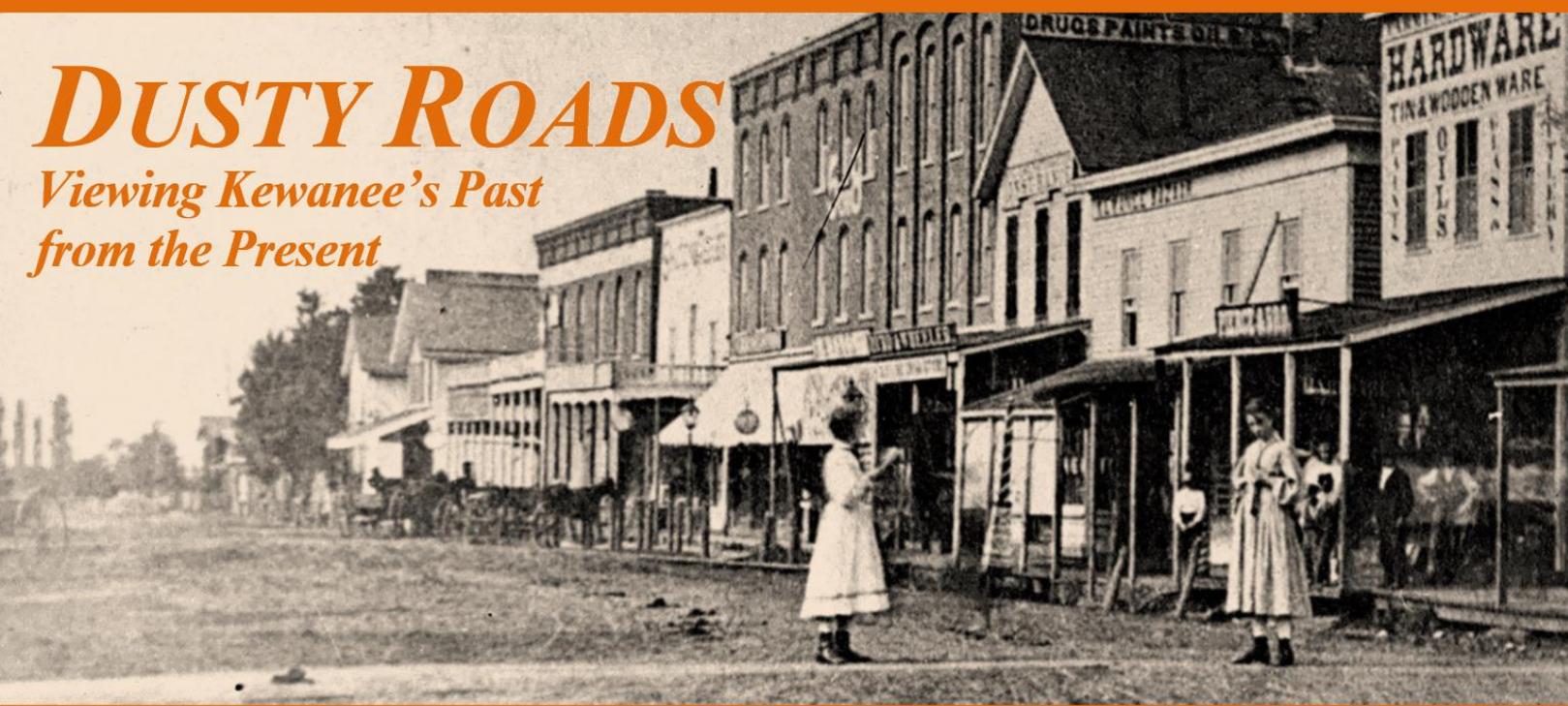


DUSTY ROADS

*Viewing Kewanee's Past
from the Present*



by Dean Karau

December 2019

Wethersfield's Saw and Grist Mills

The Colony's First Community Business Venture Failed

When the Connecticut Association of Wethersfield, Connecticut, first conceived of what became Wethersfield, Illinois, it knew the importance of a saw mill and a grist mill for the colony. After the purchasing committee returned to Connecticut in June 1836 to report what they had found and accomplished, the Association authorized a second committee to fully survey the purchased land into quarter-sections, 20 acre timber lots, and two-and-a-half acre village lots. Reverend Caleb Jewett Tenney, the moving force behind the Association, instructed committee members Henry G. Little and John F. Willard to “ascertain . . . whether there is in the vicinity any stream that will carry a mill.” Tenney’s instructions suggest the Association initially preferred a water powered mill.

