

*The Mills
& Mill House
On Beaver Brook
Chelmsford Center Village
- The Early Years -*

The Mills & Mill House On Beaver Brook in Chelmsford Center Village

The Early Years, by David W. Brown

Introduction

The first saw mill in Chelmsford Center Village was built on Abraham and Rose Parker's land in 1678. It was jointly owned by Abraham and two of his sons. John was the oldest son and was specifically mentioned by his father as having been involved in its construction. That first mill building stood until 1700, but it was followed by various other saw mills and grist mills on the property through the early twentieth century.

The purpose of this paper is to document the early history of the property until just after the mill house was built in the mid-nineteenth century. In doing so, it also briefly looks at how some of the early families lived and dealt with issues and adversities of their day.

The last old saw mill and grist mill building was removed one hundred years ago, but the mill house is still at 24 Central Square supporting the local community. This is dedicated to building owner Jack Handley for beautifully restoring the building when it most needed it and to all those that continue to work at the historic landmark.



The Parker Family Saw Mill (1653-1748)

1653-1679 - The Parkers Settle In Chelmsford

Abraham and Rose Parker came from Woburn in about 1652, one year before a charter was granted by the General Court to establish the town of Chelmsford¹. Their first homestead² was located close to the Pawtucket Indigenous People, with their meadows described as "lying at the old Wigwam". They later moved closer to the center of town³, where the saw mill on Beaver Brook was constructed.



The Upper Dam, viewed from Bartlett Woodlot

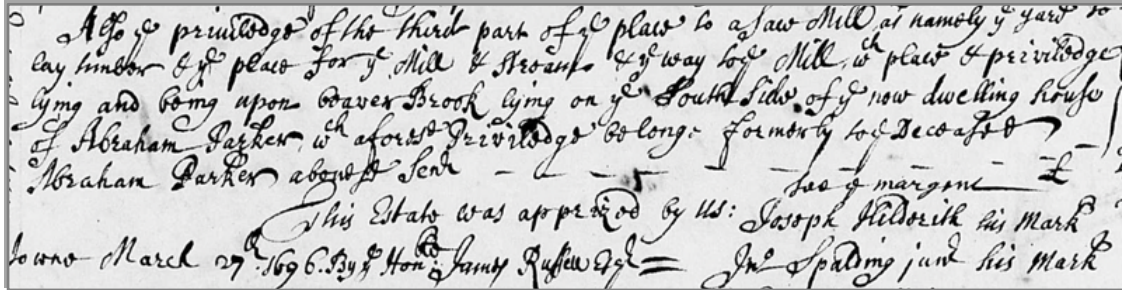
1679-1683 - The Saw Mill On Beaver Brook:

Abraham Parker started to distribute property to his three adult sons in the late 1670's. He gave John several tracts of land in January 1679⁴, saying they were "in consideration of the love and affection he beareth to his eldest son"⁵. The deed mentioned that John already had a one-third investment in the saw mill "now standing up in his father's land". Abraham gave him first priority to come and go and to always have a timber yard, highway to the mill and benefits of the ponds and upper and lower dams.

Moses, the youngest of the three sons, was given a twenty acre parcel in 1683 that bordered the upper dam "in consideration of their love and affection for him" (plus £25 Sterling). It included land on the upstream side of the dam that needed to be flooded on a seasonal basis to fill the upper mill pond, so the deed required that Moses allow it to be "flowed" when needed for the benefit of the saw mill owners⁶.

1685-1696 - Abraham & Rose Parker's Estate:

Abraham Parker died in August 1685⁷ and Rose died six years later. John inherited the ten acre homestead⁸, but there were still portions of the estate that were not distributed eleven years later. Among them was the third part of "ye yard to lay timber and ye place for ye mill stream and ye way to ye mill" on Beaver Brook⁹.



A handwritten inventory document in cursive script. The text describes a third part of a place for a saw mill, including a yard to lay timber and a place for the mill stream and way to the mill, located on Beaver Brook. It mentions Abraham Parker and his widow Rose, and is dated March 27, 1696. The document is signed by Joseph Hildorick and John Spading.

