

SIMSBURY

Genealogical and Historical Research Library

Volume 17 Issue 1

Spring 2010

Simsbury History is Saved and Told The Town's First Three Histories

A headline in the *Hartford Courant* in 1913 told this remarkable story: "STATE LIBRARY HAS ROLL OF MINUTE MEN, List of Simsbury Volunteers of 1776 Found in Dump Heap."¹ The article explained that about thirteen years before Lucius W. Bigelow, who has a place in Simsbury history as its last tin peddler and a veteran of the Civil War, heard that a refuse pile in the backyard of a house in the Weatogue section of Simsbury was going to be burned. He asked for it to be turned over to him and spent time over two years picking through it.

Among the documents he discovered was the Revolutionary War enlistment roll of the men in the First Company, Eighteenth Regiment of the Connecticut Militia. The article says, "The document begins with a letter from Jonathan Pettibone, colonel of the regiment, to Abel Pettibone, captain of the First Company, dated June 11, 1776, directing the enlistment or detachment of a third of his men in obedience to the enactment of the General Assembly, which ordered that a portion of each regiment be detached to serve as 'minute men,' to hold themselves 'in constant readiness for the better defense of this colony.'" The men listed as Simsbury's Minute Men were Samuel Howard, Elisha Willcox, Eli Alderman, Ezekiel Allen, Elijah Tuller, Abijah Pettibone, Noah Humphrey Jr., Joel Tuttle, Ozias Phelps, Joel Case, Isaac Willcox, Richard Humphrey, John Alderman, James Cornish Jr. and Aaron Willcox.²

Mr. Bigelow gave the letter and list to the Connecticut State Library for safekeeping and access for researchers. In addition, Mr. Bigelow found many papers signed by prominent people. Perhaps the earliest was the commission appointing a Pettibone as commander of the Simsbury Trainband (early militia) in 1736 or 1737. This document he gave to Simsbury's Abigail Phelps Chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR).

In a similar case, the tattered handwritten records that Rev. Dudley Woodbridge, pastor of the Congregational Church, had kept of his parishioners' baptisms, marriages and deaths from 1697 through 1710 were saved from being ground into pulp at a paper mill by someone who realized their historical worth. The Connecticut Historical Society's librarian, Albert Carlos Bates, later preserved these records by having them transcribed and published in book form.³ Both the anonymous rescuer and Mr. Bates did a great service for historians and the descendants of Colonial-era townspeople who would later wish to see the vital records of their ancestors. These examples illustrate how easily real connections to the past can be lost.

Simsbury is fortunate to have had many individuals over the years who have valued the past. Many generations of townspeople have carefully cared for early dwelling houses and artifacts. A special few have preserved the history of the town and its residents in print, either by the publication of primary source materials, as in the case of Rev. Woodbridge's church records, or as articles and books of history.

History of Simsbury, Granby and Canton from 1642 to 1845
by Noah A. Phelps (1788-1872)

Noah A. Phelps published the first book on Simsbury's history in 1845. It was long out of print before the Abigail Phelps Chapter, DAR, published a facsimile reprint for the Simsbury Genealogical and Historical Research Library in 2001. At this time the DAR inserted a useful chronology of the town's history and index of the text (excluding the appendixes) compiled by Priscilla Bergethon.

Mr. Phelps' very readable 145-page text is followed by thirty pages of valuable appendixes. They include the "Indian Deeds" and "Simsbury Patent," several lists of Colonial-era freemen and rate (tax) payers, some population statistics, a few extracts from town meeting records, some early vital statistics, and officers and officials up to the time of publication (1845). These are the Judges of Probate, Representatives to the General Assembly, Justices of the Peace and Town Clerks. There are no illustrations or maps.

As the title of his book denotes, Mr. Phelps recounted the history of the entire area that comprised Simsbury during Colonial times. Therefore, Phelps' history includes events that happened and townspeople who lived in geographical areas that were part of Colonial Simsbury, but that were not a part of the town in his day. Granby had become a separate town in 1786, two years before Phelps' birth, and he witnessed the separation of Canton from Simsbury in 1806 and the loss of land to Bloomfield when that town was incorporated in 1835. After his book was published, East Granby separated from Granby in 1858.

