



THESE RUINS of the old Godfrey water wheel have long since disappeared from the banks of Minnehaha Creek. The wheel is typical of the ones that powered the old-fashioned gristmills.

The Six FLOURING MILLS on MINNEHAHA CREEK

Foster W. Dunwiddie

MUCH HAS BEEN written about the flour-milling industry of Minneapolis and the history of St. Anthony Falls. With development of the immense water power available at the falls, Minneapolis grew to become the flour-milling capital of the world, a position it was to

¹Lucile M. Kane, *The Waterfall That Built a City*, 99, 173 (St. Paul, 1966). The term "flour" is taken from the French term "fleur de farine," which literally means "the flower, or finest, of the meal." The word "flouring" or "flowering" was applied to mills in this country as early as 1797. The suffix, "ing," was added to form a verbal noun, used in this case as an adjective to describe the type of mill. With typical lack of concern, our ancestors used the terms flouring mill, flowering mill, and flour mill interchangeably. The author has chosen to use "flouring" in the title of this article because it was used by Edward D. Neill, Isaac Atwater, and others in describing the gristmills along Minnehaha Creek.

²Otto F. Schussler, *Riverside Reveries*, 105n (Minneapolis, 1928). Dr. Schussler was the son of Peter Schussler, the owner of the Globe Mill in St. Louis Park. The author spent his boyhood there.

³June D. Holmquist and Jean A. Brookins, *Minnesota's Major Historic Sites: A Guide*, 38 (St. Paul, 1972); Isaac Atwater, *History of Minneapolis*, 528 (New York, 1893); W[illiam] H. Mitchell and J[ohn] H. Stevens, *Geographical and Statistical History of the County of Hennepin*, 31 (Minneapolis, 1868).

Mr. Dunwiddie, member of the American Institute of Architects, is president of Miller-Dunwiddie, Architects, in Bloomington, and a specialist in restoration. He is on the board of directors of the Edina Historical Society. His curiosity about old mills was piqued by the remains of the Edina Mill two blocks from his home.

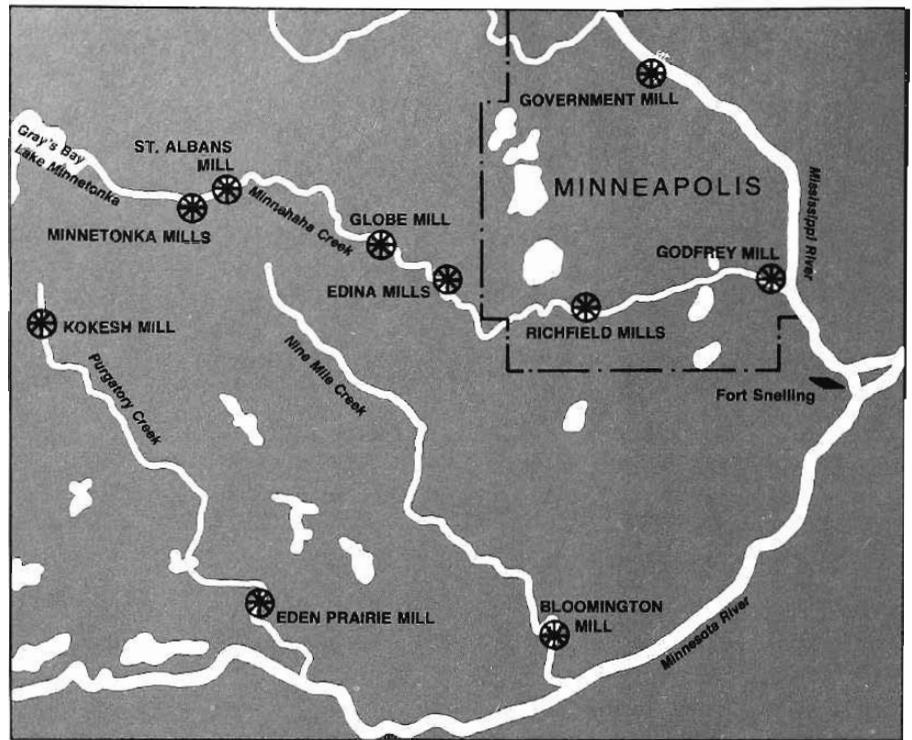
enjoy for fifty years — from 1880 to 1930. But in the pioneer days of Minnesota Territory, hauling grain to Minneapolis and St. Anthony was an arduous task, especially during certain seasons of the year. Roads were poor and often impassable. This led quite naturally to the demand for small local flouring mills that were more readily accessible to the farmers, and a great many flouring mills were erected throughout the territory.¹

In the nineteenth century, Minnehaha Creek, which still flows from Gray's Bay in Lake Minnetonka almost directly eastward to the Mississippi River, was a stream having sufficient flow of water to develop the necessary power for milling operations. In the period between 1855 and 1874, no less than six flouring mills were built along this fifteen-mile-long, meandering stream.

"To those who are accustomed to think of Minnehaha Creek as a series of isolated, stagnant pools that for a few weeks in spring are joined to form a weed-choked channel . . . , it may seem incredible that this so-called 'creek' was once a not inconsiderable river and went . . . by the name of Brown's River in Territorial times."² It was also known as Brown's Creek, the Little River, and Little Falls Creek in the early days.³

Some sources attribute the name Brown's River, or Brown's Creek, to Joseph Renshaw Brown, pioneer Minnesota soldier-statesman. In the summer of 1822, Brown, then a seventeen-year-old drummer boy at Fort Snelling, explored the beautiful country along Minnehaha Creek. Brown, William Joseph Snelling, the son of Colonel Josiah Snelling, commanding officer of the fort, and two soldiers started out one day to discover the source of Minnehaha Creek. Young Snelling apparently

THE EARLY MILLS along Minnehaha Creek are located on this map. Also shown — but not discussed in the article — are the Government Mill at St. Anthony Falls, one on Nine Mile Creek, and two on Purgatory Creek.

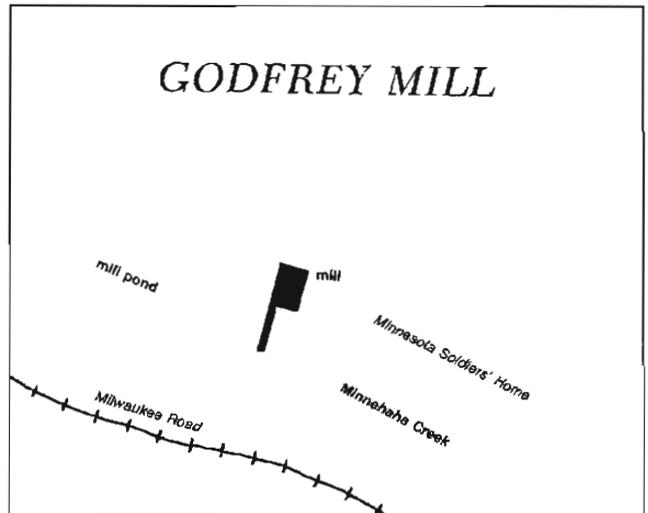


was not of explorer caliber. A letter from him much later records that when the mosquitoes became bad, Snelling quit the expedition and returned to the fort. Brown continued upstream, following the creek to the vicinity of Minnetonka Mills and thence to Lake Minnetonka. He returned to the fort bursting with the story of a stream, known thereafter as Joe Brown's Creek, and a body of water as big as Lake Champlain. The stream was Minnehaha Creek, and the lake was later named Minnetonka.⁴

