



A large, rusted metal water wheel is the central focus, partially obscured by wooden beams and stone walls. The wheel's spokes are thick and weathered, and its rim shows signs of significant age and use. The background consists of rough-hewn stone masonry, suggesting a historic mill building. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights on the metal and deep shadows in the crevices.

CIRCLING THE PAST

Once frontier-age temples of commerce,
today's surviving mills offer a poignant
glimpse of an earlier Bluegrass

circling the past

By Harriet Fowler / Photos by Carol Peachee

It's no coincidence that dozens of road names in Central Kentucky include the word "mill" in them. Mill Street, Armstrong Mill, Bowman's Mill, Clays Mill, Higbee Mill, Lemons Mill — the list goes on and on. Mills once abounded in and around Lexington, mills of almost every conceivable type: carding mills, saw mills, grist mills, flour mills, fullers' mills, textile mills, and others. Old Lexington *Leaders* and Lexington *Heralds* yield a trove of items and articles on downtown mills, including references to a United Woolen Mills on West Main Street and the Woolcott Flour Mills at Fourth and Blackburn, home of Lexington Maid Flour, as well as the Lexington Roller Mills at Broadway and Vine.

Once every settlement and early town in this country was anchored by a mill's presence, usually by waterside. In the 18th and 19th centuries, mills were used to produce essentials of food, lum-

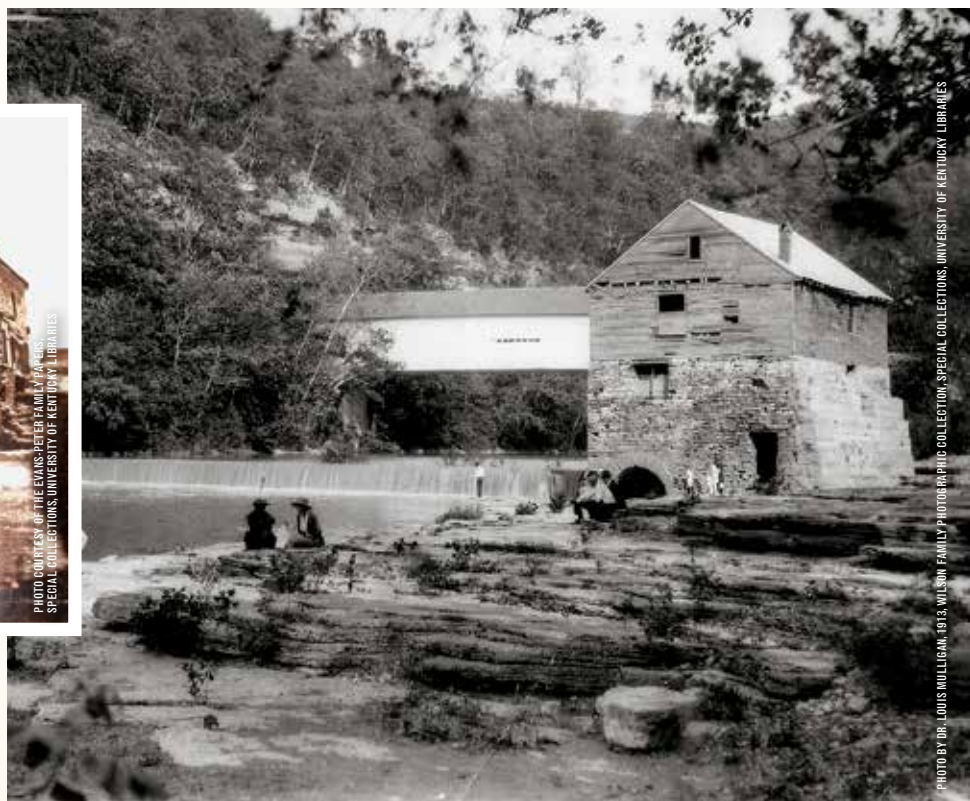
ber, textiles — in short, almost every conceivable staple of daily life. They were our first manufacturing plants. They preceded the general store as a kind of community center.

