

Along the Outlet of Keuka Lake

by

Frances Dumas

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Dibble's and Sheppard's Millsites

In October 1823 William Frazee signed a contract with the owners of Shearman & Weaver's Mill that allowed him to overflow certain lands along the Outlet in exchange for a promise never to build a gristmill there.

Frazee bought another adjacent parcel the following year and built a linseed oil mill. He bought flaxseed from local farmers and expressed the valuable oil, used then as now as an ingredient in paints and varnishes, as well as for lighting purposes. The crushed seeds were made into cakes that served as nutritious food for livestock.

Frazee also built a sawmill using the same water power. Unfortunately he doesn't seem to have been able to make a financial success of either business, for in 1829 all his real and personal property was assigned to trustees who were to sell it and pay his debts. All the property is listed on a deed of assignment, including accounts receivable, inventory—250 bushels of flaxseed, a canal boat, shares in a neighboring wheat field, saw logs, milled lumber, a charcoal pit, grass seed, one third of the local blacksmith's profits—and personal items like bedding, dishes and crockery, barrels of pork and beef, churns, basins, livestock, tools, "100 bush. potatoes, 2 1/2 tons hay and Corn stalks, 1 patent plough, 1 saddle, 2 calf skins, and 3 bushels of White Beans."

The five-acre mill complex was sold to William Brownell for \$3,500. Brownell lived in Penn Yan and held onto the mill until 1836. It passed through the hands of several partnerships, none of whom seem to have made much money from the property. Two of the partners, William Bradley Jr. and Alva Clark, mortgaged the mill in October 1837 to the United States Loan Commissioners for \$677.. Annual interest payments were made faithfully every year until 1907, when the principal was finally paid off by then-owner Andrew Dibble, 60 years after the loan was actually due.

Another mortgage was taken on the property in 1837, and this one was foreclosed in 1848 and the mill sold at auction for a high bid of \$494. The new owner, Robert McKane of the town of Seneca, immediately resold the mill to Albert Randall of Penn Yan.

Randall was 25 years old in 1850, a native of Yates County. He lived in a house across the road from the mill with his 18-year-old wife Emeline and Patrick McCay, one of the owners of the gristmill immediately upstream (formerly Shearman & Weaver.)

The following year the Corning & Canandaigua Railroad was built through Penn Yan and Randall's sawmill operated 24 hours a day manufacturing rails. This was in the days before steel rails were widely used; the wooden rails were shod with iron.

All this time, in fact from a few years prior to Frazee's building his oil mill, another water-powered mill was operating just downstream from this site. This was a fulling mill built by one of the founders of Penn Yan, Morris F. Sheppard.

Sheppard arrived in what is now Yates County in 1800 and married David Wagener's niece in 1801. He was a tanner by trade and built a tannery on Jacob's Brook before 1808, near where Main Street crossed the stage route to Canandaigua (now North Avenue)

He bought acreage along the Outlet in 1819 from his wife's half-brother, south of the stream and along the road to the cotton factory at what is now Shutts' Millsite. His mill on this property became known as the Black Fulling Mill, presumably because the wooden building was treated with pitch to waterproof it. Sheppard carded wool at the mill and fulled the woven fabric; in 1835 his business here grossed more than \$10,000.

Sheppard advertised the sale of the Black Mill in 1840. At this time the property comprised six acres, a fulling mill and sawmills. In 1841 a notice in the local papers advised prospective buyers that Sheppard had sold his clothing works and wished to sell the carding, picking and shearing machinery. No deed was registered for the sale of the property and Sheppard died in 1846. Later deeds mention the premises were sold by his heirs to Richard Chapman.

Chapman, who lived in the town of Urbana, ran the sawmill until 1852 when his mortgage was foreclosed. The heirs of the mortgagee hired David Randall (unrelated to Albert) to run the mill.

Albert Randall continued to run his successful business at Frazee's old millsite for many years. In 1860 he was running three different operations here: his sawmill, a flax mill and a wool carding mill. The flax mill processed flax straw into tow and was located in the old oil mill. The wool carding business was probably being carried on in the Black Mill, the buildings of which were adjacent to his own.

In 1867 Randall set up a sorghum mill nearby, to crush locally-grown cane and express its sugar-rich sap which was boiled down into a molasses-like syrup.

The flax mill increased its capacity each year until the late 1870s, when Randall remodelled his entire mill into a wheel and spoke factory. The Penn Yan Wheel Co. was formed in 1880 and complete wheels with the exception of the iron parts were manufactured there. In 1888 Randall sold the millsite to the corporation for \$10,000, reserving the right to use the gas well on the premises to heat and light his house.

"The work of the wheel factory down the stream seems to speak for itself," the local paper reported in the spring of 1889. "The orders are coming in faster than ever. Several new workmen are to be added to the already large force."

The factory was destroyed by fire in 1893 and Andrew Dibble, a Barrington spokemaker who had been managing the firm before the fire, bought the property with three partners. Two of them were grandsons of Morris F. Sheppard.

The factory was rebuilt and began to turn out spokes at a rate incredible to modern people who forget how many wooden spokes must have been used by each household. About 400,000 spokes were manufactured here annually and shipped all over the United States as well as to places like Spain and Australia. Three water-driven turbines generated 90 horsepower to turn the lathes and other machinery.

Dibble bought out his partners in 1900 and when he died in 1907 he left everything he owned to his wife Ada. Mrs. Dibble took two men as partners, one being the foreman of the factory, Arthur Barnes; the other was the county sheriff, Delmar Knapp. Knapp died unexpectedly a year later and his widow and Mrs. Dibble kept the mill going between them with Barnes continuing as manager.

The mill burned for the second and final time in July 1913. Sparks from the fire box in the engine room were the cause, and the seasoned lumber stored in the mill made excellent fodder. A close neighbor, George Whitbeck, saw the fire about 9 p.m., broke in and tried unsuccessfully to put it out. The fire spread through the wooden buildings very rapidly and the whole main part of the factory along with the entire stock of manufactured spokes was a total loss.

The factory was never rebuilt. The knew owners of Shutts' Mill downstream bought both Dibble's and Sheppard's Mills in 1916, apparently to ensure a good head of power for their operation. The property passed into the hands of the E. L. Phillips combine in 1924 and to New York Central Electric Corp. in 1931.

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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!