Other sources attribute the name Brown's Creek to Jacob Brown, major general and commander-in-chief of the United States army from 1814 to 1828. Both Edward D. Neill, historian, minister, and educator, and Major Lawrence Taliaferro, the noted Indian agent at Fort Snelling, are said to credit this version since the name Brown's Falls appears on the Fort Snelling map of 1823, only a year after the exploit of Joseph R. Brown. They felt it was unlikely that the name of a mere drummer boy would have been applied on a map drawn by an army officer. However, both men were personal enemies of Joseph Brown and perhaps inclined to discredit his discovery. Neill and Taliaferro may have been correct, but the early pioneers often referred to the stream as Joe Brown's Creek and the falls near its mouth as Joe Brown's Falls.⁵

Joseph Brown rose from a drummer boy to become a major in the United States army. The creek and falls that bore his name were later immortalized by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in his poem, *Song of Hiawatha*,

published in 1855, and it is by the Dakota name Minnehaha that we know them today.⁶



ONE OF the early flouring mills on Minnehaha Creek was erected by Ard Godfrey in 1857. Godfrey, a Maine

⁴R[eturn] I. Holcombe and William H. Bingham, *Compendium of History and Biography of Minneapolis and Hennepin County, Minnesota*, 38 (Chicago, 1914).

⁵Warren Upham, *Minnesota Geographic Names*, 230 (reprint edition, St. Paul, 1969); Holcombe and Bingham, *Compendium*, 36.

⁶Holcombe and Bingham, *Compendium*, 37; Upham, *Minnesota Geographic Names*, 230.

millwright, had arrived in Minnesota in 1847 to assist Franklin Steele with the development of his milling interests on the east bank of St. Anthony Falls.⁷

About 1851, Godfrey had one of the officers at Fort Snelling make a claim for him on the Fort Snelling Military Reservation. He selected "the wooded point lying between the Mississippi river and Brown's creek, as Minnehaha was then called. . . . The title to this land was in due time obtained, and here Mr. Godfrey made his home. . . ." He later pre-empted the land for himself on April 24, 1855, and received a patent from the United States government on June 10, 1871.⁸

The Godfrey Mill was located below Minnehaha Falls in the glen near the mouth of the creek on Godfrey's Point. It stood on the north bank of Minnehaha Creek "near the saw-mill which burned in 1863 [sic]." The sawmill, built by Godfrey in 1853, stood about midway between Minnehaha Falls and the gristmill, which was built in 1857. The sawmill burned on May 20, 1864, according to his daughter, Harriet Godfrey.⁹

The gristmill located downstream was operated by Godfrey "until 1870 [sic], and then sold to other parties." Gideon W. Walker purchased the mill from Godfrey on June 13, 1871, for the sum of \$5,000. Walker operated the mill until 1875, when, unable to meet the mortgage payments, he let the title pass to Isaac Atwater. On August 25, 1877, Atwater sold the gristmill to the ubiquitous Franklin Steele for \$3,280, "with right to flow on adjoining land . . . to extent of raising dam three feet above present height." Following the death of Steele and his wife, Annie, title passed to their heirs in 1881. One of the daughters, Caroline H. Steele, received an "undivided one half" of the "mill property



THIS FADED photograph of the Godfrey Mill gives an indication of its size. There appears to be a woman standing at the right of the mill. At its entrance, barely discernible, is a horse-drawn wagon with a man seated in it.



GODFREY BUILT this dam in the 1850s.



AN UNIDENTIFIED man regards the ruins of the Godfrey mill site in about 1898.

⁷George E. Warner and Charles M. Foote, comps., *History of Hennepin County and the City of Minneapolis*, 346, 361 (Minneapolis, 1881).

⁸Atwater, *History of Minneapolis*, 528 (quote); Hennepin County, Minnesota, Register of Deeds, Abstract of Lands, entry 190, p. 1; Hennepin County, Register of Deeds, Deed Records, Book 30, p. 301-02.

⁹Warner and Foote, comps., *History of Hennepin County*, 346; Atwater, *History of Minneapolis*, 528; *Minnetonka Record* (Excelsior), March 13, 1947, p. 3; *Minneapolis Journal*, March 27, 1927, city life section, p. 1. An entry dated May 20, 1864, in the diary of Harriet Godfrey — the first white child born in Minneapolis — notes that "the old sawmill was set on fire and burned."

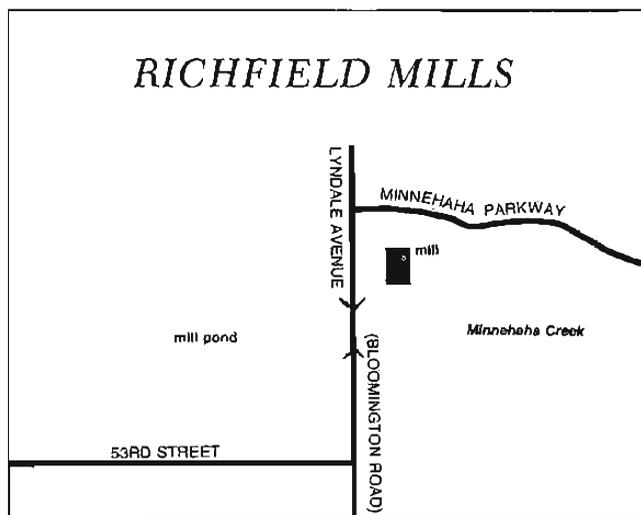
¹⁰Warner and Foote, comps., *History of Hennepin County*, 346 (first quote); Deed Records, Book 30, p. 315, Book 49, p. 64, Book 67, p. 465-66 (second quote), Book 98, p. 1-49 (third quote, p. 4); Hennepin County, Register of Deeds, Miscellaneous Records, Book 16, p. 156-57; *Minnetonka Record*, March 13, 1947, p. 3. Collar renewed the lease on April 1, 1886, but the map of the proposed Minnehaha State Park (Register of Deeds, Plat Book 15, p. 10) shows "ruins of old mill" on the mill property.

[on] east Minnehaha creek." Shortly thereafter, the property was leased to Egbert Collar for a five-year period commencing April 1, 1883. Unfortunately the mill was destroyed by fire about 1887.¹⁰

The Godfrey Mill was a two-story, wood frame building with a simple gable roof. The building was of a rectilinear plan and measured approximately 24 feet by 30 feet. The exterior walls were of beveled wood siding with vertical corner boards. A brick chimney pierced the

wood-shingled roof near the north end of the structure. Teams from nearby farms unloaded their grain directly into the mill through a single door on the north side. The wooden overshot water wheel was located on the floor below at the opposite end of the mill. Wooden, double-hung windows, each with six panes (or a total of twelve panes per window), provided light to the interior of the building.

