

THE MILL AT PLEASANT MILLS

Mullica Township, NJ



Mullica Township Environmental Commission:

Jon Malkin, Chairperson

Jeff Lawrenson, Vice Chairperson

Gary Brill, Secretary

Dan Turygan, Committee Representative

Felix Filpus, Historian



Mullica Township is more than a place in the woods. If you look around, you can still see glimpses of its history. One such place is the old Mill. This historic treasure tells a story of what life used to be like in a section of Mullica Township known as Pleasant Mills. The Mullica Township Environmental Commission produced this brief look at the Mill with a grant from the New Jersey Department of

Environmental Protection and a matching grant from Mullica Township.

The Mullica Township Environmental Commission would like to thank Mr. Calvin Beebe for all his knowledge and information he provided to make this booklet. We also thank the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection and Township Committee for their financial assistance.

We would also like to thank Gayle Brill for her assistance in designing the book, Susan Polk for her editing and proof reading and Mary Alice Malkin for the photos. Without all their help this booklet would not have been possible.

For more information concerning the Mill contact the Mullica Township Environmental Commission.



Your environment is more than the surrounding plants and animals. Your environment has been shaped by the activities of humans. The Mill at Pleasant Mills is one example of this phenomenon.

As you pass through Mullica Township there is no historical site that draws your attention quite like the Mill does. At the northwestern end of Pleasant Mills Road across from Lake Nescochague stands the ruins of what was once a thriving industry.

You have to wonder what this place was and why it is located in this area. Let's take a look at the history of this magnificent site and find out.

A Brief History of the Mill

In 1822, on the site of a former sawmill, Benjamin Richards erected a 3,000-spindle cotton mill and named it Pleasant Mills. The Mill, which operated for almost three decades, was destroyed by fire in 1855. After standing vacant, the property was purchased by Thomas Irving and John McNeil in 1861. On the site of the former cotton mill the partners built a paper mill. Once again the scourge of the Pine Barrens struck when, in 1878 a fire caused the profitable mill to shut its doors. In 1880 another paper mill was constructed on the site and opened under the name of the Pleasant Mills Paper Company. The records indicate that this paper mill operated for three decades before closing its doors in 1915. Two years later the mill was sold to Alexander J. McKeone, former manager of the plant, who maintained possession of the property for several years. Not able to make his company profitable, McKeone sold the mill. The new owners of the mill, running into financial difficulties, closed it for the final time in 1925.¹



¹ Inside the Pinelands, A Report by the Pinelands Preservation Alliance, Volume 9, Number 8

A Tour Through the Mill

As you approach the Mill, the tall brick chimney is an impressive sight. Surrounding the chimney are the crumbling walls of the former Mill.



Once at the site, the thick wooden doors offer the visitor access to the inner workings of The Mill.

Let's go in.

Once you enter, you see an open room with wide plank wooden floors and a loft above. It is here in the old office that the owner of The Mill and his managers would observe the operations taking place within the manufacturing section of the mill.



Standing in the loft, they could watch through the large window at the other end of the room. Beyond this window was the heart of the operations. In the production area, the workers turned cotton into thread and rope. Later, they made salt hay and other raw materials into paper.



6.



7.

The Mill and Its Environment

The Mill was not built at its current location by accident. It was built there because of the uniqueness of the property. Today, manufacturing facilities can be placed almost anywhere since the power they need to operate is typically generated off-site and is delivered directly to them.

When The Mill was constructed, a source of power had to be considered. A commonly used source was water. In this area water was abundant from streams, ponds and lakes. By harnessing the power of falling water across a water wheel, electricity could be generated to power the equipment in The Mill.

All of the electrical needs of the Mill were provided by water. This power was provided by water upstream of The Mill.



Behind the Pleasant Mills-Batsto Church were two ponds, New Pond and Fords Pond. From these ponds a canal was constructed to funnel this water into Lake Nescochague. Gates were put into place to control the flow of water into the Lake as needed. Also, two large wooden water towers were constructed along Pleasant Mills Road near the spillway of the lake for added water pressure when conditions, such as a drought or the need for increased water, required their use. By using wooden gates and valves, the flow of the water across the water wheel could be controlled to give a steady flow of water. The water wheel would turn the turbines, generators and gears located beneath the production



section of the Mill enabling it to produce its own electricity. This electricity would operate the machinery to produce cotton thread and rope and later to produce paper.

The Mill In Motion

During the peak of production two shifts of men worked the machinery. The day shift was eleven hours long and paid 37 cents an hour and the night shift was 13 hours long and paid 38 cents an hour.