Excerpt from the 1696 remaining inventory of Abraham and Rose Parker's estate

1696-1715 - The Old Mill Rebuilt & Sold (to) John Parker II

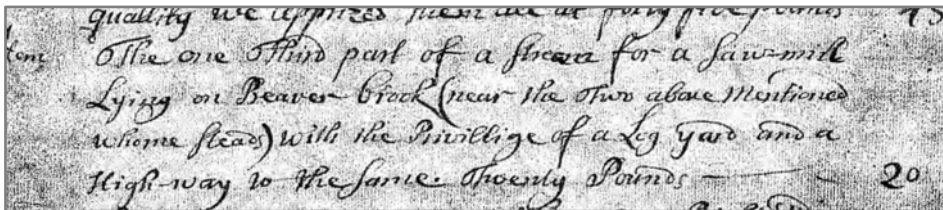
Abraham and Rose's portion of the mill lot was still not distributed when John, the administrator of their estate, died in 1699. By then the mill was called "the old saw mill"¹⁰ and by August 1701, it was no longer standing¹¹.

At that point, Abraham Parker Jr., the second oldest Parker son and last of the three original owners, sold his interest in the mill lot to Jonathan Hill. The deed stated "...one third part of the stream for erecting of a saw mill where the saw mill formerly stood, with one part of all the irons that are now to be found which belonged to the old saw mill...". John Parker's widow Mary also technically owned a portion of the lot as part of her widow's dower, but the Parkers gave Jonathan Hill full liberty to "re-build and improve it"¹².

Jonathan Hill kept the property until his death in 1711¹³. He apparently did re-build the saw mill because his heirs sold it back to the Parker family. It was purchased by John Parker II in 1715¹⁴.

1729 - John Parker II & His Mother In Court:

Almost three decades later in 1729, John Parker II and his mother Mary still owned the mill lot. By then, Mary was 73 and was living with John and his wife Rebecca out of financial necessity because her dower from long ago was entirely in real estate. After so many years, it was also no longer clear to the family exactly what the estate included and to what extent it had been improved "or in any respects had been made worse". Mary wanted to benefit financially from her dower, so she went to court to sort it out¹⁵.



A handwritten inventory document in cursive script. The text describes a third part of a stream for a saw mill, including a yard and a high-way to the same. It is dated 1729 and numbered 20.

Excerpt from the 1729 Inventory Document

Mary told the court that she had no way to support herself, so the court selected five men to take a new inventory and sell enough property to give Mary access to cash. As a result, she was finally able to sell her part of the saw mill that was "standing on the brook". John bought it for £5¹⁶ and with that purchase, he became the full owner of the mill.

1742-1748 - John Parker II's Death & Estate:

In 1742, John Parker II, his wife Rebecca, and their thirteen year old son Isaac all died suddenly during a four day period¹⁷ between February 17th and 21st. His estate was "considerable", involving multiple properties, but had "fences down and other things much out of repair". At the bottom of a long list of the properties inventoried from the estate was the half acre of land and stream adjoining to "the old saw mill" along with the old mill¹⁸.



The upper dam, viewed from Bartlett Woodlot. The stone wall runs along the top of the earthen dam and the spillway is on the brook. The dam still forms a small pond on the same land that Abraham Parker gave to his son Moses in 1683.

John II's son John III was the administrator of his father's estate. He divided the small mill property among his three brothers, but two of the three did not want it^{19,20}. The third brother was Jonathan who, along with his wife Joanna, both became very sick for an extended period of time starting in late 1744. During that time, John loaned them money and provided "rum, shuger and bisket in the time of his sickness and her sickness". Because of his kindness, Joanna eventually recovered but Jonathan died in November 1745.

John likely acquired the remainder of the mill property²¹ to help pay debts from the estate. But once again, their father's saw mill itself was referred to in the past tense.

1748-1763 - John Parker III - The Innholder:

It isn't clear what happened to the small mill lot at the upper dam during the next few decades. What we do know is that Rev. Ebenezer Bridge owned the corn mill at the lower dam during that time and he referred in his diary years later in September 1771 to his workmen at "my upper damm".

