

TOWNSHIP CONNECTIONS

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The Otterville Falls



*The story behind Ontario's
oldest watermill*

The Otterville Falls



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Otterville Falls. Located in the heart of the quaint village of Otterville in the South of Norwich Township, these picturesque falls were once the hub and bustle of this community at the turn of the 19th century. It was a popular site for skating in the winter and a favourite spot for picnics in the summer. From Otterville Park, Big Otter Creek is to the east and Sweet's Creek, named after the early pioneer John Sweet, is north; here they join. During that time, there were twelve steam mills and fourteen water mills which dotted in, on and around Big Otter Creek in Otterville. To fully appreciate the historic significance of Otterville Falls, one has to step back into history to understand its role in the community and to Otterville Mill.

Mill owners became entrepreneurs and prominent citizens of their community. The Otterville Mill is a grist mill that was known by other names, the Bullock Flour and Grist Mill and Treffry Mill. The first mills, sawmills, were of lumber as there were bountiful stands of large white pine in the area. After timber was cleared from the land, mills were converted to grinding all kinds of grains supplying area farmers with oats and corn to feed their livestock. Some mills were adapted to the production of woolen goods. When farmers started growing tobacco, the use of mills subsided, and then became less scarce when farmers switched to cash crops like corn and soybeans.

Known as the pioneers of Otterville, John Earl and Paul Averill (mistakenly known as Paul Avery which is the name on the plaque at Otterville Mill) were United Empire Loyalists who received a grant of land from the government where they built the first known grist and saw mills in Otterville in 1807. These mills were located near the present mill on the south side of Main Street. In 1808, Cook and Calloway purchased land on the north side of Main Street and built mills. The three mills were eventually sold to William Cromwell in 1819 who built

his home near Otterville Falls that still stands today.

In 1845, Edward Bullock purchased the three mills known as Otter Creek Mills or Cromwell Mills. He kept the saw mill but converted the grist mill into a custom woolen mill and erected another grist mill east of the river which is the present Otterville Mill. This three-story mill is powered by water turbine and constructed of quality white pine. Huge beams rested on a fieldstone foundation, clapboard covered the mill with numerous double hung, twelve over twelve window sashes. Edward Bullock also built the first brick house in Otterville for his family across from Otterville Cemetery on Church St. Edward's son James operated the mills until 1877.

Solomon Lossing purchased the mills in 1880. At that time, there was a mill at the west end of the dam and a woolen mill at the east end that were connected by a footbridge. The Lossing family ran these mills for three generations which included Solomon, LeRoy and Reginald. In 1904, Lossing built a cement dam in front of the 1845 wooden dam at the cost of \$2,000.00. As such, the Otterville Falls became known as the Lossing Dam. The strength of the dam was put to the test during the flood on April 26, 1937 when the embankments of the dam were washed out along with the road on Main Street.

At one time the mill made flour and was known as



the Bullock Flour and Grist Mill which produced 20,000 bushels annually. However, after 1920 the Bullock Mill stopped producing flour after larger flour mills dominated the business. Ernest Treffry purchased Otterville Mill during the 1940's and took several months to restore the mill's operation and machinery after it had been idle for four or five years. Ernest's son, Lorne Treffry ran the mill from 1952 until retiring in April 1980.

During that same year, the South Norwich Historical Society erected a plaque to commemorate Otterville Mill's 135 year history as well as to acknowledge the families who operated it. On a sunny day on July 2, 1980, 270 people were present to see Lorne Treffry and Bert Lossing unveil the plaque.

Afraid to lose such a historic site, the South Norwich Historical Society, along with the Long Point Region Conservation Authority, encouraged South Norwich Council to purchase the mill and property for \$60,000.00 in October 1981. The property includes the 2.6 acres mill site, 39 acres on the north side of County Road 19, the dam, the mill pond, plus water rights for the land as far as a mile up the Otter Creek. A year later the mill was designated as an architectural and historical site.

Since February 1983, the South Norwich Historical Society restored and maintains Otterville Mill. The mill's restoration began in April 1983 with extensive foundation work, new siding, new windows and a new cedar shingle roof all by 1986. Restoration occurred inside the mill with updated electrical services and constant repairs to the turbine and equipment. To accommodate tours of the mill and picnics, tables and outdoor toilets were also erected.

On June 28, 1987, the late Lieutenant Governor Lincoln Alexander officially opened the restored mill which commemorated the 180 Anniversary of the founding of Otterville. The Otterville Mill is the oldest, continually operating water-powered mill in Ontario. For this distinction, the Otterville Mill is mentioned on page 206 of George Fischer and Mark Harris's book *Ontario's Historic Mills*.

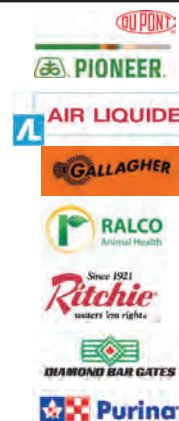
President of the South Norwich Historical Society Gail Lewis reported that the mill is operational during special events like the Annual Mill Runners Car Show,



happening on June 8, 2013 the Annual Cured Pork Chop BBQ on June 30, 2013 and the Annual Mill Meadow Chicken BBQ on August 25, 2013. (For information contact Gail Lewis 519-879-6804 or Mae Leonard 519-879-6622.) Tours are available from May to October and include the mill, Station Museum, Blacksmith Shop, St. John's Anglican Church and the AME Cemetery.

With its steep stairs, only the first level of the Mill is accessible. Both locals and visitors to the site are told how the mill operates and shown various machinery used to process the grain.

Faint paths can still be seen where farmers would cut blocks of ice from the pond which would be dragged out by horses to be stored in hay in barns to be used for refrigeration. Gail reported how this past February Otterville residents skated on the Mill Pond at dusk. A local resident took a lovely picture of the skaters in the moonlight, reminiscent of skaters in the 1800s.



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