Mr. Phelps brought to his text the knowledge and insight of one who was born in Simsbury into a family whose own history was entwined with the town's. Along with some of the earliest settlers of Colonial Simsbury, his ancestor Joseph Phelps was awarded a grant of land in 1667 in the East Weatogue section of town.⁴ His grandfather, Noah Phelps, who served with valor in the Revolutionary War, is heralded as "The Spy at Ticonderoga."⁵

The two-volume Phelps family genealogy, which can be found in SGHRL's collection of family histories, states that historian Phelps' father, Noah Amherst Phelps, "graduated from Yale College in 1783, studied law and practiced in Simsbury many years."⁶ He represented the town in the state legislature, was the postmaster and was a colonel in the militia when he died in 1817. Historian Phelps' mother, Charlotte Wilcox, was the daughter of Ezekiel and Rosannah (Pettibone) Wilcox.

Historian Noah A. Phelps studied at Yale and became a lawyer. As an adult he lived and practiced law in Hartford and was sheriff of Hartford County for twelve years. He also was Assistant Judge of Hartford County and Judge of Middlesex County. He served for a time as Secretary of the State, was for many terms in the Connecticut legislature and was a state senator in 1844.⁷

One of the most reprinted and quoted portions of his history book is the account of Daniel Hayes, who lived in the Salmon Brook Ecclesiastical Society (now part of Granby). Hayes was captured by the Indians in 1707 and taken to Canada, where lived with the tribe until he was purchased by a Frenchman



**Simsbury Free Library
Board of Trustees**

James P. Flynn
Chairman

Tara D. Willerup
Vice-Chairman

Paul F. McAlenney
Secretary

Martin Geitz
Treasurer

Richard Schoenhardt
Mary Jane Springman

Arthur House

Thomas J. Donohue

Melissa McKeen

Richard D. Wagner Jr.

and eventually allowed to return to his family.⁸ Historian Phelps also included an account of the copper mines in the Turkey Hills Ecclesiastical Society (now part of East Granby) and the subsequent development of Newgate Prison in and above the mines.⁹

A Record and Documentary History of Simsbury, 1643-1888
by Lucius I. Barber (1806-1889)

Dr. Lucius Israel Barber, a physician, spent the latter part of his life collecting material on Simsbury's history and writing articles which were published in newspapers and historical collections. Sadly, he did not see his 429-page comprehensive history book published. His second wife, Abbie Sexton Barber, was a member of the Abigail Phelps Chapter, DAR, and it was that organization which did the final preparation of the manuscript and published it in 1931, some forty-two years after his death.¹⁰ The Chapter reprinted Barber's history of Simsbury in 1974 and 1999. The second reprint contains an index to the text and a chronology of events compiled by Priscilla Bergethon for the Simsbury Historical Society.

One feature of this book that delights historians and genealogists are the many records that he transcribed from the handwritten originals. Instead of footnotes he used quaint marginal notes to identify the sources of the records in the Simsbury Town Records, Connecticut Colonial Records, or other sources.¹¹ In his text Dr. Barber developed the history of the town most fully from the Colonial era through the Revolutionary War, but he did bring some subjects, such as church and military history, education, agriculture, manufacturing and transportation, up to his own time, albeit with less detail.

