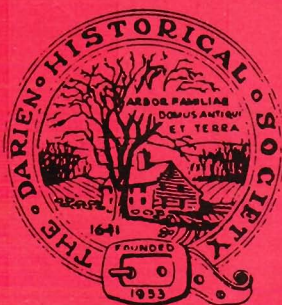


# The Darien Historical Society Annual



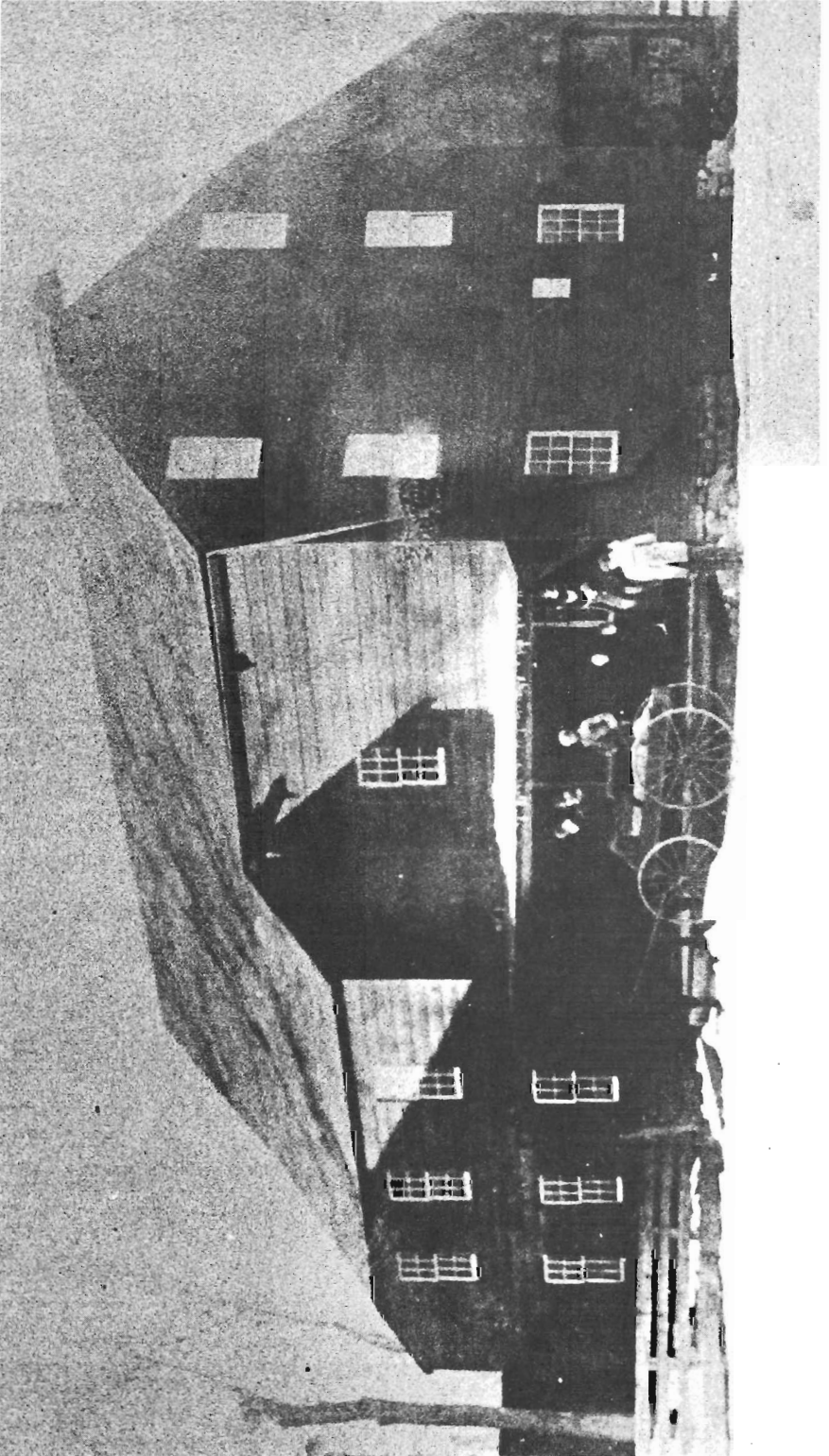
1982

VOLUME 4

NUMBER 8



*The Old Red Mill, Five Mile River, Conn.*



*The Old Red Grist Mill*

# THE RED MILL AT FIVE MILE RIVER

by  
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**W**HO, in this day of robots and high technology should be even mildly interested in the fortunes of Darien's old "Red Mill?" This 18th century grist mill has long since vanished from the banks of Five Mile River, and was only a very local rural industry even in its heyday. It was, however, the centre of a prosperous farming neighborhood on the outskirts of both Norwalk and Stamford. (Darien was part of Stamford until 1820). At this point the river is the boundary line between the two towns.

The mill site lies on a wooded bank on the left side of Old Kings Highway just before the road crosses the river into Norwalk. A jungle of trees and brush conceal the line of the ruined millrace which originally brought water to the roadside mill from a mill pond and dam some distance back in the woods. The pond and the dam were washed out years ago, and all sign of the millrace may soon be gone also, for the property is at present writing marked with a "For Sale" sign.

Fortunately, the Darien Historical Society has several photographs of the mill and of the equally historic sawmill behind it on the banks of the mill pond. A picture dated 1894 shows the mill half-hidden among trees with a picturesque gravel road and wooden bridge in the foreground. This winding road was part of the main highway in colonial days that connected New York with Boston. George Washington passed this way in 1775, when he traveled to Cambridge to take command of the Continental Army.

It is a pity that no television crew could be present when the General's carriage forded the stream by the Red Mill, because research has failed to discover any more dramatic tales concerned with either of these mills. The interest in this bit of local history lies principally in the men who operated the mills and their occasional struggles with the elements, when spring floods and torrential rains threatened the mill dam.