It seems unlikely that the purchasing committee did not find what is today’s Mill Creek, so Tenney’s letter to the second committee suggests that the water flow on Mill Creek was found insufficient to power

mills. In the alternative, the purchasing committee merely was unsure of Mill Creek’s capabilities.

But the second committee must have concluded that Mill Creek would not support a mill, as evidenced by the numerous historical references to a steam engine powering the first mills built in the early years of the colony’s existence.

When did the mills begin operating?

In her reminiscence, Caroline Little Hurd, daughter of Abner Little, wrote that the steam sawmill was built the summer of 1838, which was “hailed with delight.” A “[p]ublic dinner was served in the mill on its completion, and we soon had lumber to use, black walnut, cherry and oak of which the grove was mostly composed.” Caroline said that the grist mill was added to the sawmill the next year, “which proved a great convenience as we had been such a distance before to have our wheat ground.”

The December 23, 1837, Peoria Register and North-

Excerpt from Caleb Jewett Tenney October 1836 letter to Henry G. Little and John F. Willard



Sawmill under construction, ca 1848

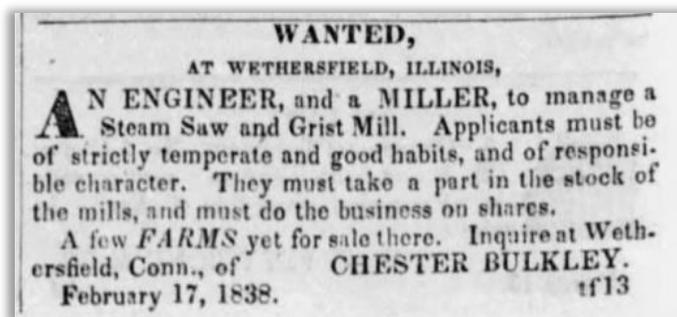
Western Gazetteer reported that “[a] steam saw mill will be started in Wethersfield *next spring . . .*” (Emphasis added.) That would be consistent with Caroline Hurd’s recollection.

However, according to Henry County historian Henry L. Kiner in his 1910 history, a steam saw and grist mill was built on the south side of Mill Street between Tenney and Willard Streets in 1837.

Wethersfield historian Frank Craig, in his 1925 history, placed the beginning of the sawmill’s operation between those conflicting dates. He wrote that work commenced on the mills in the summer of 1837, the sawmill began operating in January 1838, and the grist mill was operating by the fall of 1838, with William Howard the first engineer and Arthur Thornton the first miller. Dr. Augustus Dunn, upon whom Craig relied for his dates, also wrote in the 1850s that “Wm. Howard was sent [to Wethersfield] with the engine to run it.” (Kiner also reported that the material for the mills was shipped from Cincinnati to Hennepin and then drawn by ox teams to the village.)

If Howard was the first engineer, then all of those dates may be wrong.

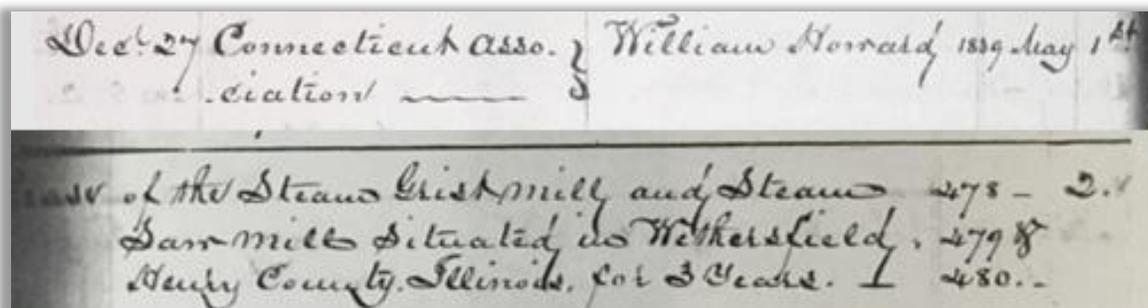
We know that the Association began running an advertisement in Connecticut newspapers in early 1838, looking for an engineer and a miller for the steam saw and grist mills, and the advertisement continued at least until mid-1838:



Advertisement in July 27, 1838, Hartford Courant

We also know that it wasn’t until May 1, 1839, that the Association granted to Howard a three-year lease for a saw mill and grist mill in the village.

