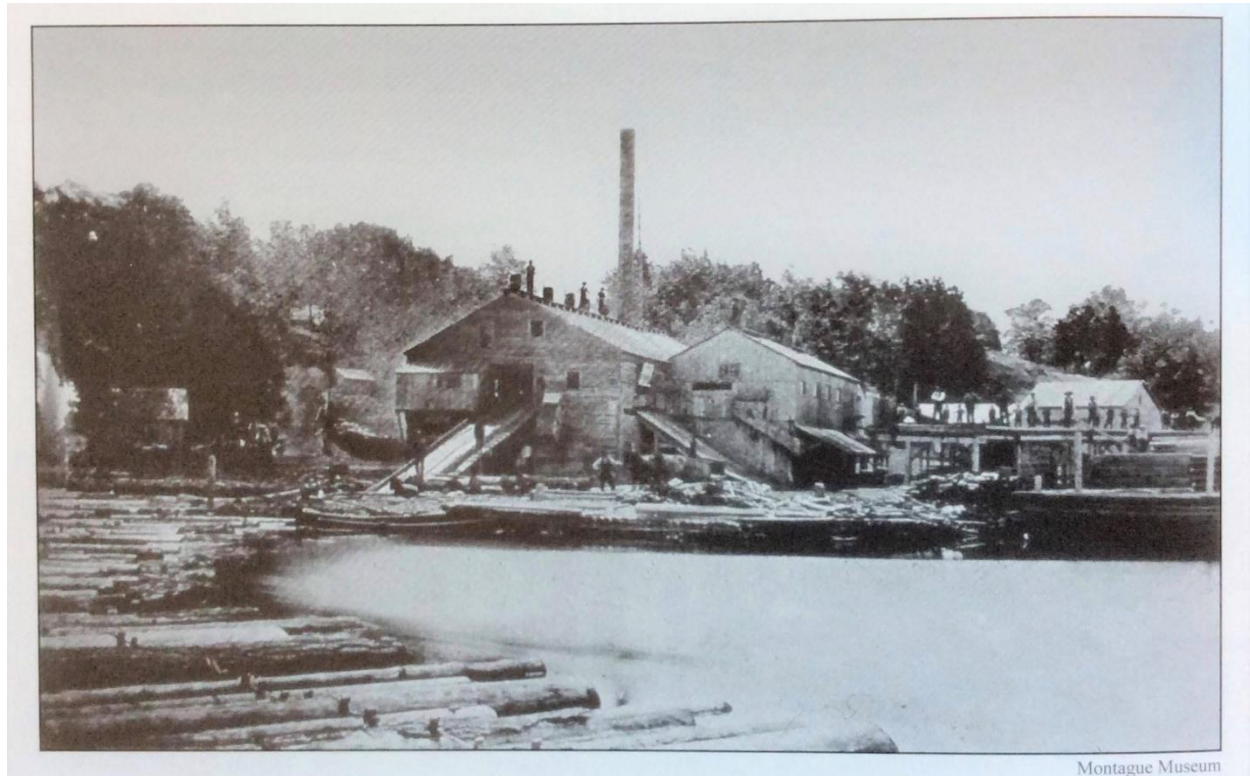


Mills - Ferry Mill at the Mouth

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Before the towns of Montague and Whitehall were established, there was a settlement in the area known as the "Mouth". Prior to the construction of the channel at its present location, the water of White Lake originally flowed in a northwesterly direction through a natural channel for almost a mile until it emptied into Lake Michigan near the site of the present Old Channel Inn. This is where the settlement known as the "Mouth" was established and flourished for nearly 40 years.

Charles Mears came to the area in April 1837 looking for a place to establish a lumber mill. He found two men holding down a claim north of the "Mouth" for one Hiram Pearson of Chicago. Mears moved on and established a mill on the south side of White Lake in the area now referred to as the "Lyon's Den". Mears did maintain a building at the "Mouth" as well as several lighters which he used for loading his vessels. He built a sloop named "Ranger" in St. Joseph, capable of carrying 15,000 feet of lumber, and was the first sailing craft ever on White Lake.

White River Township was a small township created in March 1848. By 1851, White River Township was much larger, covering the area from north of Sable Lake, down to just north of Muskegon Lake.

In the early 1850's, Barton Haggerty and his wife operated Mears' building as a lodging house for a time on his behalf. They engaged in giving meals and lodging to travelers as well as to the hands employed

there; they ferried travelers and their horses and rented the lighters for loading vessels. They also purchased items from Mears, as did many others in the area, as recorded in Mears' account books from 1850-54.

Rev. William M. Ferry came to the area during this time and built the first steam-powered mill on White Lake which was the largest at the time. By 1860, the mill employed 35 men and with an additional 60 men who worked in the woods logging. It is reported that the mill produced some 5,000,000 board feet of lumber that year.

