

SIMSBURY

Genealogical and Historical Research Library

Volume 5 Issue 1

March 1998

FROM THE CHAIRMAN'S DESK

The Trustees of the Simsbury Free Library are delighted to announce the celebration of the Tenth Anniversary of the Simsbury Genealogical and Historical Research Library. Many of you have been with us from the start and lived through our growing pains, but let's do a quick review for new, and hopefully, interested members.

Back in 1985, after providing library services to the town for almost 100 years, the lovely building at 749 Hopmeadow Street was vacated and a handsome new building further down the street became the home of the Simsbury Public Library. The Trustees of the Free Library, keeping in mind the mandate of the trust of benefactor Amos R. Eno that they provide library services in the building, came to the decision that it would be appropriate to establish a facility for genealogy and historical research. They began by planning the restoration of the first floor of the building to its historical accuracy. While this was in progress, "The Codgers" generously donated their services and painted what had been the children's library in the lower level.

When this was complete a local volunteer, Mrs. Delores Dupuis, added her genealogy collection to that of the early years of the Free Library and we were open to the public in February 1988. The years 1988-1991 saw the continuation of work on the main premises under the supervision of Trustee Richard Wagner. In 1991 we were ready to graduate to the rear section of the renovated first floor behind the beautiful wrought iron security gates designed by Trustee Richard Schoenhardt. That same year the building was placed on the Connecticut Register of Historic Places with the assistance of Trustee Robert Lindauer.

Another large step ahead came in 1993 with the hiring of a professional librarian, Stephen E. Simon, MLS. Stephen has proved invaluable to the growth of the SGHRL. Those of you who do research here know how knowledgeable, helpful and pleasant he is to work with. The Library has continued to grow over these ten years with generous donations from many patrons and users to whom we are most grateful (several of these were mentioned in the last newsletter). Of course it would be impossible to operate without the superb assistance of so many faithful volunteers who give of their time and talent in the true spirit of preserving Simsbury's heritage. The enthusiasm and dedication of the entire Board of Trustees are extraordinary and keep things happening.

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The tenth anniversary will bring exciting things in the year ahead. . . such as the restoration of the front terrace, railings, steps and bench, plus the creation of an archival section in the front lower level, and, of course, a Fund Drive in the spring and a Celebration Party in the Fall. We will be bringing details and progress reports on all of this very soon. We are very pleased with the "The Gracious Lady of Hopmeadow Street" and we hope you are too. Thanks to ALL.

Peg Donohue

QUERIES

Seeking additional information and ancestry of **Elisha Harrington** who married **Sarah Messenger Jones** on 30 June 1754 in Simsbury. Was he the father of **Hezekiah Harrington** born to **Judith Alderman** ca. 1742-45? *Reply to: Phyllis H. Ahlf, P.O. Box 7118, Santa Rosa, CA 95407-0166.*

Seeking ancestry of **Roderick Adams**, born ca. 1750, Simsbury, CT, married **Isabel-Case**, 28 January 1773 in Simsbury. Children: **Roderick, Elizabeth, Ambrose, Rosanna, Luther, Harvey, Luke, Levi** and **Lucy**. Roderick d. 18 December 1829 in his 77th year at Onondaga, New York. *Reply to: Roderick O. Adams, 269 Spruce, Highland, MI 48357.*

I am preparing a **Porter** genealogy book. Will exchange information. *Reply to: Margaret Porter O'Brien, 201 Fairway Drive, East Windsor, CT 06088*

Do you have a query you would like to see published? Send it to Stephen E. Simon or e-mail us at "genehist@micro-net.com"

Richard Henry Lee - A Quiet Hero

The year of his birth determined the fate of **Richard Henry Lee**. He might have been a farmer like his father and grandfather before him. But the babies of 1841 became the soldiers of 1861. Richard Henry (called Henry by family and friends) was born in Granby, CT 8 February 1841, the son of **Oren** and **Susan Holcomb Lee**. His mother died when he was five years old and he was raised by his father's second wife, **Elizabeth Chapin Lee**. They lived on Bushy Hill Road in Granby. Little is known of Henry's life until he enlisted in the Union Army. His legacy consists of letters and a few newspaper clippings.

Twenty young men from Granby enlisted in the 16th Connecticut Volunteers in July 1862. Someone must have seen a potential for responsible leadership in this slightly-built blonde 21 year old youth, because he was mustered in as a Sergeant a month later. His fellow soldiers from Granby (cousins, friends and schoolmates) did not resent his position as leader.

Henry sent letters to his cousins in Granby, **Addie Holcomb** and her younger brother, **Starr**. In September 1862, a letter to Addie described their first battle - bloody Antietam.

Before I left home I said I hoped I should see a fight before We went home. I have seen it. And such a fight as boys do not always See... We were considerably cut up but the boys held their own first rate. Our Granby boys behaved particularly well. it was an easy matter for me to keep the ranks closed up, for everyone was bound to do his duty.

