

*Newtown Turnpike:*

# Minerva Heady Recalls the Miles

by Karin Giannitti

It seems impossible that one of Weston's busiest highways was once nothing more than a narrow, dirt road, barely wide enough for two carriages to pass. Yet, the road was heavily traveled, featuring a school, hotel and camp. At one time folks even had to pay for the privilege of using it.

The highway is Route 53, also known as Newtown Turnpike. Originally, it was built to connect Norwalk with Newtown in the early 1800s. And as it wound its way through Weston, it incorporated what was known as the Gulf Road, a low-lying road running through the valley. The road motorists use today varies from the original in that rerouting by the state straightened out many of its curves.

In an interview, Minerva Heady, who grew up on Newtown Turnpike, recalled what the road was like in the early days. Mrs. Heady, 75, was born in the Wakeman Godfrey House (see *Chronicle Quarterly*, Vol. 12, No. 4; Fall 1993) on Godfrey Road East. When she was two years old, the family moved to her grandmother's house on Newtown Turnpike. Her father, Frances Perry Morehouse, was born there and he, like his father, was a farmer. He grew tobacco, wheat, rye and corn. What the family did not grow for their own needs, they sold in Bridgeport. Mrs. Heady remembers a childhood filled with farm animals. She had a pony that she rode everywhere.

She recalled what Newtown Turnpike looked like in her youth - an unpaved road, almost impassable in rainy weather and dusty in the summer. At the northern end of the turnpike sits a small

cemetery. South of the cemetery, where Valley Forge Road intersects Newtown Turnpike, there stood a hotel. The hotel was a rest stop for north and south stagecoach travelers, who stopped for the night. There were barns for horses, meals were served, and rooms could be rented.

Somewhat south of the hotel was the Den School, an old one-room school, not in use when Mrs. Heady went to grade school. As a child, Mrs. Heady attended Upper Parish School on Godfrey Road. She was transported by school bus. She remembers her mother fighting with school officials to get the bus to come so far. She attended Upper Parish through eighth grade and went to the original Staples School on Riverside Avenue, in Westport.

Continuing south on Newtown Turnpike was the Toltec Boys Camp,

started by Wallace Green Arnold in 1928. The camp was for city boys, who came here for swimming, horse back riding, sports, and general fun in the country. The property later became known as Singing Oaks Camp, and is now a subdivision.

Newtown Turnpike was originally built as a toll road. The toll booth was located south of the intersection of Godfrey Road.

Long time residents, like Mrs. Heady, have witnessed many changes as, first, horse drawn wagons then, later, motor vehicles rolled by their windows. She hopes the state will step in to preserve this Weston byway.

Under consideration in Hartford is the town's proposal to declare part of Newtown Turnpike a scenic highway, which would protect it from development. The program has worked well in other towns, where the landscape's beauty is being preserved for future generations.

