

Oral History Transcription of Orlando B. Swift

"History of the Warren Genral Store as told by Orlando B. Swift. Recorded in 1968

Transcribed by Heather B. Forstmann March 2021 for the Warren Historical Society.

This recording was prepared in 1968 by Orlando B. Swift, descendant of a long line of one of the oldest families of Warren Connecticut.

I am Olando Swift, a descendant of 4 generations of Warren storekeepers, and I am going to try to tell you a little bit about the history of general stores in Warren.

Most of my knowledge of olden days in Warren came through my father, who was born in 1854 and lived here until 1894. So, his acquaintance with the town went back beyond the memory of anyone now living.

Much of what I learned from him, other than family history, had to do with the old store, not now standing, operated by the family for four generations, and well over 100 years. What I believe was Warren's first general store, was established in 1782, during the last part of the Revolution, by two brothers, Benjamin and John Tallmadge. Benjamin was 28 years old, and John only 25. The older brother was a soldier in the continental army and still in active service. While John was already the owner and operator of a general store in nearby Bethlehem, CT. The existing enterprise was expanded under the name of B. Tallmadge and Company with the opening of new stores in Litchfield and Warren. John took immediate charge of the Warren Store and came here to live. The store was located about where the Service Station now stands. I have a photograph, taken about 1883, which I believe shows the original structure, then 100 years old. It is the only picture of the store that I know of and was exhibited at the last Old Home Sunday Gathering at the Town Hall.

John Tallmadge made his home in a medium-sized two-story house on about an acre of land purchased by Benoni Carter. located just north of present Tranquil House. A study of the land record would show if the house was already standing when the land was purchased. In any event, John did not marry until 1788, so probably lived elsewhere for the first few years. The house burned. I do not know exactly when, but I have reason to believe it was about 1875. The foundations of the house and outbuildings are still there. John died in 1823 and was succeeded at the store by his son George, who carried on only a few years before returning to farming. He was succeeded by Orlando Swift, a son in law, and my grandfather, who in turn, was followed by Tallmadge Swift, his son, and my father. Tallmadge continued until about 1894 when operation by the family ended. In each case, the respective successors had worked in the store as an assistant before taking over full responsibility. At some time, which I had not yet discovered the ownership of the company passed from B. Tallmadge and Company to the individual proprietor. Probably this change took place not later than after the deaths of the two founding brothers. John in 1824, and Benjamin in 1835. These events and dates are drawn from genealogies and from Charles Swain Hall's History of Benjamin Tallmadge. The latter is well documented from source materials and various collections, including Litchfield Historical Society, Connecticut Historical Society, and the Connecticut State Library. It is interesting to note that that Charles Hall is the descendant of the Hall family of many years ago in Warren. The only original picture of the home of John and Georger Tallmadge is a pencil drawing by Helen, a daughter of George, made from memory after the house

burned. It was copied as an etching by Bernard Hall of Warren, for use as a book plate, by Tallmadge Swift.

According to Charles Hall the B. Tallmadge and Co stores in both Litchfield and Warren were general stores in a very broad sense. This was indicated in part by an advertisement in the Litchfield Monitor in 1792 advertising goods for sales at the two locations. The list of merchandise most of which has been imported from Europe and the West Indies included a wide variety of yard dry goods, iron mongery, hardware, crockery, glass, window glass, books, paint pigments, lumber, groceries, tobacco, and various alcoholic beverages. This list occupies a long list in small print in Hall's History. Credit is offered, but no prices stated. In those days the typical general store provided not only merchandise but also a number of services now supplied by other means. This included acting as a banker and making loans on real estate. Performing the services of broker in the purchase and sale of stock, especially in new issues. And acting as a middleman in the marketing of local produce, such as grain, cheese and beef. All of these services were supplied at the Warren store. The functions of banker and broker were discontinued especially as these services agencies for these purposes became available. But the handling of local produce continued for a long time. Sometimes times this was done on a cash basis, and sometimes by exchange of the produce for goods at the store. Originally transportation of goods and produce was by horse drawn vehicles. Most of the goods come from Boston, Hartford and New York. Later when rail transportation became available to Cornwall Bridge and New Preston, this was used, and the store did its own hauling to and from the railroad. It maintained its own horses and vehicles and there was a barn for this purpose behind the store. The 1883 photograph of the store shows the barn and a team of Morgan horses handled by Tallmadge Swift. I have three articles connected to the barter and trade operation of the Warren store. They are a wooden grain shovel, used in handling grain, a violin taken in trade for goods, and handmade hickory axe helve [handle], bearing the name of the maker, J Morgan. He was probably James Morgan, maternal grandfather of James B. Perkins who lived close to the Warren/Kent line, and regularly traded his helves for goods to the store.