The gristmill, and the sawmill as well, were built by John Reed (1633-1730) and his two sons John Jr. (1666-1724) and Thomas (1672-1757). The Reeds were the first family to build homes in this area. By 1684 the father had begun to purchase large tracts of wild land at "Five Mile Brook" on the Norwalk side of the stream.

Although increasing numbers of colonists had been taking up land in the centre of Norwalk since 1650, this western boundary of the town was still wilderness, Indian country.

John Reed was a hardy Puritan who had fled England in 1660, because he had earlier been an officer in Cromwell's army which defeated Charles I. Oliver Cromwell, it will be remembered, was responsible for the trial and execution of the king. When the monarchy was restored in 1660 under Charles II, a number of Cromwell's supporters emigrated secretly to this country<sup>1</sup>.

In 1692 John Reed and his son John Jr. applied to the town of Norwalk for a permit "to erect a sawmill at the head of the salt" on Five Mile River. The town's proprietors approved, giving the Reeds also "the right to improve any timber within one mile of sd river," provided they set up the mill within two years. Obviously there was a great demand for lumber in the new community; but there is no later document describing the whereabouts of the mill, whether near "the salt" at the mouth of the river, or whether in the Reeds' own backyard on Old Kings Highway. Certainly, the latter seems more likely, especially since several of their neighbors held shares in the mill some years later.

In 1699 John Reed Sr. transferred 1/2 of his share, then amounting to 1/4 of the mill or 1/8 share (as the deed says) to his son Thomas. The other 1/8 share he gave to David Tuttle, the husband of his daughter Mary Tuttle. The next reference to a sawmill in this area appears in the estate of Capt. Jonathan Bates in 1753, and five years later the inventory of Eleazar Green's estate also lists a sawmill appraised at 11.5 pounds. Both men lived nearby on Old Kings Highway on the Stamford side of the river. These deeds further reinforce the opinion that by the mid-18th century anyway, the sawmill was on Old Kings Highway, where it was to remain for 150 years.