The mill itself with its wooden water wheel has long since disappeared. Like the Godfrey sawmill a short distance upstream, it also burned. But remnants of the limestone mill dam that spanned the creek remain to be seen today in the glen below Minnehaha Falls. A bronze tablet nearby, erected in 1969 by the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board, marks the location of the mill.



FOUR MILES to the west at the crossing of what was then known as Bloomington Road — now Lyndale Avenue — stood the first gristmill to be built on Minnehaha Creek. On June 4, 1855, Philander Prescott, Willis G. Moffett, and Eli Pettijohn (Prescott's son-in-law) purchased twelve acres of land on Little Falls Creek from James Adams Dunsmoor for \$200. Dunsmoor had preempted the land two weeks earlier. On this site the three partners built the Richland flouring mills. A post office named Harmony was established at the mill, and for a time the mill was known as the Richland Mills. However, in 1858 the first town meeting was held to organize the township and select a name. Although the name Richland was at first suggested for the township, the people at the meeting settled upon the name Richfield. After the township had been organized and named, the post office was rechristened Richfield and the flouring mills became known as the Richfield Mills.¹¹

Philander Prescott became the principal owner of the mill in 1858 when he purchased the interests of his

partners, Moffett and Pettijohn, for \$4,000. He continued as the principal owner until 1860 when he sold a half interest in the mills to Moffett for \$2,700. Prescott retained the other half interest until his tragic death during the Sioux Uprising of 1862.¹²

Prescott, a fur trader, arrived in Minnesota with troops under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Henry Leavenworth in 1819. He was named Indian farmer and interpreter at Fort Snelling in 1830 and married a Dakota woman. During the Sioux Uprising of 1862, Prescott was tireless in his efforts to save the lives of settlers on the frontier. Depending upon his close relationship to the Dakota nation, he took great personal risk to lead the settlers to safety. While conducting a party of whites from the Lower Sioux Agency near Redwood Falls to a place of safety, he found that he was being closely pursued by a war party. Telling his companions, men and women, to hurry on, he stopped to talk with the Indians. He was shot and killed in the attempt, but the party of white settlers was able to reach safety without further loss of life.¹³

After Prescott's death, Lawrence Taliaferro Prescott, his son, sold his half interest to Asa B. Smith for \$300. Smith then acquired Moffett's half interest for \$800 in 1863 and became the sole owner of the Richland Mills. For the next ten years the business had various owners, including Emily Webb, Leander Gorton, and William Scherfenberg. It was last owned by Charles C. Pratt and James W. Baird, who operated the mill as W. J. Baird & Company.¹⁴

Commonly known as the Old Red Mill, the Richfield Mills had a turbine wheel mill with four runs of stone. The mill's capacity was twenty barrels of flour in ten hours. No trace of it remains today, nor has this author been able to find any further description or pictures of the mill. It was probably demolished between 1886 and 1892. William D. Washburn acquired the property from James W. Baird on June 12, 1886, for the sum of \$5,000. A plat of Washburn Park, filed by Washburn on December 27, 1886, shows no mill or mill site on the property where it stood. The mill dam was breached in 1892 when the city of Minneapolis built the Lyndale Avenue bridge over Minnehaha Creek. However, the earth embankments of the old mill dam remain and serve as the

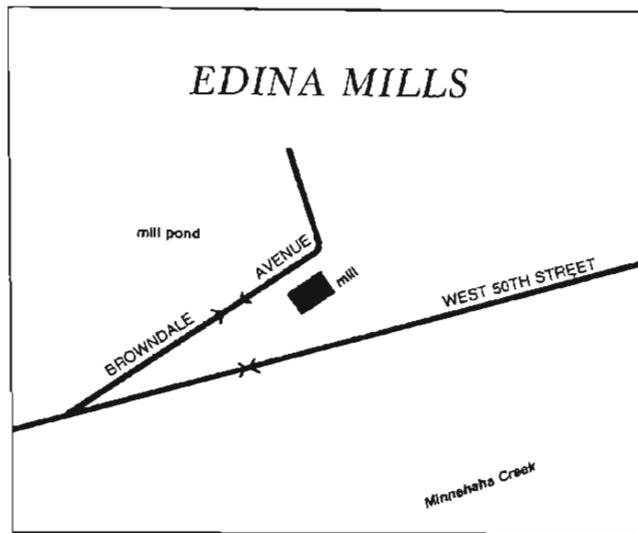
¹¹Deed Records, Book C, 53; Abstract of Lands, entry 288, p. 11; Isaac Atwater and John H. Stevens, eds., *History of Minneapolis and Hennepin County*, 1206 (New York, 1895).

¹²Deed Records, Book J, 325, and Book L, 107-08, Book O, 427; Warner and Foote, comps., *History of Hennepin County*, 215.

¹³Atwater and Stevens, eds., *History of Minneapolis and Hennepin County*, 1205; William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 2:109-10 (St. Paul, 1961).

¹⁴Deed Records, Book U, 197, 199, Book V, 199-200, Book 10, p. 25, Book 35, p. 257; Warner and Foote, comps., *History of Hennepin County*, 215.

bridge approaches. Lyndale Avenue passes over the top of the old mill dam as it crosses Minnehaha Creek today in south Minneapolis.¹⁵



TWO-AND-ONE-HALF miles to the west, where West Fiftieth Street crosses Minnehaha Creek in what is now Edina, stood still another of the early gristmills. William Hoyt pre-empted the land on October 16, 1855. Jacob L. Elliot, Richard Strout, Levi M. Stewart, and Joseph Cushman purchased 169 acres of the land from Hoyt on December 27, 1856, for \$1,700 "for the purpose of erecting . . . a mill thereon." The men built the mill during the spring and summer of 1857 on the southwest one-quarter of section eighteen.¹⁶

In May, 1857, Richard Strout drew a plat for the town of Waterville, and construction started on a flour-

ing mill. That July, Levi M. Stewart, one of the four partners, gave a promissory note to O. D. Merrick of Somerset County, Maine, pledging as security an "undivided fourth part" of what was called "Block four (4) in the Town of Waterville & known as the Mill Block . . . with the Mill Site Dam & privileges [*sic*], together with the flouring mill now erected thereon and just being finished, and also the dwelling house on said lot."¹⁷

Known as the Waterville Mill, it was sold in January, 1859, to Jonathan T. Grimes and William C. Rheem, who built a new dam and made other improvements. During the Civil War the mill was kept running day and night grinding out flour requisitioned by the government for the soldiers at Fort Snelling. Grimes "wrote that the only chance he had to rest was on the journey home from the Fort. After delivering his flour, he'd . . . catch what sleep he could stretched out on the bottom of the wagon."¹⁸ Grimes had traveled to Minnesota in 1855. "About three years later Mr. Grimes bought a tract of land west of Lake Harriet, and his old homestead, a substantial building erected by him, is still standing and in an excellent state of preservation."¹⁹ His Gothic revival-style house may be seen today at 4200 West 44th Street in northeast Edina. The Grimes farm occupied much of what later became Morningside.

