

*The Crane Property on Old Messenger Road:
Preserving Granby's Past*

By Mark Williams

An old roadway, trees sprouting from its bed, water running through deep ditches on either side – a straight course of stone wall disappearing into the woods – a few depressions in the ground lined with stone.

There's a story here on this mountain. This evidence of human habitation on land that appears barely habitable is compelling. The thick collection of second-growth timber suggests the residents have been gone for more than a century, and so they must have been living here when most people were farmers. But who would choose to farm this land so filled with boulders, so drenched in surface water, so isolated amidst the hills? That is, indeed, the story: who – and how isolated?

It was not much of a choice, actually, for Nathaniel and Eunice Messenger, who settled here on Popatunuck Mountain at the time of the French and Indian War. Nathaniel's father was a poor man who had come to live at Salmon Brook (before it was called Granby) as part of a group of people who could not get any land anywhere in New England except what was exposed to attack. He had died when Nathaniel was young. A parcel in mountainous, heavily wooded terrain was all that Nathaniel could afford when he set out to create his own farm in the 1750s. Fierce fighting in New York that might soon reach into western New England discouraged settlement west of Bushy Hill. As the war dragged on, it nearly ended the hopes of young millwrights who had already opened for business around the gorge on the west bank of Salmon Brook.

Nathaniel and Eunice, nevertheless, made the most of it and raised a large family deep within this mountain, gradually acquiring and clearing more adjacent land to serve as farms for the next generation (including today's Crane property – the southwest corner of that property was part of Nathaniel's original home lot). By the time of the American Revolution many families had moved to what is now West Granby, but even then, the Messengers remained relatively isolated within Popatunuck's rugged slopes and ledges. The soil was thin, and their plow was no match for the glacial till. And so they harvested timber for the building boom going on in other parts of Granby, and raised sheep, carting their logs and wool to sawmills and carding shops along the brook. They also established orchards, and, to the horror of the local Congregationalist minister, distilled their cider to a tempting potency.

Carrying their surplus to shops and markets was an issue, though, for their road, what is now known as Old Messenger Road, was, in fact, no road at all. That is, the town selectmen refused to survey it as an official town road. They rightly understood that it would be too expensive to maintain. The Messengers had to keep it up themselves and rely upon the good will of the owners of neighboring parcels to be able to traverse their land. It was over a mile in any direction to a town road, and they traveled in all directions: east to the meetinghouse for required Sunday services, south to the mills

around the gorge, and north toward the junction of what became two “turnpike” roads by the end of the century. By that time a next generation of four Messenger families were raising their children in an enclave of dwellings on Popatunuck Mountain. The going was rough, especially in winter and spring when their roadways replayed the ice age. Any twenty-first-century hiker can attest to the difficulty of getting up and down this mountain during those seasons, and when spring rains, less and less restrained by increasingly cleared hillsides, washed in torrents down these paths, it must have been impossible to get a cart through.

It is at that point, around 1800, that the story becomes more one of community relations – more about Granby as a whole – than simply one of poor families scraping a living from poor soil. During and after the American Revolution, the hills in the western section of Granby filled with farmers. These were generally rough, independent-minded people who bridled at church attendance requirements, had little money to pay taxes, sometimes felt that the new order was not the egalitarian world of liberty they had fought for in the Revolutionary War, and desperately needed good roads and bridges to get what little surplus they produced to market. Some of their kind were in the process of abandoning New England for Vermont and western New York, but many lacked the resources for such a move and basically struggled to stay off the paupers’ rolls. What is important for the town’s story is that these people of rough edges soon constituted a majority of town residents when they chose to attend town meetings, and the more prosperous merchants, tradesmen, and professional men of the emerging town center discovered that they had to accommodate their concerns if they wanted to hold office.

In this environment of politicking and accommodation, Amos, Lemuel, Sereno and Daniel Messenger found that they could generally get one or two of their number elected to what many might have considered a minor and burdensome office: surveyor of highways. For the Messengers, though, this turned out to be a key to survival. Surveyors of highways were empowered by state law to call upon taxpayers in their districts to work or pay for work on town roads and bridges each year. The higher one’s assessment, the more one worked, or the more one paid someone to work. And the surveyor decided where the work was to be done. It probably did not occur to Daniel Messenger’s work gang to ask if the road they were working on (Daniel’s road) was, officially, a town road. Probably there was unspoken agreement among those who actually ended up working that if no one asked too many questions all sorts of “traveled roads” could be maintained with a wink and a nod. And a little income could be had, too, for those who were being paid to work off the highway taxes of wealthier inhabitants.

