

Then & Now – Princeton's First Mills

"YE CORNE MILL"

By M. A. Fay March 12, 1940

Preface:

By suggesting I submit a paper regarding the early gristmills of Princeton, your Program Committee have started me on a quest most alluring.

There is, without question, much interesting data about these now almost forgotten mills — data that lies hidden in multitudinous historical papers. Possibly, also, there are letters, written by our fore-bears, tucked away and forgotten in garret or trunk, that contain allusions to the activities centering around this very necessary industry of the early days of Massachusetts. To discover and bring to light these interesting facts is a real task, though a pleasant one.

A quest along this particular line leads one a long way back. In the earliest of historical and descriptive writings reference is frequently made to flour and meal. These have been staple articles of man's diet for thousands of years. History seems to be silent as to who first discovered that grinding or crushing of the cereal grains helped to better release their nutritious elements and to facilitate the cooking process. But that discovery resulted in an ever-increasing number of foods made from ground grain, until at the present day the list is a long one. These range from the ready-to-serve breakfast cereal to the delicate cake or pastry that tops off the dinner and tantalizes the already satisfied appetite.

The stone mortars and pestles, used long ago in the production of meal by hand, were soon supplemented, through the ingenuity of man, by easier and more rapid methods — methods, crude in comparison with modern machinery but effective.

The milestones were made from a hard, close-grained stone. The first ones in the New England Colonies were brought across the water. A limited number were made from suitable local stone, but the best ones, used later, came from Pennsylvania, Ulster County, New York, and Montgomery Company, Virginia, where a superior type of rock was more common.



The mill consisted of two of these circular stones sometimes five or six feet in diameter — many were smaller — and six to ten inches thick, placed one on top of the other. A circular wooden curb enclosed them. The lower or "nether" stone was

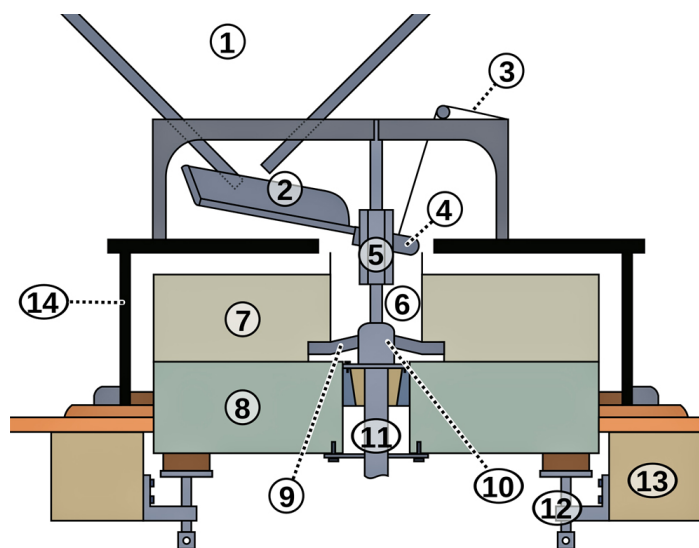


stationery. Its upper surface had cut in ridges or serrations, each having an abrupt and an oblique slope. These ridges or grooves radiated from the center. The upper stone, the thinner of the two stones, revolved upon the lower, and was powered by the water wheel. It was grooved on the under-side, opposite to its

mate, to give a maximum crushing power. From its center a shaft connected with the water wheel below. Also, a sizable hole was located here, through which the whole grain was fed from the hopper above, a small agitator insured a continuous flow of grain. Grooves at the edge of the upper stone worked the finished grist, as the stone revolved, through an opening in one side of the curb. The upper stone could be raised or lowered at will by the miller to produce a fine or a coarse meal.

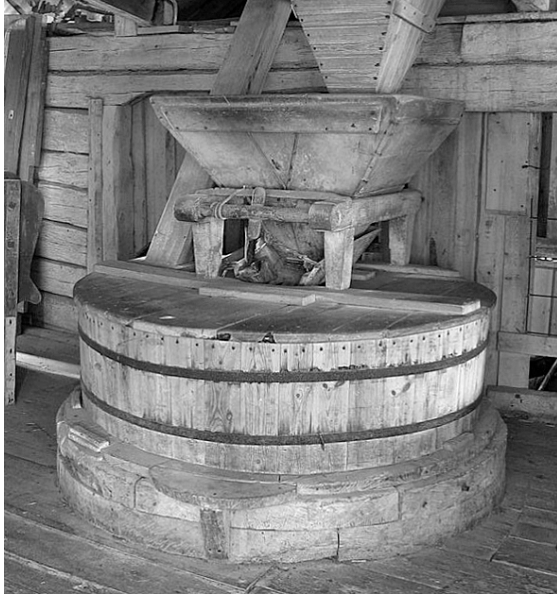
As a fee for grinding the miller was allowed a portion of the grist. By order of the General Court in 1636 the amount was limited to 1/16 of the quantity ground. The law also required "that men in each town see that corne was well ground." The miller must provide weights in his mill, and was required to weigh the grain both before and after grinding, if requested to do so. This was no reflection on the honesty of the miller, I presume, but a safeguard against possible dissatisfaction on the part of patrons!

