

VILLAGE MILLS OF THE TOWNSHIPS

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Most of the oldest villages in the Eastern Townships owe their start to the presence of a mill. Sherbrooke (Hyatt's Mills), Cowansville (Ruiter's Mills), and Rock Island (Kilborn's Mills) are a few that come to mind. Other communities, like Denison's Mills, Way's Mills, and Kinnear's Mills owe their very names to the original mill owners. Grist mills, sawmills, and woolen mills were built along rivers and streams wherever there was a flow of water sufficient to power a wheel. Mills were essential for survival, and the miller was an important man in any community.

Grist Mills:

Some of the oldest surviving mills in the Townships are grist mills. The grist mill was where grain was ground. Before there were grist mills, settlers ground their grain by hand. This was time-consuming, inefficient, and made for lumpy porridge and bread. The grist mill was a major advancement. Most were built beside streams, where dams could be built to regulate water flow, or by a waterfall, where the flow of water could turn a paddle wheel, which was connected via an elaborate system of gears and shafts to a pair of mill stones. Grain was put between two millstones, crushed, and ground into flour. The waterwheel was a simple and cheap source of power. One of the earliest grist mills in the Townships was built by Nicholas Austin in 1793 at the outlet of Lake Memphremagog.

Sawmills:

A sawmill was often the second mill built in a settlement. Before there were sawmills, settlers constructed dwellings out of logs and hand-hewn planks. But once sawmills were built, milled boards and planks were in great demand. By 1830, there were over thirty sawmills in Sherbrooke County alone.

Woolen Mills:

Sheep were essential to pioneer life. Their fleece was used to produce wool. Sheared each spring, the wool was washed of its natural grease and dirt, combed, and finally carded. Carding was the untangling of the fibres. By hand, it was a time-consuming pastime.

As the number of sheep on farms grew, and following a wave of Scottish migration to the area in the mid-19th Century (which increased the number of sheep farmers in the Townships), woolen or carding mills were built to handle the growing demand. With the advent of these mills, settlers could now bring their fleece to be processed, carded, and rolled in bundles for use on their spinning wheels and looms back home. Carding mills were the forerunners of the great industrial textile mills that are still evident in a number of towns and cities, mills such as the Paton Manufacturing Company of Sherbrooke which, in its time, was the largest textile mill in Canada.

Today very few pioneer mills remain in the Townships. The ones that do survive represent an important part of our built heritage. The following tour covers most of the better preserved village mills in the region.

1)

NAME: Cornell Mill (Missisquoi Museum)

LOCATION: Stanbridge East

RIVER: Pike (aux Brochets)

DATE: 1830

DESCRIPTION: Brick. 3 storeys. An annex houses reception, offices, storage, and a boutique. The external mill wheel is a modern replica, but parts of the original mechanism are still visible in the basement of the mill.

HISTORY: The Cornell Mill is the oldest surviving mill in the Townships. Originally a grist mill, it was built by Zebulon Cornell in 1830 and functioned until 1963. In 1964, the Missisquoi Historical Society purchased the property and transformed it into the Missisquoi Museum. The museum's three floors feature permanent and temporary exhibitions on regional history, with emphasis on the area's Loyalist heritage.

NOTES: The museum and the village of Stanbridge East are well worth a visit. Admission charge. Info: (450) 248-3153

- 1) Cornell Mill (Missisquoi Museum) in summer.
- 2) A welcoming staff
- 3) The mill during winter
- 4) The water wheel
- 5) Sign and cannon
- 6) Interior view of Hodge's Store, up the street from the mill
- 7) Curator Heather Darch in the boutique
- 8) The village from Hodge's Store (left)

2)

NAME: Freligh Mill

LOCATION: Frelighsburg

RIVER: Pike (aux Brochets)

DATE: 1839

DESCRIPTION: Fieldstone. 2 ½ storeys. A large New England-style mill.

HISTORY: A mill has stood on this site since the 1790s. In 1800, the property was purchased by Abram Freligh, after whom the town is named. A well-to-do physician from New York state, Freligh arrived with his wife, 10 children, servants and goods. To transport the entire household, it is said, took a double team of oxen 22 trips. Freligh died six months after his arrival. It was his son Richard who built the impressive grist mill that we see today. Unlike in the earlier mill, the wheel in the new mill was placed on the inside, allowing for year-round work. The mill first provided electricity to the village in 1911. In 1912, a bakery was installed in a large wooden annex. The mill operated until 1964, when a flood destroyed the dam, depriving it of water. The mill was then converted to a warehouse. Since 1967, it has been a private residence. It was classified a historic site in 1973.

