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History of Chaplin, Connecticut

History is indubitably an important facet of life. It allows one to contextualize their existence. One can see how today came to be; where it came from. That is not only helpful for understanding a person's role in today's world, but also helps someone to hypothesize about what the future might hold. With this basic argument for why history is incredibly important and not something that should be forgotten, the history of Chaplin, Connecticut has not been updated since 1972; which would be the 150th anniversary of its foundation as highlighted by Shari Smith, the town clerk and a resident of Chaplin. The 200th anniversary is coming up in 2022; therefore, using new documentary evidence and interviews with longtime residents, this project seeks to enrich the understanding of Chaplin's history and bring it up to date with an assessment of the last fifty years. In doing so, it also seeks to make those newfound documents and interview transcriptions freely available by means of a dedicated webpage.

The best way to really begin understanding modern-day Chaplin would be with some background; therefore, a brief recapitulation of Chaplin's history up to 1972 is necessary. The town was formed from pieces of Hampton, Mansfield, and Windham in 1822. The Deacon, Benjamin Chaplin, was a skillful surveyor of land. He bought up land in this unsettled area and bought it at incredibly low prices; the most impressive being 1765 acres for 1647 pounds, a "princely domain" (Naser 1972). For reference, that would be about \$51,000 in today's money, which comes out to less than thirty dollars an acre (Naser 1972). With his large swaths of land,

he divided and conquered and became a real estate mogul. While this spirit is not gone today, this drive was not uncommon in the day. Calvinistic ideals were prominent and one of these beliefs was that one's success was directly related to one's fate after this life. Those predestined were sure to meet with success and lead successful lives, therefore, people would try to prove their destiny by being successful as well as devout followers of the church. Chaplin was no exception and worked his whole life, becoming a Deacon at the first church of Mansfield despite having to travel six miles there and back every time that he attended, at least once a week. A committee of residents in the area wished to form a closer church. Benjamin Chaplin left funds for the establishment of a church within a mile of his homestead. In 1810, the church was finally organized with the help from surrounding churches, and in 1820 it got its first pastor. Before 1820, few people lived in the historic center of Chaplin, but with the establishment of the church, a town sprung up and a community was formed (Naser 1972).

The town was officially founded in 1822, with the ecclesiastical society drawing the lines of the town. To clarify, the church played an incredibly important role in Chaplin's history, and for much of the town's existence they were inseparable. The concept of Jefferson's wall, or perhaps as it is more broadly known, the separation or division of church and state, is commonly known today and its importance understood. This precedent existed in the nineteenth century, yet it did not exist before 1818, which was around the time of the town's founding. Up until 1818, the congregational Church was the state church of Connecticut. Even after state funding and mandatory religion was determined to be unconstitutional and not religiously tolerant, religion was nonetheless much more prominent than it was today. The state could not force attendance at Mass every Sunday. Christian Evangelist morals and beliefs, and the lifestyle associated with the

church, were done out of one's own freewill. It being the dominant culture in the United States, however, led it to be near inevitable. In order to fit into this homogenized society, it was in a person's best interest to adopt the pre-established culture. America has always had a problem welcoming in and accepting outsiders, continually forcing them to adopt the white man's culture. Indians, blacks, and other outsiders alike were expected to conform to the WASP (White Anglo Saxon Protestant) way of life. A speech delivered from Captain Richard H. Pratt on the Education of Native Americans as late as 1892 is titled "Kill the Indian, and Save the Man" ("Kill the Indian, and Save the Man": Capt. Richard H. Pratt on the Education of Native Americans." nd). Not forced by the state, yet highly encouraged by its citizens. One could be American, but it would be in spite of being Indian.

In order to even dream of being within a league of equality, one would have to throw out everything that their ancestors held dear, for Americans had no tolerance for it. So again, while not mandated by the state, church and religion were nonetheless a driving force in Chaplin, and much of America's history, alike. Even though there was no official document any longer pledging Connecticut's allegiance to God, no mandated or state enforced religion, there may as well have been. A person would not have been in Chaplin if they were not religious. One simply would not have been accepted. For reference, the school for the town was just as big as the church (Naser 1972). For clarification, this was not the exception at the time; this was the rule. The church and state were intertwined, and that was simply how it was. The town derives its name from Deacon Benjamin Chaplin, who, upon his death, left money to form an ecclesiastical society, which later became the congregational church. The town was originally part of Mansfield. And as one may expect, therefore, area residents - including Deacon Benjamin

Chaplin - traveled into the heart of Mansfield for church. Because of this prominence of religion, for a long time the only records of Chaplin's history were ecclesiastical records; the church ruled the town. This is no longer the case. The church still exists, still has preachings, still has followers; but by no means is it any longer the driving force behind the advancement of the town that it was at one time.

