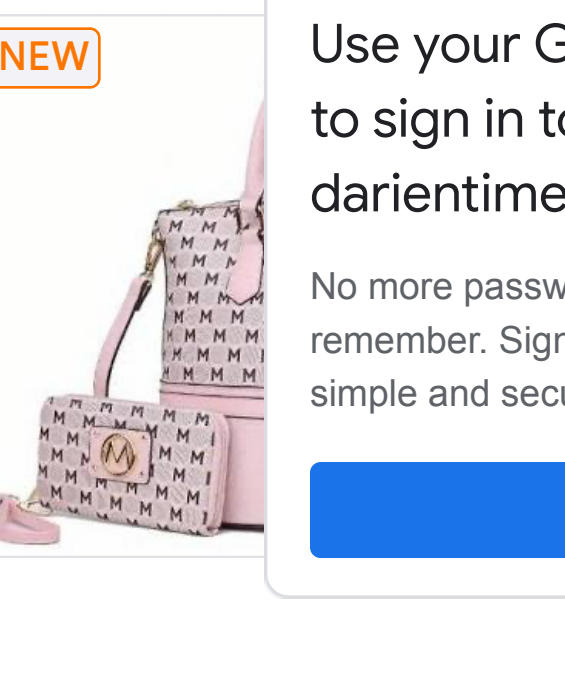
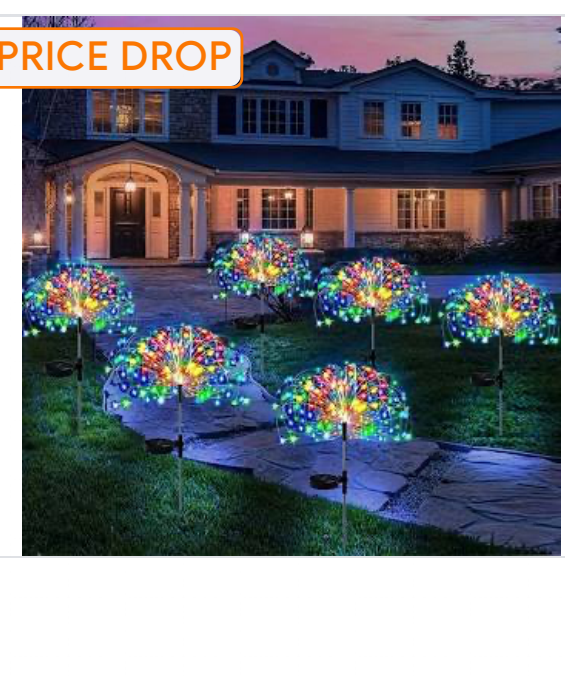
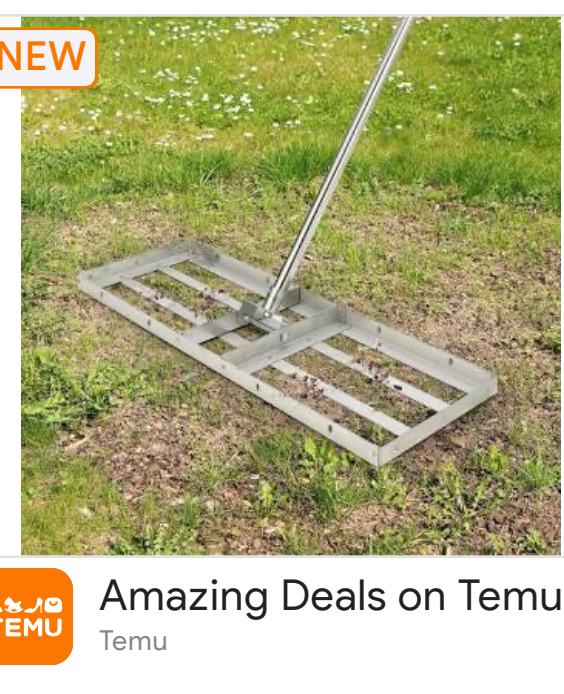


