Colonial History: The Sheep Farm, Early Edgecomb Family and Fort Hill Brook Industrial Sites

Fort Hill Brook Waterfall, Groton, Connecticut

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Synopsis

The Sheep Farm is a rare, largely intact example of a complex, early Colonial settlement in the Poquonnock uplands of Groton, Connecticut. Original stone walls, now covered with lichens, rectangular stone foundations, probably for animal enclosures, and an old road, perhaps connecting with the grist mill and other mills on site, are very well preserved. The grist mill on Fort Hill Brook, including clear evidence of a large supporting pond, is possibly from the late 17th century but certainly from the early 18th century. There is evidence upstream on Fort Hill Brook of another mill, perhaps a fulling mill or sawmill, from the early 18th century. A tannery was also reportedly on site. A very old house, known as the Samuel Edgecomb House, is located on the property. While the house has seen many alterations, most recently a major renovation about 100 years ago, Town of Groton records confirm the existence of a house there before 1754, and certain structural elements indicate a very early origin.

In addition to the well-preserved features of the Sheep Farm, the documented life of Samuel Edgecomb provides a fascinating look at the many talents, occupations, community involvement and supporting personal interactions necessary to be successful in the early 18th century. Samuel built and owned ships that were used for trading salt and other key necessities, and would rent out portions of the vessels both to produce income and, more important, to reduce the high risk. He had many farming plots both in and outside of Groton, as far away as Norwich, where he grew hay and apples. Samuel also raised chickens and shared Skull Plains, part of Poquonnock Plains (now largely covered by the reservoir) with other colonists for grazing cattle. While the genealogy of Samuel Edgecomb is incomplete, he was related to the prominent Smith and Copp families and was an in-law of Joshua Hempstead, famous for his Diary documenting Colonial life. Samuel assisted Joshua in surveying, as Joshua assisted Samuel in mending fences, digging stones out of fields, dividing stores of rum, and other tasks. Samuel was often called upon to be a pallbearer, perhaps due to his legendary size and strength, which would be passed to his descendants.

Sheep Farm – Early Land Deeds and History

Frances Caulkins notes in her extensive history of New London that “the earliest grants in the southern part of Groton or Poquonnock, were highly valued, as the soil could be brought into immediate use. Some of it was meadow and marsh, and a considerable portion of the upland had been formerly cultivated by the Indians." Nehemiah Smith, born in England in 1605, eventually came to America with his brother and reached New London in August of 1652. Carol Kimball, the Town of Groton Historian, writes that the

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1 Eva Butler, Indian and Colonial Research Center, Old Mystic, Connecticut, “Mills – Colonial,” Notebook #42 A fulling mill would pound cloth using a water powered device until the cloth was the desired thickness and texture.
3 The original spelling and capitalization is used when quoting from Colonial documents.
same year “he was given twenty acres of upland upon the plain east of the pond in Skull Plain, along what is now …Route 117. There he built his house, probably about 1657….his son, Nehemiah 2nd, …remained on the homestead farm in Poquonnock…and was Town Clerk of Groton from 1707 to 1718.”5

The Smith land extended west to Smith Lake, which is now an adjunct to Groton Reservoir, the large body of water west of Route 117 and the Pequot Health Center. Nehemiah Smith’s house was destroyed by fire in 1775, but the current Jabez-Smith House was built in 1783, most likely on the same foundation, as there are old fieldstone walls and an earthen cellar under the current house.

Other brothers of Nehemiah 2nd, were given 250 acres from the Pequot Plantation. One of Nehemiah’s nephews, Edward, was called “Shepard Smith” as he “did little else but tend a flock of sheep”6 on the 50 acres he was granted. It is not readily apparent if this is the meadow area of the current Sheep Farm, but it is an interesting possibility. Eventually the land was divided amongst the descendants of Nehemiah 2nd.

The Smiths were the first family to settle this part of Pequot Plantation and eventually sold off part of this land to Samuel Edgecomb. Three deeds in the Groton Land Records describe the lands that carry the address today of 245 and 255 Hazelnut Hill Road. The first deed, dated in 1754, says William Smith sold 15 acres to Samuel Edgecomb for 1,250 Pounds Sterling. The earliest deed describes the property using a lovely longhand script as a

Certain tract of land with a house and grist mill on the tract lying in the township of Groton near Fort Hill it being by estimation fifteen acres the same more or less and is bounded as followeth: Beginning at a heap of stones near a stone well which is Nathan Smith’s land Northwest corner then Westerly to a stump with Stones about it by Nathan Smith Land then as Southerly with {P}Smith land till it comes to Benjamin Avery land thence Easterly with S Avery land till it comes to a heap of stones which is Nathan Smiths Southwest Corner thence Northerly to Birch tree standing on a ledge Near a Grist Mill thence the same course to a Rock on a ledge thence to the first Bound. Mentioned with all the Building there on Standing to him the said Samuel Edgecomb and his heirs and assigns forever.7

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6 Ibid., p. 25.
7 Town of Groton, Land Records, Volume 10, 279.
These records also confirm that the house was built earlier than 1754 and the grist mill must have also been constructed much earlier. It is not surprising that Samuel Edgecomb bought yet another business to add to his sailing ventures, farming and animal husbandry.