John Reed became the patriarch of the neighborhood. Although his own home has disappeared, another early Reed house is still to be seen on the Norwalk side of the bridge. It is the charming gray-shingled house on the left beyond the river. When John Reed died at the age of 97, he was buried in a small Reed plot near this house.<sup>1</sup>

Incidentally, the burying ground not far away on Rowayton Avenue was authorized by the town of Norwalk in 1723/4 before the death of John Reed. John Reed Jr. and David Tuttle were appointed to "lay out" the ground on land that at that time belonged to the town. Many

of the early Reeds, Warings, and Richards lie in this graveyard, as does a later venerated patriarch, the Rev. Moses Mather.

The early history of the gristmill is still in doubt. No permit to build it has been found in either the Stamford or the Norwalk records. The mill site and 17 acres of land was sold in 1725 to John Reed's son Thomas "with all ye rights, liberties, priviledges and appurtenances", but there was no mention of a mill. At the time, Thomas Reed had recently finished building a house for his son John on the Stamford side of the river adjacent to the 17 acres. Some rear section of the house at 202 Old Kings Highway is probably part of this early dwelling. Reed also transferred to his son John his new purchase next to the river. When John sold this farm more than forty years later, it included "a 1/4 share in a gristmill and stones, a Coultling mill and all other utencils." The other shareholders were Reeds — Thomas and Nathan of Norwalk, and Josiah of Stamford. They were all close relatives and neighbors. So it would seem that the gristmill had been solely a Reed enterprise for some time.

Samuel Richards (1746-1785), the new owner of this large farm and gristmill in 1767, had just turned twenty-one. He had grown up on the Norwalk side of the river beyond the Reeds, in a house now vanished, built by his father Captain Samuel Richards. The Captain had become a very prosperous merchant in Rowayton. He and his brother Captain James Richards owned a store and boatyard near the north end of the harbor where the Pinkney House is today. The two brothers were partners in an overseas shipping business that had proved to be very profitable. Captain Samuel, therefore, could well afford to buy for his eldest son the Reed mill with a house and some forty acres of land, even at a cost of 290 pounds.

Only a few years earlier the Richards family had received news from England that the Captain's father, Samuel Richards Sr., who was also living in Norwalk, had inherited a substantial entailed estate in Staffordshire. In his youth he had left England and come out to the Colonies as a soldier volunteer in Queen Anne's War. When the war was over, after numerous adventures he had settled in Norwalk in 1713, where he married and became a tailor. Although he was now 75 years old, he and a son made preparations to undertake the arduous trip to England to claim his inheritance. Unfortunately, he died in 1761 before he could set sail. A mystery still surrounds the disposition of the inheritance.<sup>2</sup>

The grandson Samuel owned the mill property on Old Kings Highway throughout the Revolutionary War. Although raiding Tories from Long Island apparently left the mill untouched, they did

kidnap Samuel's father the Captain from his home nearby. One stormy night in 1777 Captain Richards and 14 other men were carried to Long Island by boat and thence to prison in New York City. After four months, Captain Richards, a very sick man, was released, only to die soon after his return to Norwalk.<sup>3</sup>

When the war was over, Samuel decided he would like to build a gristmill in the center of Rowayton at the head of the harbor near the store which he and his brother Captain Isaac now owned. They were carrying on their father's overseas trading ventures.

In 1783 when Samuel applied to the Stamford authorities for a permit to build a dam and mill across the head of the harbor, he was granted the permit rather reluctantly, and told that such a dam might cause flooding "to the road that crosses sd river at John Sellecks." Selleck's property was near the present White Bridge on the Darien side of the river. Admittedly, a mill would be "of benefit to the publick — if kept in repair enough to overbalance any damages," but all damages to others must be paid by Richards. The town would not be responsible.