In 1867 the mill changed hands again with Daniel H. Buckwalter as the new proprietor. Various known as the Waterville Mill, the Red Mill, and the Buckwalter Mill, it eventually was given the name Edina Mills in 1869. Andrew Craik purchased the mill that year and named it for his boyhood home of Edinburgh, Scotland.²⁰ The name Edina came from the poem, *Address to Edinburgh*, written by Robert Burns to commemorate his beloved city of Edinburgh. It appears in the opening stanza:

"Edina; Scotia's darling seat!
All hail thy palaces and tow'rs. . . ."

And again in the third stanza:

"Thy sons, Edina! social, kind,
With open arms the stranger hail;
Their views enlarg'd, their liberal mind,
Above the narrow, rural vale. "21

Andrew Craik, a prominent figure in the early history of Edina, was born near Edinburgh, on May 22, 1817, and when a child emigrated to Canada with his parents. "At the age of sixteen, he was put in charge of a country grist mill, belonging to his father, which he conducted, for some years, with entire satisfaction. . . . In 1861, he removed to La Crosse, Wisconsin, where he engaged in the flouring mill business until 1869, when he removed to Minneapolis and purchased the Edina Mills (now the village of Edina), which he improved, and commenced the manufacture of oatmeal and pearl barley — the first of the kind in the State of Minnesota."²²

¹⁵ *Minnetonka Record*, March 13, 1947, p. 3; Warner and Foote, comps., *History of Hennepin County*, 215; Deed Records, Book 194, p. 341; Hennepin County, Register of Deeds, Plat Records, Book P, 4; City of Minneapolis, Engineering Department, Records.

¹⁶ Abstract of Lands, entry 804, p. 12; Deed Records, Book 'D, 800; Hennepin County, Register of Deeds, Mortgage Records, Book F, 552-53 (quote); Atwater and Stevens, *History of Minneapolis and Hennepin County*, 1431.

¹⁷ Mortgage Records, Book F, 552.

¹⁸ Deed Records, Book L, 577; *Minnetonka Record*, March 13, 1947, p. 3; Lee H. Fletcher, "Mills of Pioneer Days on Minnehaha," in *The Crier*, November, 1930, p. 4; Evelyn Burke, "Edina Grows Up," in *The Countryside*, April, 1941, p. 6 (quote).

¹⁹ Holcombe and Bingham, *Compendium*, 328.

²⁰ Deed Records, Book 15, p. 129, Book 21, p. 253, Book 22, p. 272, 273, 292; Burke, in *The Countryside*, April, 1941, p. 5; Upham, *Minnesota Geographic Names*, 221.

²¹ *The Complete Poetical Works of Burns*, 73 (Boston, 1897).

²² Atwater and Stevens, eds., *History of Minneapolis and Hennepin County*, 1054.



A BEARDED man sits in front of the Edina Mills in this 1893 photograph.

Craik hired a Scotch miller, George Millam, shortly after acquiring the mill. Millam purchased it from Craik in 1875, operating it for twenty years until the water level of Minnehaha Creek sank so low that it could no longer turn the mill wheel. Then he sold the mill to Henry F. Brown, long-time neighbor and an uncle of former Hennepin County Sheriff Earle Brown. Gradually it fell into disuse and was finally demolished on December 1, 1932, despite efforts to preserve it as a historic landmark.²³

The Edina Mills stood on the north side of what is now West Fiftieth Street and just east of the Browndale Avenue bridge. Today the site is the quiet Dwight Williams Park. Browndale Avenue follows the top of the old mill dam as it crosses Minnehaha Creek. The old mill pond has been preserved and can still be seen upstream from the dam.

Minnehaha Creek had a fall of fifteen feet at the Edina Mills. At one time there were three turbine wheels, two of 30 inches in diameter and one 36 inches, furnishing fifty horsepower to three runs of stone for the manufacture of flour, oatmeal, and pearl barley. "One elevator was reserved for wheat and another for rye. It was the only mill in the northwest making oatmeal and pearl barley."²⁴

The original Edina Mills consisted of a simple, two-story, rectangular building, with a wood-shingled, gabled roof. The mill was 40 feet long and 36 feet wide. Two smaller lean-to structures were added later on the west and south walls of the building, probably to enclose the water wheels. The exterior of the mill was of board

and batten construction over a heavy timber frame. Some of the timbers were of oak cut from woods nearby. The exterior walls were sheathed with twelve-inch-wide planks, installed vertically, with the joints between covered by wood battens. Principal access to the mill was on the north side of the building facing what was then Fiftieth Street (now Browndale Avenue). A small loading dock was provided for the convenience of the farmers bringing their grain to the mill. An early account reveals that "it was not unusual to see as many as 25 ox teams at the mill at one time."²⁵

The interior was full of machinery. An account in the *Minneapolis Journal*, written shortly before the mill was demolished, describes the scene: "Two old mill stones, made of granite, covered with cement and bound with iron hoops, still stand inside. There used to be three of those stones, Mr. Millam said. The two covers that fitted over the stones and kept the grain in place are thrown against one wall. The wooden elevators that carried the flour up into the loft, the old wooden hopper, the wooden, cogged wheels are still in place. Below the main floor is the room and the tank where the water used to rush in and turn the old wheel. . . . An old poster advertising 'Hill's Cash Grocery' with 'full measure, down

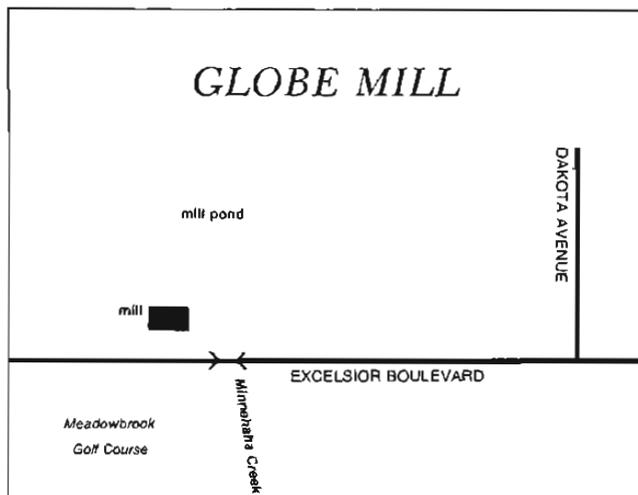
²³Deed Records, Book 54, p. 567; *Minneapolis Journal*, October 25, 1925, real estate and builders section, p. 1, April 29, 1928, p. 1, December 1, 1932, city life section, p. 1.

²⁴Warner and Foote, comps., *History of Hennepin County*, 216; *Minneapolis Journal*, April 29, 1928, p. 4 (quote).

²⁵*Minneapolis Journal*, April 29, 1928, p. 4; Burke, in *The Countryside*, April, 1941, p. 6 (quote).

weight and cash price' still hangs on one wall." The "granite" millstones were imported French burr (or buhr) stones. They were made of a special quartz quarried near Paris.²⁶

Although the mill was demolished in 1932, the millstones can still be seen at various locations in Edina. One is in the flagpole base in front of the American Legion Hall on Eden Avenue. Another burr stone, a runner stone, is in the flagpole base at Our Lady of Grace Catholic Church at 5300 Normandale Road. The matching stone to this, a bed stone, is set in the narthex floor at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church at West Fiftieth Street and Wooddale Avenue. Until recently, another pair of burr stones was embedded in the front porch of the Minnehaha Grange Hall on Normandale Road. The latter have been preserved by the Edina Historical Society. Other pieces of the machinery from the Edina Mills have been preserved and are stored in Edina's Historical Park.



