

Fragments: Water powered mills in Gloucester, Massachusetts

Compiled by Jane W. Mead

The original intent of this study was to identify the location and first privilege-holders of colonial-era water-powered mills in Gloucester. It was never intended to be a narrative but rather a collection of bits of information that might be of interest to local historians. The material was taken from the 19th century transcript of the 17th and 18th century Town Records, Volumes I & II, located in the City of Gloucester Archives. Additional fragments were added from inventories of streets and roads, Gloucester City Directories, the histories of Babson and Pringle, the survey published by the Massachusetts Historical Commission – the time frame spread into the 19th and a bit of the 20th century. There is a gap in the research between the dates of the Town Records and the mid-19th century City Directories. I did not consult the Assessors' records, which would be a valuable additional resource.

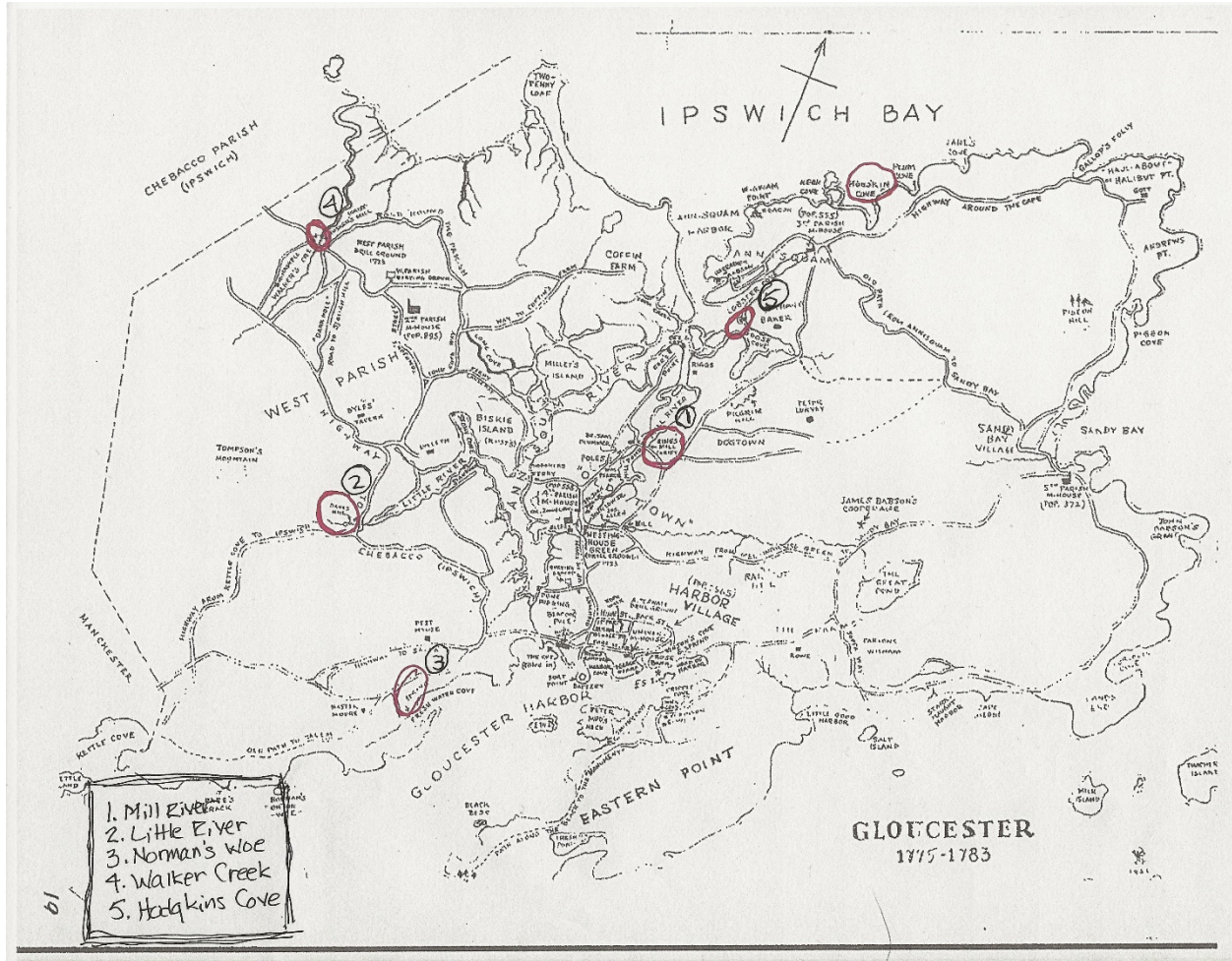
The information is arranged by watershed and then chronologically. Mills in what is now Rockport are not included.