A letter to Starr a few days later told of army life and Henry's thoughts on the poor conditions caused by incompetence. *We went over the potomoc this afternoon and took a bath, washed our clothes and put them on wet. Had not had my shirt washed before for about three weeks... Our rations are nothing but hardtack and army coffee. When we get any meat it is cooked before the animal heat is out of it, and we have to eat it without salt... I have enlisted from patriotic motive and do not wish to leave until the Stars and Stripes float proudly over the whole land, but no man can feel the earnestness and enthusiasm that Should Characterise the American Soldier, if he is fed on rotten rations or marched on an empty Stomach.*

Early in 1863, the 16th Connecticut was sent by railroad and steamer to Fortress Monroe, Virginia, arriving on Henry's birthday. *I thought of the past, of my quiet birthdays at home. How little I expected to be in such circumstances. I should like the barrack well enough if there were not so many fellows in here. You don't begin to tell the number when you say*

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Richard Henry Lee - A Quiet Hero cont.

50,000. I don't mean to say that 50,000 soldiers, armed and equipped, sleep in one barrack. What I do mean to say is although I have been in places where lice were thick and large. I never before saw any such fellows as inhabit these barracks. A soldier lies down to sleep, first he knows a louse jumps into his shoe, digs a whole in his stocking, and is just proceeding to lance a vein when Mr. Soldier wakes up and makes a dive for Mr. Louse.

March 1864 found Co. E in Plymouth, North Carolina. The 16th Connecticut had been roused from their "splendid and commodious camp" in Plymouth., Virginia by General Hickman. Evidently the General wanted the snug framed tent houses for his troops. However, the camp "accidentally" caught fire as the 16th was leaving. "He thinks the 16th boys are terrible fellows."

A letter to his cousin Addie, dated March 2, 1864, was the last letter Henry mailed to Granby. On April 17, the garrison of 1600 men was attacked by an overwhelming Confederate force 12,000. The besieged troops held out stubbornly for 3 days of bitter fighting. The 16th Connecticut Volunteers refused to let their flags fall into the hands of the enemy. The colorguard tore the flags into strips and gave them to the members of the regiment to conceal. In 1879, remnants of the flags were gathered from survivors and a new flag was made and placed in the State Capitol at Hartford on "Battle Flag Day." The captured Granby soldiers were sent to the infamous prison at Andersonville.

The desperate men at Andersonville wrote a petition headed *The memorial of thirty-thousand suffering and starving men* encouraging Abraham Lincoln to resume the prisoner exchange. When the petition came to the little group of Connecticut Yankees, they, typically, had a meeting to decide their position. Henry spoke at length and said the petition was unworthy of them and the government. He closed with substantially these words *The nation's faith is pledged to the slave, it has no right to break that pledge and we no right to ask it.* Not one signature from this group of Connecticut men appeared on the petition.

Henry was mustered out 15 June 1865. He married **Mary E. Holcomb**, daughter of **Chauncey and Polly Holcomb**. They moved to Lansing, Iowa where he started a career in manufacturing. They had two daughters before Henry died 27 May 1876 at the age of 35 of consumption contracted at Andersonville.

On Memorial Day 1876, Deacon **Asel H. Rice** proposed that the name of Henry Richard Lee be added to the list of those memorialized on the Soldier's Monument on the Green. Henry's remains were brought home to Granby for burial in the Center Cemetery. His name was never added to the Civil War monument.

Carol Laun

Simsbury - During the Civil War

You may have wondered about the impact of the Civil War on Simsbury from April 1861 to April 1865. We do not have many specifics about the conditions in town at that time, but we do know that this was a serious interruption to this primarily agrarian community. The town, with a population of 2410 people, was quite rural. There were many farms, this being the principle occupation, but then were also industries such as the Toy Bickford Co., several creameries, saw and grist mills, textile mills, the turpentine business, and a distillery or two. Rumors abounded, especially with the publication of propaganda such as "Uncle Tom's Cabin" by **Harriet Beecher Stowe**, who Lincoln blamed for starting the Civil War.

Ten days after the Confederates fired on Fort Sumter, Charleston, SC, a Simsbury town meeting was held "to consult with reference to the present crisis in our international affairs." The meeting at once appointed a committee of five to receive and distribute funds for the benefit of those who would enlist in defense of the government. On that day, nine Simsbury men volunteered for service, and volunteer subscriptions in the amount of \$1100 were distributed among them and their families. Until a draft became necessary in August 1863, the town frequently voted to pay a bounty of \$100 to each man who would enlist for the term of nine months.

It must have been difficult to endure those years with so many of the young men gone to wage battle between the Union and the Confederacy. We see by the rolls that Simsbury answered President Lincoln's call for volunteers and supplied 195 choice young men – 172 privates, 11 corporals, 6 sergeants, 2 musicians, 1 second lieutenant, 1 major, 1 captain, and 1 assistant surgeon. Some 13% of Simsbury's population went off to war. Worse yet, the town's population was divided into three groups by the census of those days – 600 were free white males over 16 years of age, 600 were free white males under 16 years of age, and 1200 were free white females. Thus, if only those in the first group were called to volunteer, and 195 did so, then 33% of the adult males left town to serve the Union. That created a problem for the women who were left behind, since they then had the responsibility to raise their families and the crops as well.

