

Strong-Porter House
COVENTRY, CT



November 2010
Volume 20, Issue 4

Sign Post

Brick School House
COVENTRY, CT



The Armstrong Wagon Returns!

(From restoration by John Mikkola of The Olde Woodright Shop, Hampden MA)



The **Henry Armstrong Wagon Co.** building still stands in South Coventry, off of Main St. The Coventry Historical Society has a number of photos and papers that were donated by the White family of Cooper lane. Mrs. E.A. White was the youngest child of Henry and Catherine Armstrong. Here are a few.



COULD THIS BE CONNECTICUT'S FIRST CHRISTMAS TREE?

We will never know for sure who was responsible for decorating and illuminating Connecticut's first Christmas tree or when this event took place. However, a good choice would be Hendrick Roddmore and the time shortly after 1777.

Roddmore was a Hessian soldier who served in the British Army under General Burgoyne during the Revolutionary War. He was captured at Bennington, Vermont and probably was later paroled and decided to stay in America rather than return to Germany.

At a later date he arrived in Pine Meadow, a section of Windsor, and now called Windsor Locks. He was hired by a local landowner, Samuel Denslow, because Roddmore was such a good farmer. A cabin was built for him on the farm near a stream that is still called Hendrick's Brook.

It is a well known fact that the Hessian soldiers who served with the British during the Revolution would cut and decorate trees to celebrate Christmas. Decorating Christmas Trees has been a German tradition since the middle Ages. So at this point in the story we have to use our imagination and surmise that Hendrick Roddmore carried out the tradition of his homeland. Proving this event took place is another matter. We have to rely on oral history and local legend that Roddmore set up the first Christmas tree in Connecticut. It is interesting to speculate what the reaction of his Yankee neighbors might have been when they first looked upon the decorated tree.

According to a 1900 Book of Reminiscences by Jabez B. Hayden, Roddmore's cabin was built 15 rods north of Spring Street and 90 rods west of West Street. At the request of Joseph and Ruth Bonito of the Windsor Locks Historical Society, Surveyor Richard Frawley attempted to locate the spot where Hendrick's cabin was located. Frawley looked up old records, converted rods, chains and links to yards, feet and inches. He did the calculations and located a spot that was high enough above the stream and safe from flooding. So if the legend is true, Richard Frawley has found the spot where the first Christmas tree in Connecticut was displayed.

In October 2007, Girl Scout Troops 556 and 567 planted a tree, installed a bench, and placed a marker on the site of Hendrick Roddmore's cabin. A dedication ceremony was held marking the end of the Girl Scout's project to recognize Connecticut and possibly New England's first documented Christmas tree. State Representative Peggy Sayers spoke at the ceremony and congratulated the Girl Scouts for completing their project and for their help in documenting the first Christmas tree in Connecticut. This event took place on the Noden-Reed Park on West Street, Windsor Locks.

Connecticut Governor Jodi Rell issued a proclamation on October 5, 2008 congratulating the Town of Windsor Locks and the Girl Scouts of Troops 556 and 567 for their work and the ceremony marking the end of their project to recognize Connecticut's first documented Christmas tree.

In October 2009, Bud Gavitt, editor of the Connecticut Christmas Tree Growers' Association and I visited the 22 acre Noden-Reed Park. Joe and Ruth Bonito of the Windsor Locks Historical Society gave us a guided tour of the Historic House, barn and property. We visited the site of Hendrick Roddmore's cabin and saw the Fraser Fir tree, bench, and marker placed there by the Girl Scouts. Noden-Park is a great place to visit. They have one of the few remaining brick barns in New England with displays of old farm tools along with an 1840 farm house with displays of vintage clothing. They have 1500 to 2000 visitors each summer.

Bob Visny
Coventry Historical Society

Deck the Halls The Holly Tree Story By Jesse Brainard (1993)

Many years ago, young folks from the village could gather on the Center School yard every Saturday mourning following December 10th to make their annual visit to the "Holly Tree". The tree grew deep in the woods behind the crest of the long hill between Main Street and Old Eagleville Road.

Its branches with their shiny green leaves and bright crimson berries were the crowning decoration on the family's traditional Christmas wreath when pinned onto the bow of the wreath's bright broad red ribbon.

Everyone made their Christmas wreaths, using Princess Pine, sprigs of hemlock and white pine interspersed with red berried twigs of bayberry and silvery-grey bayberry clusters.

My first visit to the Holly Tree was in 1923. Even though my folks had often made the annual pilgrimage, there was some confusion as to just which way to go once we were in the woods.

My Mother and Aunts made their first visit with their Mothers and several school chums around the "Cuban War" days as the Spanish American War was called.