The complete set of “fragments” from which this post was derived, are available through [NOBLE Digital Heritage - Gloucester](#). In the Fragments, I kept the original spellings of the Town Records, which makes a word search pretty difficult. The sources are indicated in abbreviated form with each statement and more fully at the end of each collection of texts. Almost all of the source materials are available at the City Archives or the Cape Ann Museum Archives. Both institutions have online catalogs from which the originals can be located.

Water Powered Mills

The first mills built as towns settled were saw and grist mills, erected to provide food and shelter. The sawmills were likely to have been so-called up/down mills, illustrated here: [Ledyard Up/Down Sawmill](#). Grist mill technology was more advanced. Master millers were recruited from Europe to set the mills up and mill stones might be imported. This video of the [Sudbury Mill](#) shows some of the workings of a New England grist mill from the late 18th century.

Where Were Gloucester's Colonial-era Mills?

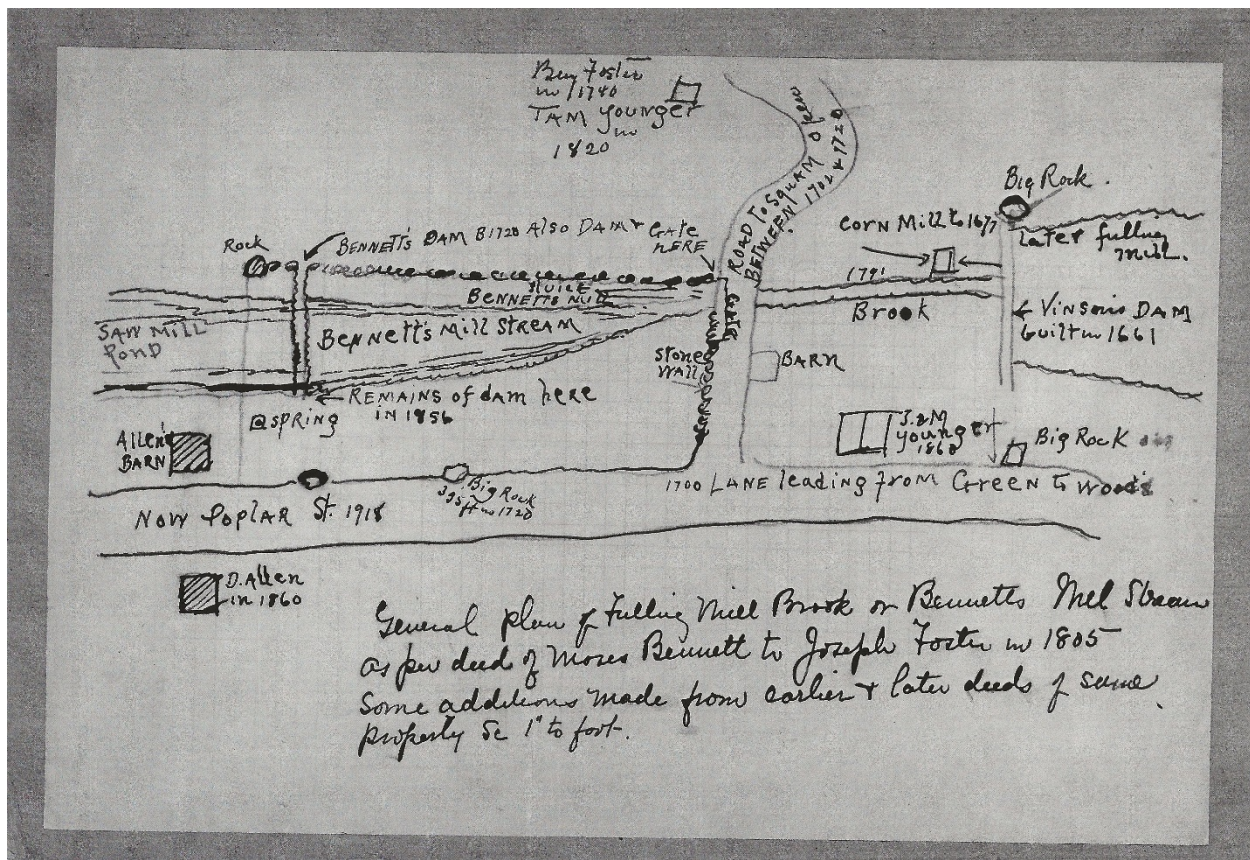


1. Mill River

- 1652 Mill River. First known sawmill on Cape Ann at the western end of Cape Pond. ¹
- 1664 – mill pond and stream granted to Rev. Emerson condition that he maintain a corn mill such that it could grind for the use of the town.
- 1677 – Emerson et al to erect a corn mill and were required to repair the old sawmill. Neither was accomplished. After Emerson's death, rapid succession of owners with disputes over upstream water withdrawals and passage of alewives.

The story jumps to the lengthy argument over common rights:

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- 1881 – City Clerk John Somes documents lengthy court cases and finding in favor of John Bennet allowing fish passage and adequate water for his mill.
- 1925 – Remaining mill buildings on Mill River were torn down.