Thus, it seems more likely that Howard was re-



Excerpt from Henry County grantor / grantee land records for lease to William Howard

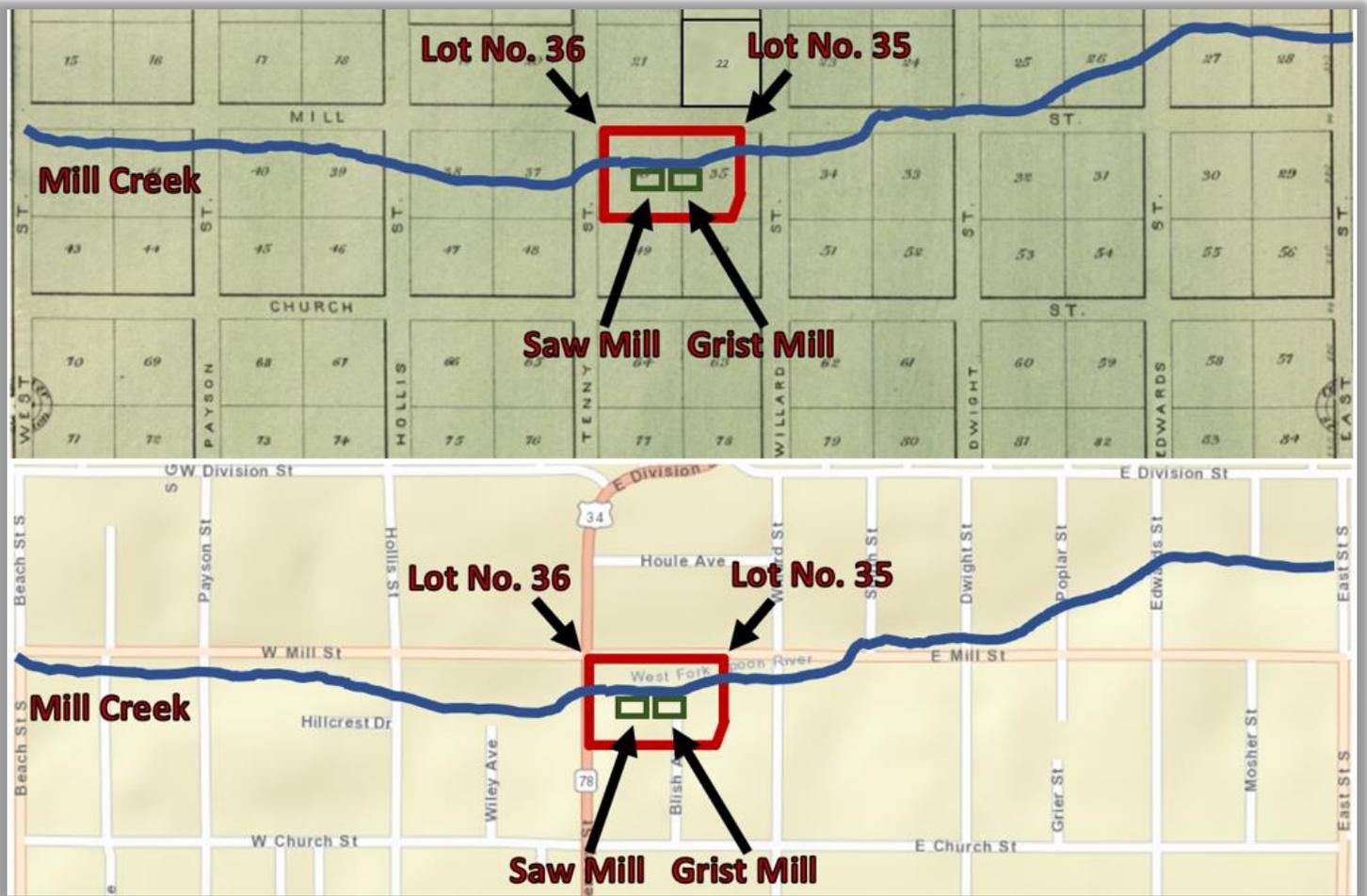
cruited in the second half of 1838, did not arrive with the steam engine until early 1839, and so the mills began operating in 1839, not 1838.

