SOUTH SHORE MILLERS OF HEMPSTEAD TOWN—THE INDISPENSABLE FEW.

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Seldom has much attention been given to millers—men in a vocation which required many additional skills, including those of a carpenter, banker, and sometimes a grocer.

Years ago in the Journal, Preston R. Bassett chose to focus upon millers rather than the equipment and finances of gristmills. If so much history could be dredged out of one stream—between the vicinity of Lakeview and East Rockaway—this writer felt that the operators of gristmills throughout Hempstead Town would also make a fascinating subject for research.

Farmers who delivered their grain to be ground often lingered for a chat, and neighbors went ice-skating or boating on the millpond. With so many persons attracted to the premises, a miller often added other businesses such as a grocery, and stagecoaches would make regular stops there.

Heavy responsibility fell upon the miller's shoulders. He usually received exclusive rights to a stream, although generally there were strings attached by the Town, for example, a limit of about one-tenth on the share of flour a processor could take. Millers knew that they faced revocation of licenses for failure to keep plants in good repair or if they didn't maintain satisfactory business policies and obey all Town regulations. When a Long Island community had too little flour and/or cornmeal its miller went into action, selling any surplus locally or in other villages; in the same way he imported from other places if he had a shortage. He also became a sort of banker to customers as well.

One mile downstream from Hempstead Village Peter Cornelisen operated the earliest gristmill which is mentioned in the Hempstead Town Records. On May 22, 1659, Cornelisen sold out his interest in the enterprise to one
William Smith, who soon took in Henry Linnington as a partner. When Smith purchased his partner's half interest for forty pounds sterling (payable in cattle at beaver prices and thirty baskets of Indian corn), Linnington reserved some of the partnership's equipment and built a new mill further into the South Woods.

How vital a service grain processing became is demonstrated by what happened to Linnington. Presently he was involved as a plaintiff or defendant in lawsuits resulting from disagreements with some of his customers. In between these civil cases Linnington faced a criminal charge when a young girl accused him of making immoral proposals to her. Convicted after trial, he was banished from the Town for an indeterminate period.

Although customers did not like all of the exiled offender's traits, they liked the idea of his returning to work—after all, everyone needed food. So when he offered to reform, minutes of a town meeting say, he was “received again upon promise of reformacon (sic) into ye liberties of an inhabitant.” Bond was put up by friends for his good behavior. Linnington must have mended his ways as no additional millers got the same privileges along the stream for at least forty years. His ex-partner Smith prospered, bought much land, and acquired a status symbol by becoming the owner of a slave.

Milburn (now a “lost city”)
Situated between Freeport and Baldwin, Milburn gained the benefits of waterpower in 1686, thanks to John Pine's damming of Milburn Brook—an improvement that gave new spirit and faster growth to what is now the vicinity of Merrick Road. During the seventeenth century Hicks' Neck (Baldwin Harbor) had developed slowly. But Pine's gristmill, which became the nucleus of a business center, stimulated development further north in a section called Milburn Center.

When Daniel Terry ran the mill he used the pond to test his invention of a screw propeller for boats and also experimented with perpetual motion. Little did Terry or his predecessors suspect that one of their successors would lose a legal battle over ownership of the pond.

Carman Smith, in the 1880's, caught a merchant fishing on the pond and promptly charged him with trespassing. A Justice of the Peace ruled in Smith's favor, but the defendant, Christopher Risley of Brooklyn, appealed his case to the Court of Appeals and won in 1885. The court said that Smith never really owned the pond at any time but that it still belonged to the descendants of John Tredwell who for a fee had granted his privileges exclusively for the mill.

East Rockaway
On December 28, 1688, Joseph Haviland was granted rights "upon ye stream of ye Rockaway Swamp" in East Rockaway and allowed "six acres of land if he sets up a complete good gristmill within one year and a day to grind ye town's corn for a twelfth part thereof." In 1739, Aaron Alburtis owned the tidewater mill which Isaac Bloom bought twenty-three years later.5

Near East Rockaway Inlet, at Ocean and Atlantic Avenues, the mill had facilities for easy shipment of flour and cornmeal. In the nineteenth century, however, competitors gained access to rail transportation which greatly helped the Davison family, who were owners for generations after Alexander Davison bought the combined saw and gristmills in 1816.6 Their main building has become a museum in the park adjoining Village Hall.

