

# FROM: ARCH NOTES NEWSLETTER PUBLISHED BY THE ONTARIO ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

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pp. 36-39

**ELISE SHERMAN ABRAM**

## **The Mystery of the Missing Mill**

Historical research at best is not easy--the archives never hold the documents you are looking for, and if they do, it's never early enough in the historic record; books and other documents, the documents you know hold the key to your research, always seem to go missing; and the people at the land registry office never understand why anybody would ever want to look at two hundred year old records. A Historical Archaeologist, or any historical researcher for that matter, is one part curiosity, one part problem solver, and two parts masochist. In spite of the problems and pitfalls you might expect to encounter while doing historical research (primary research predominately from the original documents), and some you would never expect to come up against, I decided to research a property.

Driving in the car one day along Centre Street in Thornhill, I happened upon Old Yonge Street. Old Yonge Street, I discovered, begins on the north side of Centre Street, one short block west of modern day Yonge Street. I drove north on Old Yonge,

marveling at the backsides of historical houses relocated to Yonge Street for conservation (ACAC 1979), my excitement building, until I reached its terminus at Mill Street. My heart leapt! Mill Streets are, more often than not, named so because a mill once stood there. I turned left onto Mill Street, knowing my quest would culminate with the sighting of the remains of the mill. Excitement mounted as I found the 1825 mill house, moved to the street in 1979. Disappointment soon overshadowed my journey when Mill Street terminated--not in the mill--but in a private golf club.

Mill Street was a bust that day, but the thought of the absent mill on Mill Street plagued my mind with a million questions: Where was the mill located? Who owned the mill? What kind of mill was it? What happened to it? The curiosity in me longed to find out; the masochist in me vowed to find out; the problem solver in me thought she knew how.

I began my quest at the Land

Registry Office. My request for a two hundred year old list of land transactions for lot 32, concession 1--the location of the mill property--was met with disbelief. After a frustrating discussion with the clerk--she refused to give me the records I wanted because if I needed to see more records, it would cost me another eight dollars to see them--I realized I was not going to leave there with the information I needed. I decided to continue my search at the archives, and finish it with secondary sources (books written on historic Thornhill).

Bingo! The mill I so desperately searched for belonged to none other than Benjamin Thorne, the man Thornhill was named after. Benjamin Thorne came to Canada from England in 1820 (Pitt 1820:122). In 1828 he and brother-in-law William Parsons purchased the site of Purdy Saw Mills. In 1830, Thorne married Anna Maria Wilcocks of Cobourg (Miller 1968:104). Also in 1830, Thorne and Parsons built a "five

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or six" storey grist mill and a tannery on the property, enlarging the existing sawmill (ACAC 1979:41). The community served by the mill, previously known as Atkinson's Mills, and Dundurn, soon became known as Thorne's Mills, and then Thorne's Hill, Thorne Hills, and eventually, Thorn Hill (Fitzgerald 1964:122).

Thorne's Mill prospered under the partnership of Thorne and Parsons. By instituting a policy of cash, rather than a system of barter, for payment, Thorne's business quickly increased (ACAC 1979:40). It was said the patrons would "line up along Yonge Street 'til ten p.m. waiting to use the mill" (Stecyk 1990). The mill and tannery were soon joined by a post office (Fitzgerald 1970:9), hotel, store, stables, sheds, and other outbuildings (Fitzgerald 1964:122). While a profit was to be had from the operation of the mill and associated businesses, a greater profit was to be made from the revenue of Thorne's other properties. Research indicates Thorne owned properties in York (Toronto) as well as England. Thorne made the bulk of his capital exporting wheat

flour to England, and importing iron ore (Fitzgerald 1970:29). Prior to 1845, Thorne and Parsons took on a third partner, David McDougall (ACAC 1970:45).

In 1846, tariffs on grain imports to England were removed, "allowing grain from all countries to enter Britain duty free." Thorne's Mill was left with shiploads of unsold flour. In 1847, the business failed leaving Thorne bankrupt (Fitzgerald 1970:29). In 1848, Thorne's properties were sold via public auction (Crew 1848).

McDougall took over the mill (ACAC 1979:47), tannery, and store properties (Public Archives 1851-2). Desolated by his losses, Thorne managed to pay off all his debts, owed as a result of his bankruptcy, after the public auction. A broken man, Benjamin Thorne committed a "melancholy suicide," by walking out into the fields behind his house and "shooting himself in the body with a gun" (n.a. 1848). He was survived by his wife Anna 45, and nine children: William 17, Anna

15, Mary 13, Benjamin 12,, Cathrine 11, Richard 9, Charles 6, Horace 5, and Alfred 3 (Public Archives 1851-2).