NOTES: Private property. Frelighsburg, a charming village built around the falls of the Pike River, boasts some splendid historic buildings. The river drops about 25 feet at the mill site.

- 1) Freligh Mill
- 2) Mill entrance. Note the mill stone to the right of the door.
- 3) Mill from upstream
- 4) General store
- 5) View from the bridge

3)

NAME: Huntingville Mill

LOCATION: In Huntingville village. Just West of Rte. 147, within view of the bridge.

RIVER: Ascot

DATE: 1939

DESCRIPTION: Clapboard. Cement foundation. 2 storeys.

HISTORY: The history of Huntingville is closely connected to the Hunting family and the mills

that they built. The settlement began in 1815, when Seth Hunting bought 200 acres of land here. Seth's brother William built the first dam, with a grist mill on the north side of the river and a sawmill on the south side. A second sawmill was built next to the grist mill in 1897. In 1904, descendant William K. Hunting built a new wooden dam to replace the old stone one built by his ancestors. In 1939, Kenneth Hunting, another descendant, built a planing mill on the site of the original sawmill. It is this mill that we see today. Kenneth Hunting also built the present concrete dam. After the mills on the south bank were destroyed by fire in 1960, the company, Hunting & Sons, set up shop on the opposite side of Rte. 147. The mill is presently owned by Cascades Paper, and provides power to Hydro-Québec.

NOTES: Private property. Huntingville is a beautiful spot and a favourite subject for photographers. The splendid Universalist Church and one-room schoolhouse are located within view of the mill.

CAUTION: Motorists should be careful, because Huntingville is located at a dangerous curve.

- 1) Huntingville Mill, summer
- 2) Huntingville mill, winter
- 3) Sheds
- 4) Ice under the dam
- 5) Huntingville Universalist Church

4)

NAME: Moe's River Sawmill

LOCATION: Moe's River

RIVER: Moe

DATE: 1961

DESCRIPTION: Clapboard. 2 storeys.

HISTORY: According to local historian, Shirley Haseltine Paton, there was a sawmill in Moe's River as early as 1850. It was located at almost the exact spot of the present sawmill. In the early days, says Haseltine, it was customary to pay for every three boards sawn at the mill with a fourth board "in kind." The mill changed hands many times over the years, and was damaged and rebuilt following several fires and floods. In 1961, a fire reduced it to ashes. Owner Gerald Haseltine rebuild it with the help of a local builder, and operated until 1969. Eventually the mill was purchased by Haseltine's son Ronald. In the 1980s, a decline in the demand for lumber among area farmers, together with an increasing use of new construction materials and portable sawmills, signalled the demise of the sawmill in many villages. Moe's River was no exception. Today, this relatively recent, but old-style sawmill still functions, but only occasionally and strictly for the personal use of its owner. The interior water wheel is no longer functional, and a gasoline engine powers the saws when needed.

NOTES: Private property.

- 1) The sawmill, winter
- 2) The mill
- 3) Moe's River
- 4) Signpost
- 5) Brass plaque on the church steeple: "We Welcome All"

5)

NAME: Legendre Grist Mill

LOCATION: 1.3 km NW of Stornoway on S side of Rte 161.

RIVER: Legendre

DATE: 1883

DESCRIPTION: Clapboard. 2 storeys.

HISTORY: Built by Téléspore Legendre in 1883 to replace an earlier mill on the same spot, the

Legendre Mill ground flour for local people until about 1940. In order to avoid icing up during the cold winter months, Legendre placed the mill wheel on the inside.

NOTES: A picturesque spot. Private property.

- 1) Legendre Mill, during a snowstorm
- 2) Note the oculus in the attic

6)

NAME: Bernier Mill

LOCATION: Courcelles

RIVER: des Bleuets (Blueberry)

DATE: c.1865

DESCRIPTION: Clapboard. 2 storeys. Mansard roof. Traditional French Canadian architecture, rare for a mill in the Eastern Townships.

HISTORY: This former mill, built c.1865 by a Mr. Morin, was at the heart of industrial and commercial life in the village for generations, producing shingles, construction material, and later flour. Flour was milled until 1957, and the sawmill functioned into the 1980s. Designated a historic site in 1991, when the municipality acquired it from its then owner, Gérard Bernier, the mill, completely restored in 2002-2003, now contains an interpretation centre as well as community and tourist facilities. The mill's turbine has been restored.

NOTES: The nearby log dam was built at the same time as the mill. Admission charge. Info: (418) 483-5524

- 1) Moulin Bernier
- 2) The dam
- 3) During restoration work, January 2003.

7)

NAME: Groleau Carding Mill

LOCATION: 518 Rang 5 Sud, East Broughton.