The second deed describes 8 acres purchased in 1761 for 32 Pounds Sterling, including a Dwelling House

beginning at the Northwest Corner at the Corner of two stone walls thence running Easterly about forty Rods with said wall thence Southerly with a Stone wall and over the mill Brook till it Comes to an old double stone wall thence Westerly with second double wall till it Comes to Samuel Edgecomb Land thence bounded westerly and Northerly with Samuel Edgecomb Land till it Comes to the Bounds first Mentioned together with all the Appurtenances thereto.8

Finally, the third deed records 26 acres and 92 rods9 were purchased in 1769 for 66 Pounds Sterling, 5 Shillings, and is described as

Beginning at a Corner of a Stone wall on a Small Ledge thence East four Degrees South forty one Rods and 9 Links10 to a black oak tree thence South 70 Degrees East to a heap of Stones in Latham Line thence Southerly and bounded Easterly with Doctor {Fitch} Land till it Comes to Benjamin Avery Land thence westerly with Samuel Avery Land till it comes to Samuel Edgcomb Land thence Northerly to an old stone wall Near a brook, thence Easterly with Stone wall and still bounded with Samuel Edgecomb land thence Northerly with Samuel Edgecomb land till it Comes to {Cesop} Stone wall thence westerly with Stone wall till it Comes to a Small Ledge near said Edgecomb Barn thence Northerly to the first Bound.11

One side note is that in the fifteen years that passed between the first and last deed, measurements became much more accurate, and included compass degrees, Links and an interesting reference to an “old” stone wall.

8 Ibid., p. 279a.
9 1 square rod is 0.00625 acres. In this case 92 rods equal .575 acres.
10 1 Rod is 16.5 feet; 1 Link is 7.92 inches.
11 Town of Groton, Land Records, Volume 10, p. 280>
All together this would make about 50 acres of land, approximately the same size the 65 acre farm is today. The neighboring families are exactly the names confirmed by other early land records, thus also secondarily confirming the location of the properties. While the first deed does mention the land includes “a house and grist mill”, the high price of the initial land purchase described in the first deed (1,250 Pounds Sterling for 15 acres) also indicates that the grist mill as a successful business was included, and not recorded on a separate deed as was often the custom. A second house was mentioned in the second deed, which was a relatively inexpensive purchase (32 Pounds Sterling for 8 acres). Samuel Edgecomb purchased the grist mill business and may have added other mills upstream, as was often the case. Because it was the custom for the miller, who would be a hired expert mill operator, to have a house, the house mentioned in the second deed could have been the miller’s house.

It is very interesting that heaps of stones still survive, as do stone walls tapering off on to rising ledges, two parallel stone walls, double stone walls, the barn foundation and the remains of the grist mill and other mills.

**Sheep Farm – Old House**

Early homes were often simple one room, thatched-roof frame cottages. Kathleen Greenhalgh noted “the houses were built facing south so the sun could help to warm them in the winter.” The Samuel Edgecomb house is a large gambrel colonial style with a center chimney and faces south. It is included in the “State of Connecticut Historical Resources Inventory” under 245 Hazelnut Hill Road, Groton, Connecticut. The inventory page notes the 1761 land grant and describes the property as follows: “House and grounds are significant together as a well preserved example of the early agrarian life of Groton.” Unfortunately, as of today, the house has been abandoned and is in very poor condition.

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An old chimney is evident, with the basement stonework made up of very rough flat stones. There are very old, rough lumber boards in the attic. Some of the doors appear to be 18th century. Nonetheless, as a whole, a recent archeological study found “the house appears to reflect extensive Colonial Revival-period (1890-1930) modifications to a mid-18th century house…The cased corner posts that protrude into the rooms and the large cased summers13 appear to represent authentic Colonial-period materials and, if so, would indicate a date of around 1750.”14 A stream emerges from the ground about 100 feet from the southwest corner of the house. This may have been the well referred to in early documents. Even today it is a reliable source of water.

**Sheep Farm - Old Road**

The modern Hazelnut Hill Road is the Western boundary of the property and was “formerly part of a road that ran to the southwest to connect with North Road; this road curved around to the west to connect again with North Road approximately along the course of present-day Poheganut Drive, according to the archaeological survey.”15 This may have connected to the very old road running north on the easternmost side of the Paulson Farm north of Interstate 95. In addition, there is an old narrow stone-lined road that runs east from the front of the Samuel Edgecomb house and then northeast towards Fort Hill Brook, connecting eastward across Fort Hill Brook, eventually turning southward to Route 1.

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13 Cased summers are large beams used to carry joists for a floor. Instead of running the floor joists from one end of the room to the other, Colonial builders cut the span in half by using a center beam called a summer.


15 Ibid., p. 4.
It is definitely not the old Boston Post Road as that was located farther North along what is now Gold Star Highway. It could be an old local road. Interestingly, Tom Althuis of the Groton Bank Historical Society related that Elizabeth M. Avery wrote in her study of ancient streets of Groton that "a highway following the old Indian trail from Groton Bank to Mystic was laid out in 1652 to accommodate the farmers on the east side of the river. It followed the trail over the hill now Broad Street turning south just below the present Crouch farm, running over Long Hill past the 'Indians barns' on top of the hill through what was later the farm of Sir John Davie, to the head of Poquonnoc. Beyond Fort Hill it was but a pent\textsuperscript{16} way for several generations.\textsuperscript{17} So it is possible that the road was used as a highway to Mystic. Another possibility is that the old road was intended to provide access to the grist mill and other mills, and then connect down towards Noank and up towards Old Mystic. Given the importance of grist mills from the mid-1600s onwards, and the narrow width bounded on both sides by very old stone walls, a road not wide enough for two carts to pass as were later roads, it is probably a very early route, maybe even one originally used at least partially by Native Americans who had at least one fort on the adjacent Fort Hill.