2. Little River

- 1682 – Jacob Davis and others were granted the first stream privilege on Little River.
- 1685 – Davis was given liberty to cut enough logs on the town common to make 10,000 feet of boards per year.
- 1830 – the site of a mill on Little River is noted on John Mason's map but the ownership is unclear.
- 1851 -- Walling map shows a sawmill and mill pond owned by members of the Bray family.
- 1969 – West Gloucester Water Treatment plant built on or near the site of the Davis mill.



Davis-Freeman House, believed to be the site of the Davis Mill. Photo – Alice Curtis

3. Norman's Woe, Kettle and Freshwater Coves

- 1685 – J. Parsons, et al granted privilege of stream in the Town Common between Kettle and Freshwater Coves. They were given the right to cut logs on the Town Common to make up to 15,000 feet of boards if residents didn't bring enough wood to be sawn to keep the mill in business.
- 1693 – privilege forfeited to Jos. Allan and others
- 1703 J. Sargent, J. Parsons R. Doliver & N. Parsons constructed a sawmill on Norman's Oh.
- Ships were reputed to pull into Freshwater Cove to replenish their water supplies.
- The site of this mill is no longer shown on any maps.

4. Walker's Creek, Haskell's Brook

- 1690 – Wm. & Mark Haskell granted privilege to construct a corn mill. In exchange, they were to maintain the bridge over Walker's Creek and the road to Ipswich. Although their mills were on the Mill River on other side of the Annisquam River and in disrepair, all three owners objected to Haskell's privilege. The Haskell's prevailed.

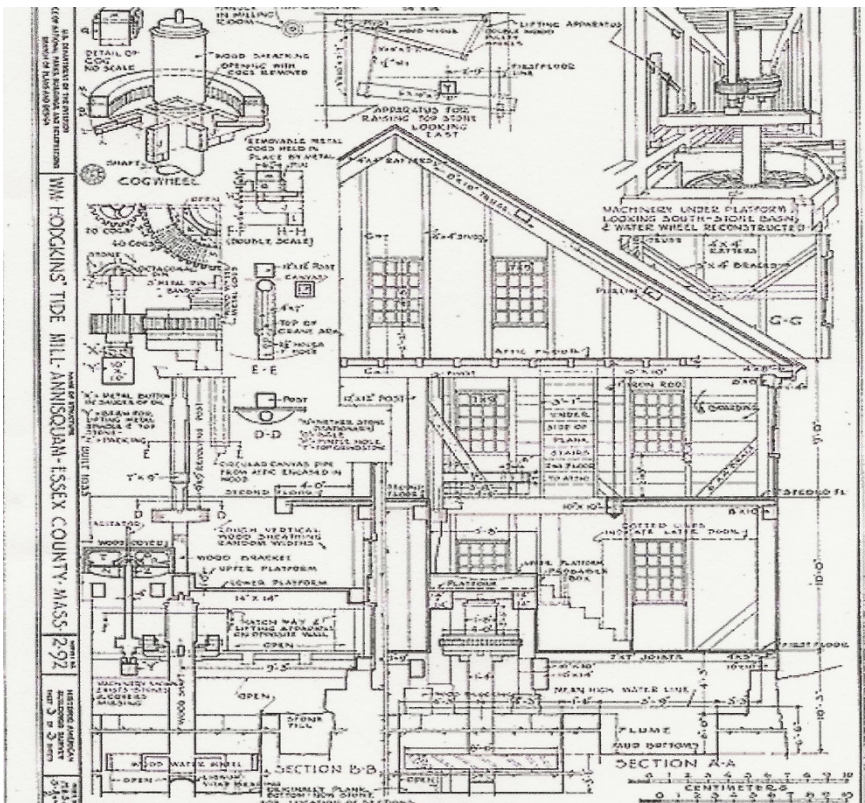
- 1823 – Burnham’s Corn mill, a tide mill, is located on the site of Haskell’s mill.
- Members of the Haskell family built saw and grist mills further upstream. The foundations are intact, with Route 133 built over the remains of Abram’s mill.
- The mill pond and the spillway for the Burnham/Haskell tide mill are still visible at low tide.



Burnham’s Corn Mill, spillway and mill pond. Google Earth, 2015

5. Hodgkin’s Cove (Hogskin Cove)

- 1701 – John Harridan was given the privilege of the stream to Hogskin Cove
- 1702 – Harridan constructed his sawmill and was given the right to sell sawn boards out of town (a right rarely given)
- 1833 – Construction of a causeway over Goose Cove. The causeway functioned as a dam for a tide mill.
- 1834 – A tide mill was constructed. It was documented through the Depression-era Historic American Building Survey [Hodgkin's Tide Mill](#) and is still standing:



Hodgkin's Tide Mill works. Library of Congress.

Dennison Street

There isn't a lot of information available, but what appear to be remnants of a spillway are visible on the eastern side of Goose Cove.

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