



Kent Historical Society Newsletter

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Fuller's Earth: Dipping a Hand in the Colony Cookie Jar

by Marge Smith and Jeffrey Morgan

In 2015, Jerry and Gail Tobin began a major rescue effort at the old Tobin farmhouse at 560 Skiff Mountain Rd. They asked Jeff to come up and take a look before they began the project to see if he could give them an approximate build date and assess its condition. His verdict was that parts of it were very, very old, and that it was in dire need of repair, since in one area the sky was

visible from the cellar! At some point during the project, a casing was removed from an ancient beam, revealing the name "Joseph Skiff" chalked on the back of the casing board. That might suggest that it was built by a member of the Skiff family, so for a while the Tobins went with that assumption, which was boosted by an old photo of the house that is labeled "Sarah Skiff's birthplace."



The farmhouse from the south side. The oldest part is to the right of the front door.

Courtesy of Gail and Jerry Tobin

Fuller's Earth (con't)

But then they decided they really wanted to know as much about the house's past as possible, and asked us to help them search the land records. By now, dear readers, you've learned enough about us and our passion for playing in those records to realize that of course we said yes! Little did we know that we would trace it back to one of Kent's earliest land-grab scandals!

We met Gail at the Town Hall and set to work. We quickly traced it backwards from Daniel Tobin to Birdsey Pratt and then to James True in 1870. But beyond that date it got complicated with the descriptions of the property changing as adjoining acreage was bought, lots added together, and then divisions happening in estate settlements. Sometimes there were references to 50 acres,

sometimes 300, sometimes 120 and sometimes 136. Confusing! We had to spend time looking at deeds for the abutting properties to make sure we didn't lose sight of the ownership of the land on which the house actually stood. One deed in 1761 from Thomas Eaton to Joseph Skiff referred to 2 acres with appurtenances and described the boundary as "beginning at the Grindstone." That wasn't the piece that we were tracking, but it sure sounded like a fun rabbit hole to go down!! No, we must exercise will power and stay focused on the house and farm!

All along, we'd been wondering who James True was. Not a name that we had run across in other hunts through Kent history. After looking for the house on the 1859 and 1874 maps, we



Daniel and Margaret Tobin with some of their large family, circa 1900.

Courtesy of Gail and Jerry Tobin

saw a connection to another Skiff Mountain family – the Fullers. On the 1859 map, we saw the name “W. Fuller” next to the house, and in 1874 “J.N. True.” So we pulled out Fran Johnson’s amazing book on Kent genealogy, and found that W. Fuller was Wildman Fuller, the son of Jeremiah Fuller and Dolly Stone. Jeremiah was the son of Abraham and grandson of Kent Proprietor Joseph Fuller. So how to connect James True? It turned out that James True was the widower of Mary C. Fuller, who in turn was the daughter of John Fuller, also a descendant of Joseph. The large Fuller family, like many other early Kent families, bought, sold, gave and otherwise transferred land among themselves in some very confusing patterns, as suggested above, so we had to proceed with caution.

But we stuck with it (we’ll spare you the boring facts and dates), and can prove a very clear title to the land from Dennis Tobin all the way back to an 1860 deed in which Dolly transferred ownership of 300 acres in several parcels with buildings to her sons Ashbel, Jeremiah and Abraham. But there the trail in the land records stopped, so we turned to Ancestry.com to look for probate records – another means by which land can be conveyed. We found Jeremiah’s 1858 probate in which he left the property to his widow Dolly and their sons Ashbel, Jeremiah and Abraham. He left money to his sons Wildman and John. It is likely that Wildman as the oldest son living in the house at the time had his name attached to the property on the map. Ancestry.com provided no probate record for Jeremiah’s father Abraham, but we did find his father Joseph’s 1775 probate! It was very revealing.

The probate document is written in a cramped hand that is hard for even the two of us to decipher, but we think the word “house” is listed along with other possessions such as cattle, swine and (notably) “indoor moveable estate.” We have to emphasize here that we are *assuming* the word

“house” is correct, based on the facts that the rest of the probate reveals a comfortably well-off farm family, who clearly had to have had a house for all their many possessions, and that the word “house” does not appear anywhere else in the probate list.

So far, so good. Between research in the land records and probate records, we had *in theory* traced the property back to Joseph Fuller. We feel confident about the line of inheritance, and the fact that we know Joseph had no dwelling house down in Flanders lends strength to our argument.

But we couldn’t figure out when Fuller had acquired the property, which the Tobins wanted to know. At about this point in our research, the Pandemic hit and we were locked out of our home-away-from-home, the Vault! Forced to look to other sources to figure out when and how Joseph got the land, we turned to various written histories of Kent, especially our bible – Charles Grant’s *Democracy in the Connecticut Frontier Town of Kent*. We think the answer lies in what Joseph was up to at the time and where this particular piece of land lies. It hit us one day as we were indulging in another favorite pastime – staring at the early Kent divisions map that hangs in the KHS office.

