

Woodbury Copper Mine History Notes by Susan Shepard, July 17, 2020

This is research in progress so stand by for updates when it is possible to use town vaults again to continue the search for original records! The story is only getting more interesting. Note that spelling – and sometimes entire surnames - were not standardized in the 18th century. Remarks on document images are given in an easier to understand wording and not literal.

What the heck happened at the Woodbury Copper Mine site in the early 1700s?

All land mentioned in the lease deeds cited here pertaining to the Woodbury Copper Mine project is within a very small area and it is where the current exploration project is located. Rumors for years have said there were “diggings” within this area but whether they can all still be found, or if they were nothing but abandoned shallow searches, or simply exaggeration is presently unknown. It’s important to keep in mind that looking for mineral mines was important in colonial Connecticut and many mining ventures were undertaken on both an amateur and professional level.

There is, so far, no evidence that the now found mine was a profitable enterprise or even worked for very long despite high hopes by the mysterious Thomas Cranne, the man who searched for a mine site, and the consortium who petitioned successfully for Connecticut colony permission to mine for copper in 1731 on land leased by Cranne. It is absent from mention in any probate inventories of the principals I have been able to find and examine so far, but I continue to look. After the 1731 effort William Cothren’s “History of Ancient Woodbury, Connecticut, from the First Indian Deed in 1659 to 1854” Vol. 1 (1854), states that two men again tried to work “the mine”, probably this one, but nothing is known of their success or failure. It’s not even clear that it was the mine now identified but one of the men owned adjoining property so it does make sense that it was this one or a nearby dig, but we need to be careful taking Cothren at face value here since he had clearly mixed up some of the jigsaw puzzle of leases and deeds for early mining efforts in Ancient Woodbury which then included Mine Hill and other sites in Roxbury. Another question, how did Cothren get the location of the newly identified mine so wrong and place it in Roxbury? Easy to understand as many references are very vague and the parties involved owned land throughout what is now Woodbury, Southbury, Roxbury, Bethlehem, Washington, and part of Middlebury! Given what Cothren had to work with for sources, including word of mouth from old folks, and research tools in the mid-19th century, not a surprise. Woodbury’s own more modern local historian, the late Dan Hull, did a thorough job some 50 years ago of researching the probable correct location of the mentioned mine as the current stretch of South Brook. The new finds support his conclusions and confirms that there really was something to look for all those years ago.

Failed mining projects were plentiful in 18th century Woodbury where the ground had a little bit of every prized mineral but not much of it, excepting valuable spathic iron in the Roxbury section, Mine Hill. One of the better documented later mine attempts illustrates 18th century mining dreams gone bad. The story of the search for and digging the Woodbury Copper Mine may be a similar story whose documentation was either lost or never even made given that it began at least 40 years earlier in the 1720s. The failed Simon, Myers, Trail lead mine in pre-Revolutionary Woodbury tells this common story...

That attempt was a tract on Mine Hill involved a 42 year mine lease taken by the New York partnership of Samson Simson, Meyer Myers, and George Trail in 1764. They hired Swiss gold and silversmith Daniel Fuetor, then living in New York and advertising himself as able to make “exact

Assays of all Sorts of Ores and Metals” in a 1763 ad, to oversee the operation. (Fuetor was an honorable man, not to be confused with the German goldsmith, Fuechter, who was scandalously head of a previous failed and possibly fraudulent silver mining attempt in Roxbury.) All the pieces were in place for the Simson, Myers and Trail mine: Wealthy backing, skilled principals, a long lease, land that had a touch of promise....

The site was worked hard as a lead mine for two years by 33 miners and a blacksmith toolmaker but abandoned in 1766. The trio had leased the land from the Brownson brothers, locals who had previously purchased and leased land in their own unsuccessful search for a silver mine worth working. Simson and Myers were New York born Jews of English and Dutch roots with a huge network of trade and metallurgical connections in America and Europe. Simson was a very successful merchant and international trader in just about every product one can imagine. Meyer Myers was a celebrated gold and silversmith with a reputation as an expert refiner, brother of coppersmith Asher Myers. Simson died at age 48 in 1773, Trail a bit later, and Myers went on to be recommended as a problem solver, it seems, for working mines such as the Middletown, Connecticut, lead mine during the American Revolution. He never pursued anything seriously in Roxbury again despite the partnership’s lease and confusion surrounding its value and rights were known to Governor Trumbull and George Washington during the American Revolution because it was rumored to be a rich lead mine even though abandoned 10 years earlier by a skilled team with resources! At least two more failed silver/lead mining ventures took place by others, probably as squatters. Simson left his considerable wealth to his brother Solomon, including a share in the lead mine lease. Solomon was an equally astute businessman with myriad interests who in turn left his brother’s and his own wealth to his son, Samson Simson, the renowned 19th century philanthropist most remembered as the “father of Mt. Sinai Hospital”. The mine lease and decades of mineral rumors got tangled up in this inheritance until Samson the nephew tried to claim rights long after the lease expired. He lost his case in 1856, it had no merit to begin with, but the whole story shows how tantalizing the prospect of riches from the earth was despite ample contrary evidence.

