

IMAGES

... then and now

From The Indian Hill Historical Society

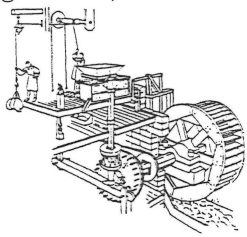


Buckingham Lodge
1861

Water Mills in the Settlement of Indian Hill

Water powered mills on the Little Miami River played an important role in the growth of the Indian Hill area. Early settlers, squatters, and landowners took products from their plots of ground to the mills where the raw materials became commodities.

Around 1800 Nathaniel Armstrong moved to the Ohio Lands with his wife and eight children. He and his son, Thomas, who was a miller's apprentice back east, established several mills at the confluence of Walton Creek and the Little Miami. The Armstrong Mills were known as "Upper", "Middle", and "Lower", (named for their proximity to the river's headwaters), and the family prospered from their water powered sawmill, gristmill, and woolen mill.



Water from the Little Miami was brought to the wheel by means of a flume or pipe. From the flume, water dropped onto the wheel's paddles, propelling the wheel, which transferred power to the drive shaft. In turn, the drive shaft powered gears that enabled the top millstone to grind. Two millstones - weighing about a ton - were utilized to grind whole grain into flour. The same technology applied in the sawmill and the woolen mill. This complex method of using water as a power source was environmentally sound because the water was recycled.

In earlier times individuals used a mortar and pestle to crush grain. Circular millstones driven by water processed a larger quantity at a greater speed. The top stone balanced on a spindle, which could be raised or lowered, varying the space between the millstones, thus producing fine or coarse meal. Both stones were corrugated, so that when the top stone was turning, the grain between it and the bottom stone was scraped rather than bruised. To make flour from meal, it was sifted through mesh sieves, with the fresh grist going into the donor's bag or barrel. Flour was used for baking, and coarser meal was provender for livestock.

The woolen mill enabled local farmers to turn a profit on sheep and made production of household garments much easier. Shorn fleece was taken to the mill, washed, picked clean of impurities, and carded into rolls. Large revolving cylinders combed it; then it was rolled and wound on spools. The machines produced in one hour what would have required a day to card by hand. The wool could then be spun into yarn for knitting stockings, and finer grades were used for clothing. What the farmer did not use was sold in downtown Cincinnati markets.

The sawmill worked similarly. Logs cleared from a settler's land were transported down Upper Mill Road (currently Drake and Varner) to the mill where the logs were sawed into boards or planks. The boards were used in barns and houses, or sold for profit. Millers were able to do custom work sawing logs from a farmer's lot into precise dimensions to build a new barn. The local landscape that once was an impenetrable forest changed with the advent of the sawmill.

The Armstrongs and other local millers (Beasley, Elliott, Waldschmidt, and Kugler) were entrepreneurs who helped tame the wilderness of Ohio. Because of their role in economic development they became leasers in their communities, charging a toll or portion of goods as payment for milling any product. Eventually cash fees replaced traditional tolls.

Mills eased the workloads of early residents. Instead of using hand tools to prepare meal, or two-man saws to cut logs, settlers utilized local mills to reduce the drudgery of providing basic food and shelter. Going to the mill also brought together scattered neighbors, facilitating social intercourse in the rural community and making living in isolated areas more enjoyable.

Over time the water mills gave way to the new power sources of steam and electricity. Local mills declined, became obsolete, and eventually were razed. Yet these early mechanisms were a major factor in the early life in this area, enabling previous generations to thrive on the land that we now call Indian Hill.