

A Modern History of New Haven and Eastern New Haven County, by Everett G. Hill
Chapter XXXVI, Stony Creek

THE UNIQUE SHORE RESORT, THE CENTER OF THE QUARRY INDUSTRY, THE OYSTER PRODUCING VILLAGE WHICH IS A PART OF THE TOWN OF BRANFORD

For many years the white settlers of Branford dwelt in harmony with the Indian neighbors from whom the land had been acquired, and it may be that one of the reasons for the harmony was a tacit division of the land. The early settlers gravitated to some stream. The whites took the mouth of that river that rises in the heights of Totoket, and most of their habitations, for many years after the settlement, were along the New Haven side of it, near its mouth. To their Indian allies they left another and smaller stream – the “stony creek” that enters the Sound near what is now the southeastern boundary of Branford. Verily it was a stony creek. Born of one branch in the heights of western Guilford, of another in the meadows of southeastern Branford, it flowed over a rocky bed to the sea. Around it for two miles up from its mouth are ledges of what looked to the farmer like valueless rock, but its bed and the shores east and west of where it meets the Sound were and are a treasure ground of sea food. Fish, but more especially clams and oysters, had, to judge from the shell-piles, abounded there for centuries before the white man first viewed the land.

Long before that it seems to have been the happy hunting ground of the Indian. All the products of that chase by which he lived were there in profusion. Wild fowl were in its sedgy creeks and inlets and on its meadows. Deer and the smaller animals were found there and nearby. His eye for nature’s beauties was not as ours, but that romantic group of islands which lies just off the coast did not fail to appeal to him, and around their shores, in his hunting trips, he may frequently have ventured in his light canoe.

The rocky stream and what lies near it, the supplies of food and those same “Thimble Islands,” make the modern Stony Creek. For all Stony Creek is divided, like Caesar’s Gaul, into three parts, its quarries, its oyster business and its summer shore and hotel business. Of the features that make these, probably the islands first attracted attention. There are about twenty-five of “the Thimbles,” counting the islands to which a house might cling, and they are old in story and tradition. The attention of the earliest settlers of Branford was drawn to them from the tale that Captain Kidd, who scurried through the Sound more or less in the first half century of Branford’s existence, had buried some of his ill-gotten gains on the island which afterward came to be called “Money Island.” Some of the first settlers handed down the story that they had seen him there; some had even talked with him. The legend that he buried any treasure in the vicinity is little credited now; it is entirely possible that the pirate may have stopped one or more times for shelter or supplies in some of the numerous island harbors.

But there are the islands, and they have treasures exceeding any of which Kidd ever dreamed. They have a beauty of natural scenery, a romance of variety, a fascination of sun and storm and sea of many moods, that never cease to draw and hold, and in these days jaded humans come from far for their restoration and rest. Long years ago, as a pioneer, Captain William O’Brien bought Pot Island, and erected a house there. Now there is hardly an island big enough to give foundation to a dwelling that has not one or more of summer habitations, while some of them

have been transformed by wealth and art into summer fairylands. Their path of the sea is a free highway, and the boatman or the canoeist may find increasing joy in cruising about their labyrinth. They are largely responsible for a company of pilgrims as large or sometimes larger than the credited population of Stony Creek, that annually visits cottages or hotels or boarding places on Stony Creek shore or in the village.

The chief of these hotels is at Indian Point, the Indian Point House, now owned by Mrs. Martha C. Maynard and conducted by her daughter, Mrs. Charles Madiera, and her husband. The Three Elms House, just inshore from this, is owned by Mrs. Maynard, and was formerly under the same management. In the village are the Brainard House, a summer hotel, and the Bay View Inn, an all-the-year house. At Flying Point there is the Flying Point Hotel, and at Money Island the Harbor View and Money Island hotels.

The story of Stony Creek's quarry industry, which makes the abiding substance of the village, is a story of the settlement itself. As a portion of the Branford agricultural community – there is some good farm land to the northwest of the village – it began very early. There is pretty definite record of the settlement there, as a pioneer in 1671, of Francis Norton. There were Nortons among the original settlers from New Haven, and the presumption is that he came from that way. But William Leete, who appeared to the eastward of him only two years later, undoubtedly came from Guilford. In the company of others who came soon after are the names of Richard Butler, Farmer, Abraham and William Hoadley, Frisbie, Barker, Palmer, Howd, Rogers and Rockwell.

So they spread all over the southeastern part of the town, and increased. By 1788 there were so many that Stony Creek, as it seems to have been called almost from the first, was made a school district. Not all of the settlers were farmers; some were fishermen. Still others were sailors, some of them on deep waters. Stony Creek shared with Branford, for a good part of the nineteenth century, the prosperity and distinction of a Sound coasting port.

