

SECORD, SERVOS AND NIAGARA'S FIRST MILLS

By the summer of 1778, just three years into the American Revolutionary War, provisioning at Fort Niagara had become a major problem. Supplies had to be brought from the lower St. Lawrence or even imported from Britain, and the presence of troops, Butler's Rangers, Loyalist refugees and displaced natives taxed resources to the limit. An agreement with the Seneca restricted cultivation on the east side of the Niagara River, and the only solution was to open up the west bank for settlement. Initially this was done in a highly controlled fashion. In June 1779 General Frederick Haldimand, Governor of Quebec, gave tentative approval, and in December 1780 Colonel John Butler reported that "four or five families" had built houses across the river.

One of the very first was Peter Secord, who had taken up land on the Four Mile Creek where the village of St. Davids is today. A year and a half later, in a letter dated June 12, 1782 to Captain Robert Mathews, Haldimand's Military Secretary, Butler wrote, "Peter Secord and James Seacord, Farmers, are about building a Saw and Grist Mill, which I think will be a great acquisition to this Post."

This is the first known reference to mills in the Niagara Peninsula. That much is certain. But what happened next remains somewhat of a mystery, which I intend to address in this article.

King's Mills

In his reply to Butler in July 1782 Mathews stated that the Secords were welcome to build the mills at the government's expense, but they would not be permitted to own them. The mills would belong to the Crown — in other words they were to be King's Mills. The Secords could operate the mills as tenants, and would be "allowed a reasonable profit for working them." All this was in accordance with the seigneurial system of the Province of Quebec, with the Crown assuming the role of seigneur.

Butler responded that the mills were never intended to be privately owned, and in an undated memorandum later that year he provided an estimate "for building a saw and grist mill at Peter Secord's farm." The saw mill would be built first, and the total cost would be £500 N.Y. currency. In the same memorandum he also gave an estimate for building mills in another location, this "at the head of the Four Mile Creek." Since Secord's farm was close to the creek's headwaters, it is not clear where this other site was. But Butler provides a clue when he says that at this second location (where the cost would be £50 more) "there is plenty of water for both mills, which the other has not." This suggests that, despite his use of the word "head," he had in mind a spot lower down the creek.

By November 1782 Lieutenant David Brass of the Rangers had been engaged to build the mills. He was well qualified for the task — Major John Ross, commandant at Cataraqui, referred to him as a "remarkable genius" and an "exceeding good Millwright." He had the timber cut and squared by February 1783, but delays in shipping the necessary ironwork and millstones brought the project to a halt. These items arrived by the fall, however, so the mills were likely completed before winter set in.

But where were the mills located? Were they on Secord land, or were they at the other location? Some writers assume the former, and point to the ancient Peter Secord mill that still stands on Four Mile Creek Road in St. Davids as proof. Originally built as a grist mill, it later served as an inn, and is now a private residence. In 2004 it was designated by the Town of Niagara on the Lake. In the designation by-law it is referred to as a King's Mill, and it carries a plaque bearing the date 1782-3.

But there is no solid evidence that this was the grist mill built by Brass, nor indeed is there proof that the mills he erected were anywhere on Secord land. At the same time there is ample evidence for the other location, which turns out to be seven miles downstream just above the Four Mile Pond, through which the creek entered Lake Ontario.

Mills are mentioned many times in letters sent back and forth between Niagara and Quebec in 1782 and 1783, but apart from Butler's tantalizing reference to the "head" there are no clues as to the second location. But a letter written to Haldimand in July 1784 by Lieutenant-Colonel Arent DePeyster, newly arrived as commandant at Fort Niagara, does contain a hint. The letter concerns the fact that Brass and his co-workers had still not been paid, and gives the location of the mills as "the Four Mile Run," which could well mean the approach to the pond.

This is confirmed by a map of the "Settlement at Niagara" drawn by Allan MacDonell in 1783, which shows a "grist mill & Saw mill" above the Four Mile Pond, but nothing on Secord land upstream. A second map drawn by Philip Frey in 1788 shows essentially the same thing. When Butler used the word "head," therefore, he most likely meant the head of the pond, not the creek.

Further evidence comes from a list of mills in the Home District prepared in 1792 by surveyor Augustus Jones for John Graves Simcoe, first Lieutenant Governor of Upper Canada. By this time privately-owned mills were permitted, and 20 appear on the list, together with the name of the builder, the year of construction and by what authority it was built. Two entries are of special significance. The

first is for a grist mill built on the Four Mile Creek by Peter Secord “on the verbal Promise made him by Lord Dorchester.” But the date of construction is given as 1789, not 1783.