RIVER: Roy Brook

DATE: 1941

DESCRIPTION: Shingle siding; 2 storeys. Mansard roof. French Canadian architecture.

HISTORY: The first mill on this site was a sawmill built by François Vachon around 1853. Purchased by Edmond Gosselin, it burned in 1895 but was rebuilt. In 1911, it was purchased by Ernest Plante, who built a new dam in 1921 and added mill stones for grinding flour. In time, the Plantes turned to carding wool, which at that time supplied the material for most blankets and 60% of the clothing people wore – mittens, coats, and hats. In 1931, the mill passed to Plante's daughter, Ernestine, and her husband Amédé Groleau. A fire levelled the mill in 1941, but it was once again rebuilt. This time, its sole vocation was carding wool, which Ernestine continued to do until 1973. Eventually the mill was sold to the local historical society which turned it into an interpretation centre, but in 1996, it was sold back to Alain Leclerc, the adoptive son of Ernestine. During the summer months, Leclerc and his family operate the mill as an interpretation centre. Wool is still carded on site, and the massive interior 18-foot mill wheel as well as the original carding machinery are still in use. A canal channels water to the mill from a dam upstream.

NOTES: A private for-profit interpretation centre, the Groleau Mill also features a summer theatre and picnic facilities. Admission charge. Info: (418) 427-2834.

- 1) Groleau Carding Mill during summer. (Photo courtesy of Moulin à carder Groleau)
- 2) The mill during winter
- 3) Sign
- 4) Wool carding machinery
- 5) On the first floor

- 6) The mill wheel
- 7) The mill wheel, from below
- 8) The milling mechanism

8)

NAME: Denison Grist Mill

LOCATION: Denison Mills (5 km N. of Richmond on Rte. 116; then 2 km E. on Lac Denison Rd.)

RIVER: Outlet of Lake Denison

DATE: 1850s

DESCRIPTION: Clapboard. 2½ storeys. A roof overhang on the west side sheltered a block and tackle for hoisting grain.

HISTORY: Denison Mill was classified a historic site in 1973. It is built of local materials, but the architecture reflects the American origins of the builders, Simeon Minor Denison and his son Joseph Root Denison. The mill was once the heart of a flourishing community that also included a blacksmith, cheese factory, general store, harness shop, saw mill (also built by the Denisons), school, and post office. Today the hamlet is almost a ghost town. The Anglican Church, grist mill, and two houses are all that remain. The mill, whose turbine functioned until 1963, is now a private home.

NOTES: Private property.

- 1) Denison Mill during winter. Note the stream and remains of a dam at right.
- 2) One of two remaining houses in Denison Mills
- 3) Anglican Church and Denison Mills Cemetery at sunset

9)

NAME: Ulverton Woolen Mill (Blanchette Mill)

LOCATION: Just North of Ulverton, turn West on Mooney Rd.; then South on Porter Rd.

RIVER: Ulverton

DATE: c.1850

DESCRIPTION: Shingle siding. 3 storeys.

HISTORY: The largest textile interpretation centre in Canada, the Ulverton Woolen (or carding) Mill was designated a historic site in 1977 by the Quebec government. Built by Scottish immigrants to the area around 1850, it was fully restored in 1982. It is the only one of its kind with a complete and fully operational set of early 20th century wool processing machinery. It also boasts one of the oldest operational turbines in Canada. Today, the mill serves as an interpretation centre for early wool production.

NOTES: The site includes a network of trails, a covered bridge, a boutique, and a picnic area. Guided tours available. Well worth a visit. Admission charge. Info: (819) 826-3157

- 1) Ulverton Mill. (Photo: Courtesy of Ulverton Woolen Mill)
- 2) Ulverton Mill from the river. (Photo: Courtesy of Ulverton Woolen Mill)
- 3) Wool processing. (Photo: Courtesy of Ulverton Woolen Mill)
- 4) Strafford Company power loom (1933). (Photo: Courtesy of Ulverton Woolen Mill)
- 5) Moulin Ulverton logo
- 6) Covered bridge. (Photo: Courtesy of Ulverton Woolen Mill)

10) Hundreds of small mills have disappeared from the Townships landscape over the last century.

- 1) Mill, dam, and fishermen, Farnham, c.1930
- 2) Missisquoi River and mills, Mansonville, c.1910
- 3) Flour mill, Cowansville, c.1906

- 4) Grist Mill Falls, Sutton, c.1910
- 5) Power Dam, Coaticook, c.1906
- 6) Mill complex, Coaticook, c.1910

In some places their remains are still evident.

- 7) Ruined mill, Massawippi, 2003
- 8) Ruined mill, Massawipp, 2003