

# *The Woodbridge Story*

## **The First Generation — Deodat and Esther**

By Maude McGovern, May 2025

### **The Woodbridges Come to the Farmstead**

The story of the Woodbridge Farmstead begins with a young man from a prominent East Hartford family. Deodat Woodbridge (1757-1836) was descended from the Reverend John Woodbridge, who had immigrated from England to Massachusetts in 1634. Deodat's grandfather was the minister of East Hartford's Congregational Church for many years, and his father, Russell, served in the Connecticut General Assembly and as a captain in a local militia. His mother was Anna Olmsted, also from East Hartford. The family operated a successful tavern.

Deodat worked in the family tavern as a young man and perhaps managed it for a while. As far as we know, he didn't attend college. However, it's clear that he had a solid education and valued books and learning all his life. In 1780 he married Esther Welles (1759-1820), herself from a "good" family being descended from an early governor of Connecticut. Their first child, Electa (1781-1853), was born the next year followed by Dudley (1783-1844) and Mary (1786-1868).

On November 27, 1786, Deodat purchased 140 acres "With the Appurtenances thereof." The appurtenances weren't listed, but clearly one of them was a tavern because in February of the following year, he placed a notice in *The Connecticut Courant* announcing that he had bought "the place formerly Capt. Stephen Hills' in East-Hartford Fivemiles, where he keeps an house of Entertainment for all gentlemen and ladies..." It was located in a small settlement (later called Manchester Green) in the Parish of Orford, a section of East Hartford. Orford would be incorporated as Manchester in 1823. Still in their twenties, Deodat and Esther Woodbridge were now parents of a growing family, farmers with well over a hundred acres, and proprietors of a tavern.

### **Woodbridge Tavern—the Early Days**

Taverns in the colonial and early federal period were much more than just places to grab a drink with friends. As early as 1644, the General Court of Connecticut ordered every town to provide a place for travelers to eat, sleep, and stable their horses. In addition, taverns (sometimes called houses of entertainment or ordinaries) also played vital roles in their communities. People came to eat, drink, and socialize, perhaps to listen to music or even dance. They exchanged news and opinions on everything from the weather to politics. Stagecoaches stopped at Woodbridge's and other taverns bringing mail and newspapers as well as travelers. Other common activities included business meetings and tax collection, both of which we know took place at Woodbridge Tavern. A notice in *The Connecticut Courant* in 1804 announced an auction to be held at the tavern to settle a local bankruptcy case, and an 1813 notice instructed people to pay their taxes there.

Tavern keeper was a position of high public status. In fact, a Connecticut law of 1780 mandated that each town government nominate a person suitable to keep a "House of Entertainment" for the coming year. Tavern owners were entrusted with providing safe and adequate lodging for travelers including women traveling alone. The successful tavern keeper was a man (and sometimes a woman, particularly a widow who might take over after her husband's death) with good business and people skills, someone who was hardworking and responsible.

*Images below:* • Deodat Woodbridge announces he's bought a tavern, February 1787 notice in *The Connecticut Courant*. • circa 1920s photo of the Woodbridge Tavern, looking west. Middle Turnpike to the right.

Call and fee.  
THE subscriber begs leave to inform the public, that he has lately purchased the place formerly Capt. Stephen Hills' in East-Hartford Fivemiles, where he keeps an house of Entertainment for all gentlemen and ladies that will oblige him with their custom, and the smallest favour gratefully acknowledged, by their most humble servant.  
DEODAT WOODBRIDGE,  
East Hartford, Feb. 5, 1787.



Location was critical to success, and Woodbridge Tavern was well positioned on the main road, the “highway” through East Hartford along one of the important post roads through Connecticut. Beginning early in the European settlement period, post riders and other travelers passed through what we call Manchester Green on their way from Hartford diagonally across the northeast corner of Connecticut to Boston. They were following a route first traveled by Indigenous people that runs through Bolton Notch. Today, we’d recognize this “highway” as Silver Lane, and Spencer, West Center, Center, and East Center Streets.

