



History of Old Wye Mill

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Several mill sites and the village of Wye Mills have existed for over three centuries with the primary mill having a long and sometimes colorful and contentious history.

A mill and village of Wye Mills were established shortly after the creation of Wilton, an original land grant patented in 1665 by Thomas Williams. Another land patent, called Wilton Addition, was later granted, with both totaling 1,350 acres (MHR, Provincial Patents). The first of the grist mills was built about 1668 on or near the present site of the Old Wye Mill. By 1671, Thomas Williams left the county, ostensibly to avoid payment of debts, according to his creditors. He settled in Northumberland County, VA, where following his death, his heirs – Thomas II and Elizabeth Williams became absent landlords of his Maryland land patents. Being absentee landlords and the lack of contact, none of the subsequent mill operators and land owners were aware of the true ownership. Several inaccurate surveys and the loss of land titles to courthouse fires also confused the issue (Preston, D.J., 1972).

The first miller was Edward Barrocliff who operated the mill from about 1683 to 1693, ultimately selling it to Richard Sweatnam, a carpenter and miller who had built Talbot County's first courthouse at York in 1682 and who operated the mill until he died in 1697. At this time, it passed to his wife and son, William (MHR, Provincial Wills).

About this time a significant change in ownership was to take place involving the influential and wealthy merchant planters of the Bennett and Lloyd families. Richard Bennett III, a



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wealthy landowner entered the area and set about acquiring as much land as possible (Carr, L.G., 1988). Bennett's grandfather, Edward Bennett I and Edward Lloyd I, also a wealthy landowner, had been instrumental in negotiating a peace treaty with the Susquehannock Indians in 1652. This treaty ceded all Indian lands to the whites on the west side of the Chesapeake Bay from the Susquehanna River to the Patuxent River and on the east side of the Bay, from the Elk River to the Choptank River (MHR, MD Archives III).

Richard Bennett researched ownership of local lands and in 1703, found that the heirs of Thomas Williams still legally owned Wilton and Wilton Addition and the mill, now operated by William Sweatnam, Richard's son. Bennett acquired a 3-year lease from the William's and immediately threw Sweatnam and others off the properties (Preston, D.J., 1972; MHR Land Conveyances). Arrested, Bennett proved in court that he had a legal lease. Though Sweatnam appealed, Bennett's claim was upheld in court (MHR, Talbot Co. Court Judgments).

Some of Bennett's insistence on the removal of Sweatnam may have its basis in an earlier incident. Bennett's father died when he was just a child and his mother, Henrietta Maria, remarried Philemon Lloyd in 1667. Shortly after Lloyd died in 1689, Richard Sweatnam led a raid against Wye House, the home of the Lloyds, to seize arms and ammunition on the pretext that they might be used to arm a pro-French (and pro-Catholic) uprising among the Indians. Henrietta Maria was there alone at the time and later successfully sued Sweatnam to get her property returned. (Preston, D.J. 1972; MHR, Talbot Co. Court Judgments).

In 1706, upon expiration of the lease from the heirs of Thomas Williams, Bennett purchased the land holdings for 350 pounds from a speculator who had recently purchased them from the Williams estate for 200 pounds. These holdings included Wilton and Wilton Addition as well as the mill and other improvements. Bennett then offered William Sweatnam a very severe lease which Bennett titled an "Indenture", requiring him to care for and keep the property in repair, pay the annual rent promptly and return it peacefully after 65 years. It required the initial payment of 8,000 pounds of tobacco and annual payments of 500 pounds of tobacco. (In the cash-poor early Colonial society, tobacco was the accepted currency of the period.) Although the lease was registered, Sweatnam's signature is absent and there is no evidence that he ever served again as a tenant of the mill. (A photocopy of this original indenture proposal is in the possession of the Friends of Wye Mill, Inc.). Sweatnam later had a part or complete interest in the early Chester Mill.

