 9.
  9. Norman Dodge named the church St. James Union Church. Today it is called Lovely Lane Chapel and is part of Epworth By The Sea, the Methodist conference and retreat center that occupies the former site of the lumber mills on St. Simons Island.
  10. Nassahegan is the name of the Sachem from whom William Phelps, emigrant from England, purchased land in the 1660s within the town of Windsor.
  11. Hartley House in Manhattan at 413 W 46<sup>th</sup> Street is still open and serving its community.
  12. *Hartford Courant*, March 26, 1907, 16.
  13. Norman White Dodge died in Nyack, New Jersey, on February 20, 1907. Besides his son, he left a widow, the former Grace Vernon, whom he married January 5, 1897. (See *Hartford Courant*, February 23, 1907, 17; *New York Times*, January 7, 1897, 5).
  14. *Farmington Valley Herald*, September 25, 1908, 1. This was the only child that the couple would have. He was killed in an automobile accident while driving through the French countryside the summer after his graduation from Yale.
  15. *Hartford Courant*, May 11, 1899, 5. Amos F. Eno, Horace Belden, Jeffrey O. Phelps, and Ralph H. Ensign also lost valuable timber in this fire, which was caused by a Central New England Railroad Company locomotive.
  16. *Hartford Courant*, September 27, 1905, 16.



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William C. Hungerford and his wife from New Britain completed the group.<sup>21</sup> Many of the ministers were, at one time or another, featured speakers at the Neighborhood House.

In the decade following his wife's death, Rev. Croft had periods of illness that made him unable to conduct Sunday evening programs. His doctor advised him to go south in January 1913 to shake off a persistent "bronchial cold," so George Connor took over the task of organizing events and many of the regular supporters gave programs.<sup>22</sup> This allowed Rev. Croft to travel to Panama and the West Indies. Mr. Connor and his wife, Lillian (Marks) Connor owned a farm in Weatogue. He was described in the 1910 Federal census as a house carpenter and later as a foreman at the Ensign-Bickford Company. Mr. Conner undoubtedly was assisted by his sister-in-law, Sarah E. Marks, who had followed Mary "Daisy" Winslow, the late Rev. Horace Winslow's daughter, as the secretary of the board.<sup>23</sup>

The future of the organization was in question by July 1913, when this item appeared in the *Farmington Valley Herald*,

The Neighborhood House in Weatogue has been closed for the summer, much to the regret of all dwellers in that part of Simsbury and Avon. The Neighborhood House under the direct management of Rev. C. P. Croft has been a unique institution and it is the belief of this writer that it was doing a tremendous amount of good in Simsbury. Being nondenominational, and being a rallying point for all in the south part of town and the northern part of Avon, it helped the social life of the community along in a manner that cannot be measured in units when the matter of usefulness is considered. It is hoped by all that a way will be found to open the house again in the fall and to keep it going ahead as a social center.<sup>24</sup>

Rev. Croft did reopen the House in September and by the time he left on another southern vacation the next winter, he had enlisted the help of a young clergyman, Rev. Paul Macy of the Hartford Theological Seminary, to arrange for the Sunday evening meetings and the members rallied to give suppers and entertainments until Rev. Croft returned in the spring. Activities continued there until October 1919, when this item appeared in the *Hartford Courant*, "The Neighborhood House has been closed, there not being enough people in that section interested in the work to pay the expense of keeping it in running condition. Rev. Charles P. Croft ... has always helped materially to defray expenses. Because of ill health he has not been able to be as active as formerly..."<sup>25</sup>

By the time Rev. Charles Pitman Croft died at the age of seventy-seven on November 15, 1921, the Weatogue Neighborhood House had not been functioning for about two years. Back in July 1919 the Ethel Walker School had rented the former Pettibone Tavern and, with the aid of some of the students' parents, reopened it as an inn, restaurant and tea room.<sup>26</sup> About a year later it was announced that the Neighborhood House was going to be an annex to the Pettibone Tavern, which had become, according to the *Farmington Valley Herald*, "a fashionable place for Hartford people to drive to, for dinners."

Referring to the sales of many small family farms in the area to the American Sumatra Tobacco Company and the resulting corporate farming, a reporter commented, "Times have changed and the population living in Weatogue has changed. Probably advancing years, which make it impossible for Mr. Croft to do what he did a dozen years ago to keep up interest, has called for a change."<sup>27</sup> Recalling the Sunday evening services that were a regular part of the Neighborhood House program, another article said, "Mr. Croft's failing

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17. *Hartford Courant*, July 3, 1909, 3, 7.