Of the more than 900 grist and sawmills in 1860s Kentucky, most are gone now. A number of abandoned mills still exist, some housing shops, museums, restaurants, or even private residences. An even smaller number continue to operate. Many of them are now old enough to be admired and valued for their historical importance. They might have looked sadly outdated during 20th century modernist years but can now be appreciated in their own right. Essential to any early settlement, their earnestly plain outlines perfectly united form and function. They were our earliest industrial architecture.

Given Kentucky's love of history, it's no surprise that the commonwealth's mills have their champions. The Kentucky Old Mill Association (KOMA) has painstakingly documented mill history throughout the region and has published helpful lists of what's where (see sidebar). A mill name usually traces back to the original landowner who either constructed it or allowed it on his prop-



Above, Lemon's Mill once stood at the Fayette-Scott County line and was a popular gathering spot for many years, even after the mill was torn down in 1908. Right, King's Mill on the Dix tributary at the Kentucky River is pictured before the flood in the late 1920s.

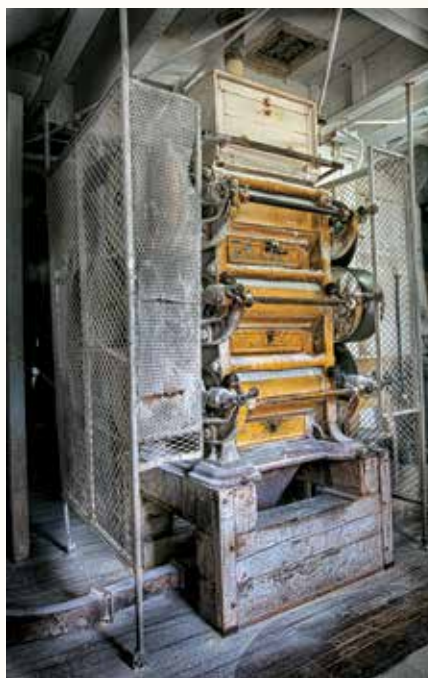




erty. Occasionally the name has changed to reflect a transfer of ownership.

Among the area's best-known mills is Weisenberger near Midway, first built in 1865. Family-owned for six generations, it is the oldest continually operating mill in the state. Its various grain products, all grown locally, have supplied the food service industry since its beginnings; in recent years some of the more popular offerings have been available for retail. All types of flour and corn mixes sell briskly, everything from muffins, scones, and hush puppies to pizza, spoonbread, grits, and, of course, plain flour. The mill has a reputation for high-quality products that are often served in better restaurants throughout the nation.

Weisenberger sits on the South Elkhorn and uses the creek to power its twin turbine engines. (Electric as backup was added in the early 20th century, but the mill regularly sells back unused power to the grid.) The original mill, built by German émigré Augustus Weisenberger in 1865, was torn down in 1913 and the present one constructed. During the 1930s the front office section loading/receiving area was added to the original building. Both the original building and the addition have a genuine period feel to them. There's nothing staged or displayed to look historic — decades-old photographs and mementos look as if they've been there forever. One has the sense that the father-and-son Weisenbergers are too busy running their mill to even think about glossing their public image.



One of Kentucky's rare surviving mills, Weisenberger in Woodford County has been continually operating since 1865. Above, interior wheels of mill production; left, during the transformation of corn kernels into meal, corn is moved through a progression of grinding mechanisms. During the process the product can be examined in each of the stacked box-like drawers.

circling the past



Guyn's Mill in Woodford County

Another surviving Woodford County treasure is Guyn's Mill on Pauls Mill Road at Mundy's Landing, specifically on the east fork of Clear Creek, a tributary of the Kentucky River. Named after Robert Guyn, whose private residence still stands just up the road, the original grist mill was once part of a complex of buildings that included a sawmill, miller's house, barns, and blacksmith shop. The entire complex is one of only 14 such extant mill settlements in Kentucky and is considered the most visually cohesive. It is recognized as an actual historic district.

