

Along the Outlet of Keuka Lake

by

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Dresden Milling Complex

In 1812 a pair of Geneva politicians and speculators bought a parcel of land at the mouth of the Outlet. The property consisted of 806 acres between Seneca lake and the New Pre-Emption Line, including excellent water power and a commanding view of the lake. The price was \$5,000.

The buyers were Samuel Colt and Harmon H. Bogert. Soon after the Dresden site was purchased, Bogert's younger brother moved there and opened a store.

Ten years after the initial purchase, Colt sold his share to Isaac Bogert at a handsome profit. In the meantime a dam had been built across the Outlet, an enormous pond backed up, and a race dug more or less parallel to the stream and north of it. The 1825 census mentions a gristmill, a sawmill, a distillery, a fulling mill, two carding machines and an ashery all operated by Isaac Bogert and presumably powered by water flowing through this race.

In the next few years the Crooked Lake Canal was surveyed and built, and it became clear that Dresden would profit enormously from it. About 1831 a second gristmill was built to handle the local custom work, the big mill on Seneca Street specialized in flour for export. In 1838 a tannery was erected between the race and the Canal, operated by Andrew and Hiram Vescelius. And in 1844 Luther Harris bought a piece of land adjacent to the Canal for a boathouse.

Meanwhile, in a series of complicated financial dealings made necessary by the death of Isaac Bogert in 1832, Harmon Bogert sold all his remaining property in Dresden to the New York merchant Henry Beeckman. The sale included 247 acres of land, the fulling mill and the big flouring mill with its storehouses and retail outlet.

Luther Harris meanwhile bought more land and put in a drydock for the repair of canal boats. A few years later he acquired the sawmill and used it to produce boat timbers for his business.

Meanwhile the roof fell in on Henry Beeckman, who had evidently overextended himself in a big way. The flouring mill fell into the hands of the bankers, who operated it for nearly two decades. Benjamin Borden bought the fulling mill and operated it as a woolen factory.

A young English-born miller named Charles P. Willis bought the custom gristmill in 1847. By 1850 an even younger countryman of his was boarding at his house, 25-year-old Henry Birkett, another miller.

Willis sold his mill to Amos C. Leach in 1855 after making a contract with the owners of the big flouring mill to operate it instead. In the same year the Vescelius tannery and a plaster mill on the same lot were sold to Russell and Jacob Vandeventer.

The 1855 census shows several milling activities along the Outlet in Dresden. The Vandeventer plaster mill ground 300 tons of gypsum that year; the Borden woolen factory produced 10,000 yards of cloth, employing six men, two women and a boy (the men were paid \$26 a month, the women, \$8); Luther Harris made two new boats and repaired 90, his sawmill turning out 300,000 feet of plank; Charles Willis' flouring mill produced 5,000 barrels of flour and 8,000 bushels of "ship stuff"; and the custom gristmill ground 15,000 bushels of feed and flour.

Sometime soon after 1856 the woolen factory closed down and its machinery was sold off. A local lumber dealer, Charles Brown, refitted the mill as a spoke factory.

About the same time Henry Birkett became part-owner of the custom gristmill. He operated it until his death in 1887 (with a two-year break in the later 1860s during which he reportedly tried farming and decided he didn't like it). The mill was then taken over by his sons and run by them until 1893 when Clarence Ferenbaugh bought it along with a planing mill the Birketts added.

A big distillery was built next door to the flouring mill on the same Seneca Street lot in 1859 and the busy village cooperages expanded to handle the business. However, this prosperity was short-lived. Between the late 1860s and 1877 a succession of disastrous fires destroyed the distillery, the big flouring mill, the sawmill, the tannery and the spoke factory, leaving only the Birkett gristmill still operating.

In 1878 Luther Harris was forced into bankruptcy and his property was bought by John S. Sheppard of Penn Yan. The same year the plaster mill was sold to James M. Clark, who lost it himself to hard times in 1881. The buyer was Mary Meek.

Mrs Meek's husband Theodore set about that summer refitting the mill, converting it into a gristmill and finally opening under the name of the Banner Mill. Mrs. Meek sold it in 1884 for \$10,000 after buying it in Clark's bankruptcy auction for \$355 only three years before. It changed hands four times during the next year, eventually fetching \$16,000 from James M. French of Auburn and Rochester. In 1888 the papers were reporting that the Banner Mill had been sold to William Patteson, "who has recently fallen heir to some real estate here [his mother was a Sheppard].... It is hinted that insomuch as he owns all the property now from the lake to the big bridge, that he will move the mill up to the seat near the dam and put in the roller process."

Patteson operated the Baner Mill until 1898. By that time he had moved to Penn Yan, bought a steam planing mill west of the dam there and begun his remarkable career as an industrialist and world traveller. It was Patteson who brought the Walker Bin Co. to Penn Yan from Philadelphia.

Patteson may actually have moved the mill, but the first roller process mill in Dresden was Ferenbaugh's. Patteson sold all his remaining Dresden property in 1898 to Walter

Bradley of the Watkins Salt Co. The Banner Mill was sold for taxes in 1905; at least the land it stood on was, described as "a vacant lot in Dresden assessed in 1903 to Banner Mill property." The buyer, William Preece of Jerusalem, sold the water rights in 1911 to interests representing Edward R. Taylor of the Taylor Chemical Co.

All Dresden's milling properties passed into Taylor's hands and thence in 1923 to Yates Electric Light & Power Corp. as part of a grand scheme to develop the entire hydropower of the Outlet for the generation of electricity.

However, in 1925 the dam was partially washed out and damaged again in 1935. When the huge Greenidge power plant was built in 1939 it was fueled by coal. The last remaining mill structure was the Birkett custom gristmill at the dam's south end. It was razed in 1929 and the lumber used by the electric company's crews in other construction projects nearby.

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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!