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NEWS

# The history behind the Mather Homestead in Darien

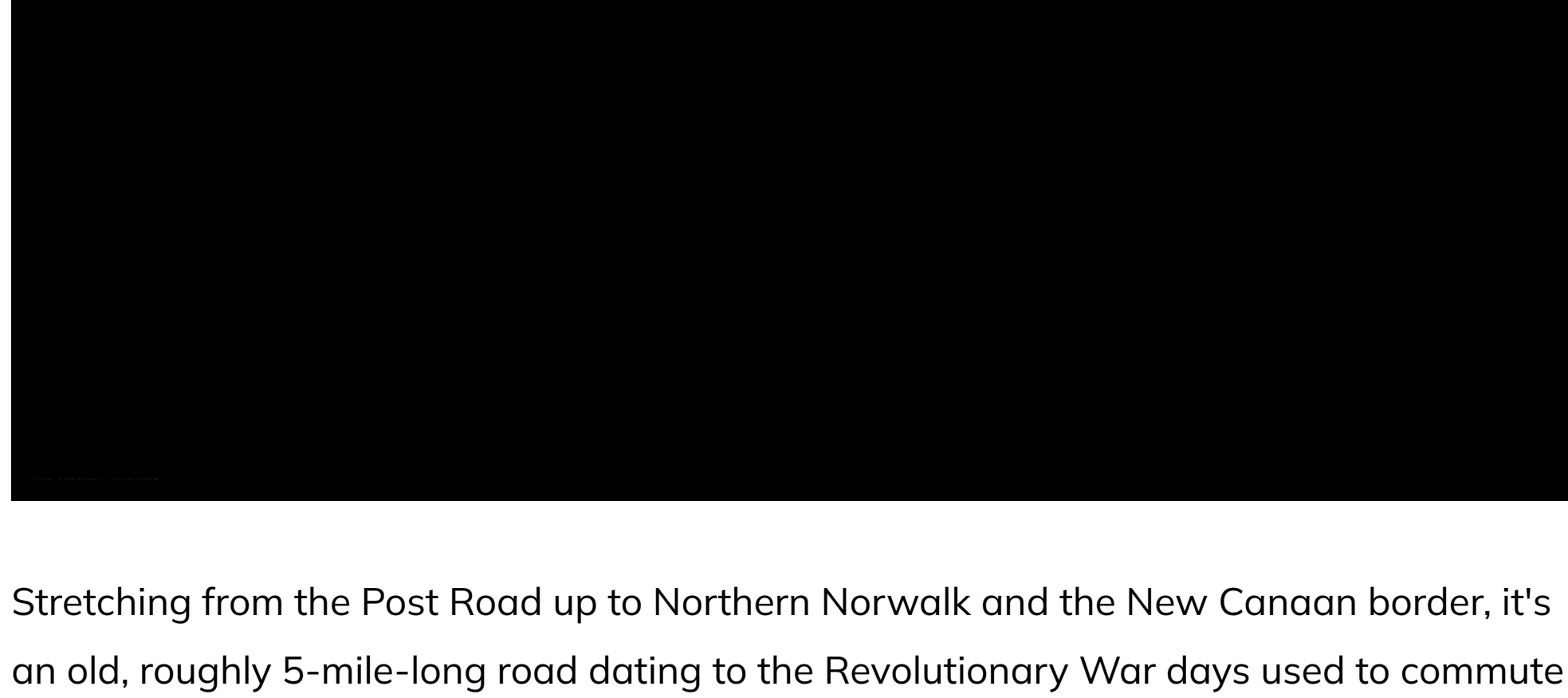
By John H. Palmer, Correspondent  
Updated July 1, 2011 12:59 p.m.



The Mather Homestead at the corner of Brookside Road and Stephen Mather Road is one of the most historic houses in Darien. British troops raided the house during the Revolutionary War, and was also the home of Stephen Mather, who founded the National Park Service. - Photo by John H. Palmer

File Photo

It's pretty easy to take for granted a ride down Darien's Brookside Road.



Stretching from the Post Road up to Northern Norwalk and the New Canaan border, it's an old, roughly 5-mile-long road dating to the Revolutionary War days used to commute between the two towns.

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Fact box

Chances are drivers don't notice the 18th century home at the corner of Brookside and Stephen Mather Drive that's nestled in between two pristine meadows and looks like something out of "Little House on the Prairie."

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It's out of the way, and takes some time to drive it. So why is it that in 1782 a group of British soldiers who were far from home and didn't know where they were decided to make the trip on foot to stake out that house?

"They built (the house) up there because the thinking was they would be safe up there," said Ken Reiss, a former president of the Darien Historical Society. "It was raided anyway."

