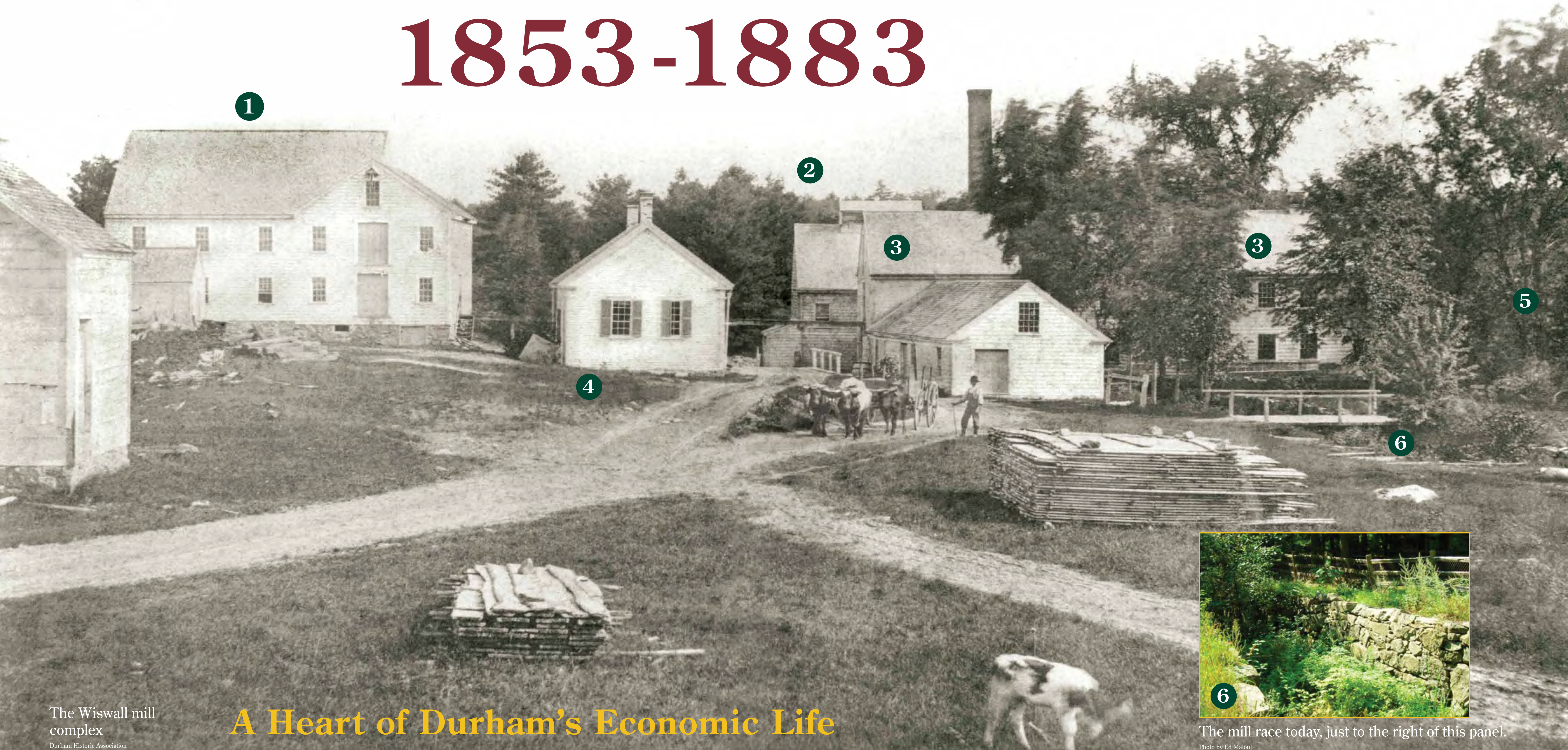


# THE WISWALL ERA: 1853-1883



The Wiswall mill complex  
Durham Historic Association

## A Heart of Durham's Economic Life

The T.H. Wiswall Paper Company was one of thirty-four paper mills in New Hampshire, and one of only two that made wallpaper. At its peak, Wiswall's wallpaper mill employed ten men and five women. The machinery ran eleven hours a day all year long. The sawmill also continued to operate. The site was a noisy, bustling place and one of Durham's largest employers. Employees worked hard but had a good life by the standards of the day.