During my school and College years we made the trek from time to time. When Sue and I set up housekeeping in our "Gingerbread House" on Depot Road more than fifty years ago we resumed, and for many years continued our pre-Christmas visits to the Holly Tree. (Continued on page 3)

My last visit was with a friend and our sons, Tom and Bill, in the late fall of 1972. It took considerable cruising and wrong leads before spotting the bright green leaves of this now much taller tree. It was like a beacon among its bare, leafless neighbors.

If today we added we added another twenty years, the Holly Tree would be at least ninety years old; and I suspect that it still stands. There are several ways to get to the Holly Tree.

When I was a boy we'd go up School Street through the parking lot of the former St. Mary's church, straight ahead through what we called Oscar Bowen's pasture, then down the lane past his barn and cranberry bog and followed his wood road to the top of the hill (where the power lines still are). We'd turn right and walk the ridge line woods towards Willimantic looking carefully at about a forty-five degree angle to the left as we went along. Somewhere along that line one of us would spot the shiny green-leafed Holly Tree. If snow was on the ground it stood out like a beacon.

Another way to find the Holly Tree was to follow the old crossroad leading northerly, off Route 31 near Chick Bearce's home into the woods.

By searching beside the power lines coming downhill and crossing the Old Eagleville Road, anyone would soon be in the vicinity of the Holly Tree. So too would following the old wood road beside Hubner's Pond bring one upward into the hill near the Holly Tree.

Take, if you will, a small sprig for your own family Christmas. It will surely brighten your wreath or mantle and will certainly brighten your spirits on Christmas Day!



Society Events

December

December 5th the Coventry Historical Society will be participating in **Christmas in the Village**. Tim Ackert has graciously offered us space in his garage to sell Christmas arrangements and Christmas Cookies.

We will need Cookie Bakers for this event. If you can bake cookies to help us with this event, please contact Pat Natusch at 742-7474.

We are hoping to have another Christmas House Tour in 2011 and maybe a Kitchen Tour in 2012. If you have a kitchen or house that you would like to volunteer, please let Pat Natusch know. 742-7474

April 30th - The **Timeline Trade Fair** Re-enactors from all periods in time will be invited to trade their wares on the Strong-Porter grounds as a fund raiser for the Coventry Historical Society. Fees will be charged for space. This event will be open to the public. Call Jim Murphy 860-742-3054 or email irishbrit0471@att.net for registrations or details.

August 13th - **Back in Time** to the 60's & 70's car/bike cruise day/night at the Strong-Porter House museum. Live period music, food (maybe, volunteers needed). Appropriate 60's-70's attire desired but not necessary. Also, as Coventry was a farm town, antique farm tractors and equipment might be on site. More details will be made available as soon as possible, all proceeds to benefit the Coventry Historical Society. Call Jim Murphy 860-742-3054 or email irishbrit0471@att.net for details.

Many thanks to **Rachel Dawkins** who has been cleaning the **Strong-Porter Museum** every Sunday. It really looked great every Sunday when **Bill Reale** gave tours. We also had a vacuum cleaner donated to the museum.

Coventry Historical Society

P. O. Box 534
Coventry, Connecticut 06238

Phone:
860.742.9025

E-Mail:

[WriteToUs@coventryct
historicalsociety.org](mailto:WriteToUs@coventrycthistoricalsociety.org)

The Coventry Historical
Society Web Site is located
at:

[www.coventrycthistorical
society.org](http://www.coventrycthistorical
society.org)

Executive Board

President	Peter Hershonik	742-9123
Vice President	Jim Murphy	742-3054
Secretary	Diana Gale	742-2450
Treasurer	Gary Dilk	742-9656
Past President	Pat Natusch	742-7474

Members at Large

Ginney Dilk	742-9656
Yvonne Filip	742-3005
Milton Natusch	742-7474
Mary Schweitzer	742-6295
Bob Visny	742-8354
Susan Way	742-5271

Board Meetings are the second Thursday of the month at the

Strong-Porter house at 7:30 pm. All members are welcome.

**Wanted: Articles for Publication in THE
SIGN POST.**

Send or email your article (Word or PDF form
preferred) to:

Sign Post Editor

Jim Murphy

irishbrit0471@att.net

48 Midland Rd, Coventry CT 06238

Become a Member

If you aren't already a
member of the Coventry
Historical Society, please
consider joining now!

Single Membership \$10.00

Family Membership \$15.00

Send us your name, address
and contact information
using one of the methods
listed on the left of this
page.

Telephone number and
email address would be
appreciated.

*Coventry Historical Society
P. O. Box 534
Coventry, CT 06238*