

Along the Outlet of Keuka Lake

by

Frances Dumas

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May's Millsite

James Parker's name comes up again and again in any discussion of the beginning of Yates County. A leader of Jemima Wilkinson's Society of Universal Friends, Parker bought the original land for the Friends' settlement in 1788; and it was he who negotiated with the state of New York after the Friends' original title became clouded. Parker was one of three original shareholders in the Friends' Mill when it was built in 1790 at the falls of the Outlet.

In 1797 Parker sold out his interest in this first mill and bought 300 acres from Charles Williamson, agent for the Pulteney Associates, the English syndicate developing the vast acreage that Phelps and Gorham purchased from the Senecas. It was about this time that the original Friends' settlement broke up over the issue of land ownership and soon the Friend herself was to move west to the present town of Jerusalem. Parker became a leader of those opposed to her. The land he bought from Williamson lay along the Outlet's south bank just east of the old Pre-Emption Line. Sometime before 1805 he built a gristmill there.

As a town road commissioner Parker was paid \$40 in that year to build a bridge across the Outlet "on the flat near his Mills." It was a wooden bridge, with oak timbers 16 inches square and a deck of oak planks two inches thick.

Parker soon bought additional property on the north bank and built a house near the Outlet, having moved from his original home near City Hill. By 1815 he was operating a gristmill, a fulling mill, a distillery and probably a sawmill as well.

The following year a group of local farmers incorporated the Farmers' Woolen Manufacturing Co. and bought some land and a building from Parker. Parker had just enlarged and rebuilt his gristmill, and the new woolen factory was adjacent to it, drawing water from the same flume.

The new venture went broke only two years later but its name stuck. The mill complex was frequently called the Farmers' Factory or the Farmers' Mill thereafter. Parker himself sold the property in 1818 to William Babcock and George I. Remer; it's said that Parker's new mill had burned, to his serious financial loss. If so, Babcock rebuilt it immediately, because it is mentioned in an 1819 deed as "Babcock's Mill".

Babcock bought out his partner and brother-in-law George Remer in 1823 and almost immediately sold the entire property except for the distillery to Richard Henderson. Henderson was a native of Ireland who settled in the area about 1795, marrying David Wagener's daughter Anna the same year. He mortgaged his new mill to Babcock for

\$3000. Half of this was to be paid by Henderson's doing the chopping and grinding for the distillery at the rate of up to 10,000 bushels a year. Some \$500 was to come from boarding and washing done for Babcock's millhands at \$1.25 a week each. The remaining \$1000 could be paid in cash or "good wheat, rye or corn at the market price."

Henderson had a great deal of trouble paying off this mortgage, actually defaulting twice and only narrowly avoiding a forced sale. Meanwhile the old Farmers' Factory was operated as a wool carding mill and cloth dressing business by a relative of William Babcock's named Joel Pratt.

Babcock himself was converted to the Temperance movement in 1829. He told a friend, "that distillery is my property, and while I live it shall make no more whiskey."

He had a notice printed in the newspapers: "I have discontinued the distillery business, and have on hand for sale very low, for ready pay or approved credit, a full set of distillery apparatus, consisting of two worms, a copper boiler, and an iron cylinder. The cylinder is large and uncommonly powerful. I have no doubt but with skillful management, the whole establishment at a moderate calculation would produce daily a sufficient quantity of whiskey to kill 50 men."

The next year, 1830, Babcock ran successfully for Congress. The old Farmers' Factory was rented to William Reed, who announced his intention to dress and dye cloth there. He advertised special rates on indigo blue.

Meanwhile Richard Henderson, nearing 70, sold the gristmill property to his son David in 1835. David sold it two years later to his mother's brother, Abraham Wagener. The old sawmill was refurbished and by 1850 was producing half a million feet of lumber a year. Wagener sold the mill to his nephew David S. Wagener, the son of Melchoir Wagener and Alpha Wilkinson Wagener, a niece of the Friend.

The gristmill was rebuilt too and in 1855 Wagener sold a half share in the whole property to his cousin Richard Henderson Jr. Henderson bought out his partner in 1861 and his family operated the mills until they were sold in 1869 to Jabez May.

May successfully ran the mills until his death in 1898—his brand name, handsomely advertised in the local newspapers, was "Mayflour"—and then they were taken over by his son Walter May, whose hobby was growing water lilies in the raceway. He eventually lost the property to foreclosure and Edward R. Taylor acquired it in 1911. Taylor was interested in generating electricity for his carbon bisulfide manufacturing plant at the Cascade Millsite just downstream. He sold off the water rights in 1923 to the Yates Electric Light & Power Co.

A newspaper article written in 1929 noted that forty years earlier there had been two stores near the mills, a creamery and a blacksmith shop. A new drugstore opened there in 1884, the year the railroad came through. A post office was opened, and the inhabitants asked that it be named Mayville; this name was already in use elsewhere and they settled for May's Mill.

The writer noted sadly that "the gristmill is now a shattered wreck and the sawmill is gone too." But he remembered drinking icy water from the spring beneath its walls.

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<http://keukaoutlettrail.org/>

Or you can also contact us at: Friends of the Outlet, Inc., PO Box 65, Dresden, NY 14441. Please support the Trail and give generously to maintain and develop this beautiful historic and recreational Trail!