

# **Dividend – Rocky Hill’s First Industrial Complex**

**By**

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## **Introduction**

Wethersfield, Connecticut was settled in 1634 at which time the land areas of Rocky Hill, Newington and Glastonbury were part of the original Wethersfield settlement. The southern or lower end of Wethersfield was first known as Stepney Parish; later it was named Rocky Hill, probably due to the high basalt ridge that is prominent in the area. This small community existed as early as 1676. Rocky Hill was officially incorporated as a town in 1843, while Newington was incorporated in 1871, and Glastonbury separated from Wethersfield in 1693.

The following report is a brief history of Rocky Hill’s first industrial park that was located in the southern extremities of the town in an area known as Dividend, which was reached by a road of the same name.

When Wethersfield was granting concessions for public use in the 17<sup>th</sup> century they reserved a strip of land 20 rods<sup>1</sup> wide from Coles Hill on the east side of the burying ground southward to Bulkeley’s Corne Mill site. Later, this narrow strip, part of which was used for a roadway, was divided among adjoining proprietors and some other sections were divided into small lots. Hence, the name Dividend was applied to this section of Rocky Hill.

## **Dividend – Rocky Hill’s First Industrial Complex**

The Rocky Hill citizens were strongly opposed to the Town selling a 68-acre parcel of wetland which was to be included as part of a larger parcel of a proposed industrial park. They were aware of the historical and environmental significance of this parcel. On December 7, 2004, this 68-acre parcel in the Dividend area of Rocky Hill was set aside as open space in perpetuity following a Town referendum. In April 2006, this area was listed on the State Register of Historic Places and designated an archaeological preserve to be known as “Dividend Brook Industrial Archaeological District”.

Dividend is located approximately eight miles south of Hartford in the town of Rocky Hill, Connecticut, adjacent to the Cromwell town line.

Dividend Brook, which flows through this property, originates in the western part of Rocky Hill and flows in an easterly direction to the Connecticut River. The brook is a small stream, which meanders through an area called “Pleasant Valley” located between Route 99 (formally, Middletown Road) and the Connecticut River. The hills to the north forming this valley have been leveled for development. The hills to the south are presently being mined for sand and gravel. The northern slope of these hills which border Dividend Brook have been left partially intact. There are two natural waterfalls along this stretch of the brook. It is along this section of

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<sup>1</sup> One rod equals 16.5 feet.

Dividend Brook that Rocky Hill's first industrial park began. It grew and flourished until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when all industry here finally ceased.

In 1661, 27 years after the settling of Wethersfield, the Town made a concession to Governor Winthrop of 140 acres conditional on his erecting a corne mill (gristmill) there. He failed to do so, and in 1668 he released the property back to the Town of Wethersfield. In 1665 the Reverend Gershom Bulkeley, minister of the First Congregational Church in Wethersfield, expressed, to the Town officials, an interest in building a gristmill.

In 1667 the town of Wethersfield granted to Rev. Bulkeley 115 score acres together with Mr. Stone, the Reverend's assistant. Mr. Stone received 100 acres and 110 acres went to Rev. Bulkeley. Rev. Bulkeley's acreage extended all the way to the Connecticut River.

At the most easterly waterfall on Dividend Brook, where the Connecticut Valley Railroad now spans the stream, is the site where Rev. Bulkeley built his gristmill in 1667. The town of Wethersfield gave him permission to flood as much of the town land as he needed to produce sufficient waterpower to operate his mill. This mill pond later became known as "Lower Dividend Pond."

Later, Rev. Bulkeley was granted an additional 150 acres towards the west. He then relocated his gristmill upstream in a hollow just below the second most westerly waterfall. Here he utilized the natural rock outcropping as part of a new dam which created a pond now known as "Upper Dividend Pond." Here in 1758, Rev. Bulkeley's descendants added a ships bakery to the gristmill facility where a variety of hard bread and biscuits were produced for vessels sailing to the West Indies and other foreign ports. An old account book at the Connecticut State Library verifies the bakery was still operating there in the years 1797-98. Gershom Bulkeley's gristmill remained in the family for five generations – a span of one hundred and fifty years.