Sometime from 1840 to 1850 the raised-limestone, braced-frame construction sawmill was built on the Guyn property; it has been described as the only documented water-powered sawmill still surviving in Kentucky. The grist mill across the creek was added in the 1870s and was the first one in the state to be steam powered. The original, intact steam engine and flywheel used to run its daily output sit next to the building. Around 1920 the mill ended production and for many years the



Built in the 1870s this grist mill is part of an agricultural complex established by Robert Guyn. It was the first mill in the state to be steam-powered.

Below, the Guyn sawmill, unusual for its raised limestone construction, has been described as the only documented surviving water-powered sawmill in Kentucky.



complex was neglected, home to weeds, wildlife, and occasional secretive use by local teenagers. Fortunately, national historic property status helps assure its future preservation. Today, an architectural design studio named Prajna occupies the grist mill. (Incidentally, on that same road is its namesake — Pauls Mill. Part of a 400-acre-plus horse farm, the mill has been extensively remodeled as a guest house or apartment.)

One of the most successful uses of mill buildings is Grimes Mill in southern Fayette County near the Madison County line. It has been

home to the Iroquois Hunt Club since 1929. The mill site was acquired by Charles Grimes from Eli Cleveland in 1805. Grimes built his grist mill (next to Boones Creek with the idea of producing flour for the export market even as the three-story stone construction immediately became popular with area farmers for grinding their corn and wheat. Grimes then built a malt house and distillery and began producing what would become his famous Old Grimes Whiskey. In 1813 he added a stone house above the mill. Today, the former mill has been outfitted with a full kitchen,

circling the past



Grimes Mill in southern Fayette County has been home to the Iroquois Hunt Club since the late 1920s. Hunt club members have beautifully maintained the property and it is considered one of the most successful adaptations or re-use projects of its type.

bar, and patio and offers special meals for Hunt Club members several times a month. It's also used to cater members' private parties. In addition, the property includes kennels, stables, and a huntsman's house.

Not far from Grimes Mill is the James Bush Mill on Boone Creek in the Lower Howard's Creek Nature and Heritage Preserve. (The preserve itself was the

subject of a *Keeneland* magazine article in the summer 2014 issue.) Only the mill's exterior walls remain — the massive two-foot-thick walls show decided curvature, especially along a chimney wall, but so far they remain standing. Like that of Grimes, Bush's mill's production was aimed at national and international markets. The grain that was processed

at Bush's was packed in sturdy barrels, then sent to Fort Boonesborough. The barrels were shipped down the Mississippi, ultimately making their way to New Orleans and finally to international ports. Bush's mill was truly a commercial operation that made the most of the area's natural resources. While the Preserve has a wild, uninhabited look to it now, around the turn of the 19th century it was home to several hundred people and flourished with mill-centered activity.

Today, nearly all of the region's mills have vanished. Early 20th century photographs record their presence, as in the Lemons Mill facility, which hosted numerous social gatherings and military musters for years after the mill itself came down in 1908.

Mills or their remains exist throughout eastern Kentucky, such as McHargue's Mill at Levi Jackson State Park, Hooten Old Town Mill south of McKee, and Renfro Valley Mill in Rock-



Paul Sawyer's oil on canvas view of King's Mill; collection of Roseanne and David Downey

FOR ENTHUSIASTS

Thanks to the Kentucky Old Mill Association (KOMA), there is considerable documentation on mills throughout the state. KOMA got its start Sept. 1, 2000, when a group of mill enthusiasts met in Frankfort and agreed to form a Kentucky chapter of the national association, the Society for the Preservation of Old Mills. Founding members were Charles Hockensmith, Larry Meadows, Eugene Peck, Dr. Fred Coy Jr., Tom Fuller, Dennis Feeback, and Harry Enoch. Headquarters of KOMA is the Red River Historical Society & Museum in Clay City. KOMA holds a Gristmill and Old Engine Weekend there each May. KOMA began publishing a 52-page, semi-annual magazine — *The Millstone* — in 2002.