Although the properties were now owned and maintained by David McDougall (with the exception of the tannery occupied by Pearson and Wilcocks of Markham), Anna and her family, along with two servants (Ann Weley 22, and William Birmingham 41, both of Ireland), a resident (Ellen M. Osler 11, of Canada), and a miller (James Kee 26, of England), remained on the property until at least 1851 (Public Archives 1851-2). By 1861, the Thornes had left the lot 32, concession 1 property, appearing to have disappeared from Vaughan (and neighbouring Markham) altogether. The Government Census Returns for the Township of Vaughan in the County of York for 1861 lists David McDougall 47, merchant miller, and family--Fanny 29, married (possibly David's wife); John 17, a clerk; William 25, a student; Jane 12, a student; Mary 8, a

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student; Isabella 5; Catherine 2; and Mary Jane Carman 16, a servant from Canada, as the inhabitants of the property (Public Archives 1961).

In 1850, the mill dam, mill and tannery, were partially razed by a flooding of the Don River (Fitzgerald 1964:238). These buildings were presumably restored and back in business, when they were described in an article in *The York Herald* in 1859 when a band of thieves (two men and a woman) attempted to rob the mill in the middle of the night on Saturday, October 22, 1859. The intruders broke into the mill building and were detected by "a number of the men employed in the mill, who reside in houses adjacent to the store." A chase was begun by McDougall who "got out a couple of his horses" and raced after the thieves down Yonge Street. One can only imagine Mr. McDougall and one of his employees (perhaps Mr. Snowdon, a millwright from England still employed by McDougall in 1861 (Public Archives 1861)), galloping down Yonge Street on their trusty steeds, in the brisk October air, finally catching up to the

criminals at Mr. Finch's Tavern (present day Finch Avenue), recovering about £500 worth of goods. The horses and offending wagon were housed in Mr. Finch's stables for the night (n.a. 1859). The mill continued to operate under McDougall's proprietorship until 1872 (Fitzgerald 1964:29).

Primary resources are usually reliable as sources of information.

The obvious dilemma surrounding the use of primary resources is that of bias. The recorders of the information are only human and therefore subject to, either accidentally or intentionally on purpose, exaggeration or minimization. The primary problem with utilizing secondary resources for historical research is one of accuracy. As I write this history, I am selective in the information I report. As a result, my report is not as accurate as the primary sources I used to research it. Deletion of information is the most obvious bias of a secondary source.

Once I felt I had exhausted the

primary resources available at the Land Registry Office, Archives, and Libraries, I decided to turn to secondary sources. These documents really didn't tell me much more than I already knew. I used them only as a check to ensure that I didn't overlook pertinent information in my primary search.

Around the turn of the century, the Thorne Homestead enjoyed one last claim to fame. According to secondary sources, John Langstaff--the owner of the property at the time--discovered the natural spring water in the area contained "beneficial minerals" that could be used for medicinal purposes. He soon opened Hawthorne Mineral Springs Resort, housed in the rebuilt Thorne House (partially demolished by fire in 1890 (Champion, et al 1988:126)).

"Managed by members of his family, it drew hundreds of visitors to the village to drink the water, convalesce, or merely rest in the pleasant country" (ACAC 1979:48). Hawthorne Mineral Springs Resort was enjoyed by

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many passers-by until 1922, when the property was sold to the Thornhill Golf Course (now the Thornhill Golf and Country Club) (Champion et al 1988:126).

Thus ended my long, exhausting search. I'd finally accomplished what I had set out to do--to solve the mystery of the missing mill. Although admittedly not as significant a search as Indiana Jones's quest for the Ark of the Covenant or the Holy Grail, to me, it was equally as exciting. As a resident of Thornhill for about seven years now, I found it exhilarating to discover the history of my city. As a historical researcher, I found it just as frustrating to hit brick wall after proverbial brick wall, in trying to track down my information with little if any help from the powers that be. Seasoned researchers will be able to identify with my frustration. New researchers should not be put off by it. Persistence is the key. Ask questions of the clerks and then ask some more, until they are more than willing to answer your questions--if for no other reason than to get you out of their hair!

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