In the late 1700's Ephraim Goodrich established a saw mill on the site of Rev. Bulkeley's original gristmill. It is possible that Rev. Bulkeley's son Edward had a fulling<sup>2</sup> mill there also.

This was the beginning of industry along Dividend Brook. Both the Upper and Lower ponds still exist. Some stone work of Bulkeley's original dam can still be seen. The building of the railroad in 1871 obliterated the bulk of the original gristmill site.

In 1775 Deacon Simon Butler and his partners Josiah Curtis and Burrage Merriman built another gristmill on Dividend Brook near the Middletown Road (Route 99). Also, at this time, Butler built a long berm along the hillside between the dam and the gristmill to create a holding pond for water to power his gristmill. After about 50 years of use Capt. William Butler, Simon's son, took over the property and erected a new building on the site of the old one. The mill was in use until about 1870 when it was then owned by Robert Sugden, Jr. For a year or two prior to 1870 Frederick Butler made pen handles there. The mill was demolished about 1880.

In 1829, a short way upstream from the gristmill adjacent to the dam, Capt. William Butler built a saw mill.

Some stone work from Butler's gristmill dam is still intact as is the holding pond which it created. A small amount of cement work is still visible at the gristmill site along with two iron rods in a vertical position. Everything else is entirely gone.

About 1830 Gershom Bulkeley's gristmill property passed out of the family. A Mister Russell manufactured axes here for a short time.

In 1845 Leonard Welles and Alfred Wilcox manufactured chisels, plantation hoes, saws and other edged tools here for many years until Wilcox's death, the result of an accident with the machinery. Following Welles and Wilcox, Joseph Jory, an English blacksmith, produced the first

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<sup>2</sup> A fulling mill was used to thicken and condense the fibers of woolen cloth by wetting and beating.

never slip horseshoes with removable corks at this site in 1866. He sold the patent for these horseshoes a year later for \$10,000.00 to a firm in Boston.

After Jory, C. E. Billings constructed a new mill building replacing the old one. This building was used mostly for drop forgings. A small gristmill was still in use nearby. Remnants of the drop forge operation still remain.

In 1854 William Sage Butler and Robert Sugden, Jr. established a foundry downstream from Butler's sawmill. They constructed a dam (this dam was breached in March of 2001) upstream from the foundry site which created a three acre pond. A long sluice way had to be built to carry water from the pond to power machinery at the foundry.

At this time Butler and Sugden petitioned the Town of Rocky Hill to build a road from Dividend to the Middletown Road (Route 99), thus Pleasant Valley Road was laid out and constructed in 1854.

This foundry was called the Pleasant Valley Foundry (noted on the Rocky Hill 1869 map as the "Shear Factory"). They manufactured shears, which were reportedly sold all over the United States and Canada. They also produced lamp brackets and miscellaneous hardware. In 1857 Butler patented a single shot muzzle loading pistol. This pistol was cast in one piece after which the barrel was bored out and the frame was then fitted with the trigger mechanism. These pistols were produced at this site. According to the 1860 Industrial Census, the Pleasant Valley Foundry employed 30 men and 4 women. This census lists pig iron, molding sand, coal, etc. as materials used at the foundry and indicated power, to run machinery, by water.

In 1863 Mr. Sugden purchased the interest of his partner William Sage Butler for \$6,000.00 containing 10 acres with a dwelling house, barns, saw mill, gristmill and factory buildings standing there on which included land covered by a pond, said pond covered about 3 acres. Mr. Sugden continued in business until October 8, 1865 when the foundry and finishing shops were destroyed by fire. The fire was believed to be the work of an arsonist.

Mr. Sugden again went into business with his former partner William S. Butler. They rebuilt the business and in 1868 sold the business to Elisha Stevens a toy manufacturer in Cromwell. Stevens then went into partnership with George Brown, a pattern maker, from Forestville, Connecticut. At this foundry they produced miniature toys, cast iron banks and many types of chandeliers. In the mid 1870's this business was also destroyed by fire. Stevens and Brown became insolvent. Elisha Stevens satisfied all of the company debts after which he went into bankruptcy. The business was never rebuilt.