During most of this period the store served also as a post office, and I now have the postmaster's desk similar to a school master's desk but made without legs to sit on a counter. Throughout the period covered in this account, there were no convenient banks or police. A man holding cash or valuable goods had to look out after himself. A few hints that may have been involved in doing so are implied in stories of the Warren Store. I have seen a door, on which an attempt had been made by a would-be burglar to cut around the lock with a saw. After that, long nails were driven into the edge of the door in the vicinity of the lock to make it impossible to cut through with a wood saw. And another time after forcible entry had been made, and some goods stolen at night, a loaded shot gun was fixed in such a position that an intruder, in the dark, would trip over a wire, which would pull a trigger, giving him a load of birdshot in the legs. On one occasion this went according to plan. The intruder got away, but nothing was stolen. Probably if a storekeeper did that today, he would be the one to go to jail, but the burglar would be free to rob the store that night. Another story is about a successful night robbery. Tracks in the dirt showed which way the robber went. A local posse followed and caught the man. What the TV westerns would call a "citizen's arrest" was made, and the stolen goods were recovered. What were the goods? Two bundles of scythes. At least one of the storekeepers were armed at times. Because of the amount of cash that had to be kept in his home, Orlando Swift slept with a strange weapon at the head of his bed. It was a pitchfork handle with one tine pointing straight out for spearing, and one tine sticking out to the side for striking. He never had to use it. I have a small

revolver, that so I have been told, he carried between his home and store. If so, he could not have been too vicious a character because the weapon he carried was an 1860 Smith and Wesson, 22 caliber rim-fire short. For a short period of time some sort of partnership existed between Orlando Swift and George Gilbert. It was terminated and Mr. Gilbert established a separate store on the hill. According to James B. Perkins, it was in one wing of a house, that stood somewhere between the present town hall and fire house. I do not know how long this continued, but for some time Gilbert and Swift were competitors. Both engaged in moving local produce to markets elsewhere in their own transportation facilities. And returning with loads of merchandise for their stores. James Perkins says that according to legend, Gilbert would make a round trip to Hartford with a two-horse rig, disposing of produce there and picking up merchandise in two nights and a day so he would only be away from the store only one day. Swift had more help and could take more time. Sometimes his trip, usually undertaken by his son, Talmadge, would be three cornered. Such as all grain to the Thomaston region, pick up a load of clocks for Hartford, and return to Warren with general merchandise. Going back to James Perkins as my authority, when Tallmadge Swift quit the store in about 1894, Justin Comstock took over the operation. I suppose he rented the buildings and went into business for himself. Some years later Finnley Knapp opened the new store, at the present location. He in turn was followed by Robert Perkins who carried on for many years. For a temporary period, Mr. Perkins conducted his business in the Old Town Hall south of the Church while the present building was being remodeled. He then moved back. He was the last of the storekeepers to do his own teaming. He hauled goods from the railroads, and he also hauled the local milk production to the railroads. The farmers all brought the milk to the store, very early in the morning. And Fred Ashman, his teamster, took it from there with a pair of large mules. In the meantime, somewhere along the way, Comstock closed his doors, and the old original store was torn down. A great deal of lumber was salvaged and good enough condition to re-use. After Rob Perkins came Roger Dickenson and his son in law, Hollis Stockman. And after them came two generations of Kohls, Lewis Coll Sr. And Lewis Col Jr.

There is one story to show that one thing in Warren has not changed. Back in about 1915, a well-dressed stranger in an impressive motor car pulled up in front of Rob Perkin's store. He entered and inquired how to get to Warren. Mr. Perkins replied "Mister, you're standing in the middle of the business district right now."

That is the end of this recording. This tape was prepared and edited by R. J. Cashion

Fact Checking:

The "Old Town Hall" is the building we now call "The Academy".