

# The Grist Mill

When Great-grandfather came to Hubbardton, Vermont, around 1769 he couldn't buy ground flour at the store as Father could. He took his grain down the road to Nathan Rumsey's grist mill by Austin Pond. There it was ground into flour.



Great-grandfather carried the corn or wheat to the mill by loading it in bags onto the wagon and driving it down. When he got there, he didn't wait for it to be ground between the big revolving millstones, but he took some flour that Nathan, the miller, had already ground. In that way, no one had to wait to get his flour.

Sometimes the farmers would bring in more grain to be ground than Nathan had flour to equal, so he kept a record of what he owed each person or gave them credit to use at the store he owned.

When Great-grandfather drove down the road to the mill, he could hear the water spilling over the dam that furnished water power to turn the top grindstone. The bottom stone stayed stationary. The grindstones were inside the mill, of course, and the one that revolved was cemented to the waterwheel that was outside. The waterwheel was turned by the pressure at the dam of the water on the paddles.

When a farmer arrived at the mill, he would back his wagon up to a platform at the front of the mill. Nathan and the farmer would carry the grain bags inside. They took hold of the tops where the cloth had been gathered and tied and swung them over their backs. Bent by the weight, they carried them to a corner by the stones and hoisted them onto the pile that waited to be ground.

Then the miller went to the farther end of the room, by the door, to get the flour for his customers. He'd weigh it and then pile it onto their wagon. Then Nathan and the customer settled their accounts and the wagon filled with flour was driven off.

Everything in the mill was covered with white powdery flour, including the miller whose eyes looked like two black beads under his floury eyebrows. When Great-grandfather had time, he went down to help at the mill so that Nathan could do other work. Great-grandmother didn't like to have him do this because he always came home so dusty - "with flour in his hair and flour in his lungs," she used to say. But he didn't mind the flour as much as she did and to be at the mill gave him a chance to visit with folks that came to have flour ground.



One day while Nathan went to Castleton for groceries, Great-grandfather worked at the mill. A fire broke out and the mill burned. It was the second grist mill that Nathan had built in Hubbardton. A spark from the large grinding stone set fire to the flour that was being ground, and then the fine dust in the air exploded. In the twinkling of an eye, the inside of the mill turned into a roaring furnace. Great-grandfather rushed to the window and jumped into the pond. Fortunately, no one was in the mill but him when this happened. The few people who saw the flames were at the fire by the time Great-grandfather had swum to shore. They worked to put out the blaze with buckets of water from the pond, but they couldn't save the mill. Great-grandfather kept saying, "Don't throw water on the hot millstones! Don't throw water on the hot millstones or you'll crack them!"

When Nathan returned and saw that his second

grist mill had burned, Great-grandfather said that he cried. Poor man! His wife had just died and his second grist mill had burned!

Great-grandfather tried to give Nathan heart by saying that the millstones had done a lot of work since the first mill burned and that they could again. But Nathan went home, left the only child he had

with his brother and went west to go over the Rockies with Lewis and Clark.

Great-grandmother said, “When Nathan left, the heart of Hubbardton was gone.”

Helen H. St. John  
author of *Willie in Early Vermont*  
and *Jed Strong*