Remember that two-acre lot near the grindstone? The rabbit hole that we didn’t go down? Well fortunately we still had our very brief notes about it from one of the early trips to the vault while we were still focused on the Skiff family. There is a trail from Joseph Skiff (not Fuller) in 1761 back to a man named Joshua Lassell in 1754. BINGO! We sure knew that name. Joshua Lassell and Joseph Fuller were the culprits in the land grab mentioned at the outset of this tale. When Kent was first laid out, all the land west of the Housatonic was retained by the General Assembly rather than being included in the auction at Windham, partly because of the Schaghticoke Indian presence there. Settlers were ordered to keep out. But Lassell and Fuller began eyeing this roughly 5,000-acre expanse of untouched earth, and

Fuller's Earth (con't)

hatched a plan to get it for themselves. They spent about ten years at the attempt, as described by Grant: *Throughout the petitions, Fuller and Lassell pictured themselves as small farmers.* "The said Joshua Lassell, having only a farm fit for grazing and little or no plowland, thought proper to look out for some land suitable for the plow. He learned that the tract aforesaid was suitable for the purpose." *When he was writing these words, Lassell was the largest landowner in Kent, and the town's most active speculator. He bought and sold more "plowland" in a single year than a dozen men could use...[they] gave the government no clue as to the size of the tract...By 1745 the government suspected that a sizeable tract was involved.*

Ultimately, after thorough investigation and rejection of their preposterous claim, the General Assembly did grant about 100 acres each to

Lassell and Fuller on the west side of the river. Lassell, having failed in his ultimate speculation, decamped and moved across the colony line to Amenia. One wonders what schemes and plots he hatched over there!!! But Joseph Fuller, who was still a highly respected citizen Kent, having held such offices as church deacon, town treasurer and selectman, remained here and became the venerated ancestor of generations of people, some of whom still live in Kent today.

So, in thinking about all of this, we are having fun envisioning the earliest days of Skiff Mountain settlement. We have proved that both men had property up in this remote part of town, very near each other, almost at the Sharon border. Did they choose that spot to build on in hopes that the General Assembly would never come find them squatting up there? Had they already built their



The Tobin barns in the late 1900s, a few of which date back to the Fuller days.

houses before the deal was struck with the Colony? Lassell sold 50 acres with some sort of buildings on it when he left for Amenia in 1754. It's possible that Fuller had also built a home by that time. Jeff says that the south part of the Tobin house is the oldest, which is where the end girt in the hall chamber with "Joseph Skiff" marked on

the casing was found. The addition to the north may have added by Joseph Skiff as well, with the casing of the beams being part of that expansion and remodeling. The house thus has quite a story, and we will continue to work on it once we get access to the Vault again.

As for the photo that had led credence to the idea

that the Tobin house had been built by the Skiffs, well, we have a fun guess! The Fuller house is next door to the original homestead of another Kent Proprietor, Nathan Skiff (550 Skiff Mountain Rd). We are pretty sure that Nathan and builder Joseph Skiff were brothers. Nathan's granddaughter Jane Skiff and her husband Allen Peck of Sharon had a daughter named Sarah. Sarah married a Charles Skiff (had to have been a cousin!), so she would have been known later as Sarah Skiff. There is proof of several marriages between the Fuller and Skiff families, so it's safe to say that they were on friendly terms. So.... we think that heavily pregnant Jane Skiff Peck might have been visiting the Fuller family on February 20, 1856, when the baby decided to be born. It was winter time, undoubtedly cold, and probably snowy - not a safe time to travel while in labor, even if just to her cousins' house next door! Hence the caption - "Sarah Skiff's birthplace" - and proof that one has to have an open mind when reading something that doesn't make sense anymore.

In the Name of God Amen

I Joseph Fuller of Kent in Litchfield County being of sound Mind & Memory and calling to mind the Mortality of this Body do hereby Make and Ordain this my Last Will and Testament Requesting my Body to be Buried decently Buried and my Spirit to God who gave it and as to my worldly Goods I hereby Give & Dispose of them in the following Manner & form

Item I Give to My well Beloved wife all my (horse) (Cattle) and Linn and all my Indorsed Movable Estate for her Sole use and Benefit during her Natural Life and all here Decent what Remains to be Equally Divided Between my two Sons Abraham and James to be & Remain to them & their Heirs for Ever

Item I Give to my Son James all My Wearings apparel to be and Remain to him & his heirs for Ever

and I having already given Substantive Portions unto the Wife of my Children viz Mindwell Appare in her Life time & to her Heirs since her Death I do hereby Testimonie Give & Confirm that I do hereby Give & Confirm this and only this to be my Last Will & Testament & hereby Revoke all others

Item I hereby appoint my two Sons Abraham and James to be Executors of this my Will Dated with Kent on this 19th Day of March Anno 1775 in the 10th year of his Majesty King signed sealed Published & Remanded

In Presence of

Corro. Marsh
 Thomsen. Marsh
 William Marsh

Joseph Fuller

Litchfield County - ss Cornwall November 21st 1775
 Personally appeared William Marsh one of 3 witnesses of J above will and made solemn oath that he saw J above named Soffater Joseph Fuller sign J above will when in J free age

Joseph Fuller's 1775 will



Christmas Past

Some scenes from our Holiday Parties.... Since we won't be able to be together this season.





*Wishing all our members and their families a peaceful holiday season
and we hope to be together again in 2021*





Kent Historical Society

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**Please remember the Kent Historical Society
in your will or estate plan.
We are incredibly grateful for the visionary
donors who have remembered us.**



Our Mission:

We are a donor-supported nonprofit organization. Our mission is to collect, preserve, interpret and present the rich history of Kent as well as to provide educational and research material to enrich the public understanding of Kent's artistic and cultural heritage.

Kent Historical Society

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