“Today, it is difficult to say why any serious silver or lead mining venture was ever launched at all,” wrote Micheal Bell and Diane Mayerfield of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies in “Time and the Land: the story of Mine Hill” (1982, with Roxbury Land Trust). They suggest it is possible there were small deposits of value, quickly played out, but we simply do not know. What we do know is that many, many men sank a lot sweat and money into trying to find mineral riches since the early days of Woodbury.

The Woodbury Copper Mine may well have been a similar search for a deposit that was found, got backers, but quickly played out and abandoned. Copper, from the start of the Colony of Connecticut, was in huge demand! It is no wonder that even a hint of it was exciting.

A very early lease to look for mines on the land where the Woodbury Copper Mine is was granted to one Thomas Cranne “of Springfield” and later “of Stratford”. But who was he? All the names of other early prospectors are well known to the history of town. Why was he looking in Woodbury? Not much about the geology cries out copper. He apparently found something but then what – why does he drop out of the story? He is very important to the history of this particular mine! Some answers still have to wait for the Covid restrictions to allow visits to town vaults in Woodbury and Stratford again but a few things have been figured out.

He was not a resident of Woodbury at any time nor does he show up in the history except in fleeting mention of an early mine lease. Was he a Crane, a large and prominent Woodbury and Stratford family? That seemed a good possibility and would explain his connection but a lot of genealogy work showed that he was not a Crane by any 18th century spelling of the name. He is remarkably absent from Stratford and even Connecticut and Massachusetts records – there were several 18th century Thomas Crannes in Massachusetts but initially none proved to be him. Did he really come from Springfield, Massachusetts, or was that a mistake by a town clerk in the early 1720s for Stratfield, a district of Stratford? Was he related at all to any early Woodbury family? Things worked by family ties in those days far more than now – in the lead mine story, Myers and Solomon Simson had married the Mears sisters, for example, and the mine lease was held closely within the family by inheritance. So far, Cranne has been, finally, found related to a Woodbury family but starting only years after his first lease, while he was still “of Springfield”, and only by his second (third?) marriage to Abigail Sherwood, widow of Dr. Thomas Hurd Sherwood of Stratford, sometime after the doctor’s 1727 death. One of his stepsons moved to 20 acres of land Dr. Sherwood left in Woodbury but again, this was after the earliest leases. Was he a neighbor of Dr. Sherwood? That seems likely, living in the part of Stratford that is now Trumbull, Connecticut, because Widow Sherwood joined the Unity Church there in 1731 as “Abigail Cranny, wife of Thomas Cranny” (Cranne). Dr. Sherwood’s Woodbury land was far from where Cranne took his 1723 and probably earlier leases to search for mines but there was no doubt a lot of familiarity with the town through the strong Stratford-Woodbury network of Cranne’s friends and neighbors – Woodbury was settled out of Stratford in 1672 and extended families remained close for generations. Just how Thomas Cranne moved into this network from Massachusetts isn’t clear – yet. Why Thomas Cranne dropped out of mining in Woodbury also isn’t clear – he may have just had too many competing interests having married the prosperous Widow Sherwood or he may have not been in good health. He had died, apparently, by 1741 when Abigail Sherwood Cranne, again a widow, married James Fordyce of Newtown. It could be that he was deceased in 1731 as he is only passing referenced in one record that year; his birth is noted and confirmed by other records in a definitive genealogy that includes his mother’s family published by the Connecticut Historical Society in 1952 but his death is undated and place unknown.

I finally found the right Thomas Cranne, indeed born in Springfield, Massachusetts in 1687 to a Scotsman called William Cranne or Cranny who came first to Hartford, Connecticut, as an indentured servant according to family stories and made good in Springfield after his indenture was over. What is documented is that his father’s name was also called William mack Cranne and all the names are used interchangeably in early records – Cranne, Cranny, mack Cranne. His wife, Thomas’s mother, was heiress to a wealthy Connecticut River Valley family called Ryley. Finally, part of the story was coming together. Cranne was not a mistake – in the early 18th century that would have been pronounced as Cranny. And Thomas really was “of Springfield” as in the early Woodbury leases. The descendants of William transitioned to McCranny only in later records or transcriptions of ancient records and it doesn’t seem that Thomas himself ever used “mack Cranne” or McCranny. He filed his intentions to marry in Springfield first in 1713 and again, to a different woman, in 1715. Whether he actually married the first is an open question. He probably married the second woman, Dorothy Barns, but exactly who she was and where she came from is still a question so we don’t know if she ties into the story of Thomas searching for mines in Woodbury at all.

