

A place lost in time

Millington a forgotten village Thompson's Mills

Based on a text by
Serge Gaudreau, historian

The municipality of Austin was created from the successive dismemberments of pieces of land within the Township of Bolton. At one time, the heart of the village lay, not at the crossroads of Nicholas Austin and Millington Fisher Roads, as it does today, but at the intersection of North and Patch Roads. This centre was first called Thompson's Mills, then renamed Millington in 1877 when a post office was opened there. Millington is one of the oldest areas of Loyalist settlement in the Eastern Townships. As mills were essential for colonization, Nicholas Austin and Alexander Thompson built the first mills in the Township of Bolton, but we still don't know which of the two built the first.

A small brook, Powell Brook, situated some two kilometres from the heart of the present village would be the driving force for settlement of the surrounding area. Around 1796, Alexander Thompson, one of Nicholas Austin's 'Associates', harnessed the stream and built a flour mill and a sawmill, vestiges of which remain to this day. However, the small volume of flow would ultimately lead to the demise of the hamlet of Millington.

The Cultural Committee of Austin wanted to publish this adaptation of the research carried out by Serge Gaudreau, after enriching it with additional research and the memories of a couple from the municipality, to keep alive this little-known part of the history of Austin.



Millington Marsh, North Road, the source of Powell Brook.

The arrival of the Loyalists

The first settlers – American Loyalists fleeing the newly-constituted United States of America – arrived in the Eastern Townships at the end of the 18th Century and faced very difficult conditions. Moving into territory inhabited by the Abenaki aboriginals, these pioneers had to call upon all the tenacity and skills they had developed in their country of origin, in order to survive.

During this phase of settlement and economic development, one invaluable area of expertise the Loyalists brought with them was knowing how to build dams and set up mills¹. Pioneers in the region were well aware that such skills were essential to establishing a settlement because, without a mill, it was impossible to attract settlers².

With other immigrants from New England, the Quaker and Loyalist Nicholas Austin put down roots in the region, even though he actually owned no property. Various industrial projects sprang up. Thus, shortly after arriving in 1793, Austin built a small flour mill in Bolton, at Gibraltar Point³. He later built others on the Magog River, in the centre of what would become the village of the Outlet of Lake Memphremagog (now Magog).



The two mills, probably around 1915, before a fire destroyed them in 1917. Enlargement of a photo of the milling complex. The stone building is the grist mill with the saw mill on its left. The building in the forefront would have been a large stable and carriage house.



Millington at the beginning of the 20th Century, postcard. The Thompson's mills are located in the centre of the picture.

Nicholas Austin, however, was not the only one to recognize the importance of mills. At around the same time, 1796, Alexander Thompson (also spelled "Thomson" or "Tomson") built the first flour mill, then a saw mill, on Powell Brook, some two kilometres north of the centre of the present village of Austin, a spot that would long be known as *Peasley's Corner*.

In 1794, Thompson, who was born in Scotland in 1747, left the village of Barnet in Vermont to come to the Eastern Townships. He settled in this area, like other Loyalist and Protestant families, several of whom were Quakers. These families, named Buzzzell, Dilce, Eastman, Manson, Peaselee (also spelled Peasley), Place and Taylor, to name only a few, would leave their mark on the history of the region. Alexander Thompson was one of the fifty-three 'Associates' who, with Nicholas Austin, finally received the concession of the Township of Bolton, by Letters Patent, in August 1797.

Thompson acquired four hundred acres in lots 18 and 19 on the 10th Range in the Township. The dam and mills he first built were of modest scale, given the limited demand, sparse population and primitive means of transportation at the time.

Thompson's Mills

In those days, fire was a constant threat for mills, and Thompson's mills did not escape this fate. Not one to give up easily, Alexander Thompson quickly rebuilt them, making them the motor of economic development. As was said earlier, the presence of the two mills encouraged people to come to the area : the sawmill to produce lumber and the grist mill to mill grain for flour, used especially for oatmeal or porridge (a staple⁴ in the Scottish diet). The mill was also used for milling animal feed. It is said that people came from as far away as Stukely (about 23 kilometres distant) to have their various grains and cereals milled, though it could not have been easy to get to lots 18 and 19 on the 10th Range in the Township of Bolton. The trip was often made on foot, over steep, winding paths hardly suited to carrying foodstuffs or other materials.