In addition to a photograph of the author, the book is illustrated with a drawing of the first meetinghouse at the head of each chapter. It also includes a plot of the long lots laid out in 1722 along Hopmeadow Street between the north and south squadron lines and it has a fold-out photograph of the 1768 seating plan of the meetinghouse. He ended his book with transcriptions of the inventories of two men's estates. One is Sergeant John Griffin, whom he identified as "the first permanent settler of 'Massaco,'" (the geographically larger colonial entity rather than today's town) and John Drake whom he identified as the "one of the *solid men* of the first generation of Simsbury inhabitants."¹²

Like Noah A. Phelps, Dr. Barber was the scion of a long-established family in Simsbury. He, too, had an ancestor, Thomas Barber, who received a grant in 1667, being a lot in the Hop Meadow section. This great-great-great grandfather of Dr. Barber's is remembered for the trouble he went through to build the first meetinghouse. After the townspeople contracted with him, they squabbled for twelve years whether to locate it on the east side or the west side of the Farmington River. Finally, they drew a lot out of a hat and the west side won. He also built the first sawmill and gristmill in the town.¹³

Dr. Barber's father, Calvin Barber, was a stonemason who quarried his own stone in town. He built the twelve-foot wall around Newgate Prison in 1802 and, in 1826, the arches for the Farmington Canal culvert over Hop Brook. He also was part of a partnership that operated a gristmill on Hop Brook.

According to the most recently published genealogy of the Barber family, Lucius Barber "graduated from Amherst College in 1826, earned an M.A. degree in 1829, and received his M.D. degree from the University of Pennsylvania Medical Department in 1833. He located first in the then small city of Milwaukee, but after a few years, he settled at Jefferson. Although he practiced medicine for a few years, from 1835 to 1839, he preferred politics. He became speaker of the house in the first assembly of the Wisconsin legislature [and was] the Clerk of the U.S. District Court of Jefferson County from 1840 to 1845."¹⁴ In Wisconsin he married Marian P. Brown, but she died shortly after giving birth to their first

child and the infant girl also died. This tragedy in 1845 seems to have caused him to return to his native town of Simsbury. Some nineteen years later he married a young widow, Abigail (Sexton) Case.

After returning to Simsbury he purchased his late father's house from the rest of the heirs. The house, which was built by Rev. Benajah Roots about 1762, had been the home of Dr. Barber's maternal grandfather Capt. Elihu Humphrey who was wounded and imprisoned during the Revolutionary War and who died in the house soon after his return. (The building on Hopmeadow Street now houses Starbucks Coffee.)

Once back in Simsbury, Lucius Barber farmed his land and resumed his political career. He was a Republican. He represented the town in the legislature in 1850 and served as Judge of Probate from 1858 to 1868.¹⁵ He soon became respected for his knowledge of the history of the town.

He was asked to deliver an oration in March 1876 on the 200th anniversary of the burning of Simsbury during King Philip's War, and the address was subsequently published.¹⁶ When J. Hammond Trumbull, the president of the Connecticut Historical Society, undertook his 570-page work *The Memorial History of Hartford County, Connecticut, 1633-1884*, he called on Dr. Barber to contribute the chapter on Simsbury.¹⁷ From time to time the *Hartford Courant* printed articles by Dr. Barber; for example, on May 7, 1887, the newspaper published his essay under the headline "Newgate Prison: An Interesting Sketch by the Historian of Simsbury."

Simsbury: Being a Brief Historical Sketch of Ancient and Modern Simsbury, 1642-1935
by John E. Ellsworth (1904-1994)

As the 300th anniversary of the founding of Connecticut approached, people all over the state planned events and publications for the 1935 celebration. In Simsbury the townspeople formed The Simsbury Committee for the Tercentenary and elected John Edwards Ellsworth its chairman.*¹⁸ The committee's most enduring contribution to preservation of the town's history was its publication of the book that Mr. Ellsworth wrote.

In addition to enlarging upon the town's early history, Mr. Ellsworth's book recorded what had happened in the forty-seven years since Dr. Barber had died. On two much-debated subjects, the identities of the town's first *permanent* settlers and the origin of the town's name, Ellsworth concurred with Dr. Barber's findings. They both give an account of the first settlers and say that the town was most likely named for Simondsburry, Dorsetshire, England.¹⁹

Mr. Ellsworth's book was the first town history with a bibliography and it includes many more illustrations and maps than Dr. Barber's book. There is a much expanded plot plan of colonial land grants and highways developed from an aerial survey, a method entirely unavailable to Dr. Barber. This historical map was researched by Mr. Ellsworth's father, Henry E. Ellsworth, and his second wife, Abigail Eno Ellsworth. For the Tercentenary Mrs. Ellsworth oversaw the Abigail Phelps Chapter's valuable study "A Record of the History of Some of the Old Homes of Simsbury."²⁰

The only index to the John Ellsworth history of Simsbury is a manuscript prepared by Alin Boicu, a student at Westminster School in 1996. Ellsworth's history was long out of print until the Higginson Book Company in the 1990s began selling a facsimile reprint, which is available through the company's Web site.