## Life in a Mill Community

Wiswall's mill complex and the nearby houses formed a small, self-contained village. By the 1870s, the hamlet even had a small store. The residents worked at the mills (shown in the photo at the top of the panel) and lived across the road in company-owned houses built between 1840 and 1860. These houses reflect the architecture of this period with their Federal/Greek Revival elements. In 1865 Wiswall, now a successful businessman, moved into a grander house, presently known as Wiswall House. Several of the original worker's houses also have survived to the present day.



36 Wiswall Road



30 Wiswall Road  
All house photos by The Preservation Company



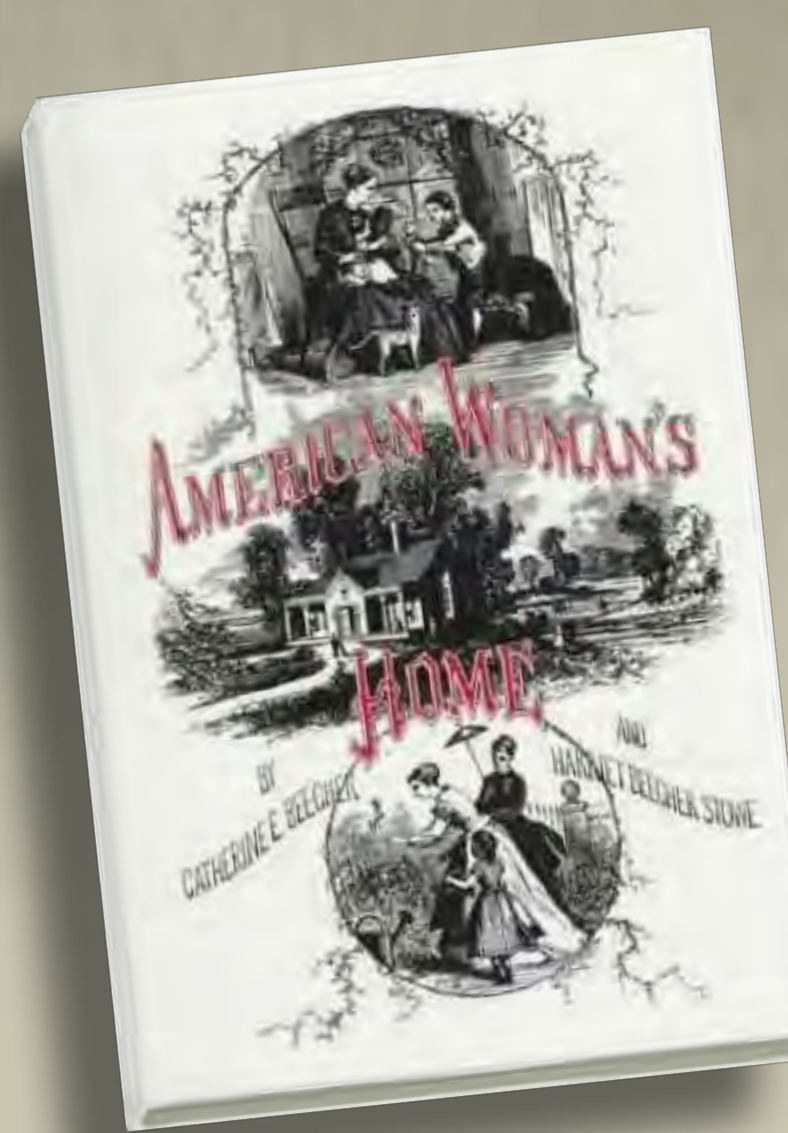
28 Wiswall Road  
(Wiswall's House)