Sheep Farm Grist Mill

Dr. Nicholas Bellantoni, Connecticut State Archaeologist, noted that the Sheep Farm’s Fort Hill Brook area “show land use patterns associated with flood control and 18\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} century industrial mill operations. The stone ruins of the dam are well preserved, providing a dramatic waterfall scene, but, also, an understanding of early industrial complexes in Groton.”\textsuperscript{18} The size of this dry stone mill dam is impressive – it is about six feet high, from six to fifteen feet in width and 125 feet in length.\textsuperscript{19} About 100 feet of the length is still intact, the section on Fort Hill Brook having been washed downstream towards the large ten foot high waterfall. Dr. Bellantoni was unsure of the source and age of the large mounds of gravel and small stones at the upper, flatter part of Fort Hill Brook and why the Brook had seemingly been straightened (this is dealt with in the following section “Sheep Farm Patent Sumac, Fulling and Lumber Mills”).

Grist mills were so valuable that originally the number of mills was tightly controlled to protect the owners from competition. In fact, only John Winthrop’s grist mill in New London was allowed during the Pequot Plantation time in the 1650s, a right that was to continue in perpetuity to his heirs.\textsuperscript{20} You can still see this mill beneath the Interstate 95 bridge on the New London side. Grinding flour was so important, and such a tedious job without a mill, that Kathleen Greenhalgh reports “the inhabitants of Mystic and Groton vicinity petitioned to have a mill in their area. The Winthrop Papers indicate that ‘Fitz-John Winthrop had a mill built at Old Mystic in 1673, John Lamb was the miller in

\begin{itemize}
    \item \textsuperscript{16} Pent or closely confined, probably with a stone wall on each side.
    \item \textsuperscript{17} Elizabeth M. Avery, “Development and History of Ancient Streets in Groton,” 1913.
    \item \textsuperscript{18} Nicholas Bellantoni, Letter Dated January 21, 2009 regarding 245/255 Hazelnut Hill Road.
    \item \textsuperscript{19} This is one of the largest, best preserved Colonial stone dams in Connecticut.
\end{itemize}
Charles Stark says in his history of Groton that on “December 6, 1711, Valentine Wightman granted to William Stark ‘the right to build dam and flow land for purposes of milling &c.’…In the early days nearly every brook of any size was harnessed for power and the town was dotted with small mills in which corn was ground or logs sawed into lumber.”

Carol Kimball, in describing the importance of grist mills for grinding grain or corn into meal, noted that because these mills could eliminate hours of backbreaking work, these mills existed from the late seventeenth century. As Eva Butler reports, there was a law in force by 1662 that “each Miller in this Colony, or owner of Mill, shall be allowed for grinding of each Bushell of Indian Corne, a twelfth part, and of other graines, a sixteenth part.” It was certainly a necessary and profitable business.

An early lease of a grist mill in the Groton Land Records, cited by Carol Kimball, describes very carefully the specifications for a new mill which was to be built: “at least 16 feet wide and 18 feet long with a new water wheel 18 or 19 feet in diameter and all other wheels necessary for said mill and find all materials necessary for the same with the Gear and all other things compleat and raise a Covering for the waterwheel.” Parts from the “old Mill” could be used and millstones “unfit for use” could be set aside.

It is interesting that, in the land records, virtually every brook used in milling is named, including Poquonnock and Great Brook. One exception is Fort Hill Brook. As Carol Kimball notes:

descendants of Nehemiah Smith established a grist mill with a dam, mill pond and miller’s house on a brook near Smith Lake. The dam, a barrier of stone, timber, brush and soil was built across the stream to create the mill pond, a storage reservoir which increased the amount of falling water provided by nature. From the pond, water was diverted into a canal or millrace which carried it to the mill where a sluice brought it to the wheel. The turning wheel set the large round grinding stone in motion to make the meal. A tailrace then carried spent water from the wheel back to the stream below the mill.

While I have not found historical evidence confirming that the Smith grist mill was in fact the same one remaining on Fort Hill Brook today, it seems very logical that it was, given that Fort Hill Brook is the only major year-round stream close to the Smith property that did not have a specific name recorded in the land records. Also the grist mill was referred to in the sale from William Smith to Samuel Edgecomb, which we know was on Fort Hill Brook. This mill was probably operating shortly after the Smiths settled the land.

It is also probable that additional mills were built shortly thereafter or in the 18th century, as described in the section on fulling and lumber mills. While Richard Radune’s book contains a picture of an old grist mill in Preston, Connecticut, built in 1695, the original structure and visible remnants are far smaller and less intact than the grist mill structure on Fort Hill Brook. The Groton mill does share the same dry stone construction of the Preston grist mill, but is far more substantial. The grist mill on Fort Hill Brook is approximately fifteen feet wide and one hundred twenty-five feet long, and of dry stone construction. It clearly produced a large mill pond that existed well into the 20th century. Lorraine Chappell, owner of an adjacent property, remembers as a child going on the mill pond in a small boat.

Groton’s Tax List of 1783 listed 8 people as having corn mills, which would essentially have been a grist mill: Robert Geer, Azuba Baley, Richard Smith, Jr., Gilbert Smith (also listed as a Shopkeeper or Trader), Moses Colver, Joseph Park, Ambrus Fish and Samuell

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25 Kimball, p. 142.
26 Radune, p. 284.
Williams III. 27 Samuel Edgcomb and Samuel Edgcomb Jr. were listed as being Carpenters and Jointers, and not having a corn or grist mill, but similarly, Gilbert Smith was listed as a Shopkeeper and Trader in addition to having a corn mill. The tax records no longer exist and so the taxing implications cannot be explored further. However, Joshua Hempstead’s Diary did include the following:

May 12, 1712, ye Boys & I finished Planting in our lot & began to hold Smiths lot. Cloudy & Raw cold. Nath went to Mill & got 2 bushell. 28