A MILE and one-half northwest of the Edina Mills, William P. Day and Company built the Globe Mill in 1874. It was located east of Hopkins where Minnehaha Creek crosses Excelsior Boulevard. Day purchased a ten-acre tract from Johnston Mealey on March 24, 1874, for the sum of \$1,000. The parcel was located on the west bank of the creek on the north side of what was then known as Excelsior Road, now Excelsior Boulevard. A month later, Day purchased a two-acre tract on the "road running from Minneapolis to Excelsior" from Calvin G. Goodrich for \$150. This parcel was on the east bank of the creek opposite the mill, and on this site Day built a dwelling for himself.²⁷

Ownership of the mill passed through a number of hands in the years that followed. Albert E. Herrick acquired a half interest in 1876 for \$9,000. Christopher F. Douglas and Asa R. Camp purchased the other half interest that same year for \$10,000. Jacob K. Sidle acquired the mill in 1879 for \$25,000 but sold out two-and-one-half years later to Peter Schussler and Julius Marth for only \$6,000. Schussler bought out Marth's interest in 1882 and became the sole owner of the mill, operating it for the next twelve years.²⁸

The Globe Mill was "a frame structure, with four runs of stone and a capacity of 125 barrels [of flour] per day." The mill had six "hands" and ran night and day during certain seasons of the year. For a long time this mill had a contract with a firm in Edinburgh, Scotland, which called for shipment of one car of flour made up of eighty barrels each day. A railroad spur line of the Minneapolis and St. Louis Railroad extended to the mill from St. Louis Park and provided facilities for shipping and receiving. When first put into operation, the mill used water power, but this proved inadequate. Sidle, Fletcher, Holmes & Company added a steam engine which furnished the power in later years. The mill also had a cooper shop to make barrels in which flour was shipped to eastern markets.²⁹

EDINA MILLS

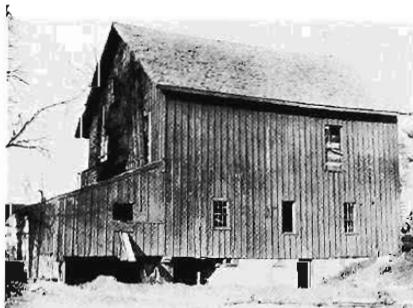
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AN EYE-LEVEL view of the Edina Mills in about 1925

THE BUSINESS CARD (above) from the Edina Mills dates back to 1869-1875 when Andrew Craik owned and operated the mill.

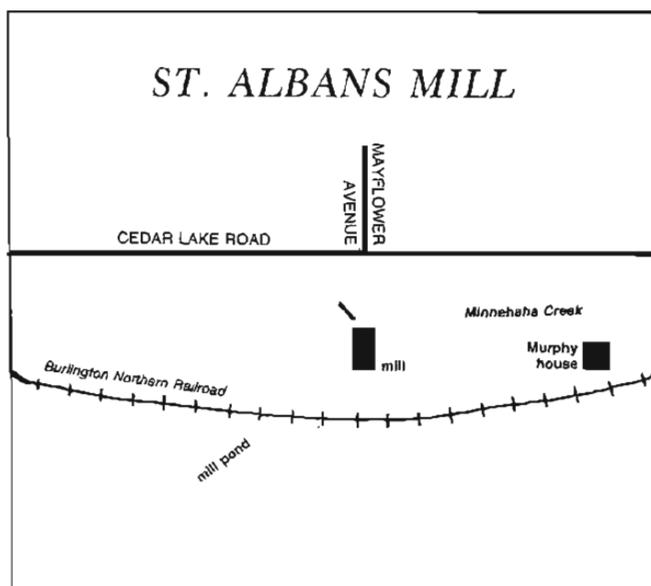
²⁶ *Minneapolis Journal*, April 29, 1928, p. 4 (quote); John Storck and Walter D. Teague, *Flour for Man's Bread*, 102 (Minneapolis, 1952).

²⁷ Warner and Foote, comps., *History of Hennepin County*, 346; Deed Records, Book 44, p. 70, 244, Book 46, p. 164.

²⁸ Deed Records, Book 56, p. 131, 174, Book 80, p. 469, Book 122, p. 487-88, Book 154, p. 93.

²⁹ Warner and Foote, comps., *History of Hennepin County*, 346 (quote); Fletcher, in *The Crier*, November, 1930, p. 4; *Minnetonka Record*, March 13, 1947, p. 3.

The mill was sold to Joseph Tyczynski through foreclosure in 1896 and dismantled in 1898.³⁰ Nothing remains to show the location of the mill today. Excelsior Boulevard travels over the top of the old mill dam as it crosses Minnehaha Creek south of the Methodist Hospital in St. Louis Park.



ST. ALBANS MILL was built in 1874 by John Alt & Company. The mill was located about three-quarters of a mile east of the Minnetonka Mills on Minnehaha Creek. John Alt had acquired 160 acres of land on the creek from Patrick McGinty in 1871 for the sum of \$2,500.³¹

On September 5, 1874, Alt entered into an agreement with Henry Gilmore, Joseph L. Willford, and William Reimers. The terms called for Alt to "erect, construct & complete on Minnehaha Creek . . . at a point thereon to be agreed upon . . . a good, suitable and substantial dam." The dam was "To be constructed and built of good and durable materials and in a good and Workmanlike manner suitable for . . . Milling purposes." Alt was to guarantee that the dam would provide "twelve feet head of water," and he agreed to excavate "the cellar for the mill . . . the necessary wheel pits and a tail-race of sufficient length[,] size and capacity to conduct the water from said mill." In return Gilmore, Willford, and Reimers agreed "to erect a good and substantial frame building . . . for the purposes of a grist mill," which was to be completed, ready for operation, by early February, 1875.³²

The agreement between Alt and his three partners described in some detail the mill structure. It was to be "at least twenty four by forty feet on the ground and twenty feet in height above the foundation."³³ (Later sources describe the completed mill as being "35 x 45 feet, three stories high."³⁴) The agreement provided

that the exterior of the mill was to be "boarded with good stock lumber and battened." The roof was to be "shingled with good quality of shingles." The "basement or foundation" was to be "constructed of a framework of posts and sheathed with common lumber."³⁵

The mill was to be equipped with "Two Turbine or eclipse water Wheels of at least thirty inches diameter; Three Run of French Burr Stone (two for wheat and one for feed) at least Three Feet & Ten Inches in diameter. A Wheat Smutter or Separator with capacity of at least Twenty bushels per hour. A Bolting Chest with two Reels, one North Western Midlings Separator (so called) with suitable connections, one Corn Sheller with a capacity of at least Thirty Bushels per hour." Later sources indicate that this was a "new process" mill, which meant that with the use of the middlings purifier, or separator, an innovation of the 1870s, it could produce high-quality flour from spring wheat.³⁶