At the time, the main institution found in Chaplin was agriculture. There was also "a mill of paper, a tannery, boot making, silk culture, palm leaf hat industry, and several lumber operations" (Naser 1972). Chaplin also utilized the Air Line trail, which at the time was a railroad. Unfortunately, in 1955 a bridge which it crossed over was destroyed and the tracks were subsequently removed. Around this time, the industries of Chaplin had changed. The making of wooden trays and baskets had become new titans, lumber and saw mills persisted with use of water power and shingle mills popped up as well; yet still agriculture remained the dominant output of the town. Now, the majority of residents in Chaplin are either retired, or work elsewhere such as Willimantic, Windham, the University of Connecticut, or even as far as Hartford. The automobile certainly changed the dynamic of Chaplin. Not considering those who work out of town, agriculture could still be the town's greatest export. Bats of Bedlam Maple Farm, Chaplin Farms, Juniper Farm, and more being no small component of the local storefronts. ("Connecticut Farms" 2020).

While seeming as though it has always been the same, schooling was very different in 1819. There were several districts which divided Chaplin. Within each district there was a school. This sounds similar, yet those districts were much smaller than they are today. These groups, again, each with their own schools, were Beare Hill (now Bear Hill), Natchaug, Tower

Hill, North and South center districts, Bedlam, and Chewink (Naser 1972). In the 1850s, the state took over schools, and schools were condensed in terms of grades, leaving only two schools. One resided where the current town dump is, and another where the current town library and senior center are. The old town library was in the William Ross building in the Chaplin Historic district, built in 1911 (Lebovich 1983). It moved to its current location in 2000 when plumbing and parking could not be added due to the small land plot. The new Chaplin Public Library is now handicap accessible and shares a well with the senior center and the community center, also founded in 2000. This building in which these staples of the town currently reside was made vacant in 1992 when the new Chaplin Elementary School was founded, giving a new home to the original elementary school established in the 40s.

Around the time of the twentieth century, secondary education was becoming the exception, as opposed to the rule. Woodstock academy, Mt. Hermon School, and finally Windham High were the destination of the new pupils of the time, being boarding schools for their attendants in a pre-automobile world. The tuition was paid in full by the town. In the 1950s and 1960s came another overhaul to the schools with consolidation. With the rising prices of education, Scotland, Hampton, and Chaplin teamed up and created the local public high school Parish Hill Middle High school. The school's first year was in 1967, enrolling 470 students in seventh through twelfth and having their own local board of education (Naser 1972).

As stated prior, Chaplin's history was last updated in 1972. The most recent document on the town's history is called *Ben Chaplin's Town 1822-1972 A History of Chaplin, Connecticut* by Gordon R. Naser. While perhaps not many eventful things have happened since, nonetheless many things have changed over time. The population of the town, for example, is always

changing, and thus this document has become outdated. Another example would be how the aforementioned town library and senior center now resides where the elementary school used to be. To many residents of Chaplin this may be old news, but to others, they know that space on the end of Chaplin street as the Chaplin Public Library and senior center as those two things only. That general store at the end of Chaplin street that has since gone out of business would be another example. The last history was written for the 150th anniversary, which fell in 1972. Updating the town's history should occur at the very least every fifty years. Ben Chaplin's last will and testament was recently donated to the town.

A few years ago, a resident bought a bunch of boxes at an auction. Years later when they were sorting the contents, the resident found Chaplin's original will in one of the boxes. While some residents believe that the ecclesiastical society founded in his honor kept it - a reasonable hypothesis considering how much of his will was devoted to specifications for contingencies regarding the continuance of eligibility for funding - that copy was regardless never released to the public, and therefore not very helpful to anyone even if it did exist. The finding of Ben Chaplin's last will and testament was a critical event because Ben Chaplin is the namesake of the town; therefore, his will is crucial in understanding its roots and origin.

The will has been transcribed and will be put up on the internet along with scans of the original document. The will is quite pretty, being written in fine script, and uses Old English which is always a fun read as well as utilizing old conventions such as the "long s," an archaic form of the lower case "s". It appears similar to how an "f" would (f and ꝥ are two common permutations of the long s, and it sometimes seen with a "horizontal bar (that) goes all the way through the vertical stem of the letter 'f' but only extends to the left of the vertical stem of the

long S in printed works,” and is only used in certain situations (“Constitution Day 2016: WE, the People: Differences & 18th Century Typography” 2019). While less interesting, there is also archaic syntax, vernacular. While not important to the town, they certainly would have been fine without using words like executrix or writing the first s in two consecutive ss like an f, they are simply interesting to see and act as a fine bonus to the information contained within the will.