October 9, 1729, I was at mill foren. aftern fetching a Ld Salt hay. S Edgcums Medow 15 Cocks & left 16. I brot 7 of off the flats. 29

October 13, 1729, I was at Mill Most of ye day. Ad Carted a Small Jagg of hay from Samll Edgcombs Medow & wee fetched home 6 bbs Cydar at night from Mr Chapmans. 30

Grist mills, similar to other money making assets like a sailing sloop or brig, also could be rented out. In 1793, Gilbert Smith leased one half acre and the Mill dam to Roswell Saltonstall for 27 Pounds Sterling per year, a fairly substantial sum at the time. The leased property was probably less than one acre in order to control the number of mills that could be built on it. The lease is very detailed as follows:

Together with the Millers House, Grist and Saw Mill now in the Improvement of said Smith…And also said Mill Pond and the waterstreams feeding the same with full liberty of egress and regress to said House and Mill and Pond and the same Liberty to take Gravel on the North side of the gap near the Mill – The said Saltonstall shall have full Liberty to assume and maintain a Cannal flume 31 and Gate from the Great Pond to the Nearest Communication with said Smith’s Mill Pond Provided said Saltonstall shall not Raise the Water in the Great Pond so high as to overflow the Meadows Adjoining to the Damage of said Smith or his Brother Jabez Smith….During the term of said lease shall keep said Grist mill a Running in good repair for the purpose of Grinding grain for those persons who Live Below the post Road in said Groton the said Saltonstall Covenants that he will not Raise the water in said Mill Pond during said term higher than the top of the Mill floom, which is now Erected on the Premises that the Expiration of said term he will quietly yield up to said Smith the possessions of the Premises in good tenantable repair save the Saw mill which said Smith shall have Liberty to Remove of the premises by the first Day of Next May if the said Saltonstall shall Erect any more Mills or Building on the Premises. 32

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27 Greenhalgh, p. 40.
29 Ibid., p. 212.
30 Ibid., p. 212.
31 A Cannal Floom, or canal flume. A flume is a narrow artificial channel or gorge, often pitched, with a stream flowing through it from a diversion dam, parallel to the natural stream. A canal is similar, although usually not as steep. These would be used to keep water regulated and flowing into the mill.
This last sentence confirms that a perennial stream, like Fort Hill Brook, would have a series of dams built on it, most likely for multiple purposes. As Carol Kimball reports, this lease was renewed for an additional seven years at 20 Pounds Sterling per year.\(^{33}\) This lease also places gravel operations at the north of the gap of the mill. The large and extensive series of mounds on the north of the property, on all sides of Fort Hill Brook and on the connecting brook to the west, were most likely the source of the gravel. To this day, a large section of the stream bed in this place is gravel, clearly visible along the stream banks. Also, the land above the gravel mounds is flat and open and may have been the meadows referenced in the lease.

**Sheep Farm Patent Sumac, Fulling and Lumber Mills**

Another interesting feature close to the gravel mounds is that Fort Hill Brook has apparently been straightened for quite some distance to the East, with gravel mounds on each side. Thus Fort Hill Brook looks and functions like a long trough, and was suitable for probably either a sumac mill or a fulling mill. In addition, the high brook sides could be used to maximize the control of water for mill operations in an industrial process requiring a long flat waterway.

Evidently of Fort Hill Brook having been straightened is on the left. This would perhaps have been engineered for a fulling mill. The high gravel sides on the north side still remain today, with fine gravel in the stream bed.

Just south of the gravel mounds, there is evidence of a possible second mill site with sluice or flume on the west side of the brook. In her history of the area, Carol Kimball has an interesting note about another factory: “At the same time Saltonstall leased from James Morgan one and a half acres on the brook north of Gilbert Smith’s dam and on this he built a ‘patent sumac manufactory’ which… shredded or powdered sumac leaves, stalks and flowers” to produce a tannic acid solution for tanning leather.\(^{34}\) Sumac plants still grow throughout the Groton area.

\(^{33}\) Kimball, p. 143.

\(^{34}\) Ibid., p. 143.
As a side note, Eva Butler recorded a tannery in addition to the grist mill existed on the adjacent Edgecomb property. A connection is made from Samuel Edgecomb to the patent sumac industry in early New London Records. A very slim volume labeled the “Record of Ear Marks” details the unique identifying mark on each owner’s cattle in Colonial times. It lists Samuel Edgecomb as having cattle in the 1738 record and apparently specialty types of cattle by 1746.\(^3\) While Samuel Edgecomb came to the area later, with a patent sumac factory nearby, he could have obtained tanning material from his next door neighbor.

Another major category of mills brought over from Europe was fulling mills. The Colonists grew sheep locally so as to produce the wool necessary to make cloth, avoiding expensive imported material. As raw shorn wool is oily, dirty and coarse, unless the wool is treated, the resulting cloth is very uncomfortable. In Europe, a process was developed to clean and soften wool using water powered fulling mills.\(^3\)

First cloth was placed in soapy water in a trough and trampled by foot to remove oil from the rough woven cloth. Then the cloth would be placed in the mechanical part of the fulling machine, where a water-powered wheel turned a tappet wheel which beat the cloth into softer material of the desired size. The resulting wool cloth would have an excellent texture.

On June 18\(^{th}\), 1674, Roger Playsted, a Fuller, said, “I will build a substantial fulling mill with fixtures to dry your cloth which shall be under one yard and half in breadth, unto

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\(^3\) Town of New London, Connecticut, Record of Ear Marks, 1691–1807, July 19, 1738; November 10, 1746.