As the colonists increased in numbers and spread out into new territory, they were careful to encourage the establishment of the necessary saw and gristmills; one to provide building material from the forests, the other to insure food from



1. Hopper 2. Shoe 3. Crook string 4. Shoe handle 5. Damsel 6. Eye 7. Runner stone 8. Bedstone 9. Rind 10. Mace 11. Stone spindle 12. Millstone support 13. Wooden beam 14.

the fields. Favorable sites were sought out, and competent men induced to settle and operate the mills. The smaller streams with good fall of water were selected



because they provided ample power and were less dangerous in their wilder moods' than the larger ones. By the construction of dams at favorable points a reserve of water was secured for continuous operation. Sometimes several saw, grist, and woodturning mills rubbed elbows on the same stream, each using the water in turn. One map of Worcester County dated 1870 shows on the brook near Buck's Mills seven different enterprises within a short distance.

In the settlement of Princeton, the "corne mill," as it was sometimes called, made its appearance early. Joshua Wilder from

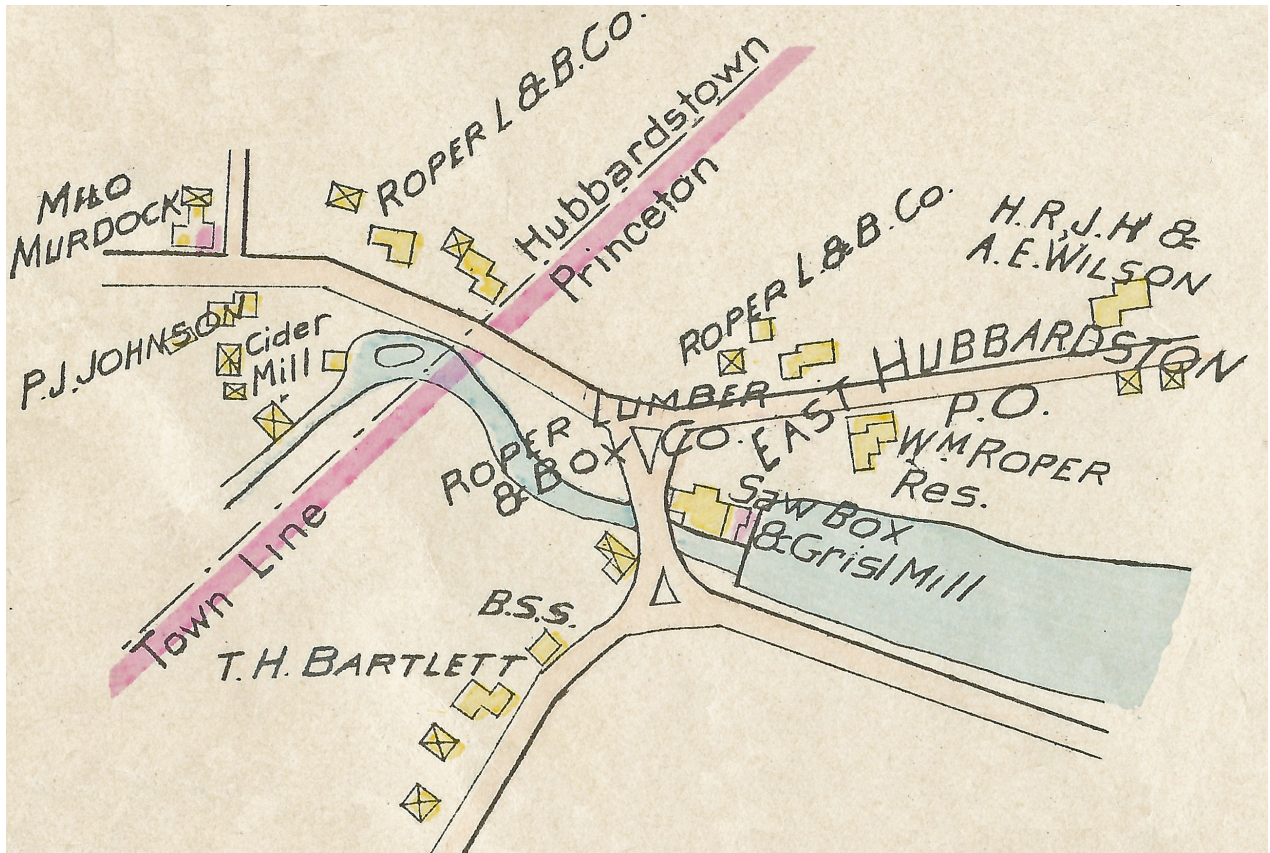
Lancaster was establishing a homestead about 1740 near what became the eastern boundary of the town. There must have been a gristmill in the vicinity though probably it was situated over the line in what is now Sterling, for several families had settled at this date not far distant on Rowley Hill, then in Lancaster. A church had been established called the "Second Parish of Lancaster," having around seventy members by 1745. From this church, several of those living in this locality took letters later and joined the Princeton church.