Rev. Bridge and John Parker were friends and may have had an agreement regarding the property that was not recorded. John owned a popular inn and tavern in town²² and Rev. Bridge said in his diary that he often visited with him there. Rev. Bridge also regularly met there with the Selectmen following town meetings. Samples of Rev. Bridge's diary during 1753-1754 called it a place he dined, "Smoak'd a pipe" with the Selectmen and on occasion gathered there with Col. Stoddard's local military Company²³. Rev. Bridge was also John's pastor and was still with him on the day that John died in 1763²⁴.

Because the records are not clear, the following few sections focus on the grist mill on the property during the years it was owned by pastors Rev. Samson Stoddard prior to 1740 and after that by Rev. Bridge.

The Grist Mill (1741-1792)

1741-1745 - Samson Stoddard Estate (to) Rev. Ebenezer Bridge:

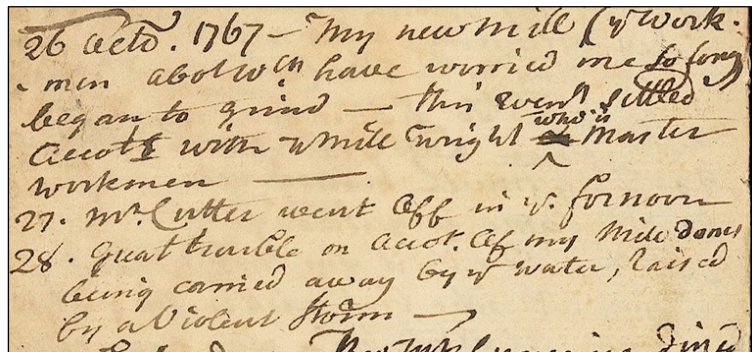
Rev. Samson Stoddard (1681-1740) was pastor of First Parish Church in Chelmsford Center from 1706 until his death in 1740. At that time, his estate included his dwelling house, barn and corn mill (on Beaver Brook)²⁵. His son-in-law, Ebenezer Bridge, followed him as pastor and purchased the 26 acre homestead in 1745. It included "all the buildings, fences, mills, dams, ponds & streams within its bounds". The deed gave the exact location of the grist mill as seven feet from the south end of the lower dam²⁶.

1745-1792 - Rev. Ebenezer Bridge's Mill:

Rev. Bridge was pastor of the Church from 1741 to 1792. It was clear from his diary that his priority was as pastor, but he did refer several times to his mill property and sometimes expressed frustration with his workmen. In several entries he said that he was afflicted, much hurried, tried, interrupted, and/or fatigued, mostly because the men interfered with his studies or in some other way with his pastoral work.

The effect of extreme weather events on the dams added to Rev. Bridge's worries, regardless of whether they just posed a threat or actually did do damage. On December 28, 1758 he was "very much disturbed" by the conduct of his miller, "by which the flood has torn my dams much"²⁷. He also noted that he "raised" his own new mill²⁸ on June 22, 1767 and began to grind on October 26, but after only two days the mill dam was carried away by water raised by a violent storm²⁹.

Rev. Bridge served the people of Chelmsford for more than fifty years. He died in 1792 and his son, Ebenezer Esq., administered the estate. During that process, Ebenezer Esq. acquired the homestead property, including the grist mill, house and barn³⁰. The 1794 Frederic French map of Chelmsford showed the grist mill on the brook³¹ but it did not show a saw mill in Center Village at that time.



Rev. Bridge's diary in Oct. 1767, the day his new mill began to grind

1811 - Ebenezer Bridge Esq. (to) Walter Hastings:

In 1810, Ebenezer Bridge Esq.'s sister, Lucretia (Bridge) Hastings, took him to court for debts he owed her³² going back years, very possibly related to their father's estate. Her son, Walter Hastings Esq., represented her successfully in the Massachusetts Court of Common Pleas where she was awarded a \$1,000 settlement.