Another company, Carman and Besnord, owned steam, saw and gristmills in East Rockaway several blocks southwest of the Davison plant in 1873, when they advertised in the atlas produced by Beers, Comstock and Cline. Actually, however, their years of operation are unknown.

A large model of the Davison gristmill is on display at the East Rockaway Park Museum from Memorial Day through Labor Day on Saturday and Sunday afternoons. Students of the W. Cresper Clarke High School in Westbury made it under the guidance of their teacher-architect, William Marsella.

Merrick
Although Joseph Matlinson, a New York merchant, received permission at a Town meeting in 1704 to erect a gristmill at
Merriick, it would appear that he lost the privilege by default. Two other men took advantage of the opportunity when, on April 6, 1742, "Liberty was given to Thomas Frost and Nathaniel Oakley by major (sic) vote to set up a gristmill on a river called Merriick River on condition of taking ye eleventh part [portion of the flour or cornmeal] as long as they keep a mill on that stream," but in case they "let the mill go down" they would sacrifice such permission.7

The same mill was mentioned in the 1766 will of James Smith, great-grandson of Merriick's founder, John Rock Smith.8 James left to his son Sylvanus "the gristmill I bought of Thomas Frost and Nathaniel Oakley in the South Woods." James's father Jonathan, in his 1738 will, described a property boundary as the "Alburtis Mill River."9 If Alburtis had constructed a mill as early as the founding of Merriick or shortly thereafter, Frost and Oakley in 1742 may have gotten permission to replace the ruins of an older structure. At the same time as Sylvanus Smith was inheriting his father's mill, another man by the name of Amos Smith owned a similar building in Freeport.

Many Merrick residents still speak of their first mill, long gone, as the Alburtis mill, but a puzzling indefiniteness hangs over its past. The remains of an ancient gristmill were discovered in Merrick during the 1880's at the head of navigation about 1,000 feet south of Merrick Road and a few feet east of present-day Meadowbrook Parkway. It has the general characteristics of one at tidewater, and it is interesting that Valentine W. Smith wrote in his genealogy of the Rock Smiths that the Alburtis mill was probably a tidewater gristmill located at approximately where the Smith dock later stood.10 He wrote that well-preserved timbers were found standing in very hard underwater land such as would be expected at the end of a mill race.

Freeport

Mystery still surrounds the Freeport saw and gristmills—as to who started them and when. The author has traced every clue but could go back only to 1761. In that year Hempstead Town Records contain a road proposal which describes the route as follows: "... along by Ezekiel Raynor's till it comes to the highway (Mill Road) that leads from John Raynor's on Main Street to Carl's or Smith's mill."

This information came to the author's attention shortly after research disclosed the following fact: On April 13, 1774, Amos Smith sold his saw and gristmills, described above as Carl's or Smith's, to Stephen and George Hewlett, Jr., brothers in a well-known Merrick-based family. Hidden in this 1774 document are words that pinpoint the Hewlett's newly acquired property: "... at the south side of town (Town of Hempstead) near where Benjamin Raynor now lives, as also the dwelling house where Amos Smith lately lived... near said gristmill."11 A study of contemporary documents shows that Benjamin Raynor resided on Main Street just around the corner from, and adjacent to, the Smith mill.

Since we know nothing about Carle except his surname, Amos Smith was the earliest identifiable miller on Mill Road who used water power. There was no pond then. "Ditches" (brooks) from the north converged into one stream on the site of what today serves as Freeport's Recreation Center. The flour factory had tough competition from three gristmills only a short wagon-ride away: Sylvanus Smith's on Merrick River, Anthony DeMott's at Rockville Centre, and the eighty-year-old mill formerly operated by James Pine between Freeport and Baldwin.

The Hewlett brothers were public-spirited citizens. Stephen helped defend New York Colony against French and Indian attacks at Fort Stanwyx, Fort William Henry, and other border outposts. He fought under the command of his brother, Colonel Richard Hewlett, who during the Revolutionary War was an officer in the Tory militia on Long Island. George J. served in elective posts as overseer and/or commissioner of highways for many years.

Not much is known about the next proprietor, Joseph Swezey, except that the censuses from 1800 through 1820 show he resided in Freeport close to his job until Daniel Raynor (1791-1867) succeeded him in 1829.12 Raynor paid $5,500 for both mills, including the pond.

Raynor's homestead on Main Street opposite Mill Road
became a grocery store and stagecoach stop besides being sort of a community center. The 1850 census designated his son Edward as miller. Bedell Raynor of the next generation took over from Edward, who decided to run a farm north and east of the pond.