After finding his earliest Springfield records and the link to the John Ryley family, it was possible to prove he was the same Thomas Cranne of Springfield who settled in Stratford! Through his grandfather Ryley’s will we can see that he inherited land in the Springfield/Westfield or bordering Connecticut area via his mother but he had eight or nine living siblings plus an illegitimate half or full

sister born before his parent's marriage to share it with. And he had at least two more half-siblings by his father's second marriage. In other words, probably not much of a share of the wealth but he had connections to some of the oldest families Connecticut and he probably used them.

Thomas Cranne was in his early 30s when he started making lease agreements in Woodbury to search for mines. Certainly something a young colonial man would be interested in doing, especially if he was restless and eager to make a mark on the world commensurate with his maternal family line. As Walter W. Woodward, Connecticut State Historian says in his book, "Prospero's America: John Winthrop, Jr., Alchemy, and the Creation of New England Culture, 1606 – 1676", Winthrop was Connecticut governor, skilled politician, well-regarded alchemist, and entrepreneur who instilled the quest for mining discoveries deeply among the people: "The quest for mines and mineral wealth continued throughout New England and would be an engine of economic activity well into the 18th century."

1723:

The April 12, 1723 abridgement to a lease between John Crissey of Woodbury and Thomas Cranne of Springfield apparently refers to earlier agreements between the two men. It was recorded on this date, we don't know for sure when the agreement was made as recording dates could be substantially later than agreement dates, sometimes years later. "J Sherman" in this instance is John Sherman who was the town clerk.

This would be John Crissey, Sr. (1696-1787) who married Mary Hurd in 1720 and no doubt had acquired significant interests in Hurd family land which included acreage around South Brook. The land deals among various descendants of John Hurd, the millwright who came from Stratford to Woodbury and established the first mill, and the deals with the early town of Woodbury for milling services and additional rights are complicated so we'll skip them for now.

The lease was for 14 acres for 18 years to Cranne "for digging & searching for mines", allowing Crissey an 18th of the profits. Crissey, in turn, agreed to "not hinder said Cranne's works in or about the said mine" by any improvements Crissey chose to make on his land. Does this imply that Cranne had established a mine already or is it the common vague wording meaning some mine to be established in the future? Crissey had some belief that there was enough potential to let Cranne go digging around his farming and lumbering property.

John Crissey hath leased unto Thomas Cranne of Springfield: fourteen
 acres of Land in woodbery for eighteen years to him his heirs & assigns for
 for digging & searching for mines for building: cutting timber: & feeding
 allowing him & Crissey 7 eighteenth part of 7 proffitt = said Crissey by his
 improvement not to hinder & Cranne's works in or about 7 mine
 this abridgment recorded
 April: 12th 1723 - Sherman record -
 out to Cornelius Hurd but four acres

1724: May

May 16, 1724 John Sherman leases 6 acres of his land for 30 years to Thomas Cranne and other Woodbury and Stratford men, for a 16th part of the “oar of a mine supposed to be on my [land] joining to the South Brook” and East of a lot he purchased from Nathaniel Hurlbut. The lease includes digging and carrying the ore, building a shop and forge (!) “for carrying on said work ... and for no other use”. Sherman apparently wants his portion of the ore delivered on the land where it is dug. We know from John Sherman’s probate inventory that the lot he bought from Nathaniel Hurlbut was “near” his home. Permission to build according to mining needs is intriguing – was anything built and is there a trace of it left?

1731: August

The long and detailed deed is created and filed that corresponds to the October 1731 approval from the Colony of Connecticut Assembly for creation of a copper mining corporation in Woodbury. This corporation formation was legally required in order to mine copper, a strictly regulated activity. John Crissey and his wife, Mary Hurd Crissey, are involved. It looks like the mine is on John Sherman’s land but ore has to be carried across Crissey land, for which John and Mary get a cut. This is all within the bounds of Thomas Cranne’s old leases to search for mines.

1731: October

“The Public Records of The Colony Of Connecticut, V; From May, 1726, to May, 1735, Inclusive.”
Permission granted from the Colony to create a corporation for mining copper in Woodbury; such permission was required and it was a big deal!

