

This is the first in a series of stories about the people and events that have shaped the face of Hebron.

Settled in 1704 and incorporated in 1708, Hebron has the distinction of being one of the oldest towns in Connecticut. But it has many other honors, one of those being Alice Elizabeth Hills Foote, believed to be the oldest living Connecticut resident at the time of her death. Born September 21, 1868, she passed away on June 14, 1980 at the age of 111, just 3 months shy of her 112th birthday.

The length of her life is secondary to the importance she holds to Hebron history. Alice Hills was born right after the end of the Civil War, and 20 years after slavery had been abolished in Connecticut. In She lived through generations of change – numerous inventions, such as telephones and automobiles, the onset of World War I, the Depression of the 1930's, World War II, the Korean and Vietnam Wars, a man landing on the moon, the movement from 11 one-room schoolhouses in her beloved Hebron to a consolidated Hebron Elementary School, the introduction of technology and computers. There is little this amazing woman didn't witness first hand in her long and fruitful life.

Alice was born into a farming family, the Hills, who owned one of the largest farms in Hebron. She grew up on West Street, near the present location of the Blackledge Country Club. She graduated from Normal School and became a teacher. "Normal School" was later renamed Willimantic State Teacher's College, and today is known as Eastern Connecticut State University. Education was a part of her persona that influenced generations of Hills and Footes, and Alice never let anyone forget that. Her descendents, to this day, remain highly involved in education, and carry the words of their ancestor close to their heart: "Education is everything."

In her later years, when asked what she attributed her longevity to, she always replied the same: "Good, hard work."

Alice would have needed that strong work ethic when she chose to marry Edward Erautus Foote in 1889. Ed Foote was an aspiring farmer, and their marriage was greeted with lots of smiles, winks and nodding heads among Hebron residents. There was only one problem people could see, and it generated lots of gossip and whispers. The Hills were die-hard Democrats; the Footes were dedicated Republicans. What was young Miss Alice going to do about that? In 1889, politics were high drama throughout the East Coast, and New York political scandals, especially Tammany Hall, had bled over into Connecticut. A person's party affiliation was quite important in those days! Well, she did what most women of that time would have done: she became a Republican. It didn't matter that she wouldn't have the right to vote until 1920, when all American women were finally granted suffrage. She was determined to stand hand-in-hand with her new (and quite handsome) husband, whether it was working the farm or being his "silent" partner in local Hebron Republican politics.

Ed and Alice bought land the following year in the northern part of Gilead, and called their new home "Footehills Farm" – a combination of their last names. Like the political debate, this again raised eyebrows in town – why didn't young Ed and Alice call their new homestead "Foote Farm"? After all, that would have been the "proper" way to name the homestead. Married women in the 1890's had few rights, especially with regard to property ownership. Edward Foote actually took a great social step when he added his wife's name to the new label for their homestead. And it remains "Footehills Farm" today.

Edward Foote died in 1934; Alice never remarried. Instead, she dedicated her life to her family, which was growing and growing, and her beloved Hebron community. There was one piece of gossip that delighted townspeople in 1964. It was noted by all that Mr. C. Daniel Way was picking up Mrs. Alice Foote in an automobile, and they were going to dinner together. It wasn't just any automobile – it was a Cadillac! It didn't matter that they were both 95 years old, and had a decades-long friendship based on their family farming ties: tongues were wagging about Alice Foote on a “date” with Dan Way! (Was it the purported “date” or was it the fact that Alice was being driven around in a Caddy?) Imagine the disappointment in town when the one-time dinner engagement failed to produce some kind of long-term union...

Alice Foote was somewhat of a folk legend throughout her life in Hebron. She lived across the street from Gilead Congregational Church, and faithfully walked to services every Sunday. Hebron residents always knew to be on the lookout for Alice, crossing the road with her cane, wearing her old black coat and her Sunday finest (including the inevitable Sunday hat.) They would watch and look and slow down accordingly. She always appreciated this courtesy. Alice knew very well how to drive a horse and buggy, but she never mastered the automobile. Despite this, her family today readily remembers that she was a master in back seat driving.