18. *New York Times*, January 31, 1915, 30.

19. *New York Times*, "Our Greatest Arms Plant" by Charles Willis Thompson, January 16, 1916; 21, 22, 56, 57.

20. *Farmington Valley Herald*, October 1, 1915, 6.

21. *Hartford Courant*, October 4, 1915, 18; October 10, 1915, 21.

22. *Hartford Courant*, November 12, 1916.

health forced him to give up conducting these meetings, and lack of a leader caused their abandonment. It was a great disappointment to Mr. Croft that no leader could be found to carry on the work in which he had taken so much interest."<sup>28</sup> When writing his will just five months before he died, Rev. Croft had realized that too few members remained to bear the cost of maintaining the Neighborhood House, so he instructed his executors to sell the property.<sup>29</sup>

*Dr. Owen L. Murphy bought the Neighborhood House from Rev. Croft's estate in 1926 and moved his medical practice there.<sup>30</sup> He and his wife, Catherine, raised their family in the house.<sup>31</sup> After the gambrel-roofed third floor was destroyed by fire in 1932, they placed a peaked roof over the remaining two stories and continued to reside there. The building, still housing medical offices, stands at 33 Canal Street. When Dr. Murphy died in 1981 he was memorialized as one of the last country doctors in the Farmington Valley.<sup>32</sup>*

by Mary Jane Springman

*The initial success of the Weatogue Neighborhood House inspired the people of Bushy Hill and West Simsbury to establish similar community centers. Rev. Croft and the Weatogue members encouraged their fellow townspeople and, on occasion, raised money to help the new organizations to get started. Future articles will give the histories of these groups.*

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## Notes

1. *Hartford Courant*, February 8, 1908, 15; February 11, 1908, 15; February 12, 1908, 15.
2. *Farmington Valley Herald*, January 16, 1914, 1.
3. *Hartford Courant*, January 9, 1909, 17. Monetary estimate from [www.westegg.com/inflation](http://www.westegg.com/inflation)
4. *Hartford Courant*, September 20, 1910, 17; *Farmington Valley Herald*, September 16, 1910, 3.
5. Minutes of the Bushy Hill Neighborhood Society, 1. *Hartford Courant*, March 11, 1911, 15.
6. *Hartford Courant*, May 23, 1913, 13.
7. *Farmington Valley Herald*, May 21, 1915, 6.
8. *Hartford Courant*, March 11, 1917, 5.
9. *Hartford Courant*, June 3, 1917, 21; July 7, 1917, 3.
10. *Hartford Courant*, June 29, 1918, 9.
11. *Hartford Courant*, June 27, 1918, 3.
12. *Hartford Courant*, November 3, 1914, 18.
13. *Hartford Courant*, June 29, 1918, 9; August 11, 1918, 4. In July 1899 Mr. and Mrs. Norman Dodge had welcomed groups of underprivileged children from New York to stay at a cottage on their estate under the supervision of Annie A. Phelps of Simsbury and Georgia Cook of Middletown. *Hartford Courant*, July 20, 1899, 11.
14. His remarks are in a thirty-two page privately published booklet "In Memory of Julia Mather Croft, 1833-1911" in the collection of the Simsbury Free Library. The pallbearers at her funeral were Horace Belden, Joseph R. Ensign, Richard B. Eno and William Woods Chandler of Simsbury; Professor Osgood of Princeton; George F. Dominick, Jr. and Marcellus Hartley Dodge of New York; William Mather Smith of New Hartford and William C. Hungerford of New Britain.
15. *Farmington Valley Herald*, January 10, 1913, 5.
16. *Farmington Valley Herald*, September 25, 1908, 1.
17. *New York Times*, October 30, 1909, 34; *Hartford Courant*, December 17, 1909, 18; September 14, 1911, 18. The book can be read online at two sites: <https://archives.org/details/theirheartsdesir00perr> ; [catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/100297676](http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/100297676).
18. *Farmington Valley Herald*, December 4, 1914, 10; *Hartford Courant*, December 6, 1914, 11.
19. *Annual Report of the Selectmen, Treasurer, School Superintendent, and Health Officer of the Town of Simsbury for the Year Ending September 12, 1903* (Hartford: The Case, Lockwood & Brainard Company, 1903) 28.
20. *Hartford Courant*, May 23, 1913, 13.
21. *Hartford Courant*, June 21, 1914, 13.
22. *Farmington Valley Herald*, January 10, 1913, 3, 10.

