

THE ANTECEDENTS : THE COLONIAL PERIOD

Somewhere around 1645, English colonists from Rhode Island founded settlements on the east end of Long Island, and over the ensuing years their foothold was extended as far west as Wading River. In 1655 Setauket was settled by English colonists from Connecticut; their landholdings eventually spread as far east as Rocky Point. The ports and harbors at the eastern end of the Island, and the harbors at "Ashford", the original name of Setauket, were the focal points for the development of those areas. Shoreham, lacking ports and harbors and lying on the fringes of the two polarized sub-colonies as a sort of "no-man's-land", was sometimes referred to as being at Rocky Point and sometimes as in Wading River.

In the 1600's we encounter the first colonial governments in the area. In 1664 Charles II of England combined all the lands from the west side of the Connecticut River to the Delaware Bay, together with all of Long Island, as a province, and put it under the rule of his brother, James, Duke of York. In 1655 Long Island, Staten

Island and Westchester were organized as a county under the name of "Yorkshire," and Colonel Richard Nichols was appointed its governor.

At approximately the same time, the Town of Brookhaven was established as a trustee form of government by virtue of the so-called "Nichols Charter," granted under the authority of the Duke of York. In the same year, 1655, Richard Woodhull, Sr. secured from the Sachem, chief of the Seatalcoot Indians, a "confirmation" whereunder the Indians gave to the Town of Brookhaven the entire northern section of the Town. In gratitude for his efforts, the Town made a gift to Woodhull of a tract of some 80 acres believed to lie in the eastern part of Shoreham. Evidently there was some doubt as to the validity or effectiveness of this gift, for under date of September 29, 1677 Edward Andros, the then Governor of "Yorkshire, gave to Richard Woodhull, Jr. and Nathaniel. Woodhull, a "patent" confirming the title to those 80 acres which had descended to them from their father, Richard Woodhull, Sr. The language of this confirmatory patent is of extreme interest since it describes this land as:

"lying westward from ye afor said Fresh Brook near a mile at a place called ye "Long Chestnuts."

"Fresh Brook" has been identified as the most westerly of the several small brooks entering Wading River Creek. The description would seem to place the easterly boundary of these lands in the vicinity of Valentine Road, and the lands themselves could have spilled over into what today is the portion of Shoreham lying east of Woodville Road. The old house on the east side of Briarcliff Road, about a half mile north of North Country Road, was at one time owned by a Woodhull and may stand on the site of the original homestead of this Colonial grant. Just how the name "Long Chestnuts" was coined is not certain, but up until the arrival of the

chestnut bark disease in 1910, tall chestnut trees were abundant here, and many of their old stumps are still to be found.

Over the ensuing sixty years there is a hiatus during which little of significance took place. A few smallish homesteads and farms were carved out of the woods. North Country Road and Middle Country Road came into existence; it cannot properly be said that they were built, for they were more in the nature of trails or cart tracks, suitable for passage by cart or on horseback but too primitive to serve even the needs of coaches. It is recorded that as recently as the time of our Revolutionary War, the peripatetic George Washington, on a journey from New York to Boston, found the most acceptable way to go was by horseback to the east end of the Island and thence by boat to Rhode Island. Wading River claims George spent a night there in the course of that journey; Shoreham seems unable to match that claim. Thanks, however, to even these rudimentary roads and the Sound, some commerce was possible: farms and orchards were developing and the woods were yielding to demands for timber and cordwood. A goodly amount of high grade hardwood timber - oak, hickory, walnut and chestnut - was cut, but the supply of wood of this quality was soon exhausted. In the years ahead, second-grade wood in the form of cordwood was to be Shoreham's most exportable commodity.

Around 1720, some of the more foresighted inhabitants of Brookhaven began to recognize the need to clear up title problems which had arisen in regard to the exact boundaries of individual landholdings. In 1723, the Trustees of the Town ordered that the common lands of the Town lying north of Middle Country Road (today's Route 25) be made into "Great Lots." The affected land was supposed to extend from the east line of the town (at Wading River) as far west as

Miller's Place. The limits are vague by today's standards, but probably were sufficient in the context of the times. The survey work needed to perform this directive was never completed, if undertaken at all, and in 1725 it was again ordered by the Trustees. In 1729 the work was completed and the land was laid out in 54 "Great Lots".

It is not the purpose of this Village History to belabor the technicalities of land titles in Shoreham, but some of the matters which are traceable back to the colonial period are worthy of inclusion as matters of general interest.

No sooner had the 54 "Great Lots" been laid out than problems began to arise. As early as 1668 a series of 50-acre "Great Lots" had been laid out by earlier surveyors. Those earlier lots extended along the Sound all or most of the way from Mount Misery to Wading River. For reasons not entirely clear, the 1678 "Great Lots", supposed to contain 50 acres each, did not extend all the way north to the Sound nor all the way south to Middle Country Road. In an attempt to resolve this inconsistency, the Town Trustees in 1735 declared that:

"The common land that lyeth between ye bounds of  
ye 50 aker lots and ye Clifts belongeth  
to ye lots afor sayd."

This only led to more confusion: what did the 'Trustees mean by the "Clifts"?

In 1753, the 'Town Trustees went after the problem again and declared that the base of the bluffs was the controlling line. But this too had a snag. It seems that in 1686 the then governor, Dongan, had issued a "patent" to the Town Trustees which confirmed their custody and control of all the lands the Town had acquired from the Indians. Under the Dongan Patent, the town might be deemed to own all lands out to low water line, whereas under the 1753 Declaration, the

great lots ran to the foot of the bluffs and under the 1735 Declaration might have been regarded as being bounded by the top line of the bluffs. These early inconsistencies did for many years plague title companies and landholders alike, but now seem to have passed on as interesting historical anomalies.

By 1765 the lands comprising Shoreham were owned by two families - the Sells and the Skidmores. In 1731, the old 80 acre Woodhull parcel at "Long Chestnuts" had been quitclaimed to one Elizabeth Wessells, who in turn in 1733 quitclaimed it to her grandson, James Sells (Sills?). It is probable that all of Shoreham east of Woodville Road was at one time owned by the Sells family.

As to the portion of Shoreham west of Woodville Road, at one time it was owned in large part by the Miller family of Miller's Place. In 1765, however, Richard Miller sold the large farm which he owned there to Peter Skidmore. The consequence was that the Sells and the Skidmores were the only two families in the vicinity for much of the 18th and part of the 19th centuries.

One of the gullies running down to the Shoreham beach was at one time known as "Skidmore's Landing". This landing may have been at or near the Village Hall, or perhaps a short distance to the west. Our Village records disclose, as an incident of a title search of lands near the Village Hall that a deed in the land title records in Riverhead mentions, in 1842, the existence of a right-of-way across the Village lands held by "Peter Skidmore"; the year the right-of-way was established is not reported. While we attempt to push back the frontiers of time by saying that the first name for Shoreham was Long Chestnuts, it can be argued that that name was not applied to lands within the limits of the Incorporated Village, and that the first identifiable name was "Skidmore's Landing".

The Sells interests apparently passed to a related member of the Woodhull family. This Woodhull was a nephew of James Sells. In the early 1800's the Swezeys purchased a major portion of the Skidmore interests, but the Skidmore farm homestead on North Country Road, in the general vicinity of Mc Carrick's today, stayed in the family for some time longer.

There is little recorded data as to participation by Shoreham residents in the Revolutionary War. Our village, caught as it was between the East and West, and being sparsely settled, had little to record. It must be noted that one of the Sellses is reputed to have been an ardent patriot, but other than that there is little to be said.

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