Isaac Horsfall bought the two mills in 1874 and eleven years later sold its waterfront site with its meadowland to the City of Brooklyn Water Department. He moved the business to a new building on Henry Street, switching to engine power. There was a gristmill owned by a P. C. Barnum at the “first pond” of the same Meadow Brook, but very little is known about it.

Wantagh

Wantagh’s gristmill, like Freeport’s, has defied efforts to solve the riddle of its age. How long ago the one across from the mill house, still standing at 1682 Old Mill Road, began grinding grain is still shrouded with mystery, but all signs point to the mid-1820’s as the probable time it went into operation.

Determining the date would be much easier if there was a choice between only two possible “first millers” at this location. We must select, however, from among the most likely candidates for that honor: Cyrus Whitmore, George Valentine and Michael Combes. Sometimes Benjamin Birdsall, a drover-farmer who made a name for himself during the Revolutionary War on Long Island, is credited with being “first” but no concrete evidence has ever tied him to the milling operations.

In determining the original miller it is necessary to answer at least one of the following questions: (1) who built the mill; (2) who occupied the mill house before anyone else; and (3) when either of these structures was built. The chief primary source the author has found is a property transfer deed as early as 1824, which throws considerable light on the three most eligible men for the designation of “first miller.”

Combes owned the mill, house and surrounding grounds when Whitmore purchased them. After their marriage, Combes and his wife, the former Harriet Valentine, occupied a farm-house in the vicinity, just to the north. Since his family’s genealogy lists Combes as a carpenter and farmer but never a miller, it is probable that his father-in-law, George Valentine, first operated the mill. A property deed in the sale to Whitmore mentions that Valentine lived there only a few months before Whitmore took over.

Cyrus Whitmore was a skillful contractor who erected a number of houses for leading Wantagh families—a fact which indicates that he was capable of building both the gristmill (purchased along with the mill house) and the dwelling house.

In 1815 Whitmore married Guilielma Seaman and thrived through speculation in acreage as well as carpentry work. With a growing family to support, he dreamed of providing a large, comfortable home on a hilltop across from the mill. His success gave the family “a dream come true” for forty-three years. After Whitmore died in 1855, his son kept the mill grinding with the help of his brother, Willet.

The homestead, gristmill and about 127 acres were sold in 1867 to George Williams, a descendant of Hempstead Town founder and pioneer councilman, Robert Williams. George apparently kept the enterprise prosperous, but died within eight years.

John Jackson Seaman bought the property in 1875 but his tenure was even shorter than Williams’s, lasting only a brief period of time when financial woes of some kind developed. Rooms in the house, as well as the gristmill facilities, were rented to Thomas Bedell. This arrangement didn’t last long as the property was taken over by Hempstead Town at the end of the decade.

During the 1880’s a succession of tragedies struck at millers who took over the enterprise. A thirteen-year-old housemaid was criminally attacked in the homestead and the three-year-old son of the miller fell into the millrace, was swept into the wheel and killed.

Finally in 1889, a new owner, Judge Thomas D. Smith, supplied capital for the functioning of the mill. An advertisement told newspaper readers that he was prepared to grind
corn into meal. This tended to offset a decline in the wheat business. George Seaman, Charles Russell, August Umhauer and William Seaman were employed in that order but the last named operator faced special problems. When the City of Brooklyn pumped water from Nassau ponds and streams, waterpower for the mill dropped and a steam engine was installed. But in 1907 when Seaman had an injury while at work, the accident brought more urgency to what was fast becoming inevitable—the shutdown of the mill. 21

There were still farms in Wantagh but not enough to keep the grain mill prosperous. Furthermore, experienced millers had become scarce locally and the business itself suffered because the grinding of wheat and/or corn was rapidly being taken over by industrial giants which mass-produced flour for distribution over a much wider territory.

Neglected, the old “workhorse” began to fall apart. Although the mill’s wooden shell survived until World War I, there was such a demand for firewood during the great conflict that Long Islanders, unable to afford coal, carried away pieces of the landmark to burn in their stoves and fireplaces. 22 So, the mill which had flourished for so long came to an end. Today the New York Water Service Corporation maintains a 650-foot well where a stream once turned the old millwheel.