Moreover, Richards would be allowed to take "no more than two quarts of each bushel of wheat, Rye and Indian corn in payment, and one quart from each bushel of barley he may grind for any of the inhabitants of sd town."

Richards did not pursue his plan further, which was just as well. Two years later he sold his house, the gristmill and much of his land for 400 pounds to his neighbor David Reed. The deed is dated March 1, 1785. In April he died, though only a young man of thirty-eight.<sup>4</sup>

David Reed soon disposed of the property at a profit. He was paid 450 pounds for it by Nathan Bouton (b.1756) whose family lived near Wilson Point. Bouton carried on the milling business for the next 13 years, although he must have employed a miller, for when he later sold the property, a "miller's house" is mentioned in the deed of sale. This house was just west of the mill, and is barely visible in the photograph. It was razed in 1918, and the timbers used in the framework of a house on Fairmead Road, according to a caption on the back of the photograph.

In 1804 Samuel Richards' son Noyes Richards (1775-1855) paid \$3150 for Nathan Bouton's 47 acres, house and barn, miller's house, and gristmill. Noyes had recently married Sally Mather, a granddaughter of the Rev. Moses Mather.<sup>5</sup> They moved into the house at 202 Old Kings Highway, where he had lived as a small boy. Richards

was listed as a farmer in the 1850 Census. He obviously had no interest in running the mill himself, for he soon sold it for \$750 to Nathaniel Hoyt (1748-1822) of Hoyt Street, who was a revolutionary War veteran<sup>6</sup>. However, Richards kept a 1/3 interest in the miller's house and the gristmill, while insisting that Hoyt should have "the privilege of keeping up the Dam." All went well, and the next year Richards sold Hoyt the remaining share of the miller's house and two acres, although he kept the 1/3 share of the mill.

Apparently, Hoyt's profits in the business were often marginal. It was, after all, a smaller enterprise than the Gorham Mill in Noroton. The owner of the Red Mill in 1785 paid only eight pounds as a tax assessment, whereas Daniel Gorham paid a tax of twenty pounds.<sup>7</sup> So the Red Mill "with its two run of stones" was not a dangerous competitor. Moreover, there were always years when flooding damaged the dam, and the cost of repairs ate into the profits. Hoyt resorted to mortgaging the business. After his death the mill, pond, and the miller's house came into the hands of John Reed Jr., who paid \$470 for the property. He kept it briefly until 1825, when he found a buyer in Zalmon Sturges of Weston, who was willing to pay \$850 for the mill and pond alone.

Sturges himself made a good profit in 1832, when he sold out to Peter Leinberger (Linesburg) for \$1300. Although the Darien Land Records list Leinberger's residence as New York City at the time of the sale, the 1850 Census calls him of Pennsylvania. So he, an outlander, settled down for over 20 years among the Connecticut Yankees — the interrelated Reeds, Warings, Richards and Bates families whose ancestors had lived near Five Mile River for over 100 years.

Disaster struck in 1843, when a "spring freshet" washed out the dam. Leinberger and Richard Bates, then the owner of the sawmill, agreed to share equally the expense of repairs. Their contract was formally entered in the Darien Land Records; and at the same time, they settled another controversial problem, their rights regarding the use of the water. The amount of flow varied, of course, depending on summer droughts and winter floods. It was agreed that from October until July 1st, each man would be entitled to equal amounts of water in the pond; but from July until October Leinberger would have unrestricted use of the water. To be sure, Bates could use water also, if he did not lower the water level of the pond more than two feet from the top of the dam; but the gristmill naturally had first call on the water supply at harvest time.