Ben Chaplin’s will is, as one would expect, very personal as well as pragmatic. While it gives money to the church, it also vividly describes precisely what should be done with Chaplin’s estate in full. It describes the boundaries of his estate, an inventory of his farmland and surveying equipment. Money is set aside for his widow, his five daughters, even, an explanation for why the money and estate given to his grandchildren is so sparse: “And the reason why I have given no more to the said Timothy and Mehetabel is, because my deceased son gave them nearly all the Estate I had given unto him” (Williams, Mr. T 1818). In terms of things broader than familial, as stated earlier, Ben Chaplin set aside money for a church:

Furthermore my Will is that if there should be a corporate society for the support of the publick (what did I say about Old English? There is it in full glory, an outdated yet nonetheless beautiful and intriguing spelling of the word now spelled “public”) worship of God according to the Faith and practices of the Churches now known and Distinguished (while I did not transcribe every intricacy in the document, hence why I will be sharing the scanned copy of the original will and testament, there are many words that are capitalized, seemingly at random) by the Denomination of Congregational Churches in New England... before the first Day of January 1812. There shall be given to such Incorporation, Delivered be Executor the ammount of £300 viz. £100 of State Note, and £200 of other Notes against sponisible persons... (Williams 1818).

Ben Chaplin goes on to detail the condition that the church shall stop receiving funds if it fails to maintain what is called steady preaching, defined as forty sabbaths a year:

And my Will is, that such Incorporation fund said Estate so that it may be safe and permanent, and apply the Annual interest of it toward the support of a learned Minister professing and preaching the Doctrines of the Gospel according as they are explained in

the Westminster Confession of Faith in such society with in the Distance of my House above expressed, provided also, that such preaching shall be kept up steadily. That is to say, there shall be at least fourty sabbaths such preaching in a year in order to be Deemed steady preaching (William 1818).

In addition to the will, there is new information on the more recent history of Chaplin from longtime residents. Three Chaplin residents have been interviewed: Warren Church, Hill Bullard, and Charlotte Shead. Resident Warren Church lives in the historic district, and grew up in the town. He talked about the not so distant past, when kids checked their skunk traps on the way to school and their muskrat traps on the way home. When there were bounties on skunks, when there were bulls and a bull pole/bull staff nearby in case things got out of hand. Warren, along with Hill, added some personal touch to the town. Talking about their favorite spots up on the hills, about how the modern north and south Bear Hill roads used to be called “Beare Hill,” due to the mountains being utterly devoid of trees, greenery, and general flora. Since numerous trees have been planted and subsequently sprung up, the hill now bursts with life and even with the recent trimming, due to the plague of gypsy moths, the hill would certainly not be dubbed bare by anyone (Church 2019).

Hill Bullard is a local historian who lived in the town and researched his family’s history in the town, even going through the trouble to see the original grant of land that his grandfather was given. Bullard was more interested in the topography of Chaplin over the years. He provided a map with old points of interest in the town marked. Mountains, look outs, fields, and various other points of interest around the town were all named on this map, some outdated, some still current. He also provided insight into a project set up by the government that would take aerial photos of the United States, allowing one to see just how bare the aforementioned Beare Hill was, even as recently as when this aerial view project began (Bullard 2019).

The last resident interviewed is Charlotte Shead. She is ninety-four years old and did not have much to say about informational history, events such as selectmen, names of prominent elected officials or politics of yore. But, as the others did, she provided fantastic anecdotes of the past and described life then as nobody wrote down because they thought it gratuitous and redundant. Everybody is living life this way, what is there to say about it? Why write it down? Well the way of life for many residents of Chaplin has changed since then, and for many quite drastically, and Charlotte offered a portal back to the town of Chaplin in her youth. She has lived in the town her whole life and was even a selectman in the 80s. She harped on the feeling of disunity. Whether a fault of the residents of Chaplin in particular or simply the way of the ever-shifting times, Charlotte did not make clear, but the town does not feel as close knit. When she was a youthful woman, Charlotte described this tacit understanding among town members that everybody's door was open. Whether a person would like to resolve a dispute, ask a question, have some trinket fixed or whatever was desired, one's neighbors and, by no coincidence, friends, were there and ready to help and conversate at any hour of the day. People still tended their own farmland. They did not drive to Hartford or the nearby University of Connecticut or even as close as Willimantic. They were always within an arm's reach.