Wiswall Road Bridge  
Photo by David Costabile



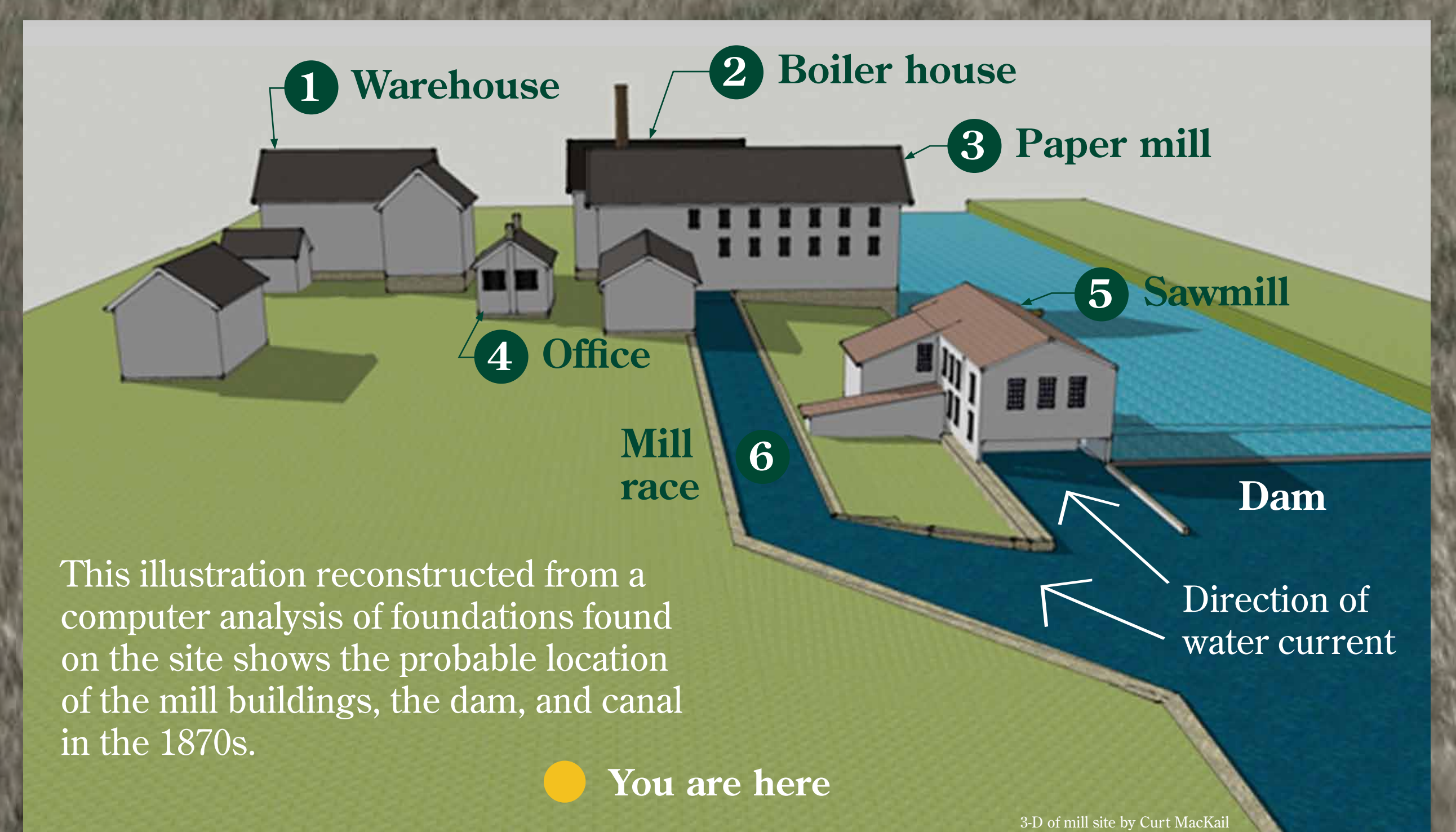
36 Wiswall Road



A postcard, probably from 1912, shows workers' houses and the then-new concrete dam.  
Postcard image - Durham Historic Association

