

Along the Outlet of Keuka Lake

by

Frances Dumas

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Fox's Millsite

Sometime about 1820, while Solomon Weaver was managing the Cotton Factory Mill (now Shutts'), he noticed another good millsite a short distance up the Outlet. The site was so attractive Weaver got some financial backing, leased some land, built a new dam and a beautiful stone gristmill.

Weaver, an experienced cloth dresser, was born in 1797 in Saratoga County. His partner George Shearman was seven years older, a native of Ireland and now a Penn Yan storekeeper, married to David Wagener's youngest daughter Rachel.

By 1825 the pair had a sawmill in addition to the gristmill. Shearman also operated the old Miller & Haight distillery in Penn Yan. He sold it in 1826 and shortly afterward built another on his land near the Outlet, just uphill from the mills.

The partners called their business The Readiness Mills. It included a blacksmith shop and before long a tannery, built at the end of 1829 by Silas Eggleston of West Bloomfield, who bought along with some land the "privelege of taking enough water for turning a bark wheel or such other machinery as particularly belongs to the tanning business; said water to be taken from the gristmill flume above the mill and to be conveyed to the tan house...when it will not interfere with nor prevent the running of the gristmill, sawmills or any other machinery that may hereafter be erected, which however are not to require in all more than eight water wheels."

The phrasing of this deed indicates that Shearman and Weaver, in common with most Outlet millsite owners, operated several mills from one dam through a complicated series of flumes and races and minutely detailed water rights.

The land the Readiness Mills occupied was owned by John Hall, who purchased most of Lot 17 from John Plympton in 1805. Hall's executors sold the west half of the farm to George Shearman in 1829, just as his partnership with Solomon Weaver was breaking up. Weaver himself moved to Branchport in 1832 and operated a lumber milling business there for 54 years. Shearman mortgaged the mill property for \$11,000, couldn't meet the payments and sold everything off in 1833. Later commentators blamed Shearman's bankruptcy on his involvement in the wicked distilling business.

A new partnership including Samuel Wise of Benton and Charles Hubbard of Penn Yan bought the gristmill. The sawmills (there were two of them by now) and most of the rest of Shearman's extensive property went to Wise's brother Zenas and Ransford Whitting of Benton.

The property descriptions note the existence of a hog pen on the distillery lot. Hogs were fed with the mash left over from the distilling process and the high-quality pork that resulted formed an important item of the distillery's income.

The Wise brothers owned the old Thomas Lee farm and the one adjoining, with a tavern and store. They laid out a racetrack which proved very popular, and when they sold this property they bought the old American Hotel on Main Street in Penn Yan which George Shearman had built. The Cornwell Block stands there today.

Charles Hubbard bought out his partners in the gristmill and by 1835 it was grossing \$22,500 a year. The property was sold in 1843 to William Root, son of Hebron native John Root, who had been the miller there some years before.

Root went into partnership with James and Patrick McCay, two young Irish immigrants who helped him build the business up until in 1850 they were processing 25,000 bushels of wheat annually, along with 3,000 bushels of corn. A couple of years later a plaster-milling business was added.

Root advertised his share in the mills in 1859: "Valuable property for sale known as the Yates Mills...on a never failing stream...Said Mills embraces a Grist and Flouring Mill with three runs of stones and a Plaster Mill with suitable outbuildings, together with two Dwelling Houses; there is about 12 feet head & fall of water, capable of immense power...The Mills are in complete repair, now running night and day..."

That same year the sawmill was foreclosed by the federal government, to whom Samuel Wise had mortgaged it in 1837, paying the interest faithfully each year but failing to reduce the principal. The property was bought by Barzeleel Streeter, whose son Daniel had built in 1856 the first malthouse in Penn Yan.

Root in the end sold the gristmill lot to his partners the McCay brothers and set up a produce brokerage in Penn Yan. The new owners took out big new ads in both local papers. The 1860 census shows the gristmill grossing \$31,000 a year with a monthly payroll of \$100; the plaster mill processed 800 tons of gypsum annually, with a single hand making \$25 a month.

The year 1865 heralded a change. George R. Youngs (who on the census that year listed his occupation as "speculator") and Charles Hewins bought both mill lots and signed an agreement with two Schoharie County brothers William and Lewis Fox. The Fox brothers built a paper mill around the stone gristmill and bought the property in 1869.

In 1870 the paper mill, which used straw to make pulp, had two water wheels and a steam engine. It employed nine men and two women with an annual payroll of \$4800. The product was brown wrapping paper.

William Fox was born in 1840 and started his first paper mill in 1860, in Pittston, Pa. He was only 24 years old when he arrived in Penn Yan but he evidently had considerable energy and business acumen.

Fox took Perley Curtis as a partner in 1882 and the business continued under the name Fox & Curtis for 23 years. Curtiss, incidentally was married to Charles Hewin's daughter.

During this period the mill, now known as Keuka Mills, produced from six to nine tons of paper a day and employed about a dozen men. By 1914 thirty men were employed, producing 15 to 17 tons a day.

Periodic spectacular fires erupted in the great piles of rye straw. In 1915 the huge barn containing 600 tons of straw was consumed and a passenger train was held up for several hours because water hoses had to be laid across the tracks.

Hydroelectric interests bought the property in 1926, retaining Fox's son John as manager of the mill. John Fox bought the mill back in 1939 without the water rights which included the banks of the Outlet and the old millpond, the dam and the raceways.

When the dam went out in 1943 John Fox was still senior partner and the mill was the only factory east of the Mississippi making paper from straw, though once there were as many as 50 in New York State alone. The mill was operating 24 hours a day making corrugated cardboard, almost all of which was used to pack bombs and munitions. The mill used 3000 tons of straw a year.

The last fire totally destroyed it on July 13, 1946. Some 40 volunteer firemen were unable to quell the blaze, which evidently started when sparks from the mill's own chimney ignited a stack of baled straw and paper.

The firemen were hampered in their efforts by the high-tension wires that fed electricity to the mill; as they fused and fell, deadly sparks showered everything. Furthermore, the pump trucks had to cross two small wooden bridges to draw water from the Outlet, which was so far below them the pumps had difficulty lifting the water.

The owners planned at first to rebuild as soon as proper papermaking machinery could be found.

But these plans were abandoned

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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!