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In 1706, Queen Anne's County was formed out of Talbot and Kent Counties and the mill served as a primary survey point on the dividing line between Talbot and the new county of Queen Anne's. The mill, therefore, straddles the county lines (Acts, 1706). In the language creating this point, it is referred to as "Sweatnam's Mill".

Richard Bennett died in 1749 and though married, had no heirs at the time of his death. His will dictated that his holdings totaling over 25,000 acres of land and other investments and funds go to scores of beneficiaries. Edward Lloyd III (1711 – 1770), to whom Bennett was close, was executor of the estate and benefited the most, receiving the Wye Mill among other holdings in the estate settlement. Little is currently known about the millers that may have operated the mill between Sweatnam's departure in 1706 and William Hemsley's hiring of Joshua Kennard as a miller in circa 1778.

In at least one instance, the mill may have been leased. In 1759, "Robert Wilson, living at Wye Town at the mouth of the Wye River offers for lease a grist mill, fulling mill, bolting mill and baking house belonging to Edward Lloyd, Esq., situated at the head of the Wye River". (MD Gazette, June 2, 1759).

Most tradesmen were landless free whites and between 1740 and 1759, there were at least three known millwrights in Talbot County but no mention of millers (MD State Archives, Artisan file, Talbot Co.). Although occupations of indentured servants and slaves were rarely listed, skilled artisans were found among each group and may have been employed in the milling operations (Middleton, A.P., 1953).

After the death of Edward Lloyd III in 1770, the mill and lands passed to his son, Edward Lloyd IV (1744 – 1796). This Lloyd kept the mill for himself, giving his brother, Richard Bennett Lloyd, much of the inherited land. To make the matter clear, the deed registered this exception, stating that it excluded ".....the Grist Mill, Fulling Mill, and Mill Houses, Mill Pond, the Miller's Dwelling House and the Bake House....". Many of the early Lloyds are interred in the family burying ground at Wye House plantation, home of the Lloyd family for eight generations.

In 1778, William Hemsley (1737 – 1812) Lloyd's estate manager who had also married into the Lloyd family, acquired the mill and made extensive repairs (Queen Anne's Co. Land Records, Liber T.M., No. 2, Folio 46r). Under Hemsley, the miller was Joshua Kennard. In Griffiths 1795 map of Maryland, the mill is described as "Kennard's Mill".

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Hemsley, also a Colonel of the Queen Anne's County militia during the American Revolution, was also appointed procurement officer and charged by the Continental Congress to procure grain, flour and corn for the American forces. A poor wheat crop in 1778 precluded any significant supply of flour. In 1779, Congress issued Hemsley 10,000 pounds to purchase wheat, flour and bread (Archives of MD). With a good harvest, this was accomplished and these products were sent to the Continental warehouses at Head of Elk (in 1787, this site was renamed Elkton) for distribution to the new nation's Continental Army.

Again in 1779, Congress requested additional flour and Hemsley sent 200 barrels before March, 1780 and another 200 barrels shortly afterwards (Archives of MD). These supplies were put on ships at Emerson's Landing (now Wye Landing) for shipment to Head of Elk. Hemsley made a profit though, charging Congress about one dollar per pound for the flour and another \$12 for the barrel (Brugger, R.J. 1983). This was still less than what other states wanted to charge Congress.

In spite of frequent shoreside predations by British forces and pirates, the Eastern Shore counties of Maryland, particularly those of the upper Eastern Shore, supplied the bulk of foodstuff provisions (wheat, corn, flour, salt, hogs, beef and whiskey) for the Continental Army. After the war, Hemsley served in both the Maryland State Senate and the Congress. William Hemsley died in 1812 and was interred at his Cloverfields estate.

In 1793, Alexander Hemsley, son of William, had acquired the mill from his father. Around 1800, the improved milling processes invented by Oliver Evans in the 1780's were installed in the mill. This reduced the labor required and improved profitability. However, Alexander Hemsley wasn't the businessman that his father was as he incurred numerous legal actions requiring him to sell off much of the land his father had accumulated.