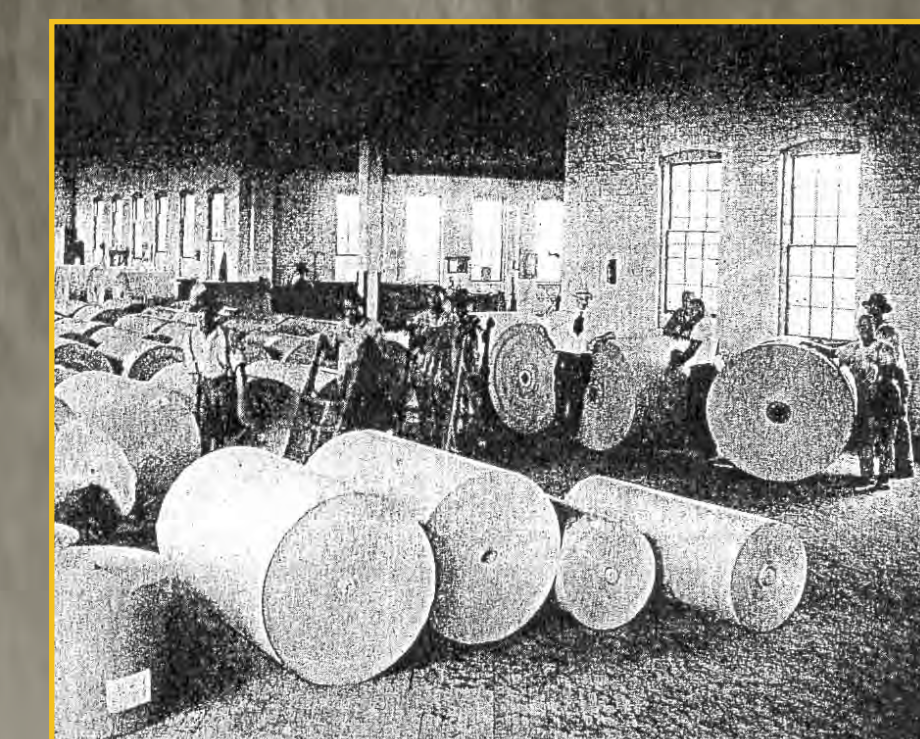
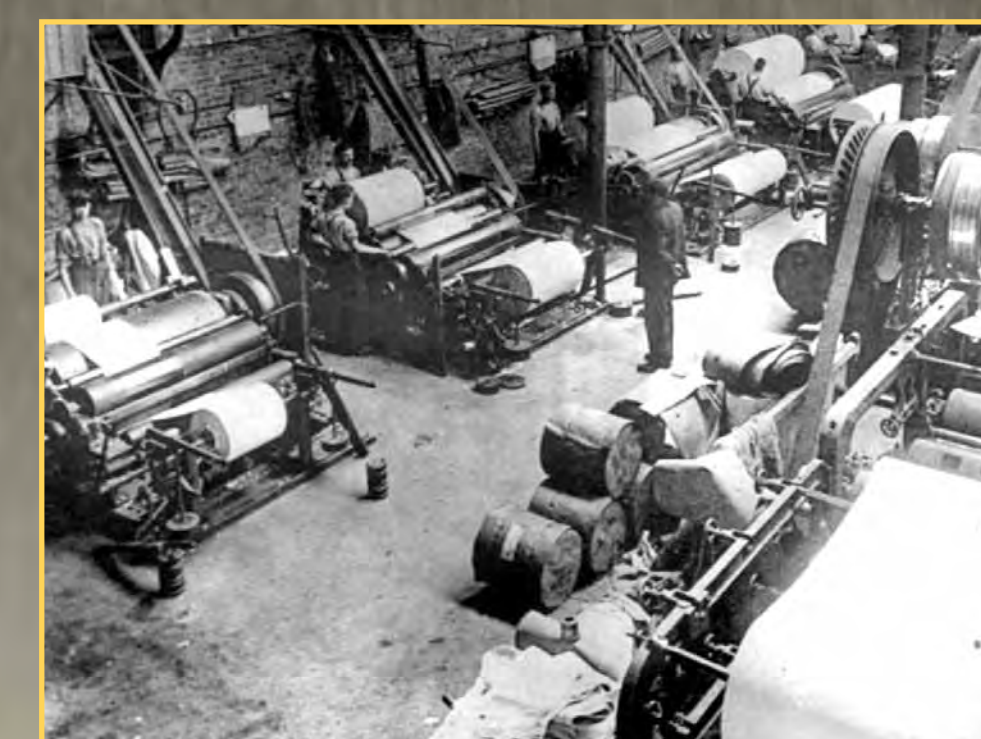


The mill race today, just to the right of this panel.  
Photo by Ed Meador



## Paper Production at Wiswall

Making paper was a difficult, dirty process. Pulp was created from wood chips digested with lye and other chemicals, followed by boiling. The pulp was rinsed and bleached, pumped onto long, fine-mesh screens, and then pressed. A steam boiler provided heat for drying the final product. Waste products were dumped untreated into the river and carried to Great Bay.



