Becoming Portland

by Doris Sherrow, January 2001

You know, of course, that Portland was originally part of Middletown. Windsor, Hartford, Wethersfield, Middletown and Haddam — the "River Towns" — were all laid out to include three miles on either side of the Connecticut River, and settled initially on the west side. Within a decade or two, settlers were crossing the river and building houses, despite the Puritan injunction against living outside the community's "watch and ward." However, it took nearly 50 years for people to venture across the river to settle in Portland — Portland had the Wangunk Indian reservation right in the middle of it, and the settlers were leery of living on the east side.

But they eventually did, and by the middle 1700s, because of the inconvenience and downright hazard of crossing the Connecticut River to attend town business on the west side, people on the east side began to petition the General Assembly for separate town status. They finally succeeded in 1767. They took the name of **Chatham**, partly after the popular Earl of Chatham, and also with reference to the boat-building industry of Chatham, England. Boat-building was the chief industry of 18th century Portland.

In 1840, a group from the western half of Chatham, which was identified as the **First Society** from the ecclesiastical society divisions, petitioned the General Assembly to split from the eastern side of the town. The architect of this petition was **Henry Churchill**, a son-in-law of the influential quarry-owning **Hall** family. He lived in a graceful Federal-style house that once stood on the southwest corner of Main and Silver streets where the Hess station is.

The primary grievance seems to be that when Chatham had been created in 1767, all parties had agreed that town meetings would be held in First Society, in the Congregational Church which was on Bartlett Street at that time. Over the years, the "easterners" had somehow managed to get the town meetings moved to a building on Penfield Hill, and maybe this actually was the cause of First Society's wrath. We should all have a dollar for every dispute in Portland that took place over the siting of an important building!

The soon-to-be East Hamptoners argued back that they did not want to be cut off. The First Society would have the bulk of the shipyards, the quarries, the good farmland, the larger shops and businesses, and the best houses as their tax base, and the eastern folks would be left with little tax base, but many small, scraggly roads — with bridges — to maintain! The petition failed in 1840.

The First Society petition came back again in 1841, and passed in the morning session of the House on June 2nd, 1841. The name for the new town was **Middlesex**, not illogically. If you stop and think about it, Middlesex County is the only Connecticut county which doesn't have a town by the county's name!

In the afternoon of June 2nd , **Noah A. Phelps**, the representative from Middletown, moved to erase the word "Middlesex." **Alexander Clarke** of Westbrook moved to fill the blank by inserting **"Harrison."** Quite likely Mr. Clarke was a Whig — Whig **President William Henry Harrison** had become the first American president to die in office on April 4th of that year, and Clarke's gesture was, no doubt, a tribute.

The House transacted some more business that June afternoon, then **Edward P. Brownell** of East Haddam moved to erase the word "Harrison," and substitute **"Conway."** There is no indication what the significance of Conway was, but it was adopted 96 to 74. Within the space of eight hours, we had gone from being Middlesex, to being Harrison, to being Conway!

However, it is said that the local clergy did not like the name "Conway." (That makes you really wonder what it referred to, doesn't it?) **Rev. Samuel Emory** of the Episcopal Church offered the name "Portland," after the stone-quarrying area in England. **"Portland"** was adopted two days later, on June 4th, 1841.

The two names, Chatham in 1767, for the British shipbuilding center, and Portland in 1841, for the British stone quarrying locality, illustrate the shift that had taken place in the town's power base: the shipbuilders held power in the 1700s and early 1800s, and the quarry owners, in the later 1800s.

Unfortunately there seems to have been no Middletown-based paper at the time to carry the arguments for these four names. Who wanted "Middlesex?" What did "Conway" refer to? So far, I

have not found any material explaining this. I had never heard of "Harrison" until two days before this column was due! And why were representatives from other towns offering names?

Perhaps we could hold a séance on the southwest corner of Main and Silver streets, and ask the shade of Henry Churchill...