

## NOTES ON SOME WESTPORT MILLS

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### Taber/Gray Mill Complex

#### Saw & grist mills built ca1714

Often attributed to Philip Taber, supposedly built prior to his untimely death in 1692. Deeds and highway records show that the mill was not established until ca1714, likely built by Philip's son John Taber (1687-1727), whose homestead farm included the St. Vincent de Paul/WLCT property. While the will of John Taber does not mention a mill, his inventory includes numerous items associated with a mill, and the will of his son Philip Taber (1708-1780) leaves one half of a grist and saw mill to grandsons Reuben and Abner Taber, the other half to grandson Philip Davis, the latter also inheriting his great-grandfather's homestead farm to the north. The mills were sold out of the family in the late 1700s and for about the next fifty years had a series of joint owners.

The modern building, supposedly built in 1874, was --- if that date is correct --- constructed by John Church (1794-1882). Earlier in his life, working in concert with Providence architect John Holden Greene, Church founded the contracting firm of Church & Sweet and completed numerous public building projects (churches, city halls, etc) in the Providence area and others in the antebellum South. Church's most notable Little Compton construction was his house, "Old Acre" at the corner of Meetinghouse Lane and West Main Road, later expanded by his heiress granddaughter, Edith Church Burchard. John Church appears to have owned the mill complex as a sort of gentleman's retirement hobby. Philip Gray purchased the mills from Church's estate in the 1880s.

From the early 1700s on, deeds often referred to Adamsville Road as "the road to Taber's Mills," and the name was commonly used to refer the village itself, as the name Adamsville was not adopted until ca1840. In the Gray era, the mill building was U-shaped, with the open end facing the mill pond. The north wing, demolished in the 1920s, was the sawmill. The grist mill formed the middle section and the "cracking room" (now Gray's Daily Grind, the coffee shop) was the south wing.

The salt works were located southeast of the mill complex, in the area behind Gray's Store. These were constructed by the brothers Samuel & Ebenezer Church (only distantly related to John Church, but their sister Deborah, who married Warren Delano, was the great-grandmother of Franklin Delano Roosevelt). The Church brothers relocated from Fairhaven, and apparently conceived the salt works as a major part of their operations. While repairing damage to the salt works sustained in the Great Gale of 1815, Samuel Church was killed by a collapsing beam. Brother Ebenezer built what became known as the Abraham Manchester store/restaurant in 1820, taking on Philip Manchester (Abraham's father) as a clerk and then partner in the mid-1800s. According to John Hart, parts of the old salt works were used to build the rear ell to Gray's Store (where John Hart and his wife Marion, who was Philip Gray's granddaughter, lived for many years).

From the turn of the century until the 1930s, Gray's Store conducted the largest ice business in the area. Three ice houses were located across the road from the mill pond, in the area between the store and the "bake shop" (now offices, in the 1940s Sanford's Meat Market) to the north. Ice was cut from the mill pond and pulled up ramps across the causeway to the ice houses. An "alternate route" for diverted vehicle traffic existed in the area east of the mill/bake shop/ice houses for use during ice harvesting time

when the causeway was blocked. The ice houses were destroyed by flooding from the 1938 hurricane. There was also an ice house to the rear of Abraham Manchester's, but in this one area of the grocery business, as in few others, the genial and diffident Jimmy Gray outperformed his hard-driving, single-minded competitor Abe Manchester.

## **Lawton Mill Complex**

### **Saw and grist mills built by 1752, possibly ca1730; box mill built before 1860**

Located east of Gifford Road in the area opposite to and southeast of the Ferry farm. This complex was started by one of the original "mill men" mentioned in Dartmouth Proprietors' Records, George Lawton (1669-1752). Lawton's homestead was located at the intersection of Rt 177 and Sodom Road. With his fellow mill men Benjamin Waite and John Tripp, he participated in the earlier "Waite's mill" located upstream from this site, but by the 1730s appears to have decided to build his own mills here. The 1752 will of George Lawton devised to his son John "my mills and mill lot and the housing there." By 1773 this property, 45 acres and 110 rods, including land both "under and above water" and "land drowned by water" was owned by Jacob Chase (3/4 share) and Philip Howland (1/4 share), the conveyances also including a "dwelling house, a grist mill and appurtenances, a saw mill and appurtenances, a blacksmith shop and a corn house."