When Peter Leinberger was 65 years old, he decided to sell the mill and also the house where he lived at the corner of Raymond Street. Nathan Roberts (b.1797) paid him \$1000 for the two properties in 1855. Although Roberts was then living in New York, he had spent his boyhood in the house at 151 Raymond Street (the Nathaniel Selleck House), which is only a step down the road from 202 Old Kings Highway, where Noyes Richards and his large family lived. His daughter Sally had married Nathan Roberts in 1820 shortly before Nathan's father Amos Roberts bought the Richards farm at 202 Old Kings Highway in 1826.<sup>8</sup> Amos and his wife Deborah Selleck Roberts were members of a small community of Quakers in Darien at that time.<sup>9</sup>

The Roberts family, father and son, owned the house for nearly sixty years, and the gristmill was listed in both of their estates. After Nathan's death, the mill was sold to William R. Lockwood and described as the "grist or flouring mill known as the Red Mill and other buildings."

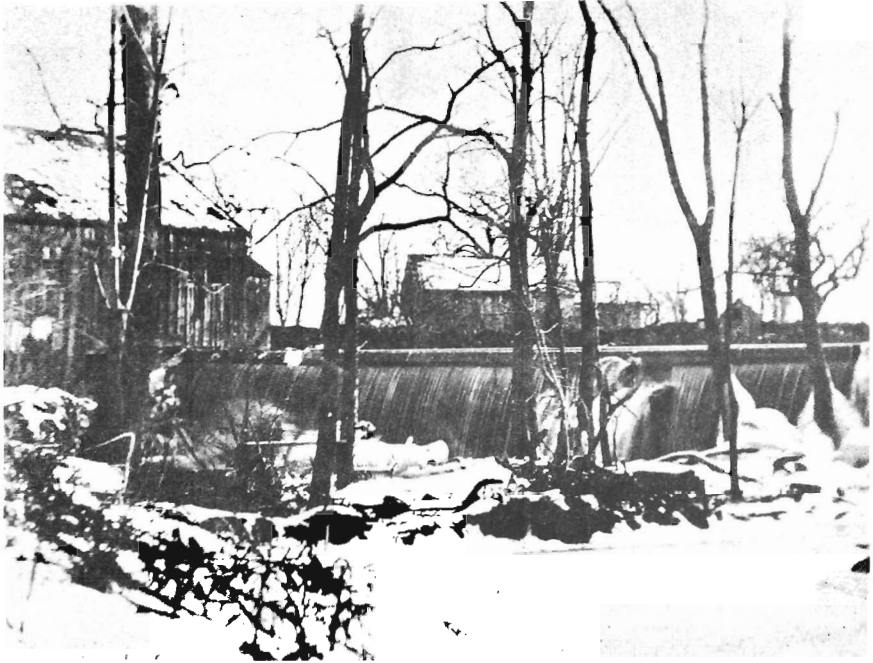
Little is known of the activities at the gristmill in these later years, except for the names of several men who operated the mill. Newton Crofoot was the miller from 1882-1890, and also from 1894-1899. He lived in the miller's house next to the mill.<sup>10</sup> In 1898 John W. Pennell became the miller and bought the property for \$3000. Clearly the mill was still in use at that time.

Surprisingly enough, the house and mill property was finally sold in 1900 to the New York New Haven & Hartford Railroad, which was interested only in the water rights to the river. The railroad also acquired at this time much of the meadowland up and down the river. A manuscript history of Darien written by Benjamin Corbin explains that the railroad used the water from Chasmar's Pond downstream near the railway line to fill the engine boilers. The trains stopped at a high water tower there to draw the water.

Later an ingenious system was devised that took less time. Long shallow troughs were installed between the tracks, so that suction pipes under the engine could draw in the water, as the train steamed by. Harry S. Street of Darien, whose keen memory goes back a good 80 years, remembers this interesting device.

So it was that the mill became a picturesque relic. It was finally dismantled in 1908 by Alexander Raymond, who was Harry Street's grandfather. With the New Haven's permission, he carted off the good timbers and the machinery, to be saved for later use. The mill wheel was stored for many years, until Mr. Street's father sold it to the

owners of the old BATTERY mill at Silvermine. Harry Street himself used some of the beams in 1925, when he built his house at 10 Five Mile River Road.