John Ellsworth was a descendant of Josiah Ellsworth, an early settler of Windsor, who received a grant of land in Simsbury, but did not settle on it. One of Josiah Ellsworth's great grandsons was Oliver Ellsworth, a drafter of the United States Constitution and the third Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.

* **Correction:** Henry E. Ellsworth was chairman of Simsbury's 1935 Tercentenary Committee. His son, John E. Ellsworth, wrote the history that was published by the committee.

In 1866 John Ellsworth's grandfather, Lemuel Stoughton Ellsworth, married Ann Jane Toy, daughter of Joseph Toy. Rev. Toy was a founder and the president of Toy, Bickford & Company, the first manufacturer of safety fuse in America. Mr. Ellsworth, who was known as Stoughton, joined the company and had a long, eventful career. By the time of his death in 1917 the firm had been renamed Ensign, Bickford & Company and he was the treasurer and a vice president.

His son Henry Edwards Ellsworth eventually became the president of Ensign-Bickford, serving in that capacity from 1935 to 1944, when he became vice-chairman of the Board of Directors. In addition to sitting on the boards of several corporations, Mr. Ellsworth served as curator of the Simsbury Historical Museum, president of the Simsbury Cemetery Association and chairman of the board of trustees of the Simsbury Free Library.²¹ He had a particular interest in the history and early traditions of his company and is credited with saving the early fuse-manufacturing machinery from being destroyed, as the earlier-mentioned list of Revolutionary War militiamen almost was.²²

Like his father before him, John E. Ellsworth graduated from The Hotchkiss School and Yale University (Class of 1926) and spent his entire working life at Ensign-Bickford Industries. He was president of the company from 1960 to 1970, chairman of the board until 1979, and chairman *emeritus* thereafter. His involvement in business and civic affairs was legion.²³ His 1935 book was followed by another in 1936 *The Ensign-Bickford Company and the Safety Fuse Industry in America: A Record of One Hundred Years of Achievement, 1836-1936*. These books together with his later leadership in the Simsbury Historical Society and his chairmanship of Simsbury's Tercentenary Committee, plus the many historical addresses he gave on Memorial Day and other occasions, made John E. Ellsworth the *de facto* town historian. Many today remember him fondly in that role.



Two more histories were published in the latter part of the 20th century. *Three Centuries of Simsbury, 1670-1970* by William M. Vibert drew heavily on Ellsworth's work and brought the town's history up to 1970. It was published by the Simsbury Historical Society on the occasion of the 300th anniversary of the incorporation of the town. Evan W. Woollacott's *The Gavel and the Book: The Simsbury Town Meeting, 1670-1986*, which was published by the Simsbury Historical Society in 1986, focused on the most important and interesting governmental decisions made in the town during its long existence. Both are valuable sources for any researcher, as are the many books and articles on single subjects that have been written through the years.

By Mary Jane Springman

Author's note: I was privileged to take the late Professor Glenn Weaver's Seminar in American Historiography (History 601) during my studies toward a Masters in American Studies at Trinity College in Hartford. This article is an attempt to apply some of what I learned from this fine historian and teacher. Any additional information (or corrections) about the writing or publishing of these histories would be greatly appreciated.

