

## Along the Outlet of Keuka Lake

by

**Frances Dumas**

*Index to Frances Dumas's series about mills along the Outlet*

### **Seneca Millsite**

Yates County got its start here. The land drew settlers; but in order to eat they had to grind their grain into flour. Settlements were founded with an eye to a good millsite, and in this area the best water-power was at the falls of the Crooked Lake's Outlet.

The first mill erected here was a saw and gristmill with a 26-foot overshot wheel and two run of stones brought all the way from Connecticut. It was completed in 1790 by followers of Jemima Wilkinson, a religious idealist who called herself the Publick Universal Friend. It may have been the first mill built west of Seneca Lake.

It was called the Friend's Mill or Smith's Mill after Richard Smith, the only one of three men who built it who remained very long in the partnership. Even after he sold the mill to his sons, Smith lived in a log house he built near the falls and operated a tannery there until shortly before his death in 1836.

Many people associated with the county's later development got their start here. David Wagener arrived in 1791, erected a public house near the falls and bought a partnership in the Friend's Mill. His daughter Lament married Richard Smith's son Avery.

William and Arnold Potter followed the Friend into the wilderness from Rhode Island, securing a parcel of land on the Outlet's north bank. They built a sawmill downstream from the Friend's Mill and planned to build a grist mill as well.

The Lee family arrived in the area about 1790. The three brothers James (who married Richard Smith's daughter in 1803), Joshua and Sherman Lee were involved in milling activities near the falls. Sherman Lee bought the Friend's Mill from Avery Smith in 1817, after Smith built another mill about 40 feet downstream to manufacture linseed oil. Only a year later James Lee acquired the mill from his brother in order to save him from financial problems.

A few years later James borrowed \$490 from local businessman William Babcock, who owned a share in Avery Smith's oil mill. Lee put up his farm and mill property as collateral, and when he defaulted on the loan Babcock took steps to have it sold at public auction. Lee came close to losing the property he had paid nearly \$10,000 for. Luckily, his brother Joshua was able to have the mortgage assigned to him, and the loan was paid off. James and Joshua Lee ran the mill together until it was destroyed in 1825.

This was the year the Marquis de Lafayette made his triumphal tour. He was scheduled to be in Geneva on June 8, and the local militia company mustered near the Friend's Mill in order to join the grand parade in the old general's honor. They celebrated the occasion by

firing their muskets and fieldpieces. The sparks ignited the old mill, and Smith's oil mill so close downstream. Both were completely consumed. The mills on the opposite bank were unharmed, however.

In the year 1800 Joseph Jones and Joshua Way bought two parcels of land from Arnold Potter. A store was built by the road that crossed the Outlet here and the partners erected a fulling and carding mill so close to Potter's sawmill that they used water from its forebay to drive their own wheel.

Jones soon sold his share to Samuel Lawrence, Way's brother-in-law. The Lawrence family was involved in several of the Outlet's many milling ventures over the years. Another of the Lawrence sisters was married to Joel Dorman, who was Way's partner in the retail end of the business.

When Lawrence sold out in 1814, Way took his son-in-law Jeremiah Andrews as a partner. Andrews' family were early settlers, his uncle Benejah opened a school near the falls in 1793 and his father Joshua married James Lee's sister Mary. The new partners rebuilt on the foundations of the old Friend's Mill. They ran a big gristmill on the north bank, and a distillery. The place became known as Way and Andrew's Hollow.

The mill on the south bank passed through several different hands during the next couple of decades. George B. Nichols, an early resident of Milo Center, owned it for a while; so did Samuel L. Bigelow, a carpenter who moved to the hollow in 1832 and built ten of the Crooked Lake Canal's locks. Andrew Oliver owned the property for a single day in 1839, having bought it at a sheriff's auction. He immediately resold it to George Youngs of Second Milo, who ended up owning the property twice.

The gristmill on the north bank was sold in 1843 to Benjamin Joy of Tompkins County, who opened the Yates County Oil Mill on the site and ran it for many years. Joy bought the south bank mill from Youngs in 1848 in partnership with James Jehiel Cook, who ran it as a grist and plaster mill.

Both properties were acquired by a new owner after Joy's death. This was John T. Andrews 2nd, whose first manufacturing venture was operating the Yates County Oil Mill and a basket factory here.

Andrews went into partnership in 1883 with Calvin Russell and his son Calvin Jr., along with two Philadelphia backers, Lewis and Meylert Armstrong. They built the following year.

The mill's stone foundations were built of beautifully dressed blocks salvaged from the four locks, abandoned in 1877, that had carried canal boats around the falls. Two big wheels used the stream's energy to produce book paper, heavy wrapping paper and sugar bags. By 1889 a new product was being turned out, electricity to light the streets of Penn Yan.

While the huge new mill was being built, a curious incident occurred. Blasting powder was used to excavate the foundations, and about 10 feet below the surface a workman found an old English coin. It bore the likeness of King George III and the date 1787.

© 1989, [Frances Dumas](#)

*[Index to Frances Dumas' series about mills along the Outlet](#)*

These booklets are reprinted with the permission of the author Frances Dumas. But the work of developing and maintaining the Keuka Lake Outlet Trail is ongoing. We hope you will help in this effort and you are invited to become a member or a sponsor of the Trail. Details on becoming a member or a sponsor can be found on the Friends of the Outlet Trail website at:

<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!