Numerous deeds from the late 1700s call the south end of Gifford Road "the road from the Country Road [Old County Road] to Lawton's mills." 19 century maps show a mill pond of impressive dimensions, making some other Westport mill ponds seem mere puddles in comparison. 19<sup>th</sup> century deeds mention the hoe factory owned by Edward S. Gifford located at the north end of the mill pond, indicating a northeastward extension of the mill pond almost to Forge Road. A box mill is shown south of the grist and saw mills on the 1871 map inset. By mid-century the complex was partly owned by Alden T. Sisson (1821-1911), who is listed as a "box maker" in the 1860 and 1870 census. In 1860 the Sisson family shared a house with the family of Thomas J. Allen, whose occupation was "miller" and was another part-owner of the complex. A prior part owner was Christopher A. Church (1811-1874), who lived at 472 Old County Road. A great-great grandson of Col. Benjamin Church, Christopher was a merchant who supposedly partnered with his wealthy neighbor Peleg W. Peckham in a number of business ventures. More research on the rather complicated chain of title for this property in the 1800s might yield further clues as to the activities pursued there.

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century the mill ownership was divided into shares as small as 1/6<sup>th</sup>. Some owners from this period include Stephen Howland, Pardon Gifford, Benjamin Cummings, Peleg W. Peckham and Daniel Macomber.

## **Waite et al/Devol/Tripp/Rotch/Gifford Mill Complex**

### **Saw mill (south side of river?) likely built by 1714; grist mill (north side of river?) built by 1773**

The three original Westport “mill men” (Benjamin Waite, George Lawton and John Tripp) were granted land by the Dartmouth Proprietors in 1714 to establish a saw mill. The mill may already have been in existence, as those records also show a grant in the same year to William Wood (the northern abutter of “the sawmill land”) and mention that Wood’s land in part was bounded by the north side of a mill pond. The total size of the sawmill land, granted in three installments, was 77 acres and 50 rods.

The location of this mill complex was north of Reed Road about one third of a mile northeast of its intersection with Forge Road (Worth). Reed Road in early deeds was called “the way to Waite’s mills.” Originally the complex appears to have included only a sawmill. In 1719 John Tripp (son of Westport settler James Tripp) sold his interest in the sawmill to partner George Lawton, land in “Acoaxet Village” which included “a sawmill, saws, dogs [logs?], mauls, dam and timber.”

Benjamin Waite (1690-1772), son of Westport settlers Reuben & Tabitha (Lounders) Waite, was one of the original mill men. Either Benjamin, a carpenter by trade, or his brother Thomas Waite was the builder of the oldest section of the Waite-Potter House. See Beranek & Johnson, “Recent Archaeological Excavations at the Waite-Kirby-Potter House Site,” WHS blog 2/2/2015. Benjamin Waite was declared non compos mentis in 1749, with guardians appointed, although he appears to have retained some measure of lucidity, as he executed numerous deeds and drafted a will after that date. Mill operations appear to have been taken over by his nephew Samuel Waite some years prior to his incapacity, as in 1732 the Dartmouth Proprietors made an additional grant of 50 acres “adjoining the sawmill land” to Samuel. George Lawton is not mentioned in this grant, perhaps indicating that he had already established his downstream mills by that date.

In 1748 Benjamin Waite purchased from William Reed, a merchant of Newport, 25.75 acres, on the north side of the Country Road, bounded south by the Country Road, north by George Lawton’s mill lot, east by “a way that goes from the landing place up into the woods to Wait’s mill” [Reed Road] and west by “a way to George Lawton’s mill” [Gifford Road].” This land was a small part of the 242 acre parcel owned originally by the Westport settlers Christopher & Robert Gifford, stretching along the north side of Old County Road from a point west of Gifford Road easterly to the area opposite the Pine Hill Road intersection. This deed is recited here because it clearly shows the orientation of the roads and their existence by that date.

In 1773 Stephen Waite sold to John Davel (Devol) a  $\frac{3}{4}$  part of “a grist or grinding mill, a sawmill, stream, dwelling house and all of grantor’s land located east and southeast of the river”. At the same time Waite sold to Benjamin Davel (grandfather of Ruby Devol Finch) the remaining quarter share of the mills and all land west and north of the river. In 1776 the Devols sold their interest in the mills to James Tripp (1757-1800), a great-grandson of Westport settler Joseph Tripp and a first cousin twice-removed of original mill man John Tripp. For some years thereafter these mills, previously referred to as “Waite’s mills,” were known as “Tripp’s mills.”

In 1796 James Tripp sold the mill property, 20 acres, to the merchant William Rotch Jr of New Bedford, including the grantor’s dwelling house, a grist mill, saw mill, and one third part of a forge, cole [coal?] house, forge storehouse and the west part of a blacksmith shop. The metes and bounds description

begins at the SE corner at a highway (Reed Road), then N 92.5 rods to the N side of the mill pond, then W along the pond or mill stream until it comes to the grist mill [presumably the saw mill was on the S side of the stream, which would be consistent with 19<sup>th</sup> century maps], then W along the middle of the river until the line reached the Forge Pond, then W along the “third part” [?] of the Forge Pond until the line reached the Forge Dam, then W by the middle of the stream to the NW corner of this parcel, then E along the highway [Forge Road + Reed Road?] to the SE corner point of beginning.

