

Along the Outlet of Keuka Lake

by

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St. John's Mill Complex

In the year 1801 Penn Yan was only one of several small knots of settlement in what would someday be Yates County. It comprised the Wagener mills, a couple of taverns and a few dwellings. New roads were being laid out by the commissioners, and in 1801 they decided to connect the settlements developing around Lawrence Townsend's place and the log cabin inhabited successively by John Plympton and his son-in-law Enoch Sherman.

The road crossed the Outlet near where the stream made a deep s-curve some distance below the Wagener brothers' mills. It was known as Plympton's Bridge; the road was laid out by road commissioner Samuel Lawrence. He was the son of John Lawrence, who built a gristmill two miles downstream at almost the same time Samuel was building Plympton's Bridge.

A few years later, in 1809, Samuel Lawrence bought 100 heavily wooded acres from Enoch Sherman. The land straddled the Outlet and included Plympton's Bridge. Almost at once Lawrence built a dam just upstream from the bridge in the center of the s-curve and put in a sawmill on the Outlet's south bank. He also built himself a house on the north side, on what was to become Cherry Street. By 1825, the 47-year-old Lawrence headed a household of 19 persons. He had cleared 80 acres and owned 10 cattle, 3 horses, 60 sheep and 25 hogs.

Also by 1825, Lawrence had added a fulling and carding works to his milling business. The new establishment stood on the Outlet's north bank at one end of the bridge. In an era when all clothing was made at home, this was one of the more important industries. To make cloth from wool the sheep fleeces needed to be carded after shearing, to align the fibers so they could be spun into yarn. Then after the yarn was actually woven into fabric, it had to be fulled or cleaned and dressed. Some fulling works also dyed the cloth.

Lawrence's sawmill was evidently one of the better ones in the area. By 1835 it grossed more than \$10,000 a year, a sum greater than that of all the other sawmills in the town combined (there were 13 in all). The fulling and carding mills grossed another \$5000, a very substantial income for that time.

Lawrence sold his mills in 1835 to Meredith Mallory, who then lived in Hammondsport though he had come to the country more than 40 years before with the followers of Jemima Wilkinson. Mallory held the property only three years, then sold it to his son Smith L. Mallory, who operated it with a partner, John Van Nortwick of Mount Morris.

Van Nortwick bought the younger Mallory's share and soon afterward emigrated to Illinois, leaving the mill in the hands of various lessees. At some point in the 1850s a plaster mill was started, either in the old fulling mill or in a new building next door. During the nineteenth century a great deal of ground gypsum was used by farmers to improve heavy clay soils; this was made in water-driven mills that ground the stone into powder.

Benedict W. Franklin bought the mills in 1852 and his family retained an interest in the property for more than 50 years. Franklin, a lawyer, was apparently not directly involved in the actual milling, but always operated the business with partners, among whom were Jethro Bonney, a retired schoolmaster turned clothier, and Stimson Gardner, a sawyer and Steuben County native.

On New Year's Day 1867, Franklin sold two of the three mills to Joseph St. John and Charles V. Bush. Bush was a local contractor and builder and St. John a lawyer who worked for the Canal Commission. They bought the sawmill and the old carding and fulling works, now being run as a planing mill. Franklin kept the plaster mill. St. John moved into Samuel Lawrence's old house on Cherry Street.

About 1875 the sawmill was converted to a grist and feed mill and was operated as such for nearly 50 years. The planing mill passed through several owners' hands and made window sash, door moldings and blinds for the hardware store on the corner of Main and Elm Streets. It eventually wound up in the hands of the Armstrong family and the site is usually known as Armstrong's Mill.

Meanwhile Franklin's son Augustus went into partnership with John T. Andrews 2nd who at this period owned the Yates County Oil Mill downstream. Andrews was to become owner or part owner of the two gristmills in Penn Yan and the Milo Paper Mill. He and Franklin were partners in a loan and real-estate business as well as the lucrative plaster mill.

All three mills operated through the 1880s. Advertisements in 1883 and 1884 show the St. John and Brother feed milling business; Armstrong, Hollowell & Wise—"Our planing mill is now in full blast"; and A. W. Franklin—"Having put our mill in perfect repair, we will hereafter be supplied with fresh ground Cayuga plaster."

A couple of years later the plaster mill was bought by Franklin's son Richard and his cousin Harry Tuthill and turned into a box and basket factory. Tons of fresh fruit were shipped out on the new railroad and presumably at least some of it was in Franklin & Tuthill baskets. Richard Franklin died in 1887 at the age of 35 and the business died with him. Already the former planing mill was used only for storage; St. John's Mill, which operated up through World War I, was the last mill here, as Lawrence's sawmill on the same site had been the first.

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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!