During the operation as a cotton mill there were 3,000-spindles each turning out a different cotton thread depending on the needs of the customer. Cotton was brought to The Mill by ships voyaging up the Mullica River. At The Forks, where the Batsto River meets the Mullica River, the cotton was unloaded onto smaller boats for the final journey to the Mill.

When The Mill produced paper, the raw materials used were manila rope, jute and occasionally salt hay from the Mullica marshes.



Papermaking was and still is a complicated process. In those days The Mill was making large quantities of kraft or wrapping paper, as well as documentary paper for the Federal Government. Another product was a special grade of stock used as a base for sandpaper. These finished products were hauled to the Elwood station of the Pennsylvania Railroad, five miles away over dirt roads. The teams would bring back goods for the Mill and the village, which had arrived at the Elwood freight platform.²

Behind the Mill were ponds used for washing the paper. One of these ponds is still there today.



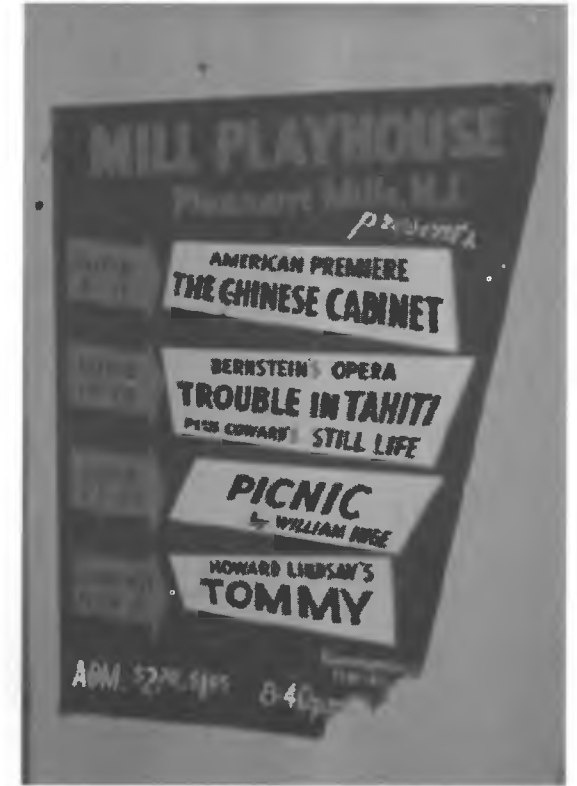
The Mill: A New Act

After closing in 1925, The Mill stood vacant and decaying over the next 23 years as it was bought and sold to various individuals who saw potential as a real estate holding. In 1948, Mary Baker, the granddaughter of Alexander McKeone, and her husband Ray purchased the property. The Bakers, artists by profession, fell in love with the picturesque old mill and hoped to use the property as a center for the arts. After partially restoring the mill and using it for the production of silk-screened materials, they too decided the property was more than they could handle.

The Mill was then sold to Ada Fenno, a close friend of the Bakers, who proceeded to transform The Mill into a 250-seat theater for the performing arts, known as the Mill Playhouse. The Mill Playhouse opened July 3, 1953.



During its brief life, it presented professional theatre and soon developed a reputation for its high caliber programs. Unfortunately the costs of restoring the Mill, building the theater and maintaining live performances were more than Mrs. Fenno had estimated and the theatre drew its final curtain in 1957.



Mrs. Fenno died in 1975 and in her will she specified that The Mill be preserved and maintained as a cultural center. Since her death, foundations have been created to try to maintain The Mill as specified in the will of Mrs. Fenno, however, none have succeeded.

The Mill is on the National Register of Historic Places. Concerned about possible long-term deterioration or vandalism at Pleasant Mills, Mullica Township officials contacted the Pinelands Commission in 2001 asking for advice on how to ensure its continued preservation. Commission staff subsequently got in touch with the owners of the site in order to discuss the matter.



The owner, Pax Amicus Castle Theater, a not-for-profit foundation that promotes the dramatic arts, had inherited The Mill from Mrs. Fenno, but local conditions prevented use of the site for its purposes. Fortunately, the foundation's director and board were willing to listen to the Township's concerns and allowed the Commission to look into the possibility of state ownership.

At this point, the Township and the Commission are exploring different possibilities for public or private ownership. In addition, a citizens' group representing the residents of the Lake Nescochague area have joined them in the effort. The purpose is to find a responsible party willing to accept management of The Mill and to see to its permanent preservation, perhaps even returning The Mill to a useful life that is in keeping with its unique past and its historic significance.





18.



19.