The second entry reads in full, “A Grist Mill on a Creek called the Four Mile near the King’s Mills, in the year 1791, by Daniel Servos, on ungranted Lands.” A former Sergeant in the Rangers, Servos is known to have settled near the mouth of Four Mile Creek at an early date — he called his land Palatine Hill — which makes the phrase “near the King’s Mills” very significant. Furthermore, documentary evidence shows that by 1785 Servos was running a business dealing largely in lumber and flour. Where did these products come from? Since the requirement that all mills be Crown-owned was not relaxed until 1786, this implies that the original tenant of the King’s Mills had to be Servos himself.

The conclusion is clear. Though the Secords were the first to suggest that mills be built in Niagara, the King’s Mills erected in 1783 were located not on Secord land but downstream near the head of the Four Mile Pond, and the first operator was Daniel Servos. The grist mill that survives in St. Davids was built by Peter Secord in 1789 and was never a King’s Mill.

Seigneurial and Privately-Owned Mills

In 1784 King’s Mills were built at Cataraqui, but they and the Niagara mills fell far short of meeting settlers’ needs. Accordingly, on February 16, 1786, it was declared that privately owned grist mills could now be built, though only under strict conditions. Fifteen potential mill sites were identified in various townships, and if the person occupying one of these sites built a mill at his own expense he would be granted the rights of seigneur for a period of 15 years. The mill had to be completed by “November next,” and it had to be kept in constant repair. At the end of the 15 years ownership would revert to the Crown, without any compensation being paid. The government did make one small concession though: “For the greater encouragement of the undertaker one batteau, properly manned” would be available to bring millstones from Lachine.

Three of the potential mill sites were in the Niagara Peninsula. One was for a wind mill on Lake Erie, and the other two for water mills. The latter were to be located “between the Great Falls and Chipeway Creek,” and “at the Falls above the 12 mile Pond, 10 miles from the Lake, and 16 from the Garrison.” The first site was on the Niagara River just downstream of Dufferin Islands (on what became Lot 174 of Stamford following the township survey), and the other was on the Twelve Mile Creek in Power Glen (later Lot 22, Concession 10 of Grantham). The “undertaker” on the first site, John Burch, may have completed his mills by the deadline, but not his counterpart on the second site, Duncan Murray. It was not Murray’s fault, however,

for he fell victim to an undertaker of a different sort when he was killed by a falling tree. His partly-built mills were transferred to Queenston merchant Robert Hamilton, who completed them, with permission from the authorities, a year late.

The policy change of 1786 did not lead to many mills being built, and since it involved the seigneurial system, it served only to produce “much uneasiness and ... discontent among the inhabitants,” to quote Cataraqui merchant Richard Cartwright. Not surprisingly, just two years later the regulations on mill building were loosened further, this in conjunction with the introduction of freehold land tenure. Anyone granted land was now free to erect mills, resulting in a mini-boom in mill construction.

This is reflected in the census of mills commissioned by Simcoe after his arrival in Upper Canada. Surveyor General D.W. Smith was nominally in charge, but the actual returns were prepared by the deputy surveyors for each district, who sought such details as “whether [the mills were] occupied, by whom, on what condition, authority, tenure, since what period, together with all other circumstances relative thereto.” Augustus Jones’ return for the Home District has already been mentioned, and it makes for interesting reading.

The first two mills on the list are Burch’s and Murray’s. On the Four Mile Creek, aside from Peter Secord’s 1789 grist mill (which was on Lot 92 of Niagara Township) and Daniel Servos’ 1791 grist mill (on Lot 194), we have two saw mills, one built by David Secord in 1791 (lot unstated) and another by Samson Lutes in 1792 (Lot 89). The King’s Mills are not listed, suggesting that the grist mill at least had been supplanted by Servos’ 1791 mill.

Space allows me to mention only a few other mills, all on the Twelve Mile Creek. One of these, of course, was the Murray/Hamilton mill, completed in 1787. Three others appear on Jones’ list: a grist mill built by David Secord in 1791 on Lot, 5, Concession 4 of Pelham, a saw mill built by Benjamin Canby in 1792 on Lot 134 of Thorold, and a saw mill “now erecting on one of the Branches of a Creek called the twelve Mile” by John DeCew on Lot 58 of Thorold.

The branch in question was Beaverdams Creek, and the mill was located just across the road from the present-day remains of DeCew’s stone house. It is sometimes stated that DeCew had a grist mill on the same site, but this is not likely. He built a grist mill with a 16-foot overshot wheel at DeCew Falls (where Morningstar Mill is now), but it was most likely after the War of 1812 since he did not buy the land in question until just before war broke out.

Credits: layout (Loris Gasparotto); editing (John Burtiak)

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