Several of Ebenezer's properties were selected by a committee to sell at auction to pay his debt. They included his 100 acre homestead in Chelmsford with all its buildings, including the grist mill^{33,34}. To further show that they meant business, they also took possession of Pew No. 4 on the floor of the meeting house, which they valued at \$50 toward the debt.

A notice announcing the auction was posted at Azariah Spaulding and Pinheas Whitney's taverns in Chelmsford and at taverns in Carlisle and Westford. Walter Hastings, who had won the case for his mother, was also the highest bidder in the auction and he owned the entire 100 acres for the next three years.

Before long there would be both a grist mill and saw mill in operation again in Center Village. The following section addresses that period leading up to the construction of the mill house.

The Grist Mill & Saw Mill (1814-1856)

1814-1830 - Owners from Walter Hastings (to) Willard Reed:

The Grist Mill

1. Walter Hastings Esq. (to) Simeon Spaulding, Abijah Spaulding & Moses Hale (1814):

Six acres, including the grist mill that had been "used & occupied for the previous 20 years"³⁵.
2. a. Simeon Spaulding (to) William Fletcher Jr.: (1820)³⁶, then (to) Willard Reed (1830)³⁷.
- b. Abijah Spaulding (to) Jonathan Parker (1822)³⁸, then to Willard Reed (1828)³⁹.
- c. Moses Hale (to) Willard Reed (1828)⁴⁰.

The Saw Mill

1. Walter Hastings (to) Moses Hale (1815):

The farm in the middle of Chelmsford where Ebenezer Bridge had lived, except for six acres with the grist mill that had recently been sold⁴¹. Moses then built a dam, saw mill & dug a canal in 1816^{42,43}.
2. Moses Hale (to) Willard Reed (1822):

The saw mill, saw mill tools, apparatus & dam on 5 acres. Also, land for a road from the ministry land (today's Bridge St.) to the saw mill land⁴⁴.



Excerpt from 1856 Walling Map

c.1826 - The Saw Mill Moved to the Lower Dam

Rev. Wilson Waters in the 1917 History of Chelmsford book mentioned that the saw mill was moved from the upper dam to the lower dam nearer the Center Village "within the memory of persons living 25 years ago" (i.e., living c.1892)⁴⁵. That was confirmed when a small metal plate marked "Built 1826" was found during removal of the old mill building almost 100 years later in August 1923.

After the mill was in operation at the lower dam, the upper dam still remained in place, with deeds years later still referring to "ponds" on the premises⁴⁶. The pond formed by the upper dam was called the saw mill pond and the pond formed by the lower dam was called the grist mill pond. Above is an excerpt from the 1856 Walling Map of Middlesex County that showed both ponds.

1834 - Willard Reed to Alonzo Cutter:

In February 1834, Willard Reed sold both the saw mill and grist mill along with the associated land and mill apparatus to Alonzo Cutter, a merchant from Enfield in Central Massachusetts^{47,48}. The property boundaries and landmarks were described in detail in the deed.

A portion of the property line ran along the edge of the brook from the saw mill dam (upper dam) downstream, "easterly on the south of the brook and grist mill pond at highwater mark to a large rock with a "X" cut on it near the ledge". That ancient boundary mark that already existed in 1834 is still visible from the brook, approximately 220 feet downstream from the upper dam along the border of Bartlett Woodlot.

1836 - Property Ownership Returns Back to Willard Reed:

Alonzo Cutter had plans to move the mill operation to Maine, so in October 1835 he traveled to Maine to prepare to move the machinery that was valued at \$1,000⁴⁹. Meanwhile, back in Chelmsford an employee of Alonzo named Mr. Gardner was packing it up for shipment.

While Alonzo was away, there were problems in Chelmsford with the paperwork for the purchase. Several of Alonzo's creditors took the case



"X" marks the spot. The ancient landmark still visible from the Brook

to court^{50,51,52}, including Willard Reed⁵³, who offered unsuccessfully to allow Alonzo to provide enough wood to make 19,000 shingles to settle his portion of the debt. Alonzo tried to make the case that he had been "confined by sickness" while away, but by the time he returned, the property was sold off by his creditors. The ownership then returned to Willard, who held the mortgage.