However, 180 years later, we simply may never know precisely how soon the mills were in operation after the first pioneers arrived.

Where were the mills? According to Craig, the mills were located on Village Lot No. 36 and spilling into Lot No. 35. Craig's measurements accompanying his description of the location are errone-

unprofitable, they nevertheless continued to operate, and Craig lists the operators as including, in addition to Howard, Henry G. Little, William Weeks, Sylvanus and Isaac Ferris, and Windor and Leonard Smith.

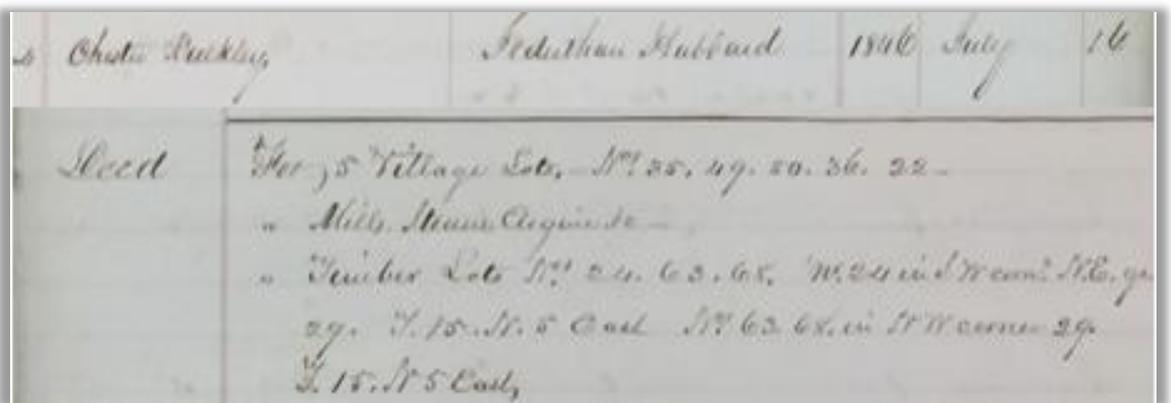
One of the early Wethersfield residents, the Honorable T. J. Henderson, told the following story about his first experience as a youth at the grist mill, which appeared in the Independent on September 1, 1887. In the early 1840s, he came with a younger



Early Wethersfield lot map (above) and a current map (below)

ous, but other information also places the mills on Lot Nos. 36 and 35. Craig's book suggests that the mills were housed in a log building accessed from Tenney.

Even after the mills proved to be



Excerpt from Henry County grantor / grantee land records for sale to Jeduthan Hubbard

brother to have some wheat ground by the Ferris brothers, the millers at the time. One of the brothers told Henderson that if he would sit up all night to keep the fire going for the steam engine, the miller would grind Henderson's grist first the next morning so they could leave for home early in the day. Henderson did so, and as others in need of their grist ground waited, he and his brother were able to head home before daylight.

Finally, in July, 1846, the Association sold Lot Nos. 36 and 35, along with the millstones and the steam engine, to Jeduthan Hubbard for \$2,000, a loss of \$7,000 for the Association. According to Craig, Hubbard then sold the mill stones to a miller on the Spoon River near Rochester and moved the saw and engine to Farmington. (Others say the sawmill went to Princeville and the millstones to Neponset.)

Wethersfield's mills were no more.

The lack of mills probably contributed to the slow growth of Wethersfield, whose population in 1848 was only about 380 persons in the township and not many living in the village proper. There was only a warehouse and small general store, a blacksmith shop, a log meeting house which served as a school and church, and a few houses there. While the village did expand to some extent in the early 1850s, its life was stunted with the railroad bypassing Wethersfield to the north in 1854. One wonders whether profitable mills would have affected the decision on the location of the railroad.

(Dave Clarke helped analyze the meaning of the records, visited the land upon which the mills were built and provided a number of photos of the site.)



View today of approximate location of the saw and grist mills



Dean Karau is a Kewanee native who moved away when he was 12 years old. Now retired, he continues to enjoy the outdoors, genealogy and history. He returns regularly to Kewanee to explore his roots and the history of Kewanee and Henry County.