

County Gore Celebrates 250th Anniversary

By Cindy Cooper

The town of Charlton celebrated its 250th anniversary two years ago, but the incorporation of the District of Charlton in 1755 did not set the current boundaries of the town. In 1750 the inhabitants of County Gore petitioned the legislature for separation from Oxford. It wasn't approved. When the later petition that created Charlton was approved, it did not include the unincorporated lands south of Spencer and Leicester that were a part of an area called County Gore. The Gore was about 10,000 acres of land in the shape of a wedge that did not belong to any town. It wasn't until another petition was accepted in 1757 that about 6,000 acres of County Gore adjacent to Charlton were added to the town. Other portions of the Gore were eventually added to Sturbridge, Oxford, and Auburn.

Rufus Dodge wrote in History of Worcester County in 1889 that the addition of the Gore meant that "...53 taxpayers could share town expenses with 39 more." This kind of increase in population certainly had an impact on the small community. It resulted in the addition of a home on Depot Road that is probably oldest in town. A school committee was formed, which voted for each of the district schools to act independently. Not only were there more taxpayers, but also businesses were added. Dodge stated: "In the early history of the town there were at this place tanneries, manufactories of hoes and scythes; also a gin-still, malthouse and brewery, besides pot and pearl ash works."

In Worcester County: America's First Frontier, Peter Whitney wrote in 1793 about businesses that developed in the area called Northside, which was once a part of the Gore. Two tanners of note were Israel Waters and Asa Corben. He explained that Waters "carries on his work to great perfection. He has an excellent bark mill, carried by water, and upon a new construction, whereby he grinds all his bark. On the same stream, a little below, there is a gin still, brewery, malt house, and a corn mill, under the same roof, the property of Mr. Eli Wheelock, who erected said works in the year 1792, and where he carries on each business very largely to his own and the publick interest. On the same stream there are several grist and saw mills, and other water works." Starting in 1797 Eli Wheelock and his partner Leonard Morey had the building we now call the Rider Tavern constructed a short distance west of the distillery. (Unfortunately, Mr. Wheelock died before the inn was completed).

The tavern construction was completed in 1799. The little village area became an ideal location for business development, especially when the Worcester and Stafford Turnpike was laid out. Part of this toll road became the current Stafford Street. One tollhouse was located on what is now Route 20, near the location where Stafford Street starts. The state legislature created the Worcester and Stafford Turnpike Corporation "...for the purpose of locating, making, and keeping in good repair, a turnpike road, from the post road in the town of Worcester, through the towns of Leicester, Charlton, Sturbridge, Holland, and South-Brimfield, to the line between Massachusetts and Connecticut, and so as to meet the Hartford Turnpike...And be it further enacted that Salem Town, Abner Brown, and Aaron Marsh, Esq's, be...appointed a committee to locate said road in the best direction, according to their best skill and judgment..." on Feb. 15, 1806. Interestingly, Salem Town was a state legislator from Charlton who had a family connection to the tavern. His daughters Pamela and Elizabeth each married into the Rider family. Brothers Isaiah and William Rider had purchased the tavern in 1801. The location of the road helped the village to develop and prosper. Dodge wrote that before the railroad of 1838, Northside "...had the only post office in the town, and with the exception of Dresser Hill, was the largest settlement in town, being on the turnpike between Boston and Hartford, and having a large public house..."