Notes

1. *Hartford Courant*, December 26, 1913, 4.
2. Mention of this document and its contents is not to be found in any of the published histories of the town.
3. Albert Carlos Bates, *Rev. Dudley Woodbridge: His Church Record at Simsbury in Conn., 1697-1710* (Hartford: Press of Case, Lockwood & Brainard, Co, 1894). See the article "Albert Carlos Bates (1865-1954): His Contribution to Local Genealogical Resources" by Mary Jane Springman in the SGHRL Winter 2001-02 newsletter.
4. Noah A. Phelps, *History of Simsbury, and Canton From 1642 to 1845* (Hartford: by the author, Press of Case, Tiffany and Burnham, 1845), 13.
5. The young people's novel "A Spy of Ticonderoga" by Clavin Fisher is based on the account that can be found in Noah Phelps' history on pages 94-95 and other sources. Berkshire Traveller Press published Mr. Fisher's book in 1975, in time for the U.S. bi-centennial, and the Simsbury Historical Society published a second edition, with Mr. Fisher's approval, in 1996.

Richard Dunbar Wagner (1924-2009)

Richard D. Wagner became a trustee of the Simsbury Free Library in February 1967 and served until August 2007, when he appointed his son, Richard D. Wagner Jr., his successor. At the time of his retirement he was Vice President of the Board of Trustees and Membership Chairman.

When reassessing the mission of the Simsbury Free Library after the Simsbury Public Library relocated, Mr. Wagner stated in 1986 that “our objective is to develop various specialties for a library and cultural center, including genealogy, historical [and] cultural groups, exhibits, etc.” Along with Chairman Margaret “Peg” Donohue and the other eight trustees, Mr. Wagner oversaw the renovation of the building, the establishment of the present research library and archives, and the installation of the William Phelps Eno Memorial Center.

Mr. Wagner’s devotion and service to the library earned him the respect and gratitude of all who were honored to serve with him. He is truly missed.

6. Oliver Seymour Phelps and Andrew T. Servin, comps., *The Phelps Family of America and their English Ancestors, with Copies of Wills, Deeds, Letters*, 2 vols. (Pittsfield, Mass: Eagle Publishing Company, 1899), 349-50.

7. *Ibid.*, 615.

8. This account of Daniel Hayes appears in Phelps’ history on pages 37-44. It was first reprinted in the *Hartford Courant* on May 21, 1845, 2.

9. See pages 113-135.

10. The manuscript is preserved in the Connecticut Historical Society Museum and Library in Hartford, where it was deposited by Barber’s widow in 1905.

11. Simsbury Town Records are carefully preserved in the original in the Town Clerk’s office in the town hall. Some, like the town’s early birth, marriage death records, have been transcribed and are available in SGHRL. Transcripts of Connecticut’s Colonial Records are indexed and available Online at www.colonialct.uconn.edu (University of Connecticut).

12. Barber, 423-429.

13. Phelps, 45-47. Barber, 150- 54.

14. Donald S. Barber, M.D., *The Connecticut Barbers: A Genealogy o the Descendants of Thomas Barber of Windsor, Connecticut*. 2nd edition (Westford, Vt: by the author, 2001), 113.

15. *Ibid.* Obituary of Dr. Lucius I. Barber, *Hartford Courant*, February 20, 1889, 4.

16. Lucius I. Barber, *The Burning of Simsbury: A Bi-centennial address in Commemoration of that Event, Delivered in the Congregational Church in Simsbury, Conn., on Sabbath evening, March 26, 1876* (Hartford: The Case, Lockwood & Brainard Co., Printers, 1876).

17. J. Hammond Trumbull, ed., *The Memorial History of Hartford County, Connecticut, 1633-1884*, 2 vols. (Boston: Edward L. Osgood Publisher, 1886).

18. John Edwards Ellsworth’s middle name reflects his direct descent from the theologian Jonathan Edwards’ sister Anne (1699-1790).

19. See Barber, 38, and Ellsworth, 19-22, for the names of the first settlers within the boundaries of present-day Simsbury. The first settler of Colonial Simsbury is believed to be John Griffin, but he settled on land now in the town of East Granby (Barber, 32). See Barber, 40-41, and Ellsworth, 23, for their comments on the origin of the town’s name.