## Simsbury Free Library Updates

Richard Cole Anthony has donated *Genealogical and Personal Memories Relating to the Families of the State of Massachusetts*, edited by William Richard Cutter and published in four volumes in 1910 by the Lewis Historical Publishing Company of New York.

The article "A 1911 Trip Abroad" that was published in the Quarterly in 2014 was based on the letters written by Mr. Anthony's grandmother, Alice Goodrich Eno Cole. In addition to these, he is currently donating materials having to do with the Eno family and other Simsbury townspeople in the twentieth century. Mr. Anthony's collection adds significant resources for anyone researching Simsbury history. A finding aid for it will be developed. The board and staff of the Simsbury Free Library want to thank Mr. Anthony for his invaluable contributions.

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We are also most grateful to Victoria Washburn Pandiscio for donating thirty-one Simsbury Town Reports, ranging from 1911 through 1979, and two Canton Town Reports. As well as being records of town business, these reports, especially the earlier ones, can yield for family historians interesting information about ancestors to supplement basic vital records.

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Kevin E. Gray donated a transcription of Rev. Charles Pitman Croft's Last Will and Testament. His timely contribution was much appreciated.

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Mary Jane Springman has donated the book *Soldier Engraver Forger, Richard Brunton's Life on the Fringe in America's New Republic* by Deborah M. Child to this library and the Simsbury Public Library. It is a brief biography of a talented engraver whose sideline of counterfeiting paper money landed him in Connecticut's Newgate Prison. You might like to peruse this richly illustrated book, published by the New England Historic Genealogical Society, before coming to hear the author speak at our library on May 18.



### Simsbury Free Library Board of Trustees

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23. Elizabeth (Fish) Stacy was the treasurer of the board from its inception. She and her husband, John Beasley Stacy, had a farm in Weatogue, and he served for many years at Simsbury's Superintendent of Highways. The Neighborhood House gave them a farewell reception in 1915 after they sold their farm and were about to move to the house that they had built in the center of town in the new Phelps-Croft subdivision. The organization lost a fine worker with their departure.

24. *Farmington Valley Herald*, July 25, 1913, 6.

25. *Hartford Courant*, October 26, 1919, 6.

26. *Hartford Courant*, July 27, 1919, 8.

27. *Farmington Valley Herald*, June 17, 1920, 2. Obituary for Rev. Charles Pitman Croft, *Farmington Valley Herald*, November 24, 1921, 1.

28. *Hartford Courant*, December 5, 1921, 15.

29. Section 14 of the Last Will and Testament of Rev. Charles Pitman Croft, dated June 24, 1921.

30. Simsbury Land Records, 63:529.

31. *Farmington Valley Herald*, June 21, 1928, 1.

32. *Hartford Courant*, March 17, 1981, A10.

# Simsbury Free Library Programs

**Drop In Book Club**—Tuesdays at 11:15 a.m.

February 9 *All the Light We Cannot See* by Anthony Doerr  
March 8 *Cutting for Stone* by Abraham Verghese  
April 12 *Jane Austin Book Club* by Karen Joy Fowler  
May 10 *Lila* by Alexandra Alter  
June 14 *Bandbox* by Thomas Mallon

Readers in search of great book discussions are always welcome at the Drop In Book Club! Free.

**Genealogy Road Show**—Saturdays from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.

February 13 & 27, March 12 & 26, April 9 & 23, May 14 and 28, June 11 & 25

If you are researching your family tree, but don't know where else to look to find your missing ancestors, bring in your tree and our genealogy librarian, Diane LeMay, will help you.

Free for members, \$5 for non-members. Reservations suggested.

**Heublein Tower En Plein Air Art Reception**—Thursday, February 25, 5:00 to 7:00 p.m.

Artwork painted at the Heublein Tower's second annual En Plein Air event will be on display. Artists Catherine Elliott, Deborah Leonard, Janet Iffland, Mandy Adendorff, Brian Colbath, Kate Tortland and Victor Legere rendered paintings of the tower and vistas beyond. All are for sale and proceeds will go to the Friends of the Heublein Tower for restoration of the tower. Refreshments will be served. Free.

**History Lecture and Book Signing**—Wednesday, May 18, time to be announced.

Author Deborah M. Child will speak on her book *Soldier Engraver Forger: Richard Brunton's Life on the Fringe of America's New Republic*. Please call or email the library for more information.

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*Mary Jane Springman, Editor, SFL Quarterly*