The economic character of the area, now known as *Thompson's Mills*, became more defined. This name commemorated pioneer Alexander Thompson, who died on May 28, 1835. However, he was not the only individual to leave his mark. One of his sons, also called Alexander, became in his turn a person of influence. A Methodist preacher who spread the word of God throughout the region, he undertook, after the death of his father, the construction of a huge stone flour mill to replace the old wooden structure. The



Millington Cemetery. Tombstones of Alexander Thomson Jr., his wife Betsey Taylor (daughter of 'Associate' Daniel Taylor) and their son Alexander. Now called East Bolton Cemetery, the cemetery is the final resting place for some members of the founding families of Millington and Austin: Thompson, Austin, Peasley, Powell, Place, Taylor, Randall, Sargent, Bryant... Stilman Patch was buried beside his father-in-law Rev. David Brill, both on the same day.

mill, several storeys high, was powered by a water wheel, a drive shaft and a complex system of gears, pulleys, belts and the heavy millstones that ground the grain.

The hamlet of *Thompson's Mills* was strengthened by the establishment of such institutions as the first church in the Township, *Wesleyan Methodist Church*⁵, completed in 1825 on part of the Thompson lands, a stone's throw from the mills (still referred to by local people as "Church Hill"). Thirty years later, in the *Township of Bolton*, the census noted that more than 250 persons identified themselves as Methodists. The school, which opened in 1826, was another catalyst for growth. Then came a post office, a community centre, a smithy and various small businesses.



Commemorative cairn, erected in 1939, for Wesleyan Methodist Church (1825-1936), Millington Road.

The swan song

The period from 1825 to 1860 was probably the golden age of *Thompson's Mills*. A golden age built on a fragile foundation, with limited economic potential because the mills could only work seasonally at full power, in the spring and fall... When hot, dry weather reduced the flow of the stream that drove the mills, there could be lengthy slowdowns. In winter, activity was limited to maintenance work and storage of flour.

In the book he wrote in 1866, Cyrus Thomas already spoke of the "tumble-down situation"⁶ of the stone mill built during the 1830s. The author was also critical of Alexander Thompson, who followed in the footsteps of his grandfather and of his father who died in 1845, whom he characterized as a "good person, just with no head for business".

Other factors were part of the equation. The reduced flow in Powell Brook did not allow the mills to compete with other, more efficient mills built on bigger watercourses. Moreover, during the second half of the 19th Century, the arrival of the railway played a part in redefining the major economic growth axis in the Townships. Competition, capacity and costs became important factors in the growth of industries. For example, there were large sawmills in Bolton Centre and in South Bolton, where, starting in 1877, the *Missisquoi Valley Railway* made a stop, and the *Orford Mountain Railway* would pass a while later.

For some villages, like Magog or Eastman, the railway link gave an unprecedented spur to development. No such thing for *Thompson's Mills* or Millington – the name by which the hamlet was known starting in 1877⁷ – which did not have the necessary assets to become a major centre.

At the turn of the 20th Century, the mills at Millington belonged to a merchant named T. B. Rider. People continued to work there on a seasonal basis. Clyde Dingman, a young man at that time, recalled that these men, including his father, were still working at the flour mill⁸. Its value at that time, like the saw mill, was estimated at \$350.

Later, in the 1900s, Ephraim J. Patch, pastor of the Methodist church became the owner of the mills and the general store, following in the footsteps of Alexander Thompson Jr. who had been both miller and pastor of Millington. Ephraim died in 1910 and one of his sons, Stilman George Patch, who was also postmaster, took over the business. He enlarged the general store and had a new dam built on Powell Brook to provide a greater volume of water for the mills, giving them a new lease on life. He then equipped the sawmill with a dry kiln and a shingle making machine. The Patch businesses also included a large stable and a carriage house which was used to house the lumber teams, wagons and sleds. He hauled foodstuffs between Bolton Centre and Millington. His property of some 200 acres also boasted a big sugar bush and an orchard.

On April 24, 1917, Patch died following a terrible accident at the saw mill. While he was adjusting a big, toothed circular saw he had just acquired, one of his sleeves was caught and he suffered grievous lacerations which proved to be fatal⁹. On April 25, his father-in-law, pastor David Brill, also passed away. Patch's wife, Nancy Anne (Brill) Patch, continued to operate the mills, though only for a short time, since a fire destroyed the house, general store and mills in 1918. Disheartened and without resources, Nancy emigrated to Vermont with her family¹⁰.