20. A copy of this manuscript can be found at SGHRL. It was indexed in 1992 by Celia Ann Roberts, Reference Librarian at the Simsbury Public Library, and volunteers.

21. Obituary of Henry E. Ellsworth, *Hartford Courant*, February 21, 1950.

22. John E. Ellsworth, *The Ensign-Bickford Company and the Safety Fuse Industry in America: A Record of One Hundred Years of Achievement, 1836 • 1936* (Simsbury: The Ensign-Bickford Company, 1936), 81.

23. In addition to his obituary, the newspaper published an article that gave a brief synopsis of John E. Ellsworth’s remarkable achievements. See Obituary of John E. Ellsworth, 8, and “John Ellsworth; was chairman of Ensign-Bickford Industries,” 9, in the *Hartford Courant*, August 10, 1994.

*2010 Spring Talk***The Eno Family: From Their Origins in France to the Present**

A Talk and Slide Presentation by
Jackson F. Eno

Historian of his Eno family, Simsbury native Jackson Eno will share his knowledge of the family from their earliest known ancestors in 14th century France through their arrival in America and their lives and times in this country. Genealogical facts will be well mixed with engaging stories as he focuses on the more interesting branches of his family tree. The New York branch that includes the Simsbury Free Library's founder, Amos R. Eno, will be among them.

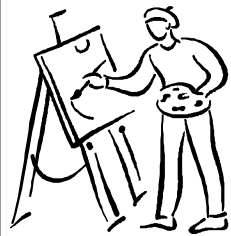
Mr. Eno will use the many family pictures that he has inherited to illustrate his talk and also include photos of old Simsbury. He hopes that his enthusiasm for genealogical research will inspire others to delve into their own family histories.

Saturday, May 15, 2010

11:00 A.M.

At the Library

Free and open to all



David Kimball on the Conservation & Restoration
of Fine Oil Paintings

Saturday, March 27, 11 A.M. Free

See the back cover for details!

SGHRL Updates

The trustees of the Simsbury Free Library wish to express their appreciation to Richard and Diane Brainard and the Lyman B. Brainard Foundation for their generous contribution to the library. They also thank Doris Cohen and Celia Roberts for their donations in memory of Richard D. Wagner.

The SGHRL collection has been expanded by the following donations of materials, for which the trustees and staff are most grateful:

The Domin Family by Lucy Domin McMahon (Suffield: Lucy Domin McMahon, 2009). Donated by the author.

The Great Migration: Immigrants to New England 1634-1635, vols. 5 & 6, by Robert Charles Anderson (Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 2009) Donated by Deborah Jones.

Simsbury Population/Historical Timeline compiled by Kevin Gray, 2010. Donated by the compiler.

The Simsbury Free Library Presents

The Art and Science of Fine Oil Painting Conservation and Restoration
including commentary on the
History and Characteristics of Significant Paintings
housed in the
Simsbury Free Library

David Kimball, Speaker

With over thirty years of museum and commercial art restoration experience, David Kimball is an internationally recognized expert in his field. He was formerly the curator of collections for the Marine Historical Association, Mystic Seaport, and is now the owner of the Stagecoach Gallery in Granby. His specialty is fine American art of the 19th and 20th centuries, with emphasis on Connecticut artists and American impressionists. Join us as this noted art conservator explains the fascinating process by which fine oil paintings are preserved or restored using state-of-the-art museum methods and standards.

Saturday, March 27, 2010
11:00 A.M.
At the Library
Free and open to all

Spring Talk on May 15: The Eno Family. See page 7 for details!

FIRST CLASS

SIMSBURY FREE LIBRARY
749 Hopmeadow Street
P.O. Box 484
Simsbury, CT 06070
860 408-1336
E-mail: info@simsburygenealogy.org
Web site: www.sgfh1.org
Thurs.-Sat. 9:30 a.m.-3:30 p.m.
Allison B. Krug, Library Director
Mary Jane Springman, Newsletter Editor