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Simsbury - *During the Civil War cont.*

Some of the men of volunteer age were able to provide substitutes for their service, for a fee of \$200, and that allowed them to stay home. Those over 50 were also exempt from serving. Those who served by substitute and stayed in town probably felt the heat of local society. It can be imagined that this feeling escalated during the war when the young men were brought home to their final resting place in Center Cemetery, or when the mail brought bad news from their volunteer friends "in the field."

Letters at the Simsbury Historical Society from **Capt. Joseph Toy, Jr.** (Company H, 12th Regiment CV) to his family tell the latest news from New Orleans in May 1862. He writes that he had written from 50 to 100 letters (there was plenty of free time) but had received just 5 in return. He talks about sleeping at night with just "the blue heaven for a coverlet." He tells of the "oppressive heat of the day and the cold, damp nights with heavy dews." Of course, there were droves of disease-carrying mosquitoes. He jokes that "Yankees are not supposed to flourish in this climate." Also, "the only water we have is from the Mississippi, which at this high stage resembles a clay pool after a thunder shower. I am trying to fix something to filter or settle it for my company's use."

He writes that he can procure milk, eggs, and chickens, but he has not been paid and so has no money. He says that "if all of New Orleans were on sale for a cent, (he) could not buy a single paving stone." He pleaded for postage stamps. "There is no telegraph communication and you cannot conceive how ignorant we are." He asks his kin for their judgment as to "how the war is going and your opinion of how and when it is like(ly) to end. Rumor has it that the Confederates have defeated Gen. McClellan and Washington is in their hands." Unfortunately, Capt. Toy contracted typhoid fever in Louisiana shortly after he wrote this letter and died on June 21, 1862. His funeral at the Congregational Church in Simsbury was attended by all of the town folk as he was one of the earliest casualties of the war. That event spurred more men to volunteer.

The writings of Pvt. **Gavette B. Holcomb**, Sgt. **Alonzo G. Case** and his brother, Sgt. **Ariel J. Case**, all of the famous 16th Connecticut Regiment, provide more insight. They tell of arriving at Antietam Creek, Sharpsburg, MD, as the battle was about to begin. Their regiment had been given uniforms, but no guns. Those (the guns) they received on the day of the battle, and most men did not how to use them. It was a bloody battle during which Alonzo and Ariel's brother, **Oliver**, was killed, and they sent this news to their father, **Job**, back here in Simsbury. After that event, the 16th went to Fredericksburg. They had no drills, and could not get replacement uniforms or shoes. They write of there being a foot of

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Simsbury-During the Civil War cont.

snow on the ground, but soon it melted and turned into mud. After that Union loss, the 16th went to garrison Plymouth, NC where they were overrun by Confederate troops and about 2200 men were taken prisoner. They were taken to Charleston NC and from there to the dreaded Andersonville (GA) Prison. Andersonville was a large open field of about twenty-eight acres, some of which was swamp. There were about 35,000 men held within a stockade fence. There were no buildings of any kind, not even a shed, no protection against storms - no tents, just blankets for shelter. Rations were given out once per day and consisted of 3 heaping tablespoons of corn meal, occasionally the same of rice. No salt. Lots of bugs. One small stick of wood was given each man per day for a fire to cook with. Men died each night. The people of Simsbury were hearing of this and they were heart-sick.

Fortunately, the three men survived their ordeal by being exchanged for Confederate prisoners. They were returned to New Bern, NC until the war was over and there to be discharged June 1865. These men were in the service of their country for two years and ten months, eleven months and ten days as prisoners of the Confederates. Of the 195 men from Simsbury who went off to war, 35 died. They are all honored and remembered on the Civil War Memorial across from the Court House.

Richard C. Meyer

Mr. Meyer is currently researching the Wilcox family.

Notes from the field. . .

The Town Hall in Simsbury has just received the recreated condensed grantor/grantee index to their deeds from 1600-1850. This means one stop searching for this vast time period. Also the deed books are back from archival preservation.

Work on reformatting the Library at the Simsbury Historical Society is progressing smoothly. Soon that facility for primary source material will have a computer card catalogue and easy finding aids for researchers.

New Hours

Thur-Sat. 9:30 AM - 3:30 PM

SPECIAL SUNDAY OPENING - MARCH 22

12 - 3 PM

Our extended hours of have been well received. The extra time has helped to ease the congestion at the microform machines and allowed more patrons an opportunity for extra help from our librarian, Stephen E. Simon. Stephen will be here on Sunday, March 22nd to make up for the snow cancellations. This is the opportunity for the 9 to 5er's to avail themselves of his help.



SIMSBURY FREE LIBRARY

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