One of her most famous skills – in the still small town that Hebron used to be – was rug making and quilting. It's interesting to note that quilting remains a local talent demonstrated by many Hebron women; indeed, “the other guys” (i.e., First Congregational Church) still have an active Quilting Club. Alice's quilts – which were always tied, rather than stitched – have been on display at many Quilt Shows at the Old Town Hall throughout the years. Her rugs were equally appreciated, and, as was usual for the time, were made of scraps and rags – old suits, old ties, old coats. In her later years, without her husband Ed as a source for these old clothing items, Alice actually took a gigantic step and made her rugs from brand new remnants of woven mohair wool. The rugs were freely given to family and friends, and many in Hebron now have one of the famous Alice Foote rugs gracing their homes.

There was another skill for which Alice is fondly remembered – doughnuts! If legend is true, she was known throughout Hebron for her doughnuts (the original spelling) – raised doughnuts made with real lard and yeast. If someone got a call to “come on down for doughnuts”, they'd be there within minutes. Although the secret recipe for Alice's doughnuts died with her, if you mention “Alice Foote's doughnuts” to those who had the pleasure of getting that personal call, you will always see a smile of remembrance.

It was devastating for everyone in the community when Alice broke her hip in 1969 at the age of 101. Ever the trooper, she used her cane to “hook” the phone cord of her wall phone and called “Central” (i.e., the term used in early phone history for “Operator”) for help. She was determined to live independently, in her own home, so conveniently located to her beloved Gilead Congregational Church. But after two failed surgeries on the broken hip, such was not to be. She went to live at the Meadows Convalescent Center in Manchester, where her birthdays continued to be celebrated year after year.

Remember that in the 1980's, it was quite unusual for any person to live to 100 or past. With each passing birthday, newspapers continued to pick up the story, and the Hartford Courant, the Manchester Evening Herald, and the Rivereast covered the annual birthdays. Pictures of the event were always included, and various pictures depicted the five generations of family members celebrating her life. At

the time of her death in 1980, Alice Elizabeth Hills Foote could proudly claim 3 children, 7 grandchildren, 22 great-grandchildren, and 8 great-great-grandchildren.

Her funeral services a few days later were conducted by another well-known and famous Hebron resident, the Reverend George M. Milne, Pastor Emeritus of the Gilead Congregational Church. His sermon, in part, read: “And now we thank thee for the life of thy servant, Alice Foote, whom thou hast taken unto thyself; For her deep roots in the ancient soil of Gilead, and her strong ancestry, going back to the first settling of these hills; For the many years of her life, spanning more than a century, and more than half of the story of America as a nation; For her knowledge of ways and conditions now so long ago that it is hard for us even to imagine them; For her gift of living in the present, and of bringing to a new age the wisdom and insights and values of an elder day; For the home which she created, her care of her children and her pride in all who bear her name and blood; For the work she shared with her husband upon the good land; For the part she played in this church for many years, in worship and in leadership and service, as member and president of the Ladies Aid; For her delight in music, in games, and in human company; For her energy and skill, with the needle and in the kitchen, creating good things to see and touch and taste, and making beauty out of rags and patchwork with patient imagination...For all that sustained her spirit; And for all good memories of her life which shall remain.”

Alice Elizabeth Hills Foote is gone now. But as Hebron enters the 21st century, she is definitely not forgotten.

Donna J. McCalla is the current President of Hebron Historical Society and a 13-year resident of Hebron. She holds a B.A. and M.A. in History and Religion from Wichita State University, and completed post-graduate studies in Religious History at The University of California, Riverside. McCalla holds an A.B.D. from The Ohio State University, and her doctoral dissertation was on Papal-Jewish Relations from the 3rd to the 13th Century.