A few years after Mr. Wilder settled, Oliver Davis bought land in 1755 in the western part of Princeton (then Rutland East Wing), established his home and built a sawmill on a branch of the Ware River (East Hubbardston on Old Colony Rd.) close to the present line of Hubbardston. Shortly after, he erected a gristmill nearby, constructing a dam to supply the waterpower. In fact, there are ruins of several dams to be seen in this vicinity, indicating ambitious planning and many hours of patient toil. These mill and water rights were controlled and carried on by the Davis family for 75 years.

When the title of the property went out of the Davis family in 1827 to Silas W. Reed, it was encumbered by a partial lease granted three years before, to one Freeman Stow, Gentleman; said Stow being entitled to the use of an adjacent building for the carding of wool. There is no mention made of the enterprise or the lease in subsequent transactions, so it probably soon died a natural death. Mr. Reed disposed of the property soon to Ezra Fay who had a chair shop a few rods away over the line in Hubbardston. Five years later George Lewis bought out the

combined industries and ran them until his death seventeen years later. His widow as administratrix sold to Moses Cheever of Princeton, in 1848.

After several changes in ownership Samuel Roper purchased the businesses. He was a grandson of Benjamin Roper who settled in Princeton near



East Hubbardston Map 1880's - Known as Valley Village

West Sterling in 1790. The population of Princeton had steadily increased during the previous hundred years. The inhabitants numbered 1318 residents when the 1850 census was taken. Business had increased also. Water was flowing through many sluices and penstocks. It splashed and foamed as it turned the numerous mill wheels. There could be heard a hum of industry at many places — Slab City (map above), East Princeton, West Sterling, Brooks Station, Everetville, and at Nicholsville near Paradise/Walker Pond (Rt 31). The saws and lathes were singing, accompanied by the rumble of turning millstones. Many bushels of golden corn and fragrant rye were harvested, cured and carried to the various mills.

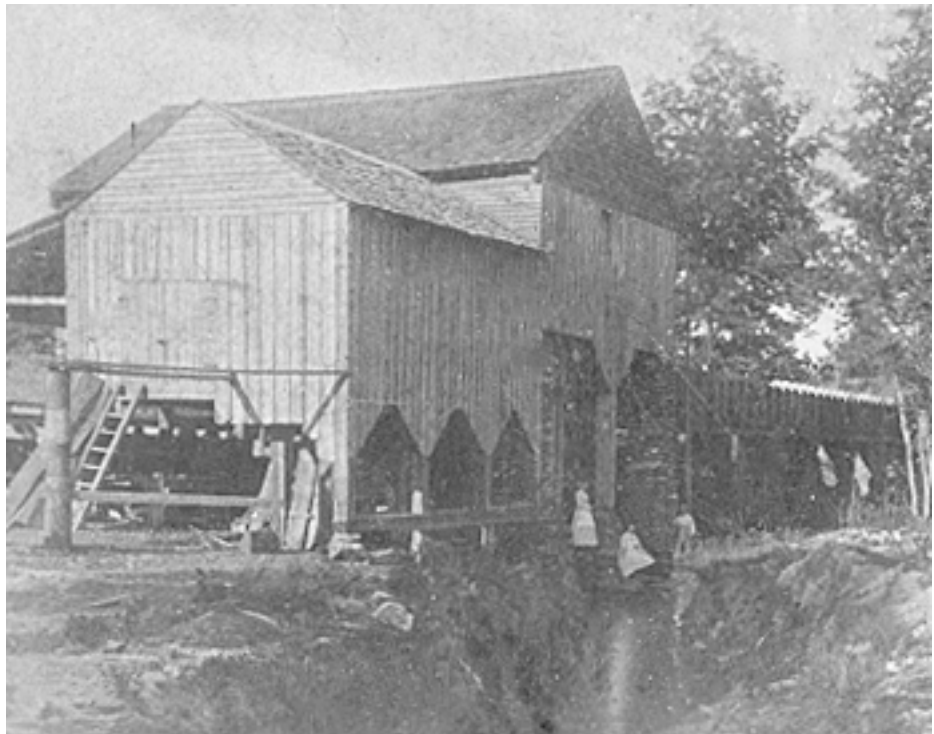
The boys and girls were growing sturdy and rosy on toothsome "hasty-pudding," homegrown rye mush, Johnnycake and brown bread.