1836 - Willard Reed (to) Robert Brinley:

Willard Reed assigned the mortgage to Robert Brinley Esq. in February 1836⁵⁴ and Robert owned the mills from 1836 to 1845.

1845 - Robert Brinley (to) George Aldrich:

Robert Brinley sold the saw mill and grist mill to George Aldrich in January 1845⁵⁵. When George obtained a \$900 mortgage for the property⁵⁶, there was no mention of a dwelling on the property.

1846 - George Aldrich Builds the Mill House:

On October 16, 1846, George Aldrich obtained a second mortgage for \$350⁵⁷ and this time the description of the property included a dwelling house. The \$350 was therefore likely the cost of building the mill house. It was located by the road at the entrance to the mill yard, with Moses Bickford on its south side and Charles Proctor on its north side. That description matches the 1856 map of Chelmsford Center (shown below) and has been the location of the mill house since then.

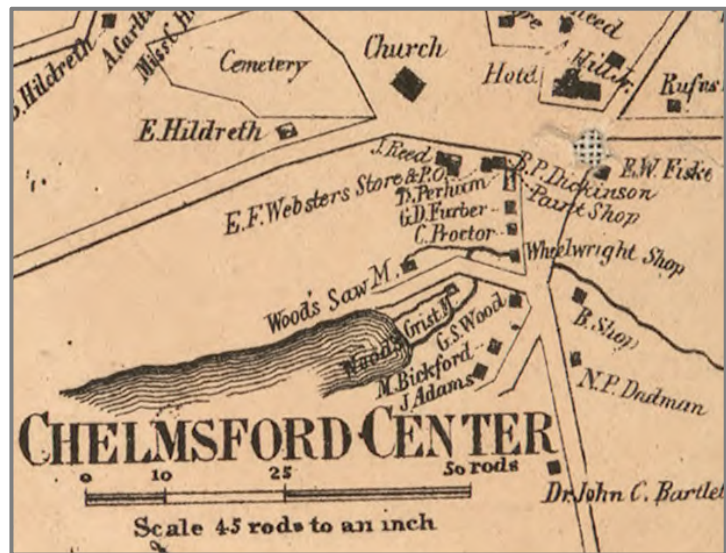
1847 - George Aldrich (to) S. Roundy:

In August 1847, Stephen Roundy from Marblehead purchased the grist mill, saw mill and dwelling house⁵⁸. He owned the property for two years.

1849 - Stephen Roundy (to) George Wood:

George Wood purchased the grist mill, saw mill and dwelling house in October 1849⁵⁹. He moved into the house⁶⁰ and was the owner for the next sixteen years.

The 1856 Walling Map of Middlesex County showed George Wood as the owner of the mills and house on the current site of the Old Mill House.



1856 Walling Map of Middlesex County, Chelmsford Center Insert
(Library of Congress)

The Mill House Today

The Old Mill House stands as a reminder of past generations of people who have contributed to the town's history and development. This document has been an effort look at some of those families that owned the property or portions of it during its early years and the circumstances by which it passed from owner to owner. Hopefully it adds a little to understanding and appreciating how the mills survived through the centuries.

Appendix

Neighbors of the Mill House Lot (c.1830's & 1840's)

