

John Elsworth

By: Doris Sherrow

Everybody in town knows Meadow Road – it's the place you go to get to Main Street if you've been up Glastonbury way. It's the other road you go to in order to see just how high the freshet is this year. It's the road where there used to be a drive-in theater, from the mid-to-later twentieth century. It's the road with the most calming view of the mighty Connecticut River.

But do you know how it got there?

In 1761, a young man named **John Elsworth** married a Portland girl named **Sarah Clark**. The next year, her father sold him a large chunk of land, 52 acres. The next year, he built a house, which still stands at 422 Gospel Lane. Many Portland folks still recall that solid colonial structure as **Stanley Clark's** house.

Four years after settling on this lot, Elsworth penned the following request to the selectmen of Middletown, of which Portland was still a part. (I have faithfully preserved his spelling...)

"To the Town of Middleton to be Conviened in Town Meeting the first Monday of December 1766---Whearas We the Subscribers on the Memorial of Capt John Elsworth, Capt David Sage and others of the Inhabatants of the third Society in Middleton--praying that there the highway going Through Wongunk Medow might be altered and Removed on the East parts of the Common field about forty Rods farther South to out of the field Between John Cornwell's house & the Said Elsworth house."

"John Cornwell's house" was likely an ancient house that once stood on the point of land between Cornwall Street and Sage Hollow Road. I learned of this long-gone structure some years ago from the late Dorothy Kelsey Robinson, one of Portland's best local history experts. Meadow Road (which becomes Sage Hollow Road on the other side of the intersection) would have run between Elsworth's house on the south, and that old Cornwell house, some one to two hundred feet further east, on the north.

Elsworth's phrase "**John Cornwell's house**" probably does not refer to the 1690 William Cornwell house, which stood to the north of **Jarvis Manufacturing** until it was disassembled in 1991. The owner of that house between 1756 and 1777 was **Timothy Cornwell**, who died in the Revolution in 1776.

This petition does relate to the 1690 **William Cornwell** house in one interesting way, however: those of you who remember this house will recall that it sat diagonal to Route 17. The reason for that was that it faced directly onto the original road that John Elsworth was petitioning to move further south!

The Town Fathers responded to Elsworth's petition thusly:

"Persuent to said appointment & the Trust Reposed in us on the 20th of March 1766 Repaired to said place and being accompanied With sundry of the Memorilest and others Did view the place and the Circumstances of the Inhabatants that Want to have the way altered and those that opposed the Alteration of the way--and Do Beg Leave to Report that the Inhabatants that Live out East & South of where the Road now Enters into the Common field are more in Number Considerably than those Northward and there Business Calls them to improve there Land in the Medow & get hay out &c much more then the Northern part and for the Southern people to have the Rhoad altered as prayed for Will save them 57 ½ Rods Travil Every time they go in or out of said Medow or through said Medow over to the Neck so caled--and it Will Make the Travil of those that Come from Northward to Travil in the new purposed Rhoad 30 Rods farther then to go where it is now used.--and we are of the opinion that the place where the New Rhoad is purposed to be Laid the Land is naturally as feaseble & more so then Where it now is used--and that the Highway may be altered without any Cost to the Town by exchange of the place now used for the other..."

This implies that more people lived in the Sage Hollow Road--Cornwall Street--Rose Hill Road area than lived to the north on Glastonbury Turnpike, Isinglass Hill Road, West Cotton Hill Road (which was called "the Great Highway" in deeds from the 1700s!), or Thompson Hill Road.

I have not done any work on the Sage Hollow Road area, but a couple decades ago, I did title search the area from the Glastonbury town line south to West Cotton Hill Road, and I found a handful of settlers up there, but by no means the large community that the Beers' History of Middlesex County chapter on Portland implies. In fact, from reading the type of droll humor employed in newspapers of the period, I was inclined to think that those locals had adopted the name of "City District" and "Upcity" for their area precisely because it was so underpopulated!

So the underpopulated north Portland area seems to have lost some of its ease of access to Siam Dock down in the River Road area, and to Main Street. And the eastern and southeastern sections of town gained greater access, presumably because they had a larger population.

Or it may simply have been because Elsworth had a commanding style. I noted for you that I had not altered his spelling. Furthermore, I double checked the handwritten documents--none of the "Rhoad" or "Medow" or "Inhabatants" are typos! Now get this: *Elsworth was a school teacher!*

In a 1770 deed, he sold **Peter Butler** "a Certain Piece of Land Near the School house about Ninety rods East of my Dwelling house..." (EHLR 1:208) And if you're thinking, well, maybe he only built the school, think again. On December 31, 1779, **Ebenezer White**, who lived at 582 Main Street, noted in his diary

"...Dan'l at John Elsworth school all ye days Except Friday." Two weeks previous he had written, "Dan'l went to school over ye meadow"--the description of Elsworth's location! It is interesting to contemplate a boldly road-moving, blithely spelling "Captain" as a school teacher. Elsworth was no meek and bashful Ichabod Crane!

But despite his gain in highway ease, Elsworth's life was not easy. He and Sarah had five children, at least two of whom died in infancy, and Sarah died nine years after their marriage, in 1770. In 1796, Elsworth sold his house and land to ship carpenter **Charles Churchell** and disappeared from the record.