The heirs of William Rotch Jr sold the mills, without the forge, to Anthony Gifford, a master mariner, in 1850. Gifford established his “rule factory” on land downstream from the mills, between the river and Reed Road. In 1869 Anthony’s widow Deborah C. Gifford sold the property, then 15 acres, in a deed including a sawmill, gristmill, dwelling house and a “turner’s shop” to William Trafford and other owners of the Westport Manufacturing Company. The property at this point was more or less triangular, its sides formed by Forge Road, Reed Road and the river.

### **Case/Lawton Grist Mill**

#### **Built by 1765**

Located along Sam Tripp brook at 1165 Drift Road. Built by Isaac Case (1688-1772), who purchased the property from Christopher Gifford [Jr] in 1749. The will of Isaac Case, drafted in 1765, mentions the grist mill on his homestead farm. The 1779 will of Isaac’s son William Case also mentions the grist mill, which was inherited by William’s sons. In 1839 the mill property was sold by Wanton, Restcome and Waity Case to George L. Lawton (1804-1893). Deeds of the mid-1800s sometimes refer to this section of Drift Road as “the way to Lawton’s mill.” The mill is shown on the 1858 map on the south side of the brook, and its absence on the 1871 and 1895 maps may indicate that it ceased operation by that time. Lawton had milling in his blood, both his grandfather (John Lawton) and great-grandfather (George Lawton) had owned the Lawton mills at the Head. The deed to Lawton retained for all descendants of William Case (in Little Compton I knew many people who were William Case descendants) the privilege of burial in the graveyard (WSP 884), which was located in part of the orchard, and the privilege of moving the west wall of the graveyard by 10 feet if additional burial space became necessary.

### **Gifford/Wing Grist Mill**

#### **Built by 1800**

Located west of Horseneck Road at an area called “the dell” or “the gorge” and close to the east shore of the East Branch, as shown on the 1858 map. In 1800 Abraham Gifford and Stephen Gifford, both yeomen of Dartmouth, sold for \$800 to David Wing, yeoman of Westport, an “overshot grist mill” with dams and appurtenances. The mill had been erected, presumably by the Giffords, on the land of Edward Wing Jr. Some of the dams were upstream on land owned by David Wing (1743-1814), and the land surrounding the mill itself had been sold “a few days previously” by Edward Wing Jr to David Wing (no such deed appears in the indices). The will of David Wing, drafted in 1810, left sons David Jr and Charles Wing all of the testator’s homestead farm and grist mill. Other deeds, both before and after this 1800 transaction, might yield further clues to the mill’s history.

This branch of the Gifford family, the brothers Abraham (1759-1852) and Stephen Gifford (1753-ca1811) were not done with connections to mills. Stephen's grandson Edward S. Gifford was the proprietor of the "hoe factory" (formerly the forge) and Stephen's son Capt Anthony Gifford around 1850 established the "rule factory" upstream from the forge.

### **Mouse Mill/Shingle Mill/Carriage Material Factory**

#### **Built by 1842**

Located on the north side of Mouse Mill Road near the Gifford Road intersection, the origins of this mill are unclear. In 1842 Orrin Macomber sold to Howard P. Tripp an 8 acre parcel of land "where the shingle mill now stands" and included the mill and mill pond. Some years later Tripp built a house on the north part of this property at 345 Gifford Road. In 1847 Tripp sold a shingle mill "called the Mouse Mill" to George H. Gifford, including machinery, appurtenances and water privileges. On the 1871 map it is shown as the George H. Gifford "Carriage Material Mfy," and supposedly Gifford manufactured carriage wheel spokes here.

Gifford was a jack-of-all trades, engaged in probating many estates, acting as a justice of the peace, and manufacturing coffins. The barn behind his house at 498 Old County Road reportedly served as Westport's first "funeral parlor" --- presumably Gifford, a staunch "temperance man," would have prohibited any tipping at the post-burial receptions.

Further research into Orrin Macomber's chain of title might yield additional clues to the Mouse Mill's origins. Macomber purchased the property, originally 79+ acres, from Humphrey D. Howland (whose mother Rhoda likely built the Stone House but never gets the credit), and the same property was sold in 1809 by Abner Devol --- whose father was part-owner of Waite's mills in the 1770s --- to Humphrey Howland (who is generally credited with building the Stone House, despite dying at least 3 years prior to its construction). Both of the two above deeds retained a privilege of burial in the graveyard, which perhaps referred to WSP 886 (Brawley-Reynolds), as this property had a long frontage on Gifford Road in its original 79 acre configuration.