In addition to articles on mill-related subjects, *The Millstone* includes recipes, cataloging of old mill postcards, and memorial tributes to former members. Most articles are written by KOMA members and focus on Kentucky mills although a few titles feature North Carolina or Tennessee subjects.

One of KOMA's most prolific authors, Harry Enoch, is a virtual encyclopedia of area mill information. Since the organization's founding, Enoch has contributed to almost every issue of *The Millstone*. Terms such as "millrace" and "tailrace" or "overshot waterwheel" or "undershot waterwheel" are part of the rich vocabulary of mill terminology as are his detailed analyses of various millstones themselves. Enoch's background in biochemistry gives his articles a firm scientific footing and his passionate interest in the subject breathes life into his words. When asked how he became interested in mills, Enoch said, "Larry Meadows of Clay City got me interested in grist mills 16 years ago when we arranged a visit to the Iroquois Hunt Club, formerly known as Grimes Mill. I'm still hooked."

For more information on KOMA, contact its web site at www.kentuckyoldmills.org (street address: c/o Red River Museum, 4541 Main St., Clay City, KY 40312) or its club president, Charles D. Hockensmith, at charleshockensmith@gmail.com, or club treasurer, Vincent A. DiNoto, Jr. at vince.dinoto@kckcs.edu

WINES on VINE

fine wines and quality spirits

400 Old Vine St.
Lexington, KY 40507
859.243.0017

Daily Lunch and Dinner Specials
Lunch Hours: Mon-Sat 11:30a to 2:30p
Dinner: Mon-Wed 5p-9p Thurs-Sat 5p-10p
Find us on Facebook to see weekly events.

CLAY'S SMOKIN' BLUEGRASS BBQ



400 MILLERSBURG ROAD
PARIS, KENTUCKY 40361
859-337-5200

Monday-Saturday 11AM to 7PM

Located across from the
hospital and beside the
East Main Street Shell.

Free Wi-Fi Available.



Discover Paris & Bourbon County

Located in Central Kentucky, Bourbon County is characterized by rich farmland and is known for “Horses, History, and Hospitality”. Famous for their thoroughbred horses, picturesque farms, and scenic drives through stone fence lined beautiful farmland; Paris is truly a horse-lover’s dream come true. Explore historic Downtown Paris.



This Victorian era Main Street is lined with galleries, antique shops, museums, restaurants, a micro-brewery, and a boutique distillery. Experience real Southern charm and hospitality by visiting this jewel of the Bluegrass.

Located just 15 miles from Lexington; Paris and Bourbon County are a must visit while staying in Central Kentucky.

For more information visit:

www.ParisKY.com

(859)-987-6237



circling the past



The remains of Bush Mill are found in the Lower Howard’s Creek Nature and Heritage Preserve.

castle County, among others. Some of these water-powered mills are open to the public during summer months. In one instance, the Army Corps of Engineers owns and operates the mill at Mill Springs, south of Lake Cumberland in Wayne County. A former commercial mill, its 40-foot steel waterwheel is reported to be the largest one operating in the country, according to a 2004 article in *The Millstone*.

More recently, there has been much talk among area enthusiasts about the superb mill restoration outside Louisville at Wolf Pen, a project of Sallie Bingham and River Fields.

There is one area mill that experienced an unusual fate. For many years King’s Mill in Frankfort, which was recorded by Kentucky’s beloved painter Paul Sawyier, stood at the juncture of the Dix tributary and the Kentucky River. When Lake Herrington was created in the 1920s, the mill, along with area houses and shops, were flooded out of existence. At its greatest depth of 249 feet, the newly created lake easily covered the three-story mill structure. There’s a certain poignancy in seeing both the faded photograph of the mill and Sawyier’s tribute to it as one realizes that the mill still exists, albeit in a lost world. **KM**



Old millstones are a natural design element in the dry-stack stone fence at Weisenberger Mill.