

THE MILLS OF SOUTH MILWAUKEE

The Mill Pond, South Milwaukee, Wis.



THE FOWLE MILL

EARLY HISTORY

The original settlers in this area arrived by boat, at port cities like Milwaukee, but in 1832 the US Government built a military road from Fort Dearborn, (now Chicago) to Fort Howard, (now Green Bay). Our HY 32 roughly follows that road. Settlers soon began moving north from Chicago and arriving in this area. Two of the early settlers were John Fowle and Elihu Higgins.

John Fowle came by a steamer, "The Thomas Jefferson", from Buffalo, New York. it was originally headed to Milwaukee, but the weather was bad and it was diverted to Chicago. He had to return north by ox-cart on the new military highway. *And we thought today's airline diversions are bad.*

Elihu Higgins left the Town of Franklin, Massachusetts in 1835 with horses and wagon. He went to Chicago and then North to Juneau's settlement (now

Milwaukee). He liked the wooded lands he passed through on the way and in the Fall went back to them to settle and sent for his wife and daughter to join him.

John Fowle settled in Oak Creek in 1835 and built a tavern and stage station. It was the only stable between Racine and Milwaukee. It was soon moved further away from the crumbling Lake Michigan bluff to what is now North Chicago Avenue and Hawthorn Avenue, and it became known as Higgins's Inn.

The area was heavily wooded and with new settlers arriving, lumber was in great demand. Elihu Higgins and John Fowle each built a water powered saw mill on the Oak Creek. Higgins' mill was completed first. It had an 8 foot head of water, but it was too close to the lake and was destroyed by ice in an 1850 storm.

John Fowle's mill, pictured here, was complete in 1840. It was more powerful, having a 12 foot head of water. As soon as he finished the saw mill, he added a grist mill. The saw mill was upstairs and the grist mill below. The long shed next to the mill was for the farmers to rest their horses while they waited for their grain to be milled. It is believed that this was the first grist mill in Milwaukee County. The mill stones were hand carved from granite boulders by John Fowle and his friend, William Sivyer. Previously farmers had to haul their grain to Burlington Wisconsin for milling.

The original mill stones still exist today. You can view them lying on either side of the dam. They are broken, but banded to keep them together. And thanks to Chester Grobschmidt, the commemorative plaques that identify them have been recently restored.

After the saw mill was built, Fowle needed a way to transport his lumber to market. He had a scow built in Milwaukee and named it the "Monkey Skunk". It hauled lumber to the growing City of Milwaukee. In the 1850's he built a small schooner and launched it in the Oak Creek. He named it the "Julianne", after his daughter.

John Fowle's son, Alfred and Jesse Dibley ran John Fowle's grist mill until 1867 when the mill was bought by Charles Ahrens. Charles was born in Mecklenberg-Schwerin, Germany. He came to Milwaukee in 1856. After buying the mill he refitted and rebuilt it. He put in new machinery, strengthened the dam, installed a seventy-five horse power engine and a new Leffel water wheel. These changes increased the mill's capacity from twenty five to fifty barrels of flour a day.

The updated Mill operated successfully until 1932 when it was torn down by the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The chimney remained until 1960 when it too was torn down.

In many ways the citizens benefited from the work of John Fowle and the other settlers. The five and one half acre Mill Pond quickly became an important part of life in South Milwaukee. The thirteen mile long Oak Creek drained 28 square miles. The creek, together with a multitude of springs all around the pond created a place of incredible natural beauty. It provided fishing and boating in summer and ice harvesting in winter. The ice skating came later and was very popular. Early pictures show quite a crowd just watching. Generations of South Milwaukee kids grew up ice skating on that pond.



Some years later Asa and Nathan Howes built a steam powered saw mill. The mill was built of Cream City bricks made by Joseph Dibley in a nearby brickyard. Howes' Mill was southwest of where 15th and Rawson is now. Howes' Mill was very successful and operated for several years.

LATER

As the Milwaukee County Park System was developed, much thought was given to creating a route that would show case the natural beauty of our landscape – the shoreline, creeks, rivers, ravines and woods. Lannon stone was brought in

from Waukesha County for use in forming bridges, walkways, dams and retaining walls that would blend with the native landscape. The resulting ring of waterways and parks around Milwaukee County is sometimes called "an Emerald Necklace"

A circa 1931 article found in the Milwaukee County Historical Society states "...This Parkway Drive, (Oak Creek Parkway) is conceded by landscape gardeners and engineers to be destined to be the most beautiful drive in the county".

An article found in the August 2, 1932 issue of the South Milwaukee Journal states "...All of this work was done by County employees, none of it having been let out to contractors, and much of the manual work was done by county relief men. It is said that an unusual good and lasting job is being done on the construction".

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The material in this article has been abstracted by Donald Bulley from Gertrued Endthoff's book "SOUTH MILWAUKEE THEN TO NOW" and Nancy Wucherers/Judy Balestrieri research paper on the development of Milwaukee County Parks. Gertrued's book is available in the S.M. Historical Society Library