And the tavern’s location was to become even better. After the Revolution, there was a great need to knit together this new nation into a strong economic unit. Good transportation was clearly key to better commerce. But the Federal Government was paying off the states’ war debts and had little to spend on projects like building roads and canals. As a result, the states turned to joint stock companies (i.e., private investment) to fund transportation. One of Connecticut’s many turnpikes was Middle Turnpike, chartered in 1797 by the Boston Turnpike Company. It merged with the old highway right at Woodbridge Tavern. It’s no surprise that in its heyday Woodbridge Tavern saw all sorts of travelers from humblest to highest including the President of the United States. Six months into his presidency, George Washington was on a tour to investigate the economy, particularly the agriculture, of the new nation. On his way home from Boston, he noted in his diary on November 9, 1789, “Stopped at Woodbridge’s in Et. Hartford, where the level land is entered upon, and from whence, through East Hartford, the country is pleasant, and the land in places very good; in others sandy and weak.”

One can just imagine what an impression Washington’s visit made on the people of the small village around the tavern. In particular, Electa Woodbridge, not quite nine at the time, enjoyed telling in later life how the President had asked her to bring him a glass of water.

### ***How Middle Turnpike got its name.***

In colonial times there were three postal routes between New York City and Boston. The oldest, the Bay Path, ran to New Haven, north to Hartford and Springfield, and then east to Worcester; it was called the upper post road. The lower post road, the Shore Path, followed along the Connecticut and Rhode Island coast. By 1700, with a growing population in Connecticut’s eastern uplands, a third postal route, the Connecticut Path, developed. Known as the middle post road, it veered east from Hartford through Bolton and then northeast to Coventry, Tolland, and Woodstock and into Massachusetts. A century later, Deodat Woodbridge in an official document referred to this route as being “... commonly called the Middle Road.”

Artist’s drawing of President Washington’s 1789 visit to the Woodbridge Tavern.



### **Woodbridge Tavern in Later Years**

Woodbridge Tavern served the community and travelers for many years, but its days were numbered. By the early 1850s, stagecoaches between Hartford and Boston were being replaced by the railroad that traversed the northern part of Manchester. The tavern closed, and the building was used over subsequent years as a private home, a community hall, a box factory, and housing for employees of the nearby Glastonbury Knitting Company. It grew more and more dilapidated until it was torn down in February 1938 and the lumber sold. A few bits of wood and hardware were saved, including a small collection in the Woodbridge Farmhouse. (These days, a gas station diagonally across from the Woodbridge farmhouse occupies the tavern site.)

### **Deodat’s Farm**

Given that Deodat’s 1786 purchase included 140 acres of land, it’s obvious he was farming as well as keeping a tavern. This wasn’t uncommon at the time; many men farmed as well as practiced another profession, and rural tavern owners often owned farms that provided much of the food served to guests. No doubt the unspecified appurtenances mentioned in the deed included farm buildings and perhaps a dwelling house. We do know for certain that the barn closest to the current house was built in the late 18th century; it was likely on the property when Deodat bought it.



Although we have no specific information about Deodat's farm, it's safe to assume it was fairly representative of Connecticut farms in this period. Prior to 1810, agricultural methods were primitive and inefficient. Soil quality suffered from a lack of fertilizing and poor tilling. Livestock tended to be of low quality due to inferior feed and little or no selective breeding. In spite of all the challenges, many farmers produced enough to feed their families with a small surplus to trade or sell.

Generally, oxen were used as draft animals and horses for riding. Most milk was made into cheese because that kept well. Pork was the staple meat because it was easy to raise hogs. Corn, rye, and wheat were the major grain crops along with some barley. Orchards primarily produced apples and pears that were used to make cider, although some apples were stored for winter use. Usually there was a small patch of flax which the farmer's wife processed into linen. Kitchen gardens provided some vegetables and herbs.