\(^3\) Exeter, U.K. town archives diagram of a water powered fulling machine.
what size of thickness yourselves shall direct, you paying me for doing, three pence for each yard, so mill and dried.” In 1721, the New London Town Meeting voted to “grant unto Joseph Smith the Libertie of setting up a fulling Mill and a grist Mill upon Alewife brook.” While it has not been confirmed if this is the same family, Carol Kimball noted “the Smith family was involved with mills from early days,” eventually owning a carding machine in the late 1700s which cleaned and aligned the wool fibers for spinning. In 1723 the Town of Groton land records show that Nehemiah Smith gave to Nathan Smith “a brook and meadows and fulling mill.” 1724, Nehemiah Smith gave to Nehemiah Jr, “land, pastures, fields, orchards, housing, outlying barns…half of his Common right and all his right in Fulling Mill and Clothing Works.” It is very likely the Smith’s fulling mill was at the top of the Sheep Farm on Fort Hill Brook, where the apparently engineered straight shallow stream would provide ample space for cleaning the raw woolen cloth. The fulling machine would be just downstream where Fort Hill Brook and the unnamed brook from the west meet, the brook to the west providing a water storage area, or perhaps farther down, but still considerably north of the grist mill, where there is clearly a separate sluice to control water.

Saw mills also were in great demand and common on every substantial stream. One of the earliest industries in Groton was a saw mill operated by William Stark. He sawed plank used in shipbuilding. Any substantial and reliable stream like Fort Hill Brook was certain to be harnessed as soon as possible for many essential industries. In that Samuel Edgecomb had many business interests such as building ships and raising cattle, it is not unlikely that there would be other mills in addition to the grist mill on the Sheep Farm.

Sheep Farm Stone Walls

Enclosing the fields are stone walls, wonderfully preserved as noted by Dr. Bellantoni after his visit in 2008 to the site. Many of the walls run North-South and East-West as was often the custom in colonial times to order to mark boundaries clearly. Some walls obviously enclosed smaller fields, around 5 acres, not surprising because the size of the field often would be limited so that the rocks would not need to be carried too far. This made the size of the meadows perfect for rotating sheep pasture, a practice engaged in by the most recent Harmidon Acres Sheep Farm on the site. If you view the stone walls of the Sheep Farm, it is clear that they partially enclosed fields, with most likely wooden fences and gates which have long since disappeared at the open end. In fact Joshua Hempstead’s Diary, when relating visits to Samuel Edgecomb’s property, mentions both stone walls and fences many times.

(Please see the next pictures, first of a meadow and then of an old rock pile).

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39 Kimball, p. 144.
40 Town of Groton, Land Records, Volume 2, p. 49.
41 Ibid., p.86.
Many rock piles, resulting from clearing smaller stones from the field, are found on the Sheep Farm. These small, now lichen-covered stones eventually formed clear boundary markers. Several rock piles exist today. There are also two smaller rock “pens,” one of which may be remains of the barn mentioned in the deed. The other, farther from the house, is less identifiable. Lichen-covered rocks line the side of the old road and similarly line the road south on Hazelnut Hill Road. The stone walls are primarily single walls, typical in more remote, rocky and hilly areas, with a few double walls as noted on the deeds. Double walls consist of two parallel stones walls either “woven” together with connecting stones or filled in with stone rubble and topped with a capstone. It is very difficult to build a double wall because it must be visually pleasing from both sides and in exact proportion with stone ties to maintain strength. Several stone walls take advantage of existing stone ledges and taper off on a ledge. While most walls use rounded field stones, others make use of the very angular stones found on ledges in the area. The Sheep Farm exhibits the variety of wall structure found in Colonial times.

These stone walls appear to closely match the fields drawn on an 1855 map of Eastern Long Island Sound, their age evidenced by their almost complete covering with lichens. Dr. Robert Thorson of the University of Connecticut writes, “The vast majority of historic New England stone walls were built by farmers, their hired hands, and their sons, daughters, and wives.” Dr. Thorson continues, “One might reasonably guess the wall was built after the recording for the first deed to a property.” If the land grant was made in 1761, and the house was existing in 1754, we have a fairly narrow chronology,

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43 Ibid., pp. 88-89.
the “sequencing event” when at least some of the existing stone walls were probably built, if not before by the Smith family. As Joshua Hempstead recorded:

April 15, 1730, Adam brot home the Oxen yesterday & Plowed for Samll Edgcumb to day & broke the beam I recd of Joseph Caulking. 30s to Charge.

April 16, I was at home all d making a N Plow beam & c. Ad drawd Stone ½ day for S. Edgcumbe.44

The fact that the very old road goes up to the house from the east along the wall and does not cut it would provide other sequencing evidence. A less precise, but valuable technique is to look at the degree of lichen coverage of the stones. A wall “with a continuous coat is likely a century or more.”45 Many of the stones are completely covered as can be seen in the above picture.

Given the extensive stone walls and gravel mounds on Fort Hill Brook, it would not be surprising if slave labor had been used to build these and to do other tasks. In fact Samuel Edgecomb had built several ships classified as sloops that could have been used for the slave trade. Later in 1715, Samuel Edgecomb built one of the first brigs46 and named it “Samuel.” The brig, a two-masted sailing vessel square-rigged on both masts, was rented out. Joshua Hempstead owned one sixteenth of it. Anne Farrow,47 confirms that both types of ships were commonly used for the slave trade. Either the Smith family or Samuel Edgecomb could have easily purchased slaves brought to New London. Joshua Hempsted’s Diary does mention the ships as well as a negro child:

February 9, 1714, I was at Lanching of Samll Edgcumbe Brigg.48

April 22, 1715, In y foren I was Dividing Molasses with C. Darro. In ye aftern fetching down ye Scow wth hhd and 2,000 Staves of S. Edgcumbs for ye Samll.49