Slag piles and remnants of the foundry furnace are still visible at this site. In February 2002 the Town of Rocky Hill issued a permit for a period of five years to the Friends of the Office of State Archaeology (FOSA) to pursue an archaeological investigation at the Pleasant Valley Foundry site. Three archaeological digs were held here with members of FOSA. Two of these digs were for the benefit of The Museum of Natural History and the Connecticut Archaeology Center located at the University of Connecticut at Storrs. Several of the original shear molds and molds for lamp brackets were recovered in the course of the excavation, while others still remain, along with many other artifacts related to the business. The site is otherwise untouched.

In 1884 Charles Billings and George D. Edmunds built a new brick building on the hill south of the Bulkeley dam and operated machinery by a long belt from the mill in the hollow. Manufacturers' tools were made here. The small gristmill continued in operation there. Edmunds continued operations at least until the 1890's. From a photo taken about 1909 it appears the building was still in use. The cement steps from the building down the hillside to the

brook are still intact. There are also tool remnants imbedded in cement footings near where the building stood.

Much more research needs to be done relative to the many businesses that thrived here.

### **Map Legend:**

1. Site of Gershom Bulkeley's Corne Mill built in 1677. In the 1750's a bakery was added to the corne mill where a variety of crackers and hard bread was produced for sea-going vessels. Eventually this mill was moved upstream to an area called "The Hollow". In the late 1700's, Ephrian Goodrich had a sawmill on this site.
2. Entrance way to the Edward Bulkeley homestead – now gone. Edward was the son of Gershom. He inherited the corne mill from his father.
3. Roadway to Gershom Bulkeley's new corne mill. Look over the bank and see the roadbed leading into the hollow.
4. Foundation of building owned by Leonard Wells and Alfred Wilcox. Wells and Wilcox manufactured chisels, plantation hoes and various other edged tools for many years.
5. Location of Bulkeley's new corn mill. This mill passed out of the family about 1830 after a tenure of 150 years and 5 generations. A Mr. Russell manufactured axes here for a short time. Later, Leonard Wells and Alfred Wilcox carried on their business until Wilcox was killed in a mill accident. Following Wells and Wilcox, Joseph Jory, an English blacksmith, produced the first "Never Slip" horse shoes at this site in 1866. A year later he sold his invention to a firm in Boston for ten thousand dollars. Following Jory, C. E. Billings put up a new building replacing the old one. It was mainly used for drop forgings. A small corn mill was still in use nearby.
6. Bulkeley Mill Dam. The dam was rebuilt and enlarged in 1875. South of the dam and uphill, C. E. Billings and George Edmands built a new brick building in 1884. The machinery was operated by a long belt from the mill in the hollow. Various tools were produced here.
7. Site of Butler and Sugden Shear Factory, 1854-1865. William Sage Butler and Robert Sugden established, at

Dividend, a foundry for the manufacture of shears and miscellaneous hardware. Butler also invented a single shot muzzle-loading pistol that was produced here. In 1860, Butler and Sugden employed 30 men and 4 women. The business burned in 1865. It was rebuilt and

sold to Elisha Stevens, a toy manufacturer in Cromwell. He produced miniature toys, cast iron hanks and chandeliers. In the mid 1870's the business again burned, never to be rebuilt.

8. Butler and Sugden dam site built in 1854 to provide waterpower for the shear factory. A long sluiceway conveyed the water to the factory site.
9. Butler Grist Mill Site 1775 – Built by Deacon Simon Butler and others, it was later rebuilt after 50 years by Captain William Butler, Simon's son. A year or two prior to 1861, Frederick Butler produced penholders there. The mill was demolished about 1880.
10. Butler Saw Mill 1829, Built by Captain William Butler – The mill was active until 1868 when it was destroyed by fire. It was replaced by a new building then sold to Robert Sugden, Jr. While in his ownership it was used by Sidney Bidwell from 1875 to 1878 for the production of railroad ties and lumber.

### **Sources:**

Town Land Records, Rocky Hill and Wethersfield  
Wethersfield Book of Votes  
Newspaper accounts of fire  
Probate records  
Connecticut State Library  
Farmington Public Library  
Keegan Associates (maps)  
Mike Martino photos  
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