

Colonial postal route recognized

By RICHARD WEIZEL
Staff writer

STRATFORD — Even though it's in the middle of the road, you can walk or drive by it without even knowing the park is there.

Some say the tiny patch of grass and shrubs at the corner of Elm Street and East Broadway in the town's Academy Hill Historic District is the smallest park in Connecticut, while others aren't quite sure if it's a park at all.

But for anyone who stops to read the fading inscription on a plaque placed there by the Daughters of the American Revolution in 1915, the little island in the road conjures up images of an historical event in American history nearly 340 years ago.

The plaque reminds those who read it they are standing on the very spot where legend has it that a U.S. postal carrier stopped as part of the first horseback journey by the postal service from New York to Boston.

What is known is that the horse galloped by the Elm Street location where historic houses from the Colonial time period still stand today, many that are still occupied.

"It took five days for that rider in 1673 to get the mail from New York to Boston, and here we are centuries later and it still takes five days for our mail to get from New York to Boston," quipped Town Historian Lewis Knapp. "That's progress for you."

Knapp explained the DAR, which put up and dedicated plaques at historical sites during the early 1900s, placed the plaque at the intersection of Elm and East Broadway.

He said up the road on a vacant lot on East Broadway, near Ferry Boulevard, an even older marker still exists that was placed there as a milestone in 1768 by Benjamin Franklin when he was the country's first postmaster. The inscription states simply "14 miles to NH," meaning New Haven.

Knapp said Franklin decided to place milestones along the main Post Roads to "let people know how far they were from their destination." Knapp said the postal carrier on that first journey, and for many years to follow, would turn right at the intersection and head for Ferry Boulevard, where he and his horse



Nancy Monk stands next to a marker on a small park, essentially a traffic island, at the intersection of Elm Street and East Broadway in Stratford's Academy Hill Historic District. The marker was placed by the Daughter of the American Revolution in 1915 to commemorate "Ye Olde King's Highway," a mail route between New York and Boston, established in 1673. At right, a close-up of the plaque, marking "the oldest mail route in America."

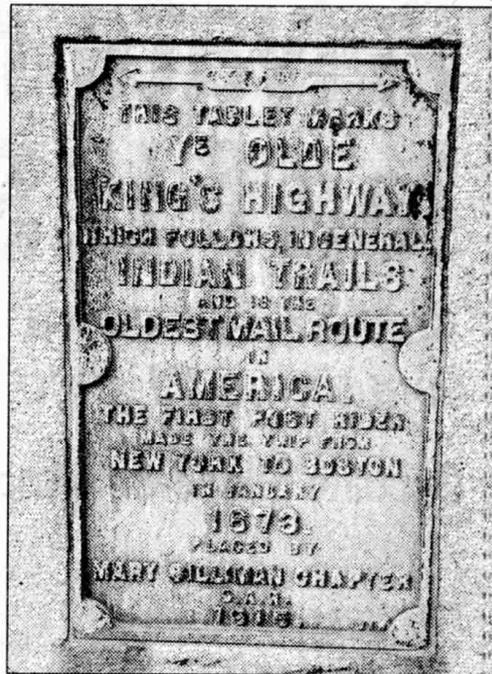
would take the Moses Wheeler ferry across the Housatonic River into Milford and resume their gallop to Boston.

It wouldn't be until about a century later that a bridge would be built on the spot where the Washington Street bridge is now located connecting the two communities.

"This tablet marks Ye Olde Kings Highway, which follows in general Indian trails and is the oldest mail route in America," reads the Elm Street plaque's inscription. "The first rider made the trip from New York to Boston in January 1673." That park and its marker "signify the northern most boundary of our historic district, and alert people to the fact they are entering a very special area," said Ann Jackson, vice-president of the Old Stratford Neighborhood Association, which includes about 80 households.

"The area has been designated by residents and the state as a local historic district, and there are about a dozen historic colonial homes near and around the park." Jackson resides in one of those homes; a blue saltbox built in 1769 known as the Stephen Frost House, where she has lived since 1990.

"It is vital that we protect and preserve these wonderful historic structures, and the park and plaque reminds us how fortunate we are to have them here in Stratford," Jackson said. She



Ned Gerard/Staff photographer

said there are also numerous historic Victorian homes in the area as well.

Nancy Monk, another member of OSNA, spent 11 years of her childhood, from age 5 to 16, living in the historic Christ Episcopal Church rectory on Main Street — her father, the Rev. Arthur Monk, was the pastor.

But Nancy Monk returned to the neighborhood in 1999, 26 years after leaving at age 16 when her family moved to Fairfield. With her husband Michael Bingham, now president of the association, the couple live in the 1740 Curtis Mansion on Elm Street, just a couple of blocks from the marker.

"I remember how there was always the feeling you were living right in the middle of real history, and the plaque is just another reminder," Monk said. "Being back here the past nine years, it's amazing how many of the same people are still living in these historic homes." Some of those people still take care of the tiny park and marker.

"It's an important part of our country's history, so we've been helping to maintain it since we moved here 40 years ago," said retired landscaper George Warmke, 72, of he and his wife Gail, who live in an historic house on East Broadway across from the site.

"There was another couple that used to do it, but after they died we just couldn't let it go," Warmke said.