Bellmore

Further down Jackson’s Creek, in Bellmore, another gristmill’s career was comparatively quiet, remaining under the control of one family and relatives for nearly all its 200 years. Originally John Jackson’s in 1704, the enterprise was handed down from one generation to another. One or more members of the powerful Jones family of Massapequa were united with the Jacksons by marriage—a fact that not only provided the financial stability for the mill but also prevented ups-and-downs like those of its neighbor to the north.

The Jackson-Jones mill’s quiet existence was rudely interrupted during the Revolution when raiders kidnapped General Jacob Seaman Jackson from his home nearby and imprisoned him in New Jersey. A few months later, he escaped and arrived home half starved. 23 This interlude of course did not mean that the mill passed out of the family’s possession and so the long years of ownership in one continuous train lasted for two centuries.

Rockville Centre

For more than sixty years, Mordicai Rock Smith ground grain in the community to which later he gave part of his name. Nearly one and a quarter centuries later, during the incorporated Village of Rockville Centre’s Diamond Jubilee in 1968, a bronze plaque was unveiled at his grave in honor of the miller who also served as Justice of the Peace, preacher and storekeeper. 24

Seeking a name for the post office in 1845, Postmaster Robert Pettit suggested Smithfield, Smithville, etc., but those names were already assigned to other communities within the State. The proposal of Rockville—to commemorate the Rock Smith family—drew the same objection. Finally by lengthening the name to Rockville Centre, it won postal authorities’ approval.

The first owner of the community’s gristmill was one Michael DeMott in 1710, followed in 1730 by his son Anthony who ran the business fifty years. Isreal Smith, a great-grandson of John Rock Smith, an original Merrick settler, bought the mill in 1780. Isreal’s son, Mordicai, who was later honored in the village’s name, became an apprentice at the age of fifteen and soon afterward began serving part time as a Methodist itinerant preacher. 25

DeMott’s mill has become well known in Long Island history for one of the first skirmishes in the Revolutionary War period between Tories and Patriots. In 1776, when Hempstead Town’s sympathies were divided between loyalty to the King and Continental Congress, a number of Loyalists hid in a swamp at about where Peninsula Boulevard circles around Tanglewood Preserve, just north of where the mill stood, owned by a loyalist sympathizer. A detachment of Patriot soldiers was sent to take Loyalists into custody. The expedition was unsuccessful but in the gun fire which occurred, one of the Tories was wounded. 26 This engagement was overshadowed later on, not only by the Battle of Long
Island in the same year, but also by numerous encounters in eastern Long Island during the course of the war. The name DeMott will forever be associated with this early incident in our country's history.

North Merrick

Franklin H. Mollineaux had a gristmill in 1883 at East Greenwich Point, now North Merrick, on the Meadow Brook. His grandfather, Jesse, started the business about 1810 with the help of his son, Royal, making paper or paperboard first, but he soon converted the plant to grinding grain.

One of the innovations which accompanied the venture was the invention of a new kind of windmill with canvas sails. Despite this new contraption it is believed that he used the old familiar source of waterpower to drive his windmill. The pitch of the windmill sails could be adjusted to the wind for greater efficiency. The mill has long ceased its operation but the family name is now connected with a fuel oil firm located in Hempstead.

Further south on the same stream near Babylon Turpke, Silvanus and Edmond Smith owned a gristmill believed to have been in operation about 1824. Although they are mentioned in various documents and genealogies, actually their years of activity remain unknown. As is the case with so many others who were millers their names have faded into obscurity. Their mill stood on the Meadow Brook bordering northeast Freeport.

Valley Stream

Little is known about the early days of milling in Valley Stream, but the Cornells—probably David, Horton and Pearsall—owned a gristmill on North Corona Avenue where it turns and dead-ends near Franklin Avenue. In 1883, the Beers, Comstock and Cline atlas carried the advertisement of a gristmill owned by J. R. Cornell.

According to Valley Stream Historian Howard Ruehl, the same family had a sawmill just north of Merrick Road where Arthur J. Hendrickson Park is now located. An 1859 map of Kings and Queens Counties by H. F. Walling indicates that C. C. Watts ground grain southeast of Sunrise Highway and Mill Road.

Baldwin

Baldwin's mill, remembered by many persons still living, was converted by its owner from one kind of operation to another. Thomas Baldwin's sawmill on Parsonage Creek just south of Silver Lake and west of Foxhurst Road was purchased in the 1890's by John Glover who turned it into a gristmill. Hollett Southard had been the operator. The quiet, lovely mill pond bordered by beautiful willow trees, extended nearly to Merrick Road until the 1920's.

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