Common farm buildings included barns, which were used mainly for storing hay and grain with animals kept

*Left:* Early American farm scene, Harvard Forest, Petersham, Mass, *Right,* 18th-century English-style barn in a contemporary photo of the Farmstead's back yard.



under cover only in severe weather. The 18th century Woodbridge barn is an "English" barn built in a traditional three-bay style that the colonists brought with them from the mother country. It was the predominant form until the time of the American Revolution. Farmers drove carts of hay through large doors into the center bay to be unloaded. That wide-open central area was also where grains were threshed and feed corn husked. The bays on either end were called "mows" and were used to store grain and hay and to shelter livestock when necessary. The Woodbridge Farmstead has one of the relatively few eighteenth century barns remaining in Connecticut. Go to <https://connecticutbarns.org/find/details/id-8670> for more about the Woodbridge barns. Many tools including rakes and shovels were made of wood. "Picking stones" out of the

rocky Connecticut soil was an ongoing and arduous task; large ones were used to build walls while small ones were simply heaped in a corner of the field. Rocks were sometimes transported on sturdy wooden sleds called "stone boats."

#### ***Why so many barns are red.***

There are a few different theories. (Although it has nothing to do with helping the cows find their way home—cows are red-green colorblind!) The consensus is that the practice started in the late 1700s. Before that, barns weren't painted at all, and the wood quickly weathered. So farmers began applying a protective varnish. This was before commercial paints were available, and people stirred together their own mixes usually consisting of lime, skimmed milk, linseed oil, and iron oxide. The iron oxide, a.k.a. rust, was plentiful around farms and was known to kill fungi and moss which could damage wood. Under the sun, the varnish turned a red ochre hue. As time went on and ready-made paint became available, farmers stuck with red in a bow to tradition. It didn't hurt that for a variety of reasons, red paint tended to be less expensive than some other colors. By the way, photos reveal that the Woodbridge barns were white for some years in the twentieth century.

#### **Other Enterprises**

In addition to being a farmer and tavern keeper, Deodat Woodbridge was a storekeeper. He placed notices in *The Connecticut Courant* in the 1790s and early 1800s advertising a variety of wares particularly

fabrics. In May 1796 he offered “an elegant assortment of Spring GOODS” which included “Chintzes and Calicoes.” Deodat and his partners (including two of his sons) carried other merchandise, for example “good St. Croix Rum, Sugar, Molasses, Tea, Coffee, Chocolate, Spices, &c.” They sometimes also offered to buy commodities such as 500 bushels of rye and “1000 yards of checked Flannel” in November 1801. One gets a picture of a fluid enterprise run by men who kept an eye on the market gauging what their customers wanted as well as what could be bought and resold to other businesses for a profit.

At some point, the store, located across from the tavern (a pizza restaurant occupies the site now) began functioning as the area’s unofficial post office. Eventually, Deodat’s son Wells took over the store. The first post office in what is now Manchester was established in 1808. It was located in the Woodbridge store with Wells, age 19, as postmaster of what was known as the Orford Parish post office. After Manchester’s incorporation in 1823, it was renamed the Manchester post office. Wells would serve for 26 years. Later, the store continued operation under different owners for many years.

Deodat operated a stagecoach line from Hartford to Boston according to a notice in *The Connecticut Courant* in 1805. He and a partner assured readers that, “The proprietors have been careful to provide the best of Horses, genteel and easy Carriages, good and careful drivers, who will pay every necessary attention to travellers.” All that for only six dollars fare from Hartford to Boston. It’s not clear how long the stagecoach line operated—it wasn’t the only one plying that route—and there is no mention of it in the will Deodat drew up in 1820.

### Church and Community

Deodat was a prominent member of the Ecclesiastical Society of the Parish of Orford, which ran the local Congregational Church (present-day Center Congregational Church of Manchester). Until the separation of church and state in Connecticut in 1818, the Society also administered the municipal affairs of Orford Parish. Deodat served as treasurer in 1792 and as clerk for the next few years. In the ensuing decades, he and his sons show up in the Society’s minutes as involved members. Likewise, records show that Deodat and his sons were active in the Masonic Order and in other community organizations.