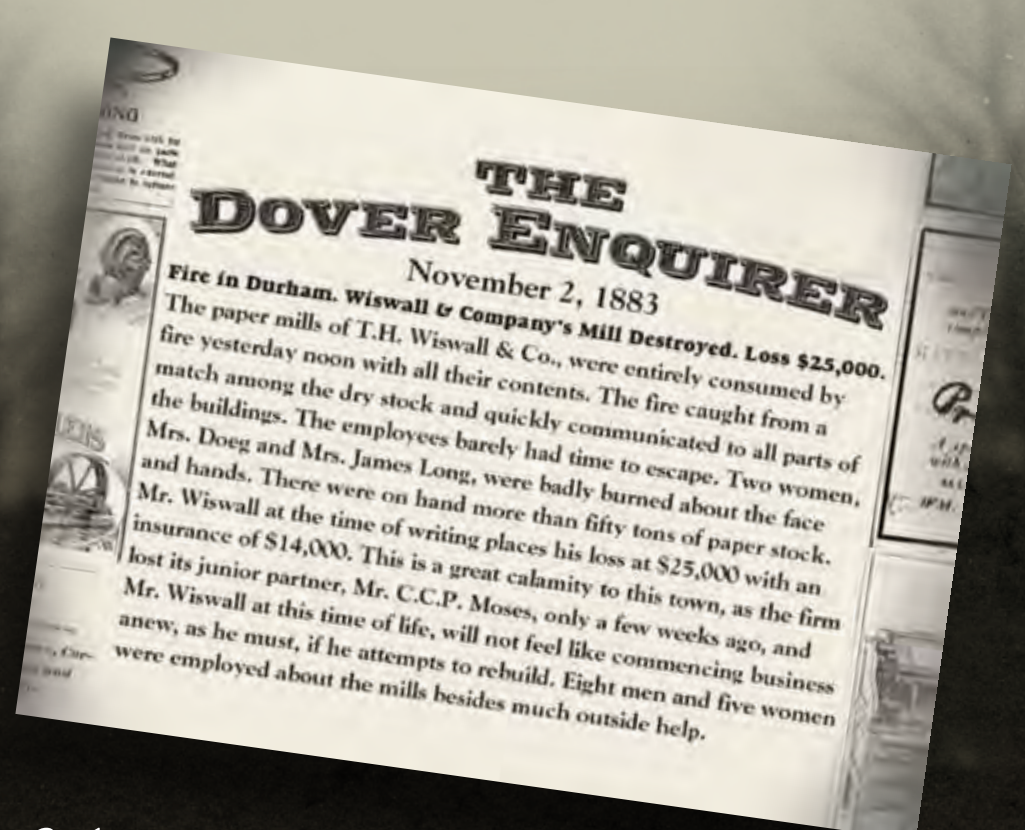
Views of wallpaper mills typical of Wiswall's era.

## Why The Passion for Wallpaper?

Beginning in 1835, American consumers were able to buy inexpensive but high quality wallpaper mass-produced by machines. Prior to this, they had to pay high prices for imported wallpaper. As the American middle class expanded in the 1860s, many could afford to furnish their homes in the style of their wealthier neighbors. Moreover, publications, such as "American Woman's Home", touted new options for home decoration, sparking a demand for a variety of wallpaper styles. Wiswall profited from this expanding market by producing paper that was shipped to factories elsewhere for printing and distribution.

## The End of an Era

On November 1, 1883, a fire sparked by a carelessly discarded match destroyed the Wiswall paper mill, including fifty tons of stock. Although it had been highly successful, the company was insured for only half its value. Suddenly, one of Durham's most successful businesses ceased to exist. The 66-year-old Thomas Wiswall decided not to rebuild. He advertised to sell the water privilege, the remaining buildings, and even his beloved home. There were no buyers. Wiswall remained in his house and supported his family with his personal savings and a small income from the sawmill, which had escaped the fire. In 1896 the spring flood washed away the dam, ending his sawmill business. All that is left today of this once-busy industrial complex is the stone-lined mill race, stone-faced bridge abutments, a dam, and the remains of foundations.



To find out more about Lamprey River mills and to view a short movie on the Wiswall mills, visit the Lamprey River website at [www.LampreyRiver.org](http://www.LampreyRiver.org). A DVD of this movie is also available at the Durham Public Library.