This included around times of break too, when everyone would come together for church activities on Thanksgiving or on Christmas, with everybody's extended family from instate and even in nearby Rhode Island coming to bond and celebrate with their loved ones and family. This raised the question of, or perhaps should raise the question of, whose responsibility is it to maintain this? The individual? The longtime residents? Some residents travel to Pennsylvania, Texas, as far afield as Japan during times of break such as Christmas, Thanksgiving, and

sometimes even a long weekend. Perhaps a committee should be created to boost morale for the little town, to introduce folks to one another and try to once again encourage this bond and brotherhood that was so special and strong among the Chaplin citizens of the past. Yes, there is the rising of the maypole at Garrison, the tree lighting put on by the local volunteer fire department every December come Christmas time, complete with complimentary hot chocolate and pizza and a Santa who rides in on a fire truck and stays after for photos and lends an open ear to nice children, but is that enough? Is that even the right approach? Holding events at a neutral location? How can we create those strong interpersonal relationships that were found in the older Chaplin? Shead did not lay out a series of steps to take yet, it is in the interest of the town and its population to give this quandary some thought (Shead 2019).

Charlotte was first selectman during a tumultuous time for Chaplin. With the rise of tourism in the United States and photography and appreciation for nature and natural beauty, Diana's Pool, a local swimming hole, came under storm. People from around the state and even further came to hike in the Natchaug forest, kayak on the class IV rapids, and fish in the emerald waters overflowing with trout (Geist 1983). This quickly became a problem when tourists and college students from the nearby university began leaving trash and beer cans in the river and on its shores. Each ticket was worth \$28 dollars at the time (roughly \$72 today) and over 200 were issued, leading many people to march up to England road and swim there (Geist 1983).

Information on the history of Chaplin should be made accessible to everybody, not only to those who can read cursive and have the time to go to the town hall and are able to gain access to the town vault. Information is nothing short of critical; it is what allows people to be valuable

citizens. One needs to understand the context of his or her town in order to do it justice in the present and future. Shari Smith, the Chaplin town clerk explained it best:

Careful preservation of town documents such as land records and vital records is essential. However, preserving other records that have historical value such as school records, militia records, records of women voters and many others, provides a window into our past in ways that are unique to each of us. For example, an individual may be able to learn the location of their ancestor's property from the land records. They could also learn more descriptive information about their ancestor's lives from the old list books, such as how many horses they may have had or what type of cattle that person was keeping on the property at that time. Details like these allow us to form an excellent picture in our minds eye of the lives our ancestors lived. It is impossible to know the long-term value of what may seem today to be a mundane record. Preserving the history of individuals and therefore of a community is a way of understanding our collective past. It is a duty that we are ethically obligated to perform for the future generations.

Chaplin's town's history is locked away. While perhaps a low barrier of entry, a barrier nonetheless. In a world of declining attention spans, the last thing that one would want is for history to be inaccessible to the common person. Without taking proper steps to preserve it, it will fade away and be lost to time. The more widely accessible information is, the more likely it is that people will be exposed to it. Generally speaking, if all somebody wanted to know in relation to their town's history was online, he or she would be much more willing to set aside some time and get familiar with his or her town than if that information was locked away at the town hall and only accessible there during operating hours.

Chaplin, Connecticut is not the most interesting town in the world, not even its state. This does not mean that it should be forgotten though. It has a story to be told and people who are willing to listen, but no speaker to tell it. That story can be gathered and placed where as many people can see it; where inquisitive minds need jump over no larger hurdle than a simple google search. This belief system can make the world as a whole better because if everybody took what

they were good at it and made a little corner on the internet for it, anything that people would like to know about that thing could just dial up their local expert on the topic and read in an easily digestible format everything they would like to know on a given topic or niche passion. Even something as seemingly trivial as the history of Chaplin has its fans. Hill Bullard was only interested in the topographical history, for instance, demonstrating that everybody has their own interests and if one shares their own, they are contributing to and helping somebody else out there with that same interest feel more comfortable and learn more about that hobby and themselves; that's a great thing. When interested in something, one will find that others are too. Do not worry if it is practical or if it has tangible value, some things should simply be done for the enjoyment of doing them, for the relief of stress that they bring. Everything has its value and the more that is shared about what makes everybody unique, what interests oneself finds oneself occupied with, a tighter, warmer, and certainly more knowledgeable place the world becomes.

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