Some say this marked the end of the saga of the mills. However, according to the assessment roll for East Bolton, the land was then purchased by a Mr. Hamel and used by two manufacturers, Georges Landry, father and son. Their operation, if indeed there was one, did not last long. The presence of the sawmill was no longer noted in the mid-1920s and everything indicates that the flour mill had also ceased all activities.

One after another, the buildings of 19th Century Millington disappeared. The businesses, the Methodist Church, the blacksmith's shop and the elementary school were soon nothing more than a memory. Shorn of a large section of its upper part, muffled in a silence that draws only fishermen, the stone mill alone survives the test of time. Its dilapidated structure and decayed condition betray both its age and the lack of interest it has generated since its demise.



Workers rebuilding one the dams on Powell Brook that powered the two mills (probably between 1910 and 1917).



Stilman G. Patch (1875-1917) and Nancy A. Brill (1881-1965) on their wedding day. They were likely the last two millers of the Thompson mills.

Nevertheless, its distinctive silhouette, set against the backdrop of the Eastern Townships countryside, fires the imagination. For a moment, one can almost hear in the burbling of the brook the sound of the grain pouring into burlap sacks. And one can even imagine hearing the voices of the men who laboured, heedless of time passing or the destiny awaiting their community.

We often feel nostalgia for the bucolic landscapes that time and man have replaced with the hustle and bustle of industry. At Millington, one beautiful spring morning, sensing the power of the rushing melt water, one can almost feel regret for the passing of the mills that once sustained a community.

Millington and the Thompson's Mills

Memories of Mr. Grayson Westover and his wife, Claire Richard Westover, collected by Serge Wagner.

One should remember that at that time, the territory of the municipality of Austin formed part of East Bolton. During the 19th Century, Austin had two centres, actually two hamlets, in competition with each other, Millington and Peasley's Corner. Millington seems to have had the upper hand, with a large concentration of dwellings and larger population.

Mr. Grayson Westover was born at the end of the 1920s on Patch Road. His wife's family moved to Patch Road in the 1930s, when she was still a child. The couple lived on Westover Road, renamed during the administration of P. Galvin, mayor (1956-1976), in memory of the father of Grayson Westover.

The couple remembers the beautiful village of Millington from their childhood, though it had already begun its decline.

"It was such a lovely village!" There were two general stores, a dam, a blacksmith's shop, a post office, a school, the Methodist Church and its cemetery, and, nearby, the Roman Catholic Church, Saint-Luc de Millington, the two Thompson mills and even a dance hall. In addition, nearby was the beautiful spring, *Chaput Trough* (or Shappie Trough in its anglicized version), with a huge wooden trough made of logs where the horses would be brought to drink.

Mrs. Westover remembers sitting with her friends in front of the dam (on Powell Brook) which provided the water power to run the mills. Children used to fish in the brook near the remnants of the stone mill. Not far away stood the residence of the Place family, an impressive array of buildings and equipment. An extension of the Place family home housed the big general store. Behind, there



Aylmer Place house, Millington, about 1900. The Place family lived in the three stories of the left part of the building. The right part housed a post office and general store on the ground floor and a dance hall on the second floor.

was a big tennis court where young people of means would come to play. Mr. Westover knew the residence of the Place family well because he was born there and his family stayed there until he was 11 years old!

Mr. Westover's father was a farmer and a horse trainer. He also hauled merchandise to the railway. The horses were shod by blacksmith Honoré Lécuyer, whose shop was on Powell Brook, upstream from the mill dam.

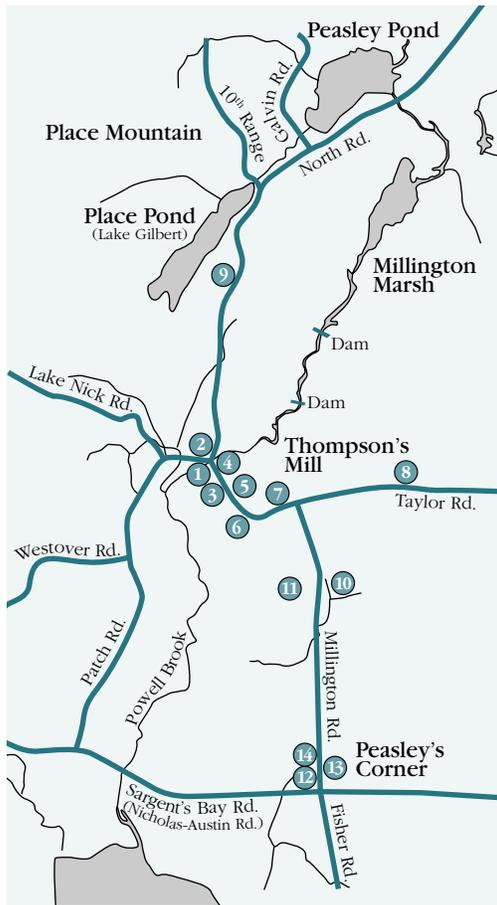
When Mr. Westover was born, "Old man Patch had just died and no one had taken over the two mills. People could buy what they needed in the stores. And, because roads and transportation in general had improved, we could have the goods and wood we needed brought in."