April 23, 1715, I workt on bord ye Samll al day. Booth fro L. Island. Ye Brigg Sayled.50

May 2, 1716, I was on bord ye Samll helping unload Salt. I had 50 baggs.51

May 5, 1739, a Negro Child of Samll Edgcumbs buried yesterday.52

44 Hempstead, p. 219.
45 Thorson, p 93.
46 Caulkins, p. 241.
47 Anne Farrow, Complicity, How the North Promoted, Prolonged, and Profited from Slavery, Ballantine Books, New York, 2005,
48 Hempstead, p. 42.
49 Ibid., p. 44.
50 Ibid., p. 44.
51 Ibid., p. 55.
52 Ibid., p. 346.
Samuel Edgecomb Family Gravesite

There is an extensive section in the Smith Lake Cemetery, which cemetery was moved to its present position when the Groton Reservoir was built, with Samuel Edgecomb and his descendents’ tombstones, most of which are in excellent shape including the Colonial stones.

John Edgcomb married Elizabeth, his second wife and a relative of Joshua Hempstead. John died in 1721, and was “aged” and left a homestead and two large farms. His children included Samuel, born 1690. A map of old houses in Groton made in 1935 by Eva Butler shows the Samuel Edgecomb house, it being labeled by Eva Butler with that name, with a medium sized tree to the Southeast corner. That tree is probably the majestic Sycamore with a diameter of 13 feet, which stands there today.

Recent History of the Sheep Farm

According to a former neighbor, Ray Block, the Sheep Farm was in fact used to raise sheep in the twentieth century, up until seven years ago. The farm was called Harmidon Acres Sheep Farm and was jointly owned by several people. It was not a serious farming occupation, as the sheep were not sheared or harvested, but they were allowed to graze on the various meadows. Sadly, the increase in coyotes decimated the herd over the years. The coyotes’ natural enemy, the wolf, had coexisted with Native Americans for centuries, as both hunted wild animals and maintained a balance between the species. The Colonists found the wolves to be particularly fond of sheep and lambs, and so a bounty of 20 Pence was offered for each wolf head presented during the Colonial Pequot Plantation times.54

53 Caulkins, p. 366.
54 Radune, p. 115-6.
Samuel’s descendant, Samuel Edgecomb, Jr., was a famous participant in the Battle of Groton Heights on September 6, 1781, and is clearly associated with the house on Hazelnut Hill Road. The Battle of Groton Heights is fully described on the following website: [http://www.battleofgrotonheights.com/Battle_of_Groton_Heights.html](http://www.battleofgrotonheights.com/Battle_of_Groton_Heights.html)

As Elizabeth H. Avery wrote, Samuel Edgecomb Jr. was “living in the house still standing, now occupied by a Mr. Chapman, on Hazelnut Hill, just beyond Smith Lake Cemetery, on the east side of the road. It is a gambrel roofed house with a door in the center and one on the end, set well back from the road.”

During the Battle of Groton Heights, Stephen Hempstead said “many of the enemy were killed under the walls by throwing simple shot over them….” The author, Charles Allyn said “Samuel Edgcomb, Jr., of a family justly celebrated for the great size and strength of its members, hurled 18-pound shot, one with each hand, upon the assailants with fearful effect, as they, after breaking through the fraizing attempted to scale the ramparts. After the enemy gained the fort on the other side, and the massacre became general, further resistance being useless, he dropped on the ground among the wounded and dead, escaping with a wound in the right hand. He was afterwards ordered to assist in the removal of the wounded, as his son, Daniel D. Edgcomb, now of Mystic River, remembers his statement that he carried off upon his back Daniel Eldridge, who was wounded in the knee. Samuel E. was ploughing for rye at the time of the alarm and left for the fort at once, not stopping to loose his oxen.”

Rufus Avery has an additional account of the end of the Battle of Groton Heights, when the defeated colonists were dealing with the dead and wounded and says “They then ordered each one of us to march out to the northeast part of the parade, and them that could not go themselves, from their wounds, were to be helped by those that were well. Mr. Samuel Edgecomb, Jr., and myself were ordered to take Ensign Charles Eldredge out of the magazine. He was a very large, heavy man, who had been shot in the knee-joint.”

Samuel Edgecomb Jr. “was 21 years of age, and died at the age of 83 years, at the old homestead on the west slope of Fort Hill, in the same house in which he was born.”

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57 Allyn, pp. 50-51.
58 This is contradictory to Daniel Eldridge mentioned in the previous paragraph.
59 Allyn, p. 51.
Appendix: Excerpts from The Diary of Joshua Hempstead  
Regarding Samuel Edgecomb

Joshua was a shipwright, farmer, surveyor, justice of the peace, selectman, militia captain, business agent and family man who lived to 80. Robert Hempstead, grandfather of the diarist, had a child who married John Edgecombe (1691?). One of the diarist’s sisters married John Edgecombe Jr, January 28, 1699. Because of these family and business ties, there are many references to Samuel Edgecomb as follows:

May 12, 1712, ye Boys & I finished Planting in our lot & began to hold Smiths lot. Cloudy & Raw cold. Nath went to Mill & got 2 bushell. P. 9

July 25, 1712, S. Edgcumb came from Seabrook. P. 12

February 26, 1713, I agreed with Christopr Darro for ye Sixteenth part of ye Sloop. Samll Edgecombe is building. P. 32

February 9, 1714, I was at Lanching of Samll Edgcumbes Brigg. P. 42

April 22, 1715, In y foren I was Dividing Molasses with C. Darro. In ye aftern fetching down ye Scow wth hhd and 2,000 Staves of S. Edgcumbs for ye Samll. P. 44