John Alt was to be the miller and "operate said mill and give his personal attention thereto." But the partnership seems to have been short-lived. The mill commenced operations in the spring of 1875, but a year later, in a series of transactions, it was acquired by Jacob Schaefer and William H. Fuller. Schaefer and Fuller, "finding the water insufficient, put in a thirty horse power engine." In 1878 the mill changed hands again when Randall W. Hanson purchased the mill from Schaefer and Fuller for \$13,000. But the mill failed to prosper, and in 1879 title passed to William C. Patterson, Jr., and the City Bank of Minneapolis through foreclosure.³⁷

Plagued with financial difficulties, the mill had encountered other problems. The waters from the mill pond interfered with the operation of St. Albans' larger neighbor, the Minnetonka Mills, three-quarters of a mile upstream. When the gates of the St. Albans dam were closed, the water backed up, submerging the turbine runner of the Minnetonka Mill Company. Following innumerable complaints, Loren Fletcher and Charles M. Loring, the owners of the Minnetonka Mills, purchased the St. Albans Mill in 1881, sold the equip-

³⁰Deed Records, Book 466, p. 257; *Minnetonka Record*, March 13, 1947, p. 3.

³¹Warner and Foote, comps., *History of Hennepin County*, 242; Deed Records, Book 29, p. 413.

³²Miscellaneous Records, Book 5, 338-40 (quotes 338-39).

³³Miscellaneous Records, Book 5, p. 339.

³⁴Warner and Foote, comps., *History of Hennepin County*, 242.

³⁵Miscellaneous Records, Book 5, p. 338-39.

³⁶Miscellaneous Records, Book 5, p. 338-39; Warner and Foote, comps., *History of Hennepin County*, 242.

³⁷Miscellaneous Records, Book 5, p. 338-39 (first quote); Deed Records, Book 58, p. 266, 270, 385, 387, 606, Book 68, p. 598, Book 82, p. 184, 323; Warner and Foote, comps., *History of Hennepin County*, 242 (second quote).

ment to a mill in Fairmont, Minnesota, and dismantled the structure.³⁸

Fletcher and Loring sold the property to Eliza Murphy that same year but reserved title to "that certain Mill structure thereon situate known as St. Albans Mill together with the Engine Room and all other appurtenances thereto with the right at anytime . . . to remove the same. . . . To make sure that they would not again be troubled by a recurrence of the problems posed by the St. Albans Mill, Mrs. Murphy was given title to the property "upon express condition that if [she] . . . shall construct or maintain a dam in said Minnehaha Creek . . . or shall use the same for Milling purpose . . . then this deed shall be and become null and void. . . ." ³⁹

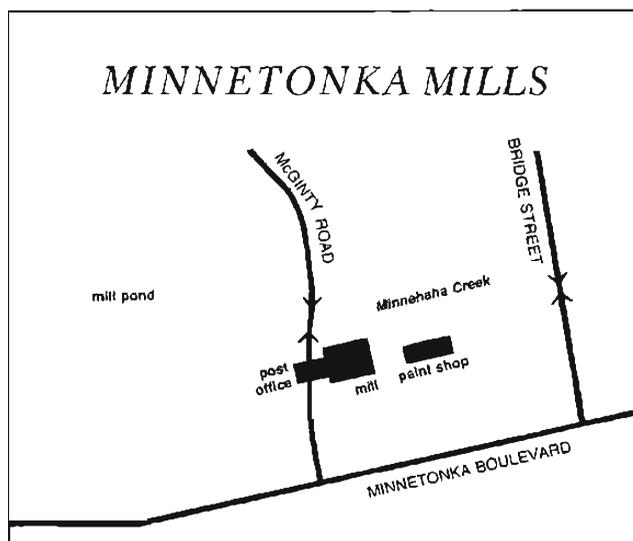
The site of St. Albans Mill is difficult to find today. Overgrown with brush, it is located a few hundred feet west of the old Murphy house that stands on an island in Minnehaha Creek just south of Cedar Lake Road in the city of Minnetonka. Little is left to suggest the presence of a mill. There are the remains of the old railroad bridge that carried the main line of the St. Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba Railway. Among other things, it served the mill across the creek. A few bridge pilings can still be seen at the bend in the creek, and the old railroad grade runs past the mill site on the north bank of Minnehaha Creek (which serves as an excellent path for trail bikes and snowmobiles today). Also visible are the remains of the earth embankment that was John Alt's mill dam spanning the creek. Then, too, an old wagon road can be seen along the south bank of Minnehaha Creek that led to the mill. That is all that remains today to suggest the presence of an old-time gristmill.



OLD RAILROAD pilings are about all that remain at the site of the St. Albans Mill.

³⁸ Foster W. Dunwiddie interview with Dana W. Frear, October 14, 1971; Deed Records, Book 93, p. 368.

³⁹ Deed Records, Book 93, p. 580-81.

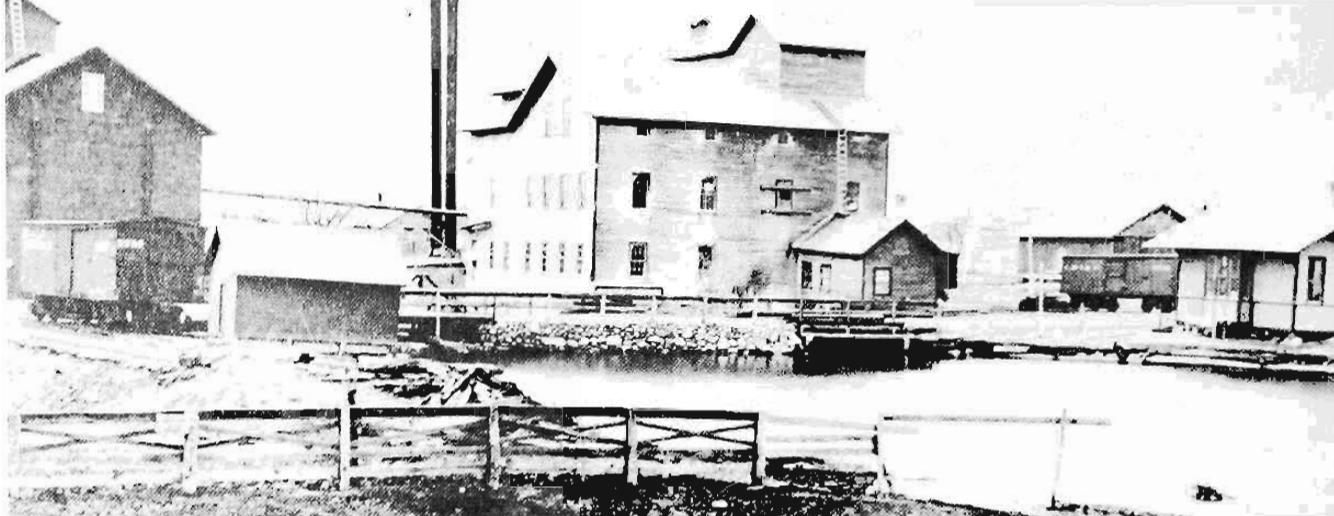


ONE OF the largest and most important of the flouring mills that stood on Minnehaha Creek in the 1870s was Minnetonka Mills. The history of this sixth and last of the flouring mills on Minnehaha Creek began on a spring day in 1852. According to Isaac Atwater and John H. Stevens, "On the 12th day of April, 1852, Simon Stevens, then unmarried, and twenty-three years old and Calvin A. Tuttle, a millwright . . ." set out from St. Anthony to search for a large body of water west of the village; they had learned "from Philander Prescott, the Indian interpreter at Fort Snelling, that the Indians told of a 'big water,' towards the setting sun, in the big woods. . ." (Stevens was the brother of John H. Stevens, who made the first claim west of the Mississippi at St. Anthony Falls. Tuttle lived near Stevens' claim.)