The inactivity at the two mills contributed to the decline of the village. This decline was hastened by the successive closing of the school, the post office, the general store and the smithy. Then in 1936, the Methodist church was torn down and a hooligan threw the tombstones from the cemetery down the ravine. Later several houses were demolished or moved.



Chaput Trough, North Road. Community water source for horses and livestock from Millington and the surrounding area. The location is now a public picnic area.

In the space of only a few years, Millington disappeared and the centre of the village shifted to *Peasley's Corner*, which became the heart of the municipality of Austin. In 1937, Reverend Mr. E. M. Taylor, a descendent of Daniel Taylor, one of Nicholas Austin's 'Associates', and a neighbour of Alexander Thompson in 1797, wrote that a traveller passing through would have had difficulty believing that at Millington a village had once prospered.¹¹



- 1 Alexander Thompson's sawmill, around 1796
- 2 House of Aylmer Place (1880-1896), also post office, general store and community centre
- 3 Alexander Thompson's flour mill, around 1796
- 4 Blacksmith shop
- 5 Millington school, 1960
- 6 Millington school, 1825, first school of the Township of Bolton
- 7 Wesleyan Methodist Church, 1825, first church of the Township of Bolton
- 8 House of Daniel Taylor, one of Nicholas Austin's 54 'Associates'
- 9 Chaput Trough
- 10 Archie Aiken cheese factory
- 11 Millington Cemetery, now East Bolton Cemetery
- 12 Church of the Atonement Anglican Church, 1865-1927, now Saint-Augustin de Cantorbéry Catholic Church
- 13 Old town hall
- 14 Current town hall and community hall of the municipality of Austin



Remnants of the dam on Powell Brook, at the corner of North Road, which can be seen from Millington Road.



Remnants of the stone flour mill, south of the crossroads at Patch, North and Millington. The ruins are situated on private land.

Endnotes

- 1 Jean-Pierre Kesteman, Peter Southam and Diane Saint-Pierre, *Histoire des Cantons de l'Est*, Sainte-Foy, Institut québécois de recherche sur la culture. Presses de l'Université Laval, 1998, p.146.
- 2 Louise-Brunelle Lavoie and Hélène Liard, *Les moulins à eau des Cantons de l'Est (1790-1987)*, Sherbrooke, Sherbrooke Historical Society, 1989, p.1.
- 3 On the early days: Rev. Ernest M. Taylor, *History of Brome County*, Montreal, Lovell, vol. I, 1908, and vol. II, 1937. Also: Harry B. Shufelt, *Nicholas Austin the Quaker and the Township of Bolton*, Knowlton, Brome County Historical Society, 1971.
- 4 Harry B. Shufelt, *op.cit.*, p.142-143.
- 5 A detailed presentation of this church appears in the brochure *A Historical Tour of Austin's Churches*, published by the Austin Cultural Committee, March, 2007.
- 6 Cyrus Thomas, *Eastern Townships: History of Bolton*, Montreal, 1866, p.347.
- 7 In 1877, a post office was established which was called Millington; the name coming from the last part of the place name *Thompson's Mills*.
- 8 Gordon Ladd, "The Old Mill at Millington", *Yesterdays of Brome County*, vol. 8, Knowlton, 1991, p.184-185.
- 9 *Sherbrooke Daily Record*, 26 April 1917, p.10. *La Tribune*, 26 April 1917, p.1.
- 10 Paul R. Patch, "The Patch Family of Brome", *Yesterdays of Brome County*, vol. 7, Knowlton, 1988, 178-189. Also: Paul R. Patch and Russel C. Patch (grandson of Stilman Patch): "Patch Family", unpub. text, 1988.
- 11 Ernest M. Taylor, *op. cit.*, t. II, p. 139.

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