April 23, 1715, I workt on bord ye Samll al day. Booth fro L. Island. Ye Brigg Sayled. P. 44

April 26, 1715, Darro...also Recd 1 hhd more of Samll Edgcumbs. He hath pd £6 to S. E. & I am to Pay £6 more to Samll E & Hartshorn ye Rest wch I have pd. P. 44

May 1, 1716, I was in Town making up Rooms to put Salt in Danield Shapleys warehouse for Hill S. Edgecombe & my Self. P. 55

May 2, 1716, I was on bord ye Samll helping unload Salt. I had 50 baggs. P. 55

July 4, 1716, I borrowed 81 foot plank of Samuel Edgecombe to Make Gunwall Waales. He had a breast hook of me wch overpd him. P. 56

November 2, 1716, I was helping Samll Egcumbe Launch his Sloop for P. Manwaring. Wee Launched about 8 Clock at night. P. 60

December 10, 1716, I workt on bord ye Sloop al d. & Samll Edgcumb & Ege Hubball. The Court Sat by adjournment. P. 61

December 31, 1716, I workt at home on ye boat & Samll Edgcombe. P. 62.

April 26, 1717, I set Some Apletrees in Smiths Lot. N. workt for S Edcumbe. P. 66

April 21, 1718, Nathll workt wth Samll Edgcumbe. P. 74

June 30, 1718, In ye foren I workt for Samll Edgcumb. P. 77
July 1, 1718, I was helping Lay out a highway from Jno Harris's to Town by the water Side & Laying a highway for Pickett into his Lot by Lewis's. Jos Coit workt for me with Samll Edgcumbe. Wednesday 2d I workt for S Edgcumbe. Thursd 3 I workt at S. Edcumbs al. d. at Night wee paid Mr Miller his Sallery. Fryd 4 I workt at Samll Edgcombs al day. Saturd 5th I workt at Samll Edgcumbs al day. Mond 7, I workt at Samll Edgcumbs all day. Tuesd 8th, I workt for Samll Edgcumbe all day. Wedensd 9th, I workt at Samll Edgcumbs Most of ye day – windy att night. I Carryd a Load of hay to Mr Coits to press. Thursd 10th, I workt at Samll Edgcumbs Most of ye day. Wee finished & Launched his boat. P. 77

August 13, 1718, I helped Samll Edgcumb make oars al. d. Except 2 or 3 hours making hay. Thursd 14, I helpt Samll Edcumb in ye foren & after Noon drawing Rum was between Sol Coit & my self & T. Truman yt came in ye Plainfield. Fryd 15, I helpt Samll Edgcumb pt of the day so much as to make up 2 days & I was draing of the Rum yt I was about yesterday. P. 78

November 1, 1719, Sund, a Sacramt d. S. Edgcumbe. P. 92

June 4, 1721, Sund, Samll Edgcumbe an Infant buried. Died yesterday. P. 109

June 5, 1721, I gave Samll Edgumb a Rectt for Sundry things household Stuff for Mothers use which he lent her to be Returned on demand. Also left in her hands the Beding & Sundrys for her life by ye advice of the Court of Probate. P. 109

August 7, 1721, I workt for Samll Edgcumb ¾ day. P. 111 Wednesd 9th I workt for Samll Edgcumb all day. Thursd 10, workt for S. Edgecumb most of ye day. P. 111

September 16, 1721, I workt at Samll Edgcumbs Emboing his Quartr pieces. I have paid him all the work I Owed him & ½ day over. P. 113

October 25, 1721, I was at home all day. Mother Signed a deed to me of her 3rd part of my Estate & of father Edgcumbs & I Signed a £100 bond to mother tht She Shall have the profit of them (viz) to Improve it her Self, or I give her what it shall be worth for wt I Improve by the judgment of Indifferent men. P. 114

November 1, 1721, Easterly air aftern a Small breeze NE & N. Samll Edgcumbe Launched his Sloop. I helpt him. She went of well. P. 114

December 25, 1722, In ye morn I went into Town & to Groton & to make up with Samll & Jno Edgcumb about what was in my hands of father Edgcumbs by a Judgmt of Court, June 1720. P. 127

January 7, 1723, I was in Town all day. I made up with Samll Edgcumbe & John Edgcumbe about wt money was in my hands due to father Edgcumbe & in his hands due to me. I pd the whole on my part being £8 14s 4d & Reed wt was due to me being £4 11s 6d. P. 128
October 23, Samll Edgcumbe Lanchd his Sloop not quite off. Ab. Is come home.  P. 147

April 11, 1725, Eliza ye wife of Samll Edgcumb took into the Church.  P. 155

November 12, 1725, In the Evening I went to Samll Edgcumbs & Bargained with him that he Should have Mothers End of the house & garden for £4 p year he to keep itt in good Repair on his own Cost only for one year and So from year to year as wee Shall agree & the grass 12s this year.  P. 161

July 12, 1726, I helpt Jno press Some hay at Samll Edgcumb for Capt Marks 5C & for Mr Winthrop 3C.  P. 171

November 15, 1726, A Trayning day both Companys yesterday Samll Edgcumbe and Samll Richards Chosen Sergeant & Jno Monroe & Samll Green Corpls.  P. 175

December 6, 1727, I counted mothers money. Brother Edgcumbe present. I dd him £4 & am to take ye Rent money for itt of Samll Edgcumbe.  P. 190

January 2, 1728, In the foren I was at home & dd to Samll Edgcumbe the bed & bedding & other household Stuff that Mother had to use for life amounting to about £10 & Samll & Thos Edgcumbe Sold their part of all to me for £2 14s 7d Each for wch I gave them a note of hand to be pd by the 2nd of Jan next.  P. 192

