

Along the Outlet of Keuka Lake

by

Frances Dumas

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Hopeton Millsite

Here in the big curve of the Outlet around Sugarloaf once lay a major milling and commercial complex, one of the centers established by the English proprietors who developed the Genesee Country.

The huge purchase made in 1788 by Phelps and Gorham eventually landed in the hands of a London syndicate led by Sir William Pulteney. They hired a Scottish veteran of the American Revolution named Charles Williamson to act as their agent in the faraway wilderness.

Williamson arrived at Geneva in 1792 and immediately set about selling land and making improvements. The Outlet, being one of the best mill streams in the entire region, was one focus of Williamson's attention and here in 1794 he had a big gristmill built to serve the nearby village of Hopeton.

This settlement was directly on the road Williamson built between Geneva and Bath and a bridge was erected here before 1802.

Williamson had convinced himself that the Genesee Country would be primarily settled from the south. He recruited settlers in Maryland and Virginia among the great slaveholding families, and his efforts bore fruit when in 1803 the Rose and Nicholas families arrived at Geneva, and with the help of their scores of slaves founded Rose Hill and White Springs Farms. By this time Williamson had been fired by his English employers, who felt he was spending too much money on improvements while the profits he brought in were far too small.

John Nicholas bought the Hopeton Mill lot from the Pulteney heirs in 1811. That fall Nicholas' eldest daughter married a storekeeper named Abraham Dox, a native of the Albany area. Dox' new father-in-law presented the couple with the mill property two months later.

In 1815 a carding mill was added, operated by Ebenezer Havens and later by Frederick Tracy. Dox built a big brick house at the crossroads in Hopeton village in 1824.

The big gristmill burned on July 12, 1826; it was completely destroyed, along with an immense store of grain, finished flour and 40 hogs. Dox sold the property within a few months, to a New York City businessman named Henry Beeckman. Beeckman divided the property and sold the actual millsite to two local men, Henry Shepard and Harry Clark.

Shepard and Clark rebuilt the mill but went broke doing it. The property was sold again in 1831 to another New Yorker, Eli Hart. Within the next few years it was sold and resold, at ever-increasing prices, to a succession of New York and Geneva investors and local merchants. In 1837 it was purchased by John Rice, a New Yorker who had married a Hammondsport woman and become involved in the booming trade on the new Crooked Lake Canal.

By 1850, Rice's gristmill employed six people and produced 20,000 barrels of flour a year. The mill was a big one, using four run of stones. However, when Rice died in 1859 and his estate was sold to pay his debts, the millsite brought next to nothing; evidently the mill itself was gone, probably destroyed again by one of the disastrous fires endemic in those days of wooden buildings and open flames.

The mill was never rebuilt, though the property passed through several more hands before finally being purchased by the New York Central Electrical Corp., which assembled a great deal of Outlet property in the interest of generating hydroelectric power.

The village of Hopeton had long since vanished. Abraham Dox's big brick house with its seven chimneys and aristocratic memories burned to the ground in 1923.

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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!