No doubt the early settlers had some hazy notion that Stony Creek's stones were valuable, but it was not adequate. They lived on through the eighteenth and nearly half of the nineteenth centuries mostly by farming and fishing, having little conception of the broader commercial possibilities that lay in their land and off their shore. For oystering was in those days no more than a local industry, if it was any industry at all. The coming of the Shore Line railroad, about 1850, was the beginning of Stony Creek's awakening. Before this, no doubt, the people had realized something of the value of the stone that was in their ledges, but there was no market for it at hand, and no means of transporting it to far markets. The railroad changed all that, and the outsiders who came with it were not long in discovering the quarry possibilities of the place. They did not for some time, however, realize the high quality or rare value of Stony Creek's peculiar granite deposits.

There were, soon after 1850, some operations for the quarrying of the stone. Most important was that of B.G. Green, who in 1858 developed a quarry and operated it for about fifteen years, employing at one time as many as fifty men. But the first operation on a large scale seems to have been that of John Beattie. Stony Creek was not to have the credit of his work, however. He commenced quarrying at the far eastern corner of the village in 1870, and finding a good quality

of stone, did an extensive business. But that district was set off to Leete's Island in Guilford in 1882, and all of the extensive Beattie work has gone for a Guilford industry.

In 1875 the first strictly local operation was commenced on the east side of the town, about a mile north of the railroad. A superior vein of stone was discovered, which seems to have been largely responsible for making widely famous the Stony Creek product. A few years later granite from this quarry was used in a part of the construction of the capitol buildings at Hartford and at Albany, New York. A system of spur tracks was laid from this plant down to the railroad. The necessity for this was largely obviated when in 1893 the course of the railroad through Stony Creek was moved farther northward.

The quarry business still conducted under their name was established in 1888 by the Norcross Brothers of Worcester. Here a superior product was found, and a corporation with a quarter of a million dollars of capital now employs several hundred men in the getting out of finished stone. It is red granite of an especially beautiful variety which is produced at this quarry.

The following year a concern known as the Branford Granite Company, but said to have been financed largely by Brooklyn capital, opened a quarry on the west side of the creek. It employed at one time from 100 to 150 men, but this business has been absorbed by the two quarry companies which survive.

The other of these besides Norcross Brothers is the Stony Creek Red Granite Company, organized by Samuel Babcock of Middletown. It has found abundance of a high class granite, and does a prosperous business. There was formerly another quarry industry, which flourished for a time, the Totoket Granite Company, which found a handsome grade of pink granite.

But though the number of individual concerns has diminished, Stony Creek's quarry industry was never so prosperous as now, and every year finds the superior quality and workmanship of its product more widely known. The stone taken out here is of brilliant beauty, and much of it takes a high polish. It has been in high favor especially for monumental purposes where unusual attractiveness is desired, while for building purposes the gray and white granite of Stony Creek goes, in quantities of hundreds of tons, all over the country.

Even more famous are Stony Creek oysters. Long ago the oyster industry ceased to be a simple matter of raking up oysters from the sea bed, culling them and placing them on the market. But that Stony Creek has kept up with the times and the science of growing oysters the reputation of the bivalves bearing the name of the village proves. They go all over the country, and command the high prices of the product that has fame. The largest grower and dealer is the Stony Creek Oyster Company, with a capital of \$42,000, of which Henry I. Lewis is president, Maud H. Smith secretary and Frank E. Smith treasurer. Charles E. Smith, of Flying Point, is another large grower and dealer.

Stony Creek has a somewhat distinct community life. In 1874 it was made the second voting district of Branford, the territory included being about a mile and a half square. It has had, as noted, its own church for over half a century. Even its shore and summer places seem to be its own, and though there is no rivalry with the town which includes it, Stony Creek has a certain

individuality. It is prosperous through certain highly developed industries. Little farming industry is included within its district now, most of that being of the market garden variety, to supply those who cannot farm for themselves, or the summer visitors. The latter make Stony Creek, for nearly six months of the year, a very busy place. The population of the hotels and cottages, the shore and the increasingly inhabited islands, makes use, in the season, of all the resources the village can supply.

From two directions terminating trolleys have had considerable effect on Stony Creek. The line from New Haven, now a part of the Connecticut Company's system, came through Branford and to the eastern side of Stony Creek late in the 'nineties. This makes a very close connection with Branford, with all the shore places, with New Haven. It has helped not a little in Stony Creek's prosperity. From the other direction, the Shore Line Electric Railway Company built in 1910 a branch line from the center of Guilford by the shore route almost to Stony Creek village. It was the intention, or so it was announced, to have these lines connect, and make a continuous shore route from New Haven to Guilford, but the thing has never been done.