The house in question is now known as the Mather Homestead, and is one of many historically-preserved properties in Darien. Since it was built in 1778, ownership of the house has passed through seven generations of the Mather family, and it is considered one of the finest existing examples of 18th century architecture, with a central chimney, and two stories with a basement and attic.

During the Revolutionary War, Darien was one of many towns on the Connecticut Shoreline that was in constant danger of being raided by British troops who were trying to wipe out the ammunition reserves of the Continental Army and steal the valuables of residents who lived in the towns. To add to the confusion, spies were everywhere. There was always the possibility that your neighbor was a Tory -- a colonist who sided with British -- and would turn you in.

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But they didn't have the mechanized infantry available to armies today. They had to march to get where they wanted. Whatever was stolen had to be carried back. Many residents of these towns knew this, and would designate "safe houses" far from the shoreline where they could hide valuables.

The Mather Homestead was one of those "safe houses," built by Joseph Mather, a deacon in what was then called Middlesex Parish, before Darien got its current name. While he was away fighting the war, his wife, Sarah, was home, taking care of 11 children and helping her neighbors hide their valuables in the house.

"I think she must have been a very strong woman; she was alone there for a long period of time when her husband was gone to war," said Anne McPherson Tracy, one of the few living descendants of the Mathers who grew up in the house. "The British came in with their bayonets and forced her to cook them something."

Tracy, who now is a Ridgefield resident, owns the house along with her brother Stephen and her sister Jane.

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While she and her siblings never knew the terror of living with imminent British attacks, she has fond memories of a simple lifestyle there, relying on fresh milk that was delivered and vegetables grown in a "victory garden" planted during World War II. Still, the history of the house was present for them every day.

She recalls a "high-boy" chest dresser in the house where it was said that Sarah Mathers stored silver flatware belonging to her neighbors. She also remembers a deep well on the property where valuables were lowered into the water for safekeeping.

"I don't think it was particularly safe, but that's all they had," she said. "Sadly, the British found it anyway."

To understand why the British troops would travel as far north as they did, away from the safety of the ships that came ashore on Weed Beach, it's important to know why the Mather name is so important to Darien. Without the Mathers, there may have been no Darien.

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Go back to 1738, when there was no Darien -- just Norwalk and Stamford. In the pre-Revolutionary period, colonists usually looked to the local minister for leadership and he generally held the clout that a mayor or president would have today. The Rev. Moses Mather was a young, outspoken minister out of Yale Divinity School, and in 1744 he was hired as minister of the Middlesex Parish Church until 1806.

"The minister knew everyone," said Susan Bhirud, a librarian at the Darien Historical Society. "Because he was also a patriot, he was the first person they could look up to to make this a parish."

In his sermons, Mather was the first to make the case that part of Stamford would become Middlesex Parish, and in 1826 became an official town on the map.

It was also Mather's sermons against the British that made him a target. In 1779, he and three of his sons were captured and held for five weeks because of his sermons encouraging colonist to rally against the British. It was Mather's son, the Rev. Joseph Mather, who built the house.

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"It was a privilege to live in that house," Mather said. "Our mother instilled in us a knowledge of the history and how they had to cope with things."

Mather's mother was Bertha Mather, a daughter of another very prominent Mather, Stephen Tynng Mather. An avid lover of the outdoors, especially the western United States, he is the man credited with starting the National Park Service in 1916. Without him, there might not have been the beautiful redwood forests, glaciers and mountainous parks such as Rocky Mountain, Acadia and Yosemite National Parks.

"We can't just live like sardines packed in a box," Mather said. "My grandfather saw that trees were being cut down -- beautiful redwoods. He said something had to be done to preserve the beauty of this country."

Mather said her grandfather's spirit lives in her, as she is an avid preservationist.

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She served nearly 40 years as director of the Land Conservancy of Ridgefield after moving there in 1968, and in 1977 she and her husband donated 10 acres of their property to the town to be kept as a wildlife habitat.

"Kids today don't know American history," she said. "You have take them to a place to make them understand how difficult it was. We take it all for granted."

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John H. Palmer, Correspondent

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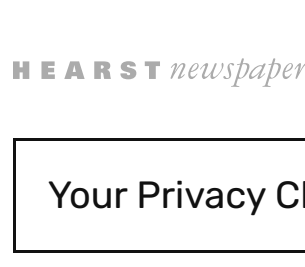
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