

Along the Outlet of Keuka Lake

by

[Frances Dumas](#)

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The Penn Yan Gristmills

The first mill inside the present village limits of Penn Yan was begun in 1794 when Lewis Birdsall hired Enoch Malin to erect a sawmill for him on the Outlet's north bank. The contract called for Malin to finish the mill within three months; in return, Birdsall was to pay him a red cow, a yoke of oxen and good wheat at cash price to total 55 pounds, Birdsall was to feed and lodge the workmen and pay them five shillings a day; he provided the timber, planks and iron parts for the mill, did the digging for the flume and furnished five gallons of whiskey for the crew.

The mill was sold to David Wagener in 1796, along with much of the land on which Penn Yan now stands. The same year, he built a gristmill on the Outlet's south bank.

David Wagener died in 1799 at the age of 47, supposedly as the result of a cold caught after falling into the millpond. His large estate was divided up and his two sons Abraham and Melchior inherited the land in what is now Penn Yan.

Abraham's bequest was the sawmill and land north of the Outlet from his father's old mill. Melchior built a sawmill and the brothers operated mills on both banks until 1812, when Melchior sold out and moved to the town of Pulteney. His gristmill was operated for some 50 years afterward by the Jillett family and was usually known as "the White Mill."

Abraham Wagener, meanwhile, became Penn Yan's first postmaster and its first mayor after incorporation in 1833. The settlement in those days centered around the crossroads of Head Street (now North Avenue)) and Main Street, which Abraham Wagener had surveyed through the woods to his mill.

In 1824 Wagener's mill suffered a fire and he rebuilt it. When the Crooked Lake Canal was completed in 1833 it became more and more obvious that the natural business center of the growing village would develop on lower Main Street, but Wagener was unwilling to sell his property except as a single parcel. In 1836 a syndicate composed of John Sloan Jr., John Rosenbury, Abner Woodworth and Aaron Remer bought it all for \$25,000. Remer eventually bought out his partners and sold a half share in the mill to Wagener's nephew Ezekiel Casner. When Remer died in 1842 his share was purchased by John Sheetz. The firm of Casner & Sheetz operated the mill for nearly 40 years.

In 1860 the mill owners decided to repair David Wagener's old log-and-earth dam and replaced it with a handsome stone structure, part of which remains today.

Jeremiah S. Jillett, the grandson of the man who bought the White Mill from Melchior Wagener, sold a half share to James Longwell, a relative by marriage, in 1870. Longwell sold out to Oliver Reed and in 1872 Jillett ended his family's connection with the mill by losing his share through bankruptcy proceedings to James Forbes.

This year 1883 saw many changes. The canal had been abandoned and a railroad was being built along its right-of-way by several local businessmen. On March 31 the White Mill was sold to Oliver Shearman. David Wagener's grandson. Shearman sold shares in the property to his partners William Fox, Perley Curtis, John T. Andrews 2nd, and Calvin Russell.

All of these men were involved in the growing papermaking industry elsewhere on the Outlet. They were interested in the water rights which were ultimately controlled by the dam in Penn Yan. In July they also bought out Casner & Scheetz, and brought in a sixth partner, Seneca L. Pratt.

At that time traffic across the Outlet had to descend a rather steep grade to the wooden bridge between the mills. Pedestrians actually climbed down by means of a flight of steps. It was decided to build a new bridge, which would include passage for the railroad. The mill on the north bank had to be moved back almost 17 feet to accommodate the widened street and the handsome new stone bridge.

A few years later Andrews and Russell bought out their partners. The two men were involved in business elsewhere on the Outlet, and when they split up in 1888 Russell became owner of the Penn Yan gristmills. He brought in Clarence Birkett who had been running his father's big gristmill in Dresden; Birkett eventually married Russell's daughter. By 1898 the two mills were producing up to 1500 barrels of winter wheat flour a week and up to 500 barrels a day of buckwheat flour.

However, in 1900 the partnership was bankrupt. The White Mill was taken over by Russell's old partners and creditors, Fox, Pratt, Andrews, Shearman and Curtis.

Andrews bought out his partners and owned the White Mill when it burned in 1913. Employees of the Birkett Mill across the Outlet sat all night on its roof with hoses and by repeatedly wetting down the south wall were able to save it from destruction. It still stands today, one of the oldest buildings remaining in the village and a reminder of the days when water power was the best source of energy.

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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!