September 23, 1728, Carted 1 Ld Hay for Samll Edgcumbe & 1 Ld Apples from Homes Lot.  P. 201

April 10, 1729, I was at home & in Town all d. Ad plowd for S. Edgcumbe.  P 207

October 9, 1729, I was at mill foren. aftern fetching a Ld Salt hay. S Edgcumbs Medow 15 Cocks & left 16.  I brot 7 of off the flats.  P. 212

October 13, 1729, I was at Mill Most of ye day. Ad Carted a Small Jagg of hay from Samll Edgcombs Medow & wee fetched home 6 bbs Cydar at night from Mr Chapmans.  P. 212

April 15, 1730, Adam brot home the Oxen yesterday & Plowed for Samll Edgcumb to day & broke the beam I recd of Joseph Caulking.  30s to Charge.  April 16, I was at home all d making a N Plow beam & c. Ad drawd Stone ½ day for S. Edgcumbe. Aftern he & John Diged up & Set out Ap. Trees at the upper End Smiths lot Some 1 Row out Side the fence.  P. 219

April 14, 1733, I was with the Comttee Laying out for Samll Edgcumb in the foren 2 Shares & in ... for Mr. Chapman 5 Shares & for Mr. Richards 8 Shares.  P. 257

May 9, 1733, I was Laying out Comons for Lt Hallam Samll Edgcumb & Mr Picket at mile plain.  P. 258
May 2, 1738, I was in Town foren to hear Some Evidences Taken at Samuel Edgcumbes Respecting my Sister Phebe Decd vizt how long father Edgcumbe kept her. Aftern at the funerall of Ms Prenttis and holding a Court at Shaplys Respecting Peregreen Gardner & James & Lebens Harris Contention. P. 330

May 26, 1738, I went to the Court to hear Petitions & tht of Samll Edgcumbs which I was cited to hear was at ye Petitioners Request Continued. P. 331

September 6, 1738, I was Laying out Commons for Colefax at Thos pembars & for Sam Edgcumbe by Ja Chapmans in the 2 Ministry Lots. P. 335

April 23, 1739, I went with Nattee with me to Set Apple tree again & Adm & Josh Carted a Ld of Samll Edgcumbs Rails to fence one part of the Comon pasture. P. 345


May 7, 1739, I went with old Mr Coit & made a Gate for the Common pasture & Set it up at the hither End of Jer Chapmans wall. Samll Edgcumbe & Samll Lattimer & old Mr Chapman drove ye pasture. P. 346

October 27, 1739, I have agreed with Samll Edgcumbe & Capt Ebenr Avery they to pay me £100 in one year and one 100 more the 2d year one £100 more in 3 year No Interest in Consideration of all my Right in the Norwich farm wch I bought of my Sisters Mary & Patience & Lucy. P. 352

February 6, 1740, I Recd of Samll Edgcumbe £93 (vizt) 73 in Bills of Cr & £29 Discount wch he pd to mr Steward on my accot all in Consideration of 100 wch was to be pd me in the Latterend of Sept next. £7 I abated for Interest. P. 357

March 3, 1741, Samuel Edgcumbe pd me £30. I Endorsed it on his Bond. P. 384

July 17, 1742, I Recd of Samll Edgcumb £72 & gave him up his old Bond. P. 390

November 12, 1743, Brothr Edgcums 2 youngest Sons Jont & Sam here. P. 411

April 19, 1745, Aftern at Madm Christophers funeral. One of ye 8 Pall bearers with mr adams mr Miller Richards Curtiss Sol. Coit & S. Edgcumbe. P. 434

November 20, 1746, toward night I went to the funeral of Elizabeth Buttolph & was one of the Pall Barers with Mr adams Justice Richd & Capt Coit Deacon Green & S. Edgcumb. P. 461

June 9, 1748, I was at home foren. In the aftern att the Comon pasture with Jer Chapman Junr Mr Tallman & Samll Edgcumbe proportioning the Comon pasture. P. 491

October 26, 1748, I went to Pomechaug to Peregrine Gardiners to help apprize the Land that Lt James Harris Recovered of him & that was once Sold by Ms Knight & Baradford
to Jont Pratt to Samll fox & by fox to Stephen Gardner. Samll Edgcumb was with me, & Stephen was Measuring it for fox. P. 497

September 4, 1749, Ms. Adams taken with an apopletick fitt at Samll Edgecombe about 3 Oclock being out on a visit & as well or better in helth than She hath bin of Late. She had Just finisht drinking 3 or 4 dishes of Tea & taken on her Left Side first & Complained of great pain in her head. P. 524 {Continues on, she dies}.

March 7, 1750, bad Traveling miry tho Snow. I Set out for Hartford on my Sorril Mare in Company with Samuel Edgcumbe to be a Witness for Jonathan Pratt (versus) Joseph Bradford & c & before wee got to Colchester Mr Tilley overtook us. We oated att Wells’s att Colchester & Stook along to Hebron. Tilly Stopt there att Buels & I too. Expenses 10s. Fryday 8 fair. I Set out Early & by that I had got almost half way. Met Messess Pratt coming to meet me with a Spare Horse. I got to Mr Pratts & Dined there & over to Court & back att night. Satturd 9. fair. I went over to Court Mr Edgcumbe also & Peregrine Gardiner & Ebe Haughton of Hebron formerly of N. London & Back att night. P. 552

April 10, 1756, I came away called to See Samll Edgcumbe & Dined there. Got to the ferry before night. P. 649

July 31, 1756, I mended up Capt Jos Coits Stonewall & Samll Edgcumbs & my outside f(ence). P. 654.

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