*The grist mill at left, sawmill at right*

The history of the sawmill is more obscure. Land Records fail to fill in all of the gaps, probably because the mill owners did not always own the land on which the mill stood. As noted earlier, the Bates family had a proprietary interest in the sawmill by the mid 18th century, and continued for several generations to own or to manage it. The Bates Homestead is nearby at 148 Old Kings Highway, and is one of the three oldest houses still existing in Darien. It is recorded in a memorable deed of 1705 as an "unfinished" house, which John Bates gave to his son Jonathan on his wedding day.<sup>11</sup>

Jonathan (c.1670-1753) became a prominent figure in the community. He was often a delegate from Stamford to the Colonial Legislature at Hartford. Historical Society members may be interested to know that he was an uncle of the John Bates who built the Bates-Scofield Homestead.<sup>12</sup> Who knows? Perhaps Jonathan Bates did the mill work for the house at his sawmill on Five Mile River.

His grandson Jonathan (1749-1816) ran the sawmill for twenty years with help from his partner Captain Nathaniel Slauson. Jonathan must have been a broad-minded and public spirited Liberal in his day. In his will he left to the Ecclesiastical Society of Middlesex (i.e. Darien) a tract of land on East Lane near his home "to lie as a burying ground forever" and to admit persons "of all denominations."

In 1810 the land on which the sawmill stood was sold to Ralph Hoyt (1790-1835), the son of Nathaniel Hoyt who was the miller at that time.

Young Ralph was bound by the deed of sale to allow his father and Jonathan Bates "the privilege of passing through to repair their mill dam at all times when needful." In spite of this reference to Jonathan Bates and his continuing interest in the sawmill, a later deed indicates that Ralph Hoyt must have operated the sawmill for most of 30 years until his death. When his estate was settled, his sister Martha Hoyt Reed and her husband, John Reed, sold the sawmill and all apparatus to Henry Bates (1779-1840), son of Jonathan 3rd. The Reeds, however, retained title to the land and the miller's house.

The privileges that went with the transfer of ownership were "the right to pass and repass from the highway through the gate east of the gristmill to and from the sawmill in the usual passway or some more convenient place, the said Bates to keep the gate in good repair at his expense and may mend and repair the driftway leading to sd mill — also the privilege of drawing in and out and placing or laying logs, timber, boards or other materials" in the mill lot; and the privilege of taking gravel from the usual place for repairs, as well as the right to use water from the mill pond "previously granted to Ralph Hoyt or his predecessors."

The sawmill was still in use in 1856, when John and Martha Reed sold the miller's house and lot, encumbered by privileges belonging to the sawmill's owner, who was unnamed. Later deeds fail to mention this mill, giving one the impression that this small country industry shut down and vanished without a trace.

However, some years ago, the Historical Society was asked to investigate the origins of the house at 208 Old Kings Highway. The land behind the house extends back to the former bank of the mill pond. The Alan Armstrongs, who owned the property at that time, had been told that their large red barn behind the house had once been a mill at Five Mile River. It had been moved years ago across the field from the riverbank. This may well be true, although no further information has been found to corroborate the story.



*The Volunteer Children's Home, Darien, Conn.*

There is another story connected with this building that *is* well documented, for there is a deed in the Land Records which calls it a "Fresh Air Home." It seems that in 1902 James and Harriet Wood of New York bought the house and land at 208 Old Kings Highway from the estate of William R. Lockwood. The next year they sold it to the Volunteers of America, the still well-known organization which cares for needy children. A detailed inventory was copied into the records, listing the contents of the main house, room by room. The furnishings of the "Fresh Air Home" are listed also, including 100 army cots. There was much to delight the children in their country home — a horse, a goat, 4 rabbits, 11 ducks, 70 chickens, and 22 pigeons, not to mention two boats to launch on the old millpond.

Harry Street remembers the city children who lived there, and says that they attended the Darien public school. At some time not yet determined, a disastrous fire destroyed the main house, which was an imposing Victorian building. The red mill, if such it is, survived, and is a reminder of days long past.

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