Who is involved in the corporation?

Dr. Thomas Leavenworth - The most prominent and wealthiest of this group. At the time, he had inherited large tracts of land on Good Hill but was living in Stratford in the section that is now the town of Huntington and actively investing in business development there. Leavenworth was also the father-in-law of Josiah Perry of Stratford who was part of the 1724 lease agreement with John Sherman. An 1873 family history of Dr. Leavenworth mentions his investment in the mine in 1731 but does not say anything further about success or failure.

Nathan Wheeler – Owned adjoining property in Woodbury.

Josiah Perry – From Stratford, married Mary Leavenworth, resided in Oxford most of his life. He was related to the Judson family, original settlers of Woodbury.

Yelverton Perry (Elverton) – From Stratford, brother of Josiah Perry, resided in Oxford most of his life.

Samuel Beard – Stratford investor, his daughter married into the Garlick family of Woodbury. This is a connection I am planning to follow through to the present day as Garlick land ran along the tract that includes the mine.

Abram Wooster (Abraham Worster) – Stratford investor, his son Joseph was involved in the project. In 1739 Abram willed most of his real property to Joseph but no mention is made in probate of any mine interest.

Joseph Wooster (Worster) – Stratford investor, son of Abram and his primary heir.

David Curtiss (aka Daniel Curtiss) – Woodbury investor or actual worker in the mine? He would have been very young to be legally a member of a corporation unless it refers to a different member of the extended family in Stratford.

No Thomas Cranne in the record below....where did he go? What happened to the investments of the corporate members? That part is still an exploration....

An Act for Repealing some Part of the Law of this Colony entitled An Act relating to Attourneys.
Be it enacted by the Governour, Council and Representatives, in General Court assembled, and by the authority of the same,
 That the said act or law, so far as it relates to the limiting or restraining the number of attourneys in this Colony, shall be repealed, and is hereby repealed and made void.

Upon the memorial of Abram Worster, Thomas Leavings-
 [63] worth, Nathan Wheeler, Samuel Beard, Daniel Curtiss ||
 Yelverton Perry, Joseph Worster, and Josiah Perry, shewing
 to this Assembly that by them a discovery of a copper mine is
 made within the bounds of Woodbury, and within the bounds
 of a tract of land purchased by your memorialists of John
 Creese and John Sherman, and that the same doth belong to
 them: praying that they, the said owners, and the said cop-
 per mines, may be regulated and governed by the law of this
 Colony made for the regulating the affairs of the copper mines
 at Symbury: Resolved by this Assembly, that the abovesaid
 copper mines at Woodbury, and all the affairs thereof, shall
 be governed and regulated, with the proprietors that doth or
 hereafter may belong thereto, by the law aforesaid, as it is
 enacted and found in the law made by this Colony, in page
 143 and 144.* And this Assembly do appoint Edmund Lewis
 of Stratford, and Joseph Minor and William Preston of Wood-
 bury, Esq^{rs}, to be their Commissioners, and do hereby fully
 empower them to hear, issue and determine, all causes, mat-
 ters, &c., respecting the said mines at Woodbury, in all re-
 spects and in all the ways that the commissioners appointed
 for the copper mines at Symbury might or could do, by force
 and virtue of the law above referred to.

Upon the memorial of the inhabitants of the town of Wal-
 lingford, by their agents Samuel Hall and Gideon Ives, shew-
 ing to this Assembly that by sundry acts of this Assembly,
 this Assembly did order that the town of Wallingford should,
 with the town of New Haven, build and maintain the bridge
 that is on New Haven East River, in the road leading from
 Wallingford to New Haven; and that, the reasons of said acts
 now ceasing, they pray the said inhabitants of Wallingford may
 be released and discharged from any care or charge about said
 bridge: It is ordered and enacted by this Assembly, that the
 said inhabitants and town of Wallingford shall, and are hereby
 for the future released and discharged from any care, cost or
 charge, about making, maintaining, mending or repairing,

* May, 1769. Vol. V. 104-5.

Susan Shepard is a Woodbury native and Litchfield County historian along with her professional research work in other areas. She co-authored the 1976 American Bicentennial book on Ancient Woodbury in the American Revolution, published numerous articles on area history, and most recently was co-curator with Marge Smith, curator and archivist at the Kent Historical Society and Sharon Historical Society, on exhibits that received Connecticut League of History Organization Awards of Merit in 2017 and 2019. She was privileged to receive the national SAR Martha Washington Medal for contributions to Patriot genealogical research.

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