In 1821, Samuel Hopkins purchased the mill and became the first miller to own the mill in over 100 years (Queen Anne's County Land Records). Until this time, the wealthy owners most likely used contract or indentured millers or lessees to operate the mill and its other businesses. About this time, the bolting and fulling mills used to process and prepare wool were removed. Eli Whitney's cotton gin, invented about 1796, revolutionized the processing of cotton so that within 20 years, this fiber became the dominant material used in a wide variety of fabrics, displacing wool. Soon though, a blacksmith shop, catering to the repair and maintenance of farm implements, carriages and wagons, was added along with a

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sawmill. The primary products of this mill were shingles and barrel staves, the latter being the universal shipping container until the 1900's.

Hopkins came from a family of Quaker millers who were also storekeepers in the town of Wye Mills. His brother Thomas was also a miller and merchant, operating mills in Caroline and Talbot Counties. In 1837, after selling his mill in Caroline County, Thomas, invested in one-half of the Wye Mill. In circa 1840, the original millstones were replaced and the mill rebuilt. It was at this time, an updated sawmill using a circular blade invented in 1814, was added. Earlier, there had been an up-and-down sawmill at the mill. These vertical blade mills could cut about 200 board feet in an 8 hour period while the later circular saw could cut five times that quantity.

Following the death of Samuel in 1836, his children sold their father's half of the mill for \$7,000 to Samuel's brother Thomas Hopkins. In addition, they conveyed "one-half of the sawmill, the millpond, the millstones, bolting cloth bolting and hoisting gears, mill pickers, measures, etc. Also one-half the blacksmith shop with bellows, anvils, hammers, etc. Also one-half of Wilton, Lobbs Crook, and Addition.". The deed also included one-half of the farm Cloverfields, which Samuel had purchased in 1826 from John Irvine Troup (Talbot Co. Land Records, No. 56, Folio 90).

In 1850, a census of Eastern Shore counties indicated that the grain crops being grown in the area included wheat, rye, Indian corn, oats, barley and buckwheat.

In 1845, John R. Hopkins, son of Samuel, purchased all of the above from his uncle, Thomas Hopkins, and continued as the miller of the Wye Mill and a store across from the mill. As a business sponsor of the 1877 Talbot County map series, he listed himself as a "Manufacturer and Dealer in all kinds of Family Flour. Also Custom Work and Sawing done at all times". He also sold the mill in 1877 and died April 25, 1886 at the age of 65. He was buried at the small Hopkins cemetery behind the miller's house on the road south of the mill.

John F.T. Brown had purchased the mill from Hopkins in 1877 and operated it until 1899. In 1889, Brown wrote to the editor of the American Miller magazine, concerning his installation of "A Very Short System Mill". He indicated that it was a "one or two-break mill" manufactured by the John T. Noye Mfg. Co. with a pair of smooth rolls to grind middlings, three Silver Creek Flour Bolts, a single and double scalper, purifier, Excelsior Bran Duster, and a Eureka and Hercules Wheat Cleaner. He said "I am making a straight

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grade equal to patent flour and have a capacity of thirty barrels in twenty-four hours. I am running my mill with water power and have sufficient water all year to drive it. I engineer the mill myself, and it suits me in every respect.”

In 1899, the mill was purchased by John S. Sewell, who operated it until 1918 (Queen Anne’s County Land Records, Liber F.R., No. 2, Folio 112). The Sewell family was descended from several generations of millers in England before coming to America. During his time as miller, Mr. Sewell ground primarily white corn as the hybrid yellow corn then available was considered to be “too hard and flinty” (Breen, 1970).

In 1961, recollections by Thomas Sewell, John Sewell’s son, indicated that (tidal) backwater in the tailrace restricted movement of the water wheel and the bevel gears needed to transfer power to the grindstones and that this resulted in his father removing the wheel and replacing it with two (Little Giant) turbines. These turbines were connected directly to two sets of millstones so that he could change at will from one kind of grain to another. However he never tried to run both at the same time.