### **Forge/Hoe Factory/Westport Manufacturing Mill #2**

#### **Forge built ca1789; numerous subsequent additions/alterations to ca1795 granite mill building**

A recitation of the whole megillah of this property history would require a treatise, which will not be attempted here, but its origins can be explained with relative simplicity. In 1789 Benjamin Devol, grandfather of Ruby Devol Finch and in times past a part-owner of Waite's mills located upstream from the forge, sold to Lemuel Milk and William Gifford a 2 acre property "to build a forge." This property was "a little downstream from James Tripp's mills" and refers to the "forge dam," apparently already built, as part of the boundary. The relatively low sale price, 15 pounds, indicates that little had been done to improve the property before this sale. When Lemuel Milk sold his half of the same property five

years later to John Avery Parker, the sale price was 180 pounds, and included the dam, the forge and a "cole house."

Two curious provisions of the Devol deed, to be repeated over the years in several other deeds, deserve mention. The first, and the hardest to determine the purpose of, is a provision using as a point of reference a rock inscribed with the number "2" located upstream from the forge in the middle of the river. The buyers were prohibited from raising the forge pond high enough to still the water in the river, in times of normal flow, more than 8 rods upstream from the marked rock.

There are two possible explanations for such a provision I can think of. Perhaps this restriction would prevent interference with the operation of Tripp's upstream mills. A second and more proximate explanation is perhaps found in a 1795 conveyance from Benjamin Devol to Isaac Tripp, blacksmith --- probably the Isaac Tripp who was the son of miller James, although there were a number of Isaac Tripps in Westport at the time --- which appears to be for land on the north and west sides and upstream of the forge pond, including buildings and one half of a "stream of water between James Tripp's corn mill and the bounds of the forge lot or pond with all ye land that will cover [i.e. will be covered?] to make a dam for works to go by water." Whether this contemplated dam was ever built is unknown, Tripp sold his water rights (but not land) to William Rotch Jr, who appears to have owned eventually all of the stream privileges from Waite's mills to the forge, excepting perhaps whatever water rights attached to the Timothy Macomber/Barnea Devol/Paul Cuffe "machine lot," which was upstream from the Devol/Tripp property but below Waite's mills.

The other provision of the Devol forge deed was a perpetual license to take earth from the hill located northwest of the forge dam (the hill was on property retained by Devol, conveyed as stated above to Isaac Tripp) in order to make repairs or improvements to the forge dam.

William Gifford (b.1755) lived in the ca1795 house at 5 Drift Road . His sons Abner B. & Adam Gifford, and grandson Jonathan Peckham Gifford, who sold the town the land upon which the Bell School was built, were to be prominent figures at the Head. Lemuel Milk (1747-1820) most likely built the house at 497 Old County Road, and appears to have partnered with John Avery Parker in a number of projects. Gifford & Milk took in as a partner Josiah Leonard from Taunton, who had some experience as a forge man.

## **Borden Sawmill**

### **Built by 1851**

In 1851 Jonathan Borden sold to his son Christopher Borden a 150 acre farm in Cranberry Neck, partly in Tiverton and partly in Westport, including a sawmill, dwelling house and outbuildings. This land appears to have been in the Borden family for several generations, although earlier deeds, perfunctory in form, do not mention a sawmill. On some 19<sup>th</sup> century maps a cider mill is shown to the northeast of the sawmill, but the cider mill appears closer to the house of Peleg S. Sanford and may have been a part of his property instead of on the Borden farm. Henry Worth claimed that the Borden sawmill was in operation by 1817, and his opinions are generally vindicated.

## **Wordell Brothers Sawmill**

### **Built by 1783**

In 1785 Phineas Wodell (Phineas Wordell), in a deed to his brother Gershom Wodell 2d for a 180 acre lot originally laid out to Increase Allen, bounded N on the Tiverton [later Fall River] line, located on the W and S sides of “the Road to Bread & Cheese Brook” [Old Bedford Road], retained for himself ½ part of a sawmill and ½ part of a dam and pond, “with a privilege for a mill yard for loading logs & stuff on the south side of the logway, with the privilege to pass from the highway to the sawmill.” In 1823 in a division deed for the heirs of Phineas Wordell, one parcel was a 5 acre property with “a mill privilege in Westport. . .that has been used and occupied for forty years or more, lastly by Phineas Wordell and Gershom Wordell, deceased.” The larger parcel, not mentioning a sawmill, was purchased by Phineas with his brothers Thomas and Silas in 1783 from Seth Allen.

It is possible that this was the site of a much earlier mill, referred to as “the New Sawmill” in Dartmouth Proprietors records, already established in 1715 and located on “the westernmost arm of the Noquechoke River” when a grant of 9 acres was made to millmen Samuel Cornell, William Soule, John Kirby, Joseph Russell Sr, William Sherman and Josiah Merrihew. There are several others contenders for the site of “the New Sawmill.”