So it was that, for decades, the Messengers, as district surveyors, were able to keep their roadbed from succumbing to annual ice flows. When the system of district work gangs gave way to the town hiring contractors for work on roads and bridges, a third generation of Messengers (and married in Bemans and Weeds) bid for road work and continued to charge the town for repairs on their non-road. The support of these people was too important for community-improvement minded reformers of Granby Street to ignore them. From the 1830s to the end of the century Granby’s political agenda was consumed by tension between businessmen, temperance reformers, and others who

hoped to “redeem Salmon Brook [Granby center] from its decaying condition,” and their backcountry constituents who were just trying to make a living, often by distilling cider brandy, their best cash crop. When the redeemers formed the Republican Party in the 1850s, its ideology of “free soil, free labor, free men” engaged the hill farmers of Granby and ushered in over a century of Republican hegemony in Granby. Republicans like Peter Jewett, Calvin Dibble, and the Loomis brothers, had to tread carefully, though, if they wanted to stay in office. They had led their constituents to victory in the Civil War, but had earned only begrudging loyalty for defeating “the Slave Oligarchy.” Prohibition of the sale of “intoxicating beverages” had to wait until 1905, and any kind of tax increase for schooling, a paved road from the railroad depot, and other community improvements was met with resistance. Meanwhile, Old Messenger Road continued to be the most expensive maintenance project in town.

In the end, as the hills emptied of their truculently independent subsistence yeomen, a Republican agenda of prohibition, consolidated schools, a town park, and a water district for the town center, much of it paid for by savings on discontinued roads, prevailed. The backcountry people no longer controlled town votes as their children responded to the twin calls of the West and the cities.

A fourth generation of Messengers, tired of trying to get by herding a few cows and sheep, hunting, fishing, and distilling cider, found that, by the end of the nineteenth century, land values in Granby as a whole had declined sufficiently to allow them to buy some good brook land down from the mountain and on real roads in West Granby. Still, they were appropriately offended in 1899 when the town discontinued their non-road. They may have left their old houses on the mountain to rot away, but they continued to harvest timber for sale as utility poles and to produce charcoal for brick kilns. They were some of the “choppers” that Republican U.S. Senator George McLean hoped to put out of business as he bought up land for a game refuge in the hills of Simsbury and Granby. In 1905 the Messengers managed to gather a couple dozen of their friends and neighbors to protest the discontinuance, but they just did not have the numbers anymore. At that town meeting the inhabitants also voted to prohibit liquor sales in Granby. Still, the clan would not be extracted from town politics. Beginning in 1939, Nathaniel and Eunice Messenger’s descendant Will Messenger began his twenty-two year career as first selectman, and his son ran the town’s highway department throughout the middle of the twentieth century. According to local legend, Bill Jr. was not above using the town’s grader now and then on the lower end of Old Messenger Road.

The abandoned foundations, roadways, and stone walls on the Crane property, hidden in the return of the forest, serve as reminders of quintessential features of Granby’s historical fabric. They date to a perilous time in the nation’s formative years when acquisition of a “competency” (subsistence land for one’s family and one’s children’s families) was everything to young people coming of age on the thin soil of upland New England. Their builders struggled against the elements and the threat of debilitating taxation, finding creative ways to scratch a living from their mountain. These remains also remind us of the nature of town politics in the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century, for they were maintained by people who used what leverage they had

to assure themselves use of their road, even at considerable expense to the town treasury. Granby's movers and shakers lived not only in elegant houses in the town center, but also in smaller and more utilitarian dwellings in the western hills. It remains amusing to recount that leverage in action, but doing so more fundamentally exposes the dynamics that shaped momentous events, including the temperance movement, "progressive" reform, and the rhetoric that once divided the nation – all this on a stretch of backcountry road that was never a road.