The account continues: "Stevens and Tuttle supposed the lake they were in search of to be distant two or three days' journey. A little before noon, of the first day, they came to a clear, swift-running stream, which they surmised was the outlet of the lake they were seeking. . . . Following the course of the stream, on its north bank, about one o'clock in the afternoon, they reached the bay, now called Gray's Lake [Gray's Bay], where they cooked and ate dinner. . . . After dinner, still uncertain whether they had found the 'big water,' they pushed on, westerly, and came to Wayzata Bay, thence across the ice, which was about three feet thick, past Breezy Point, to Big Island, where they camped for the night."

They explored the "north arm" and the "narrows" and then returned "along the western shore . . . [to] the south side of Gray's Lake. The next morning, they came down the outlet to a point about fifty rods above the site of Minnetonka, where the rapid flow of water, and the narrow valley with solid banks indicated the feasibility of a mill-dam. . . . The abundance of timber sur-

rounded the site of Minnetonka, where the rapid flow of water, and the narrow valley with solid banks indicated the feasibility of a mill-dam. . . . The abundance of timber sur-



MINNETONKA MILLS was in its heyday in 1876 when this photograph was taken. The mill pond is in the foreground. Two railroad cars are visible among the buildings. Note the office at far right.

rounding the lake and the ease "with which logs might be driven to the dam, clearly pointed out an excellent site for a saw mill.

"The following September, work was commenced upon the dam. The dam was completed about January 1st, 1853, and the mill commenced sawing early the next summer. The square oak timbers used in the construction of the first suspension bridge at Minneapolis (1853-5) were sawed at this Minnetonka saw mill. Basswood and oak were sawed for the settlers, who now came rapidly.⁴⁰

"The saw mill, built in 1853, was afterwards converted into a furniture factory, where, among other articles, many red cedar bedsteads were made."⁴¹ Hezekiah Atwood operated the sawmill and furniture factory. "He had hardwood logs from the upper lake [cut] and floated down the creek to his sawmill. He made chairs, tables, bedsteads and other furniture which he hauled to Minneapolis by team. His factory was equipped with a lathe and a paint shop. He died March 11, 1857, from pneumonia resulting from exposure after falling in the lake, when buying logs."⁴² "In 1860, the mill was destroyed by fire from which time Minnetonka was a 'deserted village'."⁴³ However, the potential for mill development continued to be recognized. In 1868 William H. Mitchell and John H. Stevens noted: "There are excellent mill privileges in the town, on Little Falls, or Brown's Creek, which when properly improved must start up the original town site of Minnetonka, and make it a place of considerable moment."⁴⁴ It was not long before the site was "properly improved."

In 1868 also, Thomas H. Perkins acquired title to a square mile of land which included the village, the mill dam, and the water-power rights. He erected "a grist mill 44 x 32, 3-½ stories high, and put in three runs of stone and other necessary machinery." Perkins and his

two sons operated the mill until 1871. In that year Perkins sold the mill to Edwin Hedderly and Henry M. Vroman for \$42,000, and they continued the business for three years. In May, 1874, Loren Fletcher and Charles M. Loring bought Hedderly's half interest for \$15,000 and "organized a stock company to be known as the Minnetonka Mill Company, dating from October 20th, 1874."⁴⁵ Charles H. Burwell became the secretary and manager of the mill.

According to another account, "They immediately refitted the mill, adding to it a wing 26 x 44 feet, and to the machinery four run of burrs, six purifiers, and considerable other machinery. They built an elevator 30 x 40, and thirty feet high, holding about 30,000 bushels, and a warehouse 30 x 30, three stories high. In 1878 the company added to the mill two run of burrs, four sets of rolls, two purifiers, and other machinery. The same year they built an addition to their warehouse, making it 30 x 74; built an engine-house 30 x 38 feet, and put in a Reynolds-Corliss engine of one hundred horsepower. Also placed in their wheel-pit a 66-inch American

⁴⁰ Atwater and Stevens, eds., *History of Minneapolis and Hennepin County*, 1448-50.

⁴¹ Atwater and Stevens, eds., *History of Minneapolis and Hennepin County*, 1451.

⁴² Elvira H. Vinson, "Pioneer Women of Edina-Morningside," 6, undated manuscript, in the possession of the Edina Historical Society, copy in the Minnesota Historical Society manuscripts division.

⁴³ Atwater and Stevens, eds., *History of Minneapolis and Hennepin County*, 1451.

⁴⁴ Mitchell and Stevens, *Geographical and Statistical History*, 110.

⁴⁵ Warner and Foote, comps., *History of Hennepin County*, 241 (first quote), 242 (second quote); Atwater and Stevens, eds., *History of Minneapolis and Hennepin County*, 1451; Deed Records, Book 29, p. 267, Book 45, p. 220-21.

turbine wheel. . . .” By 1881 the mill was manufacturing 300 barrels of flour per day and was shipping its flour to New York, Boston, and Europe. The mill employed eighteen men who were housed in twelve company-owned houses near the mill. A two-story cooper shop employing thirty-two men supplied the mill with barrels. But in 1886, yielding to the competition from the mills in Minneapolis, the mill was closed. It burned in 1902.⁴⁶

The Minnetonka Mills was the largest and most elaborate of the six gristmills on Minnehaha Creek. The mill stood on the south bank of the creek and was a three-and-one-half story wood frame building with a gabled roof and gabled monitor, or second, smaller roof (see photograph on page 172), at one end. The mill in its final form was T-shaped in plan, measuring 72 feet by 58 feet and equipped with “five runs of stone, eleven double setts of rolls, eleven purifiers. . . .” The exterior walls were of beveled wood siding. Wood shingles were used on the roof. Two circular steel stacks, rising three-and-one-half stories high, emerged from the engine house at the northeast corner of the mill. The elevator,

with a storage capacity of 50,000 bushels of wheat, stood on the north bank of the creek opposite the mill, and the two were connected by means of overhead conveyors that spanned the creek. The mill complex was served by two railroads. The Minneapolis and St. Louis Railroad maintained a spur line to the mill itself on the south bank of the creek, and the elevator on the north bank was served by a spur line from the St. Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba Railway.⁴⁷

Today there is little to suggest the extensive milling operations that took place at Minnetonka Mills. The site of the mill on Minnetonka Boulevard has become a quiet park. McGinty Road travels across the location of the mill dam. The dam has been removed and a concrete bridge installed. Even the mill pond has disappeared. Looking at the creek today, it is difficult to picture the fifty-foot steamers that once docked there, carrying mail and grain from Excelsior, across Lake Minnetonka, and down Minnehaha Creek to the Minnetonka Mills.⁴⁸