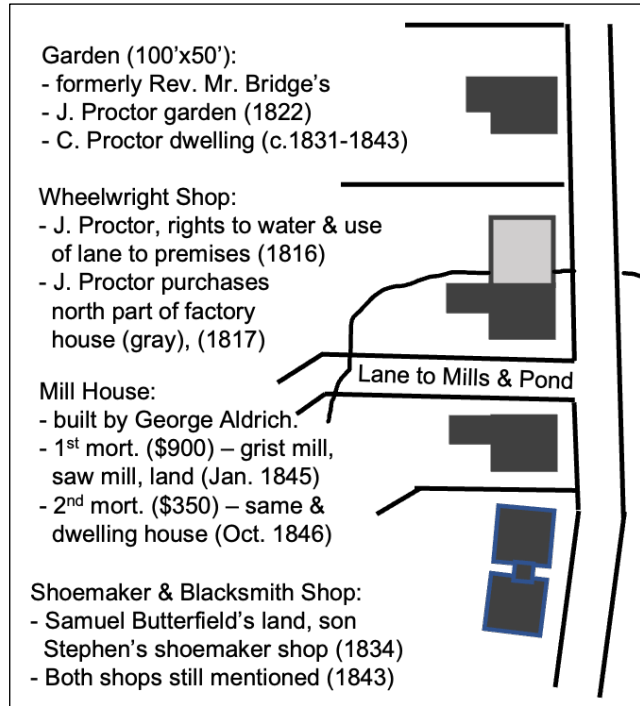
1). The Mill Lot:

Before the mill house was built, the mill property along the road was known as the "mill lot"⁶¹. The lane leading to the mill and pond, was on the north side of the lot (today's Cushing Lane). There apparently were some improvements to the lane not long before 1853, when it was referred to in a deed as the "new town road to the grist mill"⁶².

2). On the North Side:

The next property on the north side heading toward the Village Center, built directly over Beaver Brook, was Jonas Proctor's wheelwright shop. In April 1816, Jonas bought the land and water rights with authorization to build a dam on the site⁶³. He was also granted the privilege of using the mill lot lane to go to and from his premises as needed. One year later, Abijah Spaulding sold his title and interest in the two-floor north half of the "building or factory house" to Jonas⁶⁴. The entire structure was 35 feet long and 20 feet wide. The north half consisted of a 22'x20' bottom floor and a 17'x20'^v second floor.

On the north side of the factory house was a garden. It was formerly owned by Rev. Ebenezer Bridge and was one of the properties that Walter Hastings Esq. bought from his mother Lucretia in the lawsuit settlement mentioned above in the 1811 section. After Walter died in 1821, the garden lot was sold to Jonas Proctor⁶⁵. Jonas's son Charles eventually built a dwelling on the lot.



The Mill House & Neighbors (c.1830's-1840's)

3). On the South Side:

Heading south from the mill lot along the road was Stephen Butterfield's shoemaker shop and also a blacksmith shop. Stephen's father Samuel sold Willard Reed⁶⁶ the 25 acre farm there in 1834 that included the blacksmith shop and other buildings. The deed of sale stated that it was not including the shoe maker shop on the property but it reserved a privilege for Stephen to keep "his shop on the land where it already stood" as long as he was the occupant.

In 1837, Willard sold Joel Adams the 25 acre farm⁶⁷ and in 1843 he sold the quarter acre with both of the same shops and 108 feet of frontage on the road to Joseph Merriam⁶⁸ who then sold it to Samuel Wood in 1844⁶⁹.

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3. Waters, p.39
4. see notes 1 & 3 below
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7. MX PR 6:369-370
8. Ibid., 10:442
9. Ibid., 8:374
10. MX PR Paper #16625
11. MX Deeds 13:20
12. Ibid., 18:101-102
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14. MX Deeds 17:271-272
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Notes:

- 1). All years referenced are based on New Style. Prior to 1752, the new year started on March 25 (referred to as "Old Style"). In 1752, the Gregorian calendar was adopted with the new year started on January 1 (referred to as "new style").
- 2). Dates given for property transactions are actual sale dates, which usually preceded the recorded dates.
- 3). The deed was dated the 23rd day of the "eleventh month called January 1678" (1679 by today's calendar).

Acknowledgements:

- 1). Special thanks to Lucien Howard, who helped "explore" and photograph the area with me.
- 2). Thanks to Jack Handley for his advice regarding how to best share this document with the town of Chelmsford.

Dave Brown Info:

I retired as a Principal Engineer from Verizon Communications several years ago and currently live in Northbridge, MA. I am also the proud father of Mandi, who has been Manager at Old Mill House Coffee during the past year. I enjoy researching early New England history and it has been an honor to work on this project. I can be contacted by e-mail for any questions or comments at dwbrown144@gmail.com.