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Subject: From Totoket to Today: A Brief History of Branford

Thought the Board of Selectmen might like to read this to the community during this, the holiday season...

Shortly after the 350th Celebration in 1994, I wrote this brief account of Branford history, which I posted a couple years ago but some of you may not have seen. What struck me at the time--and still does--is how much our enormously rich past directly reflects that of the country at large.

From Totoket to Today: A Brief History of Branford

As much as any community its size in America, the history of Branford mirrors the history of this country. From the prerecorded era of Native American settlements, to the arrival of the Puritans, the evolution of the Yankee lifestyle, and the advent of industrialization leading to three waves of European immigration, the citizens of Branford have lived through--and contributed to--every aspect of this nation's growth.

The earliest inhabitants of Branford were, of course, the Native Americans, migrating here about 10,000 years ago and eventually comprising the southern portion of the Algonquin nation. Consisting of the Totokets--a band of Middletown's larger Mattabesec tribe--these Indians inhabited the area on a year-round basis, taking advantage of the plentiful food source found in and around Long Island Sound.

The first European to "discover" Totoket or "Land of the Tidal River" was the Dutch explorer, Adriaen Block in 1614, but Europeans did not actually inhabit the area until around 1635, when a small group of Dutch merchants established a short-lived trading post on the Branford River, near the present Dutch Wharf.

In 1638, the English from the nearby New Haven Colony expressed an interest in the area and bargained with Sachem (Chief) Montowese to "purchase" the land for "eleven coats of trucking cloth (for his warriors) and one coat of English cloth (for himself) made in the English fashion".

It was not until 1644, however, that the English actually settled in Totoket, the result of a religious dispute in Wethersfield that--at the encouragement of New Haven Colony officials--sent a disgruntled contingent heading south. Because a Connecticut town could not be formed at that time without a congregational church, both institutions were established simultaneously, and land was divided into three-acre plots among the thirty-seven founding families.

Life for the early settlers was centered primarily around the town green, where the church--doubling as a meeting house--was located. Religion was foremost for the theocratic Puritans, but their "experiment" lasted only about twenty-five years, after which time the second generation grew weary and rebellious of the strict code of behavior expected of them.

In fact, in much the same way that a Wethersfield dispute led to the settlement of Branford, dissatisfaction with the dissolution of Puritan ethics--and the absorption of the New Haven Colony into the more liberal Connecticut Colony--led to the founding of Newark, New Jersey in 1666, when about fifteen of Branford's more religiously conservative families migrated there.

At some point in the second half of the 17th century--no one knows exactly when--the name Totoket was changed to Branford, presumably after Brentford-on-the-Thames, England, a suburb of London and--since 1995--Branford's official sister city. Although early Branford also included the area that is now North Branford, in 1831 the two towns divided into separate communities.

In 1701, a group of Congregational ministers met at the Branford home of Reverend Samuel Russel, placed a number of their books on a table, and founded what was to become Yale University. Around this same time, the infamous pirate, Captain William Kidd, was allegedly seen hiding from authorities among the Thimble Islands, although--like much island lore--this has never been verified.

While farming was a mainstay of Branford life for over 200 years, the community--because of its deep harbor (the only one between New Haven and New London)--was also an accessible port, with ships trading lumber, livestock, and produce for molasses and rum from the West Indies.

During the 18th and early 19th centuries, Branford's growth was slow but steady. Various trades became established, and smaller outlying settlements--such as Stony Creek, Pine Orchard, and Indian Neck--gradually emerged, as the centralized Puritan lifestyle was replaced by "Yankee" cultural expansion.

What changed everything, however, was the coming of the railroad in 1852, and with it more people and increased commerce. Significant industries took root in Branford, among them Branford Lock Works, Malleable Iron Fittings (MIF), the Atlantic Wire Company, and Norcross Brothers Quarry--the latter of Stony Creek pink granite fame, used on the Statue of Liberty, the West Point Battle Monument, and other notable structures.

Attracted by prospects of employment, three waves of European immigration occurred over the next fifty years, starting with the Irish in 1854, the Scandinavians and British quarry workers in the 1880's, and the Eastern Europeans, Germans, Italians and others in the 1890's.

In a fashion similar to living patterns of major cities, the town became dotted with distinct ethnic "neighborhoods", each contributing to a pluralistic "melting pot" dimension, unique to Branford among shoreline communities. In addition, as industry grew and a wealthier class emerged, many colonial buildings were replaced in Branford with the ornate Victorian structures clearly evident today.

Perhaps the period of greatest transition for Branford, however, was at the turn of the 20th century. In reaction to the marked jump in population, new roads, homes, schools and churches were built, and the center of town became more vibrant. A new high school was constructed on Laurel Street in 1895, and a year later--just across that street--Branford's most elegant structure, the James Blackstone Memorial Library, opened its doors.

Although farming was still prevalent--and Branford became known as the "Strawberry Capital of New England"--in 1902, progress marched further on with the introduction of a town wide trolley line, which remained in operation until 1947.

During this time also, Branford was extremely well-known as a summer resort area, with approximately twenty hotels in operation, including the Indian Point House in Stony Creek and the Montowese House in Indian Neck. On a July weekend during the tourism heyday (1900-1910), it was not uncommon to see as many as 10,000 visitors descend upon the town by railroad, trolley, and steamship.

By the onset of World War I, however, both immigration and the resort era were in decline. The advent of the automobile made distant destinations more accessible, and an extended stay at the shore became less appealing than a trip to Niagara Falls or Yellowstone.

However, it was not until the end of World War II--and the coming baby boom and 1955 turnpike opening--that Branford began to fully shed its resort and agricultural image and take on the characteristics associated with a northeastern suburb.

In the late 1950's and early 1960's, a new modern high school and state-of-the-art community house were built; in 1972, the town constructed a middle school; and in 1974, the first hospice in the United States opened in Branford, continuing today as one of the finest such facilities in the world.

The mid-1980's saw the revitalization and transition of Branford's town center from a more generalized source of goods and services to the specialty shops, restaurants, and other establishments now enjoyed by residents and visitors alike.

The Branford of today continues to reflect in its architectural and cultural diversity the town's rich and proud past. Although all of the large industries that served as the economic and social foundation for generations of Branford families have now disappeared, the community moves into the twenty-first century adapting--as always--to the inevitable changes and challenges that have defined our history and established our place in America