Samuel Roper purchased the mill in 1856 and for over 80 years Roper's Mill

has been operated by Samuel Roper, the son and grandsons. A three-story addition to the mill was built by William M. Roper about 1875 to make room for the installation of threshing and winnowing machinery. For several years farmers brought their loads of grain to the mill to be threshed and cleaned as well as to be ground. The water rights were added to and their land titles increased year by year. As long as grain came from the farms the stones ground out the grist. Their rumbling ceased about 1900 for the opening of the grain fields in the West silenced the millstones of New England. (Note; The last stone mill to operate in this vicinity was that of Byron D. Alien of West Sterling. Infirmities of age compelled the cessation of the business between 1910 and 1915.)

There were a number of other gristmills within Princeton territory at

different times and their histories read much alike, but none of them served the community as long as the Davis-Roper Mill. In this field Oliver Davis must share primal honors with Moses Garfield and Benjamin Wilson, for, according to Francis E. Blake, these two last-mentioned men built a combination saw and grist mill in the northeast part of Princeton at nearly

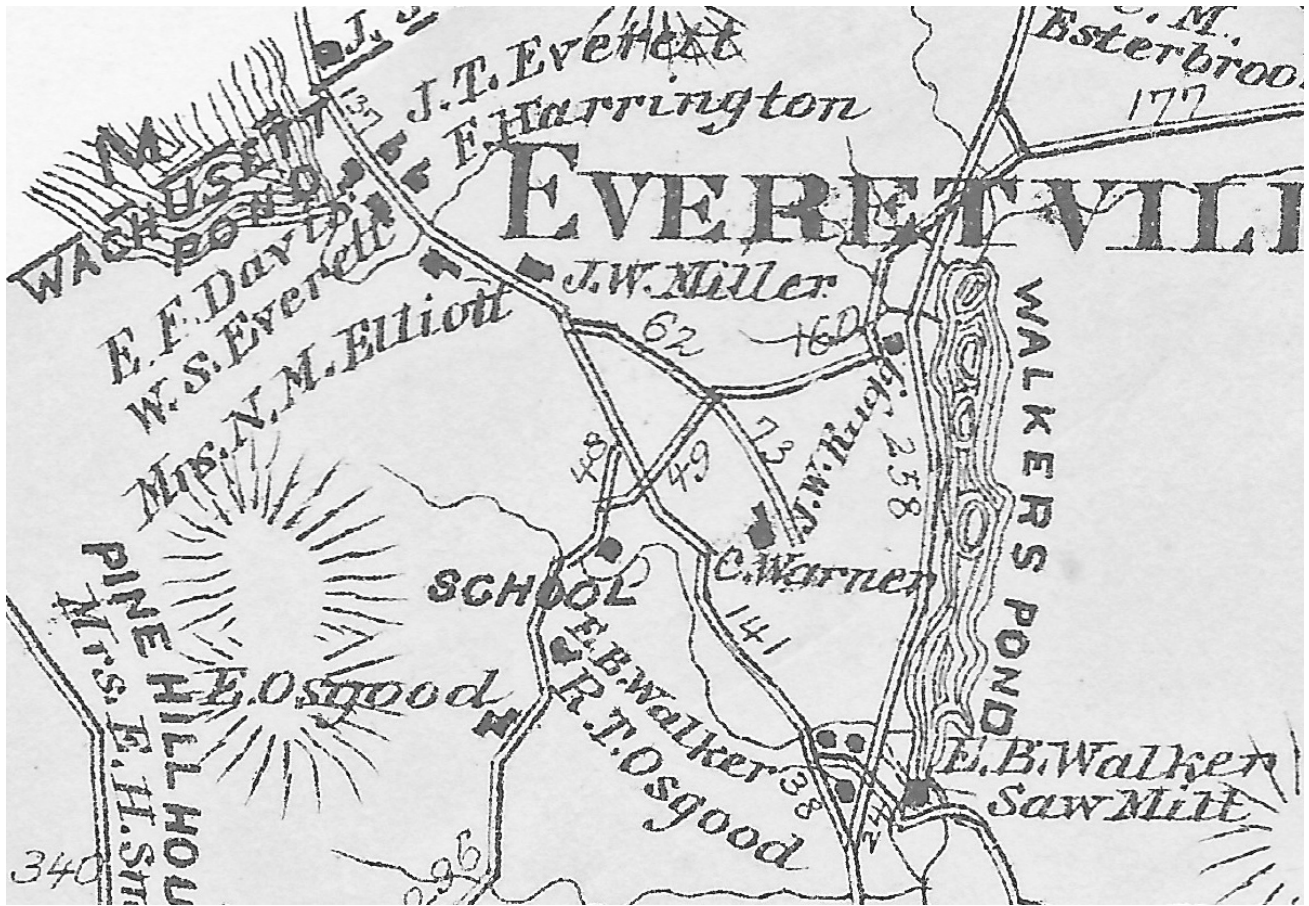


An Example of a Combination Grist and Saw Mill

the same time that the Oliver Davis mill was erected in the western part. It was located near enough to Everettville (Near Redemption Rock) to saw the lumber and grind the corn for families there. A discontinued road leads from near the home of Clifford Hobbs (Hobbs Rd) in East Princeton through the woodland to a point not far from Paradise Pond and Whip-poor-will Inn. Threading one's way through its deserted windings the mill ruins and two-deserted cellar holes indicate where men once lived and labored. Miss Ella Sawin's parents lived in one of the two houses and she remembers distinctly passing the busy mill on her trips

to and from school.

More now forgotten mills there were, the exact location of some it is not



North East Princeton 1870 Beers Map - Mills at Everettville & Paradise Pond



Princeton Gates Rd. North Toward Bickford Pond - 1870

possible to state with accuracy. Several instances there are where broken dams and traces of mill foundations indicate former enterprises of this type.

Some of you may have heard about a handful of people who objected to being excluded from the township of Princeton

