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Wadley Falls Village

As much as 8000 years before European settlers came to this area, Native Americans from as far away as Fryeburg, Maine visited here each summer to fish and camp on the five small islands that gave the area its first English name - Island Falls.

When the Europeans arrived, this location was coveted for its potential as a mill site, and as such, became the first permanently settled area within the bounds of the current Town of Lee. Not far from this sign, in the year 1657, there stood a tree "marked with two SS". The "two SS" were the initials of Samuel Symonds, a leading citizen and judge from Ipswich, Massachusetts. The "Honored Generall Court" of Massachusetts granted Mr. Symonds 640 acres that extended one mile downriver from "a little Island in the River by the Falls" and one-half mile inland on each side. The center support of the present NH Route 152 Bridge rests on that "little Island".

Mr. Symonds took possession of his grant of 640 acres on June 3, 1657 *"in the presence & with the Consent of Mohermite Sagamore of these parts"*. The great Sagamore American Indian leader made his home on a hill behind what is now the Madbury Town Hall, and from there he could oversee much of the territory that he controlled. Others present on that day were the surveyors, John Gage and Daniell Epps, who had marked the tree, and Edward Hilton and his son, who were the original colonists at the 1623 settlement of Hilton's Point (now Dover).

Walter Barefoot, a controversial character in colonial New Hampshire, acquired 320 acres from the Symonds family in 1664 and on December 16, 1664, John Woocot of Newbury agreed to build a sawmill for Barefoot and Robert Wadley that was *"sixty and four foote in length, and twenty eight foote in breadth with floome & water whele"*. The agreed cost of the mill was 80 pounds.

This mill, whose construction was to begin *"on or before the 10 day of March"* in 1665, eventually became the sole property of Robert Wadley. Its construction began a period of 266 years of continuous commercial activity powered by the falls you see before you. This path of development was to be followed by sites all over New Hampshire. Sawmills were built at sites of available water power in order to harvest the great trees that covered the countryside. As the forests were cleared, cut into boards, and shipped all over the world, the cleared fields began to produce crops, so grist mills were built to share the water power. The villages and towns matured and the falling water from the improved dams was used to power the more complex industries needed by a growing and more sophisticated population. At this site grew the village of Wadley Falls that, in addition to the sawmill, contained at various times a grist mill, a planning mill, Deacon Guy Glidden's tannery, Gideon Towle's wooden pail factory, Dr. Edgerly's herbal drug

factory (Dr. Edgerly was one of the founders of the NH Pharmaceutical Society), and the Norton Leatherboard Factory.

Before the Piscataqua River Bridge was built between Newington and Dover in 1794, travelers between Portsmouth and the inland towns of Nottingham, Northwood, Concord and beyond came south of Great Bay and made their way along what is now NH Route 152, passing over a bridge in this general vicinity. The combination of mill industry and travel commerce resulted in a small village being established here. At its peak at the turn of the 19th century, Wadley Falls Village was the largest settlement in Lee. The mills here employed some 40 individuals, and there were two stores, a post office, and a hotel. A four-horse stagecoach ran daily between Nottingham and Newmarket with a stop here at Wadley Falls.

The last surviving mill, the Norton Leatherboard Factory, burned in 1921, and ended the mill era in Lee. The dam was purchased by the Newmarket Electric Company; however, a spring flood breached the dam, further sealing the fate of industrial uses at this location.

The three-story home located across Route 152 from this sign is the Glidden-Towle-Edgerly House. Built circa 1749 (the current back ell) with a large, stately addition (now the main house) in 1828, this building's legacy includes ownership by three families who were all connected with the mill industries at Wadley Falls. It was nearly destroyed by an arsonist in April of 2010. New owners have since stabilized the structure, and it was placed on the New Hampshire State Register of Historic Places in November of 2010. Its new owners will hopefully return it to its former stature as the preeminent structure of a revitalized and forward-looking Wadley Falls Village. Fires and floods have been a threat to the fortunes of Wadley Falls Village for over three hundred years. Let's hope that the future has more sunny days and gentle spring rains to help in preserving its significant historical value!

Additional Reading:

1. The Mills of Lee, Randy Stevens, published 2014