Evidence of the Minnetonka Mill Company can still be found in the city of Minnetonka. One relic is the old mill office that stood next to the mill on the south bank of the creek. This one-story building, with its bay windows, ornamental eave triangles, decorative fans, and carved finials at the gable ends, has been moved from its original site to the Burwell property on McGinty Road and converted into a garage. One of the original twelve cottages, built and owned by the mill company for its employees, also remains on the Burwell property. Examples of the Gothic revival movement that swept the country in the 1800s, the millworker cottages had board and batten exteriors with elaborate scrollwork verge boards along the eaves. An ornamental coxcomb ridge with carved finial spires topped the wood shingle roofs of these Gothic revival style cottages. Then there is the Italianate-style

⁴⁶ Warner and Foote, comps., *History of Hennepin County*, 242 (quotes); Atwater and Stevens, eds., *History of Minneapolis and Hennepin County*, 1452; Dunwiddie interview with Frear, October 14, 1971; *Minneapolis Journal*, December 29, 1902, p. 3.

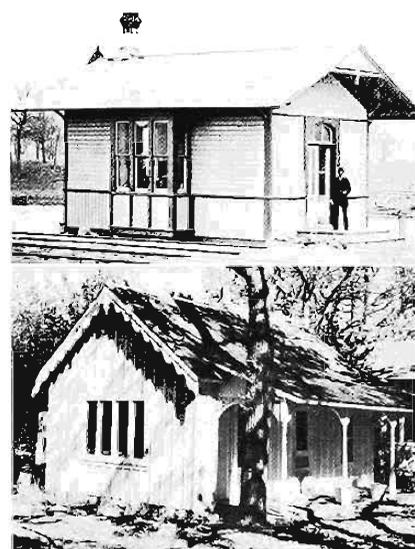
⁴⁷ Warner and Foote, comps., *History of Hennepin County*, 242.

⁴⁸ *Minneapolis Star-Journal*, June 5, 1942, p. 12. The struggle over water rights in the vicinity of Minnetonka Mills, which led to the construction of Gray's Bay dam in 1897, could be the subject of a separate dissertation. For an account, see Dana W. Frear's article in the *Minnetonka Herald*, February 7, 1952.

BURWELL HOUSE, built in 1883 by Minnetonka Mills manager Charles Burwell, is now on the National Register of Historic Places.

BURWELL stands at the door of his office in this 1883 picture. The office, now a garage, still stands on the Burwell property.

A COTTAGE built for millworkers also still stands on Burwell site.



Burwell house itself, built in 1883 by Charles Burwell, the secretary and manager of the Minnetonka Mill Company. The house, with its imposing belvedere that once overlooked the mill pond, has been somewhat altered. For the most part, though, the house remains as it was built.

THE flouring mills on Minnehaha Creek were quite typical of the "old process" gristmills of the nineteenth century. Few structures have made more efficient use of enclosed space than mills of this type, whose functional design has evolved over many years. They were a simple expression of the milling process that took place within. Since flour milling was essentially a vertical flow process, it is not surprising that the mills were multistoried structures.

The incoming grain was received at the first-floor level, elevated to the top of the mill, then passed downward by gravity through a series of cleaning devices to the millstones below. The hot meal, or "chop," that emerged from the grinding process was collected on the floor below and then raised by still another elevator to the top of the mill once more. Here it was cooled and then poured into a silk-lined "bolter" below for separation into the end products, flour, middlings, shorts, and bran. These were collected and bagged on the first-floor level.⁴⁹

The principal loading doors were at the first-floor level, enabling sacks of grain to be lifted from wagons drawn up beside the mill and sacks of flour to be loaded into waiting wagons for shipment. The whole of the space under the roof of the mill was utilized for the storage of grain. Under the rafters a series of open bins extended along each side of the building, and these were served by a central gangway running the length of the mill.⁵⁰

Heavy timber, or "mill," construction was used for the structural frame of these mills. The vibration of machinery and the imposition of heavy, intermittent loading required strong, often massive, structural members to sustain the stresses to which the building was subjected. Wood was a logical choice. It was to be found in abundance along Minnehaha Creek and in nearby woods. Wood members could be easily shaped and worked. However, the necessity of using wood was not without some degree of hazard. Friction between the millstones might at any time spark off a fire which could spread with explosive force through the dust-laden air. A small explosion would shake loose dust from above which could trigger a chain reaction with disastrous results. But the choice of materials on the frontier was limited, and the millwrights were forced to use the materials at hand.

Early mills, such as Ard Godfrey's, used wooden, overshot water wheels to harness the water power af-

forded by the stream. This type of wheel was turned by the weight of the water and was employed in slower moving waterways, usually utilizing a dam. The water was carried to the wheel by a sluiceway and spilled over the top of the overshot wheel, making it the most powerful type of water wheel. However, the metal turbine wheel, which is a housed underwater variety, gradually replaced the wood water wheel because, operating under the level of winter's ice, it was less subject to freezing, an important consideration in Minnesota. When the wooden water wheels needed repair, they were frequently replaced by turbines which were more efficient than the conventional wheels.⁵¹

The exterior of the mills was clad with clapboards or board and batten siding. The mills were treated as strictly utilitarian structures with little or no architectural embellishment. The lack of applied ornament focused the attention on the building form which was a simple expression of the function within.

A son of one miller recalls: "Inside [the mill] there was semi-darkness caused by the paste on the window panes and the dust in the air. This, together with the deep, purring rumble from the massive millstones, the rattle of wheat-cleaning machinery, the whirr and hum of fans and the slapping of belts, lent an air of mystery and danger to the place. . . ." The "whitened miller darted about in the half-light like a ghost, stopping here to feel the warm 'chop' as it came from the great millstones, there to clean the sieves of the separator, at another place to throw on a belt or to remove a full sack from the spout and replace it with an empty one. . . . What a worker of magic was the dust-covered miller who could pour the coarse grain into a hole in the floor and then draw from the spouts that came from above, the fine white flour, the soft velvety shorts and the flaky golden bran!"⁵² And over-all was the thick blanket of dust and the unforgettable gristmill odor.

The dusty miller and his dusty mill are gone. The deep, purring rumble of the massive millstones has died away. But the old-time gristmills live on in the history of Joe Brown's River.

⁴⁹ Storck and Teague, *Flour for Man's Bread*, 189.

⁵⁰ John Reynolds, *Windmills & Watermills*, 22 (New York, 1970).

⁵¹ Reynolds, *Windmills & Watermills*, 22.

⁵² Schussler, *Riverside Reveries*, 107-08.

THE BUSINESS CARD on page 169 was lent by the Edina Historical Society. The photograph of the St. Albans site on page 171 and the picture of the millworkers' cottage on 173 are by Foster W. Dunwiddie. The photographs of the Burwell house and Minnetonka Mills office are published through the courtesy of the Hennepin County Historical Society. All other photographs are from the Minnesota Historical Society's picture collection. The maps were drawn by Alan Ominsky from the author's originals.



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