On the east side of the channel was a small hamlet which was known by several different names: "Stump" or "Stump Postoffice", "Ferrysville" or "Ferrisville", "White Haven", and more familiarly as the "Mouth". The first name probably alluded to the fact that a hollowed-out stump was used as a repository for the mail that came up the beach from Grand Haven once a week. S. J. B. Watson was the acting Postmaster. The second name the Ferrys tried to attach when they built their first steam mill in the area in 1850. Men of the Lake called the mouth of the Grand River, Grand Haven, so they called the mouth of the White River, White Haven. When the government established a post office there in 1854, however, they named it the White River Post Office. Alfred A. Caine was appointed the Postmaster in March 1855.

It is reported that a map published by Lippincott in 1854, designated the settlement as White River Village.

In addition to the Ferry mill there was a company store, and several shanties for the mill workers to live. On the other side of the channel was a small settlement inhabited mostly by a company of Irish fishermen and some coppers who made barrels for packing the fish. Northwest of the channel, about where the Old Channel Inn is now there was a store, Cain's and Hobb's hotels, and Bruce's General Store with a saloon for the benefit of the sailors from the lumber schooners and others. There was Mrs. Garrison (Lucy) Storms' boardinghouse, and The Mears Hotel which was a boarding house for lumberjacks, and a few smaller buildings. At one time it was reported that the settlement consisted of about forty dwellings.

Isaac W. (I.W.) Lanford, a millwright, was first hired to run the Ferry mill. He left after a time to manage the Dalton Brothers mill on Silver Creek. Two other men, one named Scott and the other Joseph Stebbins, ran the Ferry mill for a few years. Then William Montague Ferry sold the mill to his sons, Thomas W. Ferry and Noah H. Ferry. Thomas became a member of the Michigan State Senate in 1856. Noah Ferry continued to manage the mill until 1861 when he left to head up a company of cavalrymen he recruited locally known as the White River Guards. In order to keep the mill at the Mouth operating during the war, Ferry hired local man George E. Dowling. Dowling would eventually become a partner in the mill which operated under the name Ferry, Dowling and Company.

Noah Ferry was responsible for opening White Lake to lumber schooners. The family owned the 103-foot 2-masted schooner named Telegraph, which was built for them in 1848, and used to transport lumber from White Lake to their lumber yard in Chicago. The vessel was unable to cross the sandbar that guarded the channel entrance, so it anchored in Lake Michigan. In October 1853, the Telegraph went to pieces on the shore near the old White Lake channel.

In 1855, Noah Ferry had slab piers constructed along the sides of the natural channel where it entered Lake Michigan. At the mill, Jesse Pullman took 8-inch diameter poles and attached slabs to them until he

had a crib measuring three feet wide and eighty feet long and weighted to draw eighteen inches of water. A lighter hauled each crib into position. The channel was also dredged out to allow the smaller schooners to enter the channel. Before this channel was constructed, large rafts of logs had to be towed by oxen along the shore, or poled in rafts, or taken out on lighters to the schooners waiting at anchor in deeper water of Lake Michigan.

One account stated that the slab piers extended 150 feet into Lake Michigan and that the ship owners maintained a light at the harbor.

In December 1855, soon after the improvements of the channel, the disastrous wreck of the North Yuba occurred. The 97-foot wooden 2-masted schooner, owned by I. E. Carleton was loaded with supplies for the winter, when it was wrecked on the beach near White River, resulting in the loss of all of the supplies and the ship's cook. The vessel was not an old one having been built in Manitowoc, WI and launched in May 1853. The Schooner Blue Bell also went ashore near the same spot shortly after the North Yuba.

In 1856, Mr. Ferry erected a schoolhouse, at an unknown location, in which sessions were held from time to time. Miss Mary McLaughlin, a well-known young woman of the White Lake area and a fine teacher, taught there for a time.

At the time that the 1860 Census was taken, Anson K. Mayhew was listed as overseer of the mill, with Henry Bell, Sawyer, Lorenzo Stearns, Engineer and John Dress, Master Carpenter. It also listed 13 of the millhands.

The Ferry family sold the sawmill equipment in 1863 to Heald, Avery & Company, who later consolidated it with the James Jewell's mill at Duke's Point in Montague.

As for other dwellings, A. A. Caine moved his Cosmopolitan Hotel to Whitehall in 1865, and in 1870, Mr. Mears moved the Mears Hotel to the same area. Unfortunately, both hotels were lost in the July 30, 1881, fire that swept thru Whitehall.

After the new channel was cut through in 1867, the owners of the mill at White River began dumping edgings, slabs, and other waste material into the old channel, which gradually became more and more shallow. After that change, the town gradually died out.

In 1886, Messrs. Bruce and Storms were fitting out the old mill at the Mouth with shingle machinery and soon had a force at work.

The old mill frame stood for years, as late as 1900, and farmers living in the vicinity were taking out timbers from it, probably for use in their barns.

In 1907 it was reported that the last of the old mill shanties at the Mouth was torn down.

The original outlet to the big lake has long since been choked off by the drifting sands so the old channel has no direct connection to Lake Michigan. However, with the high-water levels of 2019 & 2020, there were times after heavy rains and blowing winds that it looked like the big lake was trying to reopen the channel back up again when the water from the Lake was seen coming down Ferry Street.