In 1918, the mill was purchased by Winthrop H. Blakeslee. This owner discontinued use of the turbines (the abundant sand and gravel underlying the mill property and tailrace apparently clogged the turbines). He reinstalled the Fitz steel wheel removed by Mr. Sewell and updated the machinery with the addition of a Midget Marvel Roller Mill that necessitated removal of the second pair of millstones. Mr. Blakeslee also continued operation of the sawmill though he again had Sewell’s problem with tidal backwater in the tailrace that limited use of the sawmill. Several individuals who remember this miller say that he so disliked milk that he wouldn’t grind feed for dairy cows. In the 1920’s, he installed an AC generator in the mill and by attaching it to the mill’s water wheel gearing, was able to use water power to generate AC electrical power for the mill and his home across the road. Later, a garage was added nearby and used to repair the early automobiles in the area.

Although modern conveniences and equipment slowly filtered onto the Eastern Shore, the rural and isolated lifestyle permitted the mill to operate commercially, though in lessening importance, until 1953. At this point, the state of Maryland, wishing to purchase the mill pond for a fishing pond, acquired the mill and property from Mr. Blakeslee. The Chesapeake Bay Bridge and Rt. 50 had just been completed, bringing with it truck deliveries and modern grocery and farm services. This essentially rendered the mill unprofitable as a commercial enterprise. And after 35 years as a miller, its owner was ready to retire.

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In May, 1956, recognizing the mill as a historic site, the state of Maryland transferred the mill and $\frac{3}{4}$ acre of land to the Society for the Preservation of Maryland Antiquities (now known as Preservation Maryland) (Talbot County Land Records, Liber JTB, No. 332, Folio 294). In late 1955, Hurricane Connie had washed away the mill dam and severely damaged the mill structure. The state then paid \$10,000 for stabilization and restoration of the mill building. During this rebuilding, the machine shop/blacksmith shop and sawmill were removed. Construction of an improved mill dam and concrete spillway was paid for by the Federal Government. Donations were raised to repair the mill machinery. Thomas Sewell, son of John Sewell, a former miller, assisted with the repair of mill machinery. In 1959, the first cornmeal was ground in the restored mill.

During the 1970's, the mill was operated by Chesapeake College students through a Federal work program. In 1984, Barton McGuire, a professional miller was hired to operate the mill and oversee major renovations. These renovations were accomplished by James Kricker, a professional millwright and in 1989, the mill was rededicated and again operational. Charles Howell, a noted miller from a long line of Welsh millers and then working on the Phillipsburg Manor mill in Tarrytown, NY, acted as consultant and assisted in the training and operation of the Wye Mill. When Barton McGuire died in 1990, operation was assumed by the Friends of Wye Mill, Inc. Further restorations and improvements took place in 1992 with new electric service and restoration and painting of the mill structure. Further restoration continues as needed.

The Wye Mill has been in its current operational condition since 1990. In 1996, Preservation Maryland transferred the mill and $\frac{3}{4}$ acre of property to the Friends of Wye Mill, Inc., the local support group that now owns and operates the mill.

The mill is currently open from late April through early November, with grinding days on the first and third Saturday of each month. Wheat and corn, traditional crops ground in grist mills of the region are obtained from local sources while buckwheat, though a traditional crop, is no longer grown and must be brought in from New York state.

During the year, the mill sees a number of activities. Educational programs let elementary school children experience history by turning grain into flour. Organized tours often stop by the mill to watch water power bring a piece of history alive through rumbling belts, gears and grindstones. Volunteer miller and interpreter training programs are conducted annually to train those interested in the mill, the milling process and its significance in local and national history. Occasional festivals bring local foods, music and vendors to the mill,

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attracting many visitors from the surrounding counties and states to see one of the last operating historic mills in the state and region.

Further restoration activities and improved educational opportunities are planned or in the works for coming years so with the help and support of volunteers and the community, the historic Wye Mill will continue to grind flour for generations to come.

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