

Pomfret's 'Lost Village' Has Rich Local History

By DAVID BOYLAN

POMFRET — Set in the backwoods in the nether reaches of Pomfret are the remains of a small settlement that was once a working farm and mill complex.

The site remains well-preserved, with stone foundations and chimney bases, a flume, an old cemetery and several other artifacts which were the property of the Obadiah Higgenbotham family, who settled on the land in the late 1770s. Much of the history of the farm and mill remains a mystery, though certain facts are known about the man, his family and the property he bought — which is now known simply as "The Lost Village."

The Pomfret Historical Society recently sponsored a tour of "The Lost Village," led by Ed Jezierski of Eastford, who has done con-

siderable research of the Higgenbotham family and the land.

The family included Obadiah, his wife Dorcas, and eight children, five of whom were born in Pomfret.

Though many residents of Northeastern Connecticut have heard tales about "The Lost Village," most have never actually visited the site.

Thirty-five residents of all ages met with Jezierski for the tour, which became a very informative, two-hour trek into the past, to a time when living was often very hard and the work day lasted 12 hours or longer.

The tour began at the site of the Higgenbotham home, located about a quarter mile into the woods.

"There is a legend that Obadiah was a deserter from the Hessian mercenary force which helped the British fight the

colonists during the American Revolution," he said. "But Obadiah wasn't a Hessian. The records indicate that there were Higgenbothams living in Cranston, R.I. at least 100 years before Obadiah moved to Pomfret. Why Obadiah moved to Pomfret is unknown."

There are two separate parcels of land that Obadiah bought when he settled in Pomfret. One parcel of 10 acres was purchased in 1778 from John Trowbridge and is located on the eastern edge of Mashamoquet Brook. The second, consisting of 102 acres, was bought from Seth Grosvenor, and stretches well beyond Mashamoquet Brook to the west.

Jezierski said that when the land was purchased, there was no standing timbers, only a field of prime pasture.

All that is left of the home today is a stone foundation and chimney base, which rises to the first

floor level. Both the foundation and chimney base are remarkably well preserved, considering their age and the rugged New England climate.

The hike had been pleasant to this spot, except for the thousands of mayflies which congregated en-masse around the 35 heads of novice archeologists. But like the search by British explorer and journalist Sir Henry Stanley for the lost Dr. David Livingstone in the snake, mosquito and leech-infested jungles of Africa, we persevered remarkably well through the hardships.

Obadiah's Home

Once everyone arrived at the foundation, Jezierski continued his history.

"Obadiah Higgenbotham must have had a great deal of help in building his home, and the mill," he said. "His house was probably built by Hessian soldiers, because the chimney base is very unusual. This type of base is found in Europe, but very rarely in the United States."

If the Hessians did have a hand in building these structures, then it is easy to see how the legend about Obadiah as a Hessian was started.

Mary Page of the Pomfret Historical Society said that most colonial chimney bases had a hollow niche carved into them, where people often kept valuables.

"I've searched this chimney, but it appears solid all the way around," she said.

At one corner of the foundation is a small well which, remarkably, still contains water. At another corner sits a lye stone. Ashes from the hearth were piled on the lye stone, and water was poured onto the ashes to produce potassium hydroxide lye, which was used for making soap.

The Flax Mill

Obadiah built a mill for making flax wheels near the home.

"I strongly suspect that a man named Captain Peter Cunningham, who lived on the King's Highway in Pomfret, had a hand in building the mill and the flume which carried water to it," Jezierski said.

After inspecting the flume, we gathered at the edge of Mashamoquet Brook, where there is a stone bridge that is partially washed away. Once we crossed a make-shift bridge, we walked along a path that eventually led to another stone foundation and chimney base. According to Jezierski, this second and somewhat newer home site con-



A REMNANT of an old stone foundation marks what once was a thriving homestead.

Photo by Dave Boylan

Pomfret Ruins A Mystery

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tains a mystery.

Mystery Home

"We don't know who originally lived here. Perhaps the Hessians before they moved on, or perhaps others who worked for the Higgenbotham's. We know that Darius, one of Higgenbotham's sons, lived here when he was a man, and probably worked the farm from here before he moved away," Jezierski said.

This section of "The Lost Village" also includes the remains of an addition, or terrace, to the house, a well that is now dry, a stone hitching post and the foundation of a large barn. Jezierski also pointed out where the gardens, outhouse, grind stone and animal enclosures were located.

"Sometime after Darius Higgenbotham left, a man named Winchester Twist and his wife Mary, the daughter of Darius, moved into this house. They lived here until Mary's death in 1869. After that, the place was deserted and the property became overgrown with trees and brush," Jezierski said.

"The houses on both sides of the pond were then taken apart by people who lived near the area and the lumber was used to build barns and other houses around here," he said.

For the last leg of the tour, we moved on to the potter's field, or graveyard, located almost a mile from the home of Winchester and Mary.

The mayflies never left us, and seemed to be even thicker, as we headed to the last resting place of Obadiah and Dorcas Higgenbotham.

Slave Quarters

The cemetery is surrounded by a square stone wall and just outside the entrance is yet another very small foundation.

"We think that building was used as an old slaves quarters. Slaves lived and worked all throughout this area until well into the 1800s. Sometimes they lived well apart from the family, and sometimes they did live near the graveyard. They probably acted as caretakers," Jezierski explained.

Toward the back of the cemetery are small markers

where slaves were probably buried.

"There were also Indians present in this area where the Higgenbothams lived. The Indians could have also worked on the farm," Jezierski said.

Obadiah Higgenbotham died in 1803 and his marker is no longer standing, but there are several other markers with the Higgenbotham name and none as legible as the marker for Dorcas.

Dorcas lived a very long life. She died in 1849 at age 100, never moving from the land that she and her husband had labored on.

Winchester and Mary Twist are buried in the Abington Cemetery on Route 44. Winchester, the last resident of "The Lost Village," died in 1888 at age 70, almost 20 years after he left the settlement. Mary died at age 49.

"The Higgenbothams had to be pretty self-sufficient to survive," Jezierski said. "They made and grew everything themselves, and probably didn't have very much money. If you couldn't do things yourself, you simply didn't make it. The Higgenbothams traveled a very rough road indeed."

SUPPLEMENT

- I. Higgenbothams lived in New Haven about 1680.
- II. Connecticut was about 20% Forest land as compared to about 80% today.
- III. Houses were probably built by Hessian mercenaries that defected from the British Auxillary.
- IV. Peter Cunningham got a 999 year privilege to build part of the big ditch across Obediah Higgenbotham's property. A ditch that also went through said Cunningham's property.
- V. There is a possibility that this was the original home built and occupied by the Higgenbotham Family until the father Obediah died in 1803. Then Mother Dorcas moved to a smaller home across the brook where she lived to be 100 yrs.
- VI. Went to the cemetery where some of the Higgenbothams are buried. Also a Randall is buried there. The Randalls had three slaves according to 1790 census. Very likely the slaves lived a short distance from the cemetery on Randall's property. Potters Field was common in old cemeteries. Usually head and foot stones without any inscriptions indicated an unidentified burial. Very likely Randall's slaves are buried in the Higginbotham Cemetery where the unmarked head and foot stones are
- VII. According to the 1790 census 19 slaves were owned by about 17 landowners. Most of the land owners had only one slave. They did not necessarily live near grave yards. They lived with their masters.
- VIII. Indians lived about where the Windham County 4H Camp main lodge is located. Indians that lived here and anywhere else in the region lived apart from the colonists. They hunted, fished and gathered their own food and kept to themselves.