across the street from the Richard Guest home (205 Mountain Rd.); Arnold Doolittle owned the land and had a summer camp nearby. The waters of the brook come from the Reservation (Echo Lake) and this spot is known as "The Flume or Cascades". Visitors linger to admire the huge water-worn rocks along the brook-bed wishing the stones might speak and reveal some of the secrets of by-gone days.

At East Princeton the grist mill of Mark Wilder stood on the brook side below the bridge, serving the needs of farmers thereabout, using for power water that had already turned the wheels of several sawmills and chair shops just above.



West Sterling 1898 Richards Map

There are residents of the town at present that remember well the "corne mill" of Flavell Smith just off the Sterling Road. Its curving, tree-grown roadway is easily traced in winter as it cuts a half-circle around the buildings of the late Waldo Harrington, joining the town road a short distance above the home of Morris Calcia. It is designated in deeds as the "old Parker Mill" and was run by members of the Smith family for 40 years. T. and E. R. Buck purchased this with several other water privileges on the same stream when establishing the Buck

Chair Factory in 1880 to late 1940's.

In the southwest corner of the town on the stream that empties into Quinapoxet Pond is another abandoned mill site. Here 75 years ago a thriving saw, grist, and cider mill was a center of activity. A spur track from the nearby steam railroad provided opportunity for business beyond the usual limits of a



Quinapoxet Pond Mill on Lovers Ln.

rural neighborhood.

This was known as the Daniel Davis Mill in its busy years.

The whispering breezes come and go, but they tell us nothing of the beginning nor of the decades of productive labor. Deserted now by man except for a few months during the mild seasons of the year, nature has returned to beautify the spot in her own wild way. Rusting iron and decaying remnants of a once sturdy structure lie scattered about, half

concealed by grass and vines, or clothed with moss that grows green in the dews and mists that rise from the brook. No more harnessed at man's behest the waters flow gaily on, a delight to the eye and the home of speckled trout.

The days of "Ye Corne Mill" have passed — days filled with hope, with service and the joys of accomplishment. To us they are now clothed in mystery: to our ancestors they were Life.

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