### Family

The only pictures we have of Deodat and Esther Woodbridge are copies of a pair of portraits, probably painted around 1815-1820. Looking at these older, formally-dressed people, it’s hard to imagine them as the young, no doubt extremely busy, harried even, couple barely out of their twenties who entertained President Washington when he stopped at their tavern in 1789.

The 1790 U.S. Census lists 10 people in Deodat’s household. Information in early censuses is very sketchy but we can identify Deodat and Esther and their first four children, all under ten including baby Wells (1789-1864). There were four others, a “free white male under 16,” two “free white persons—females,” and one individual in the category “all other free persons.” Who these other people were, how many were employees or relatives, is a mystery. For that matter, there’s no way to tell if they were living in the tavern itself or in a farmhouse that may have stood on the property.

We can be sure that the children were working alongside the adults from an early age. When Electa served George Washington a glass of water, she was most likely around not just to see the great man but to help out. This was particularly true in her case. Years later, one of Electa’s daughters-in-law, Ednah Dow Cheney, wrote, “(Esther) was of nervous temperament, and subject to fits of melancholy, then called the spleen, which kept her sometimes for weeks from fulfilling her duties in her family. At such times the care of the household fell upon the oldest daughter even at a very early age.”

By the 1800 census, Electa was no longer part of Deodat and Esther’s household. Almost two years before, at age 17, she had married George Cheney; six of their eight sons would eventually establish the Cheney Brothers Silk Manufacturing Company. The children still at home, Dudley, Mary, and Wells, now had two little sisters: Emily (1791-1874) and Esther Hills (1796-1816). Deodatus, the final child, was born on August 9, 1800.

*Images below, left to right:*  
Esther Welles Woodbridge (1759-1820),  
and Deodat Woodbridge (1757-1836)



Twenty years later, in March 1820, Esther Welles Woodbridge died. Much had changed. The three younger daughters had married local men. Sadly, the youngest daughter had passed away at age twenty. Dudley and Wells were also married with families and households of their own.

In August, Deodat wrote a will. He left some land to Dudley, who at 37, was already well-established. Wells was bequeathed the tavern, the store that he was operating, a house (still standing at 634 Woodbridge Street and occupied by Wells at the time), Deodat's share of a tan works (i.e., a tannery), his 400-gallon copper still, and some turnpike and insurance stocks. Deodatus, only twenty, was to inherit the farmstead. The three surviving daughters were to split his furniture.

His affairs were in order, but Deodat wasn't through. Two months later, he married Anna Welles, sister of his first wife and a widow for many years. Ednah Dow Cheney wrote that Electa's younger children viewed Anna as a beloved grandmother figure. "He (Ednah's husband, Seth Cheney) loved to describe the aged couple coming down to visit their daughter, attended by their faithful Pomp. The dog always heralded their approach, for he understood the talk about going down to 'Lecta's,' and would start at once so as to arrive before them." Deodat and Anna were together until his death in 1836. He was buried in the family plot in Manchester's East Cemetery with his first wife and deceased daughter.

### Deodat's Encyclopedia

Deodat Woodbridge had only one personal possession so important that he specified in his will where it should go. Wells was to receive his father's *Edinburgh Encyclopedia*. This 18-volume work, a competitor in the early 1800s of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, was considered particularly strong in its coverage of scientific topics such as electromagnetism, a new field at the time. Given that Manchester's first public library was half a century in the future, what a rare (as well as expensive) thing this encyclopedia must have been! Speaking of libraries—as per an agreement his heirs made after Deodat's death in 1836, his daughters split not only the furniture but also his "library." We have no way of knowing what this library consisted of, but clearly it was of some size and value.

Woodbridge Farmstead, 495 East Middle Turnpike, Manchester CT

### Home of six generations of a Manchester farming family.

Raymond and Thelma Carr Woodbridge donated the property to the Manchester Historical Society in 1998, reserving a life use. Manchester Historical Society, 175 Pine Street, Manchester CT. 06040 • 860-647-9983

