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ABNER AUSTIN'S HOPE MILL ON CATSKILL CREEK

—Raymond Beecher

Early nineteenth century manufacturing in Greene County has never received the detailed attention it deserves. On numerous streams water power sufficed to provide the energy needed for these small industrial establishments. This article tells the story of one such mill which produced rag paper.

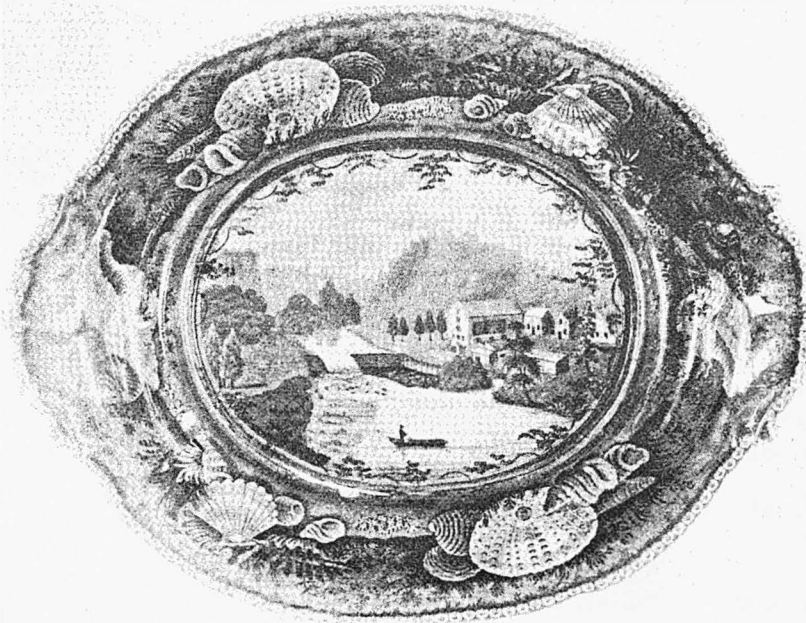
In the spring of 1981, to secure permission for a society hike in Austin's Glen, contact was made with Mrs. Helen Austin Behrendt, a direct descendant of Abner and Eliza Austin. At that time it was mentioned the Society wanted to publish an article concerning the Austin Paper Mill. As a result of this expressed interest, Mrs. Behrendt made available for serious research an extensive collection of journals, diaries, ledgers, letters and other documents relating to the Austin family at Sheffield (Massachusetts), at Hudson, at Athens, and finally at Jefferson (Catskill). The Vedder Memorial Library has designated this gift the Austin Memorial Collection. It will provide information for subsequent articles about the Austin trading store on the Susquehanna Turnpike, the Hudson — Athens years, and the milling of paper in the Victorian period. Historians owe a deep debt of gratitude to Helen Austin Behrendt for the preservation of this historical material and for its subsequent gift to the Greene County Historical Society.

It carries the designation of being among the earliest of the paper manufactories in the United States. An artist's rendition of this Hope Mill complex dating from the late 1820's survives in the highly collectible dark blue Staffordshire pottery produced by Enoch Wood for the American market, a view of considerable rarity.

Nathan Benjamin, the first owner and operator, established this rag paper facility about 1800. During the colonial period almost all the paper consumed in America had been a product of Britain, a part of that trade process whereby Parliament encouraged the importation of raw materials into Britain and the exportation of manufactured goods to the colonies. Much of that surviving paper bears English watermarks. But after the Revolution, American mills such as Nathan Benjamin's came into being, dependent upon water power.

Fire destroyed the Benjamin paper mill on a December day in the year 1806 and thereafter Nathan Benjamin faced difficult financial times. The mill was replaced but the dam and the various buildings suffered from inadequate maintenance. Benjamin, limited as to operating capital, was known to barter finished paper for rags. And it was in such a series of transactions with Abner Austin who was then operating his Hudson trading store that the two men became acquainted. Austin's Hudson account

[continued on Page 2]



Historical pottery: dark blue Staffordshire tureen platter with shell border, 12 x 10¼ inches; manufactured by Enoch Wood & Sons, England. Produced for the American market by the late 1820's. It carries the underside mark "E Pluribus Unum, Catskill, New York." The source of view is undetermined — no print has been located. It is possible the letterhead scene was modified for that purpose. This Hope Mill platter is rated by historical Staffordshire authors and by dealers as among the rarest of the American Staffordshire scenes and seldom comes on the market.

AUSTIN MILL [continued from Page 1]

book records a total barter value of rags with paper amounting to 13 pounds, 8 shillings and 11 pence; the period covered was from 1809 to 1811.

With the War of 1812 having a deteriorative effect on business in general and on Hudson's whaling fleet in particular, Abner Austin was caught in the resultant economic squeeze. Just when he decided to relocate from Columbia County to Greene County is uncertain. But by the spring of 1813 the move was underway. Russel Austin, a brother, joined Abner in a partnership, buying out the Benjamin title to 90 acres of land, 2 houses, several outbuildings and the mill with its water rights on the Catskill Creek. Russel was to manage the farm while Abner would oversee the paper mill operations.

As yet, the exact date of Nathan Benjamin's death has not been established; it is not mentioned among the obituary notices in the *Catskill Recorder*. One clue comes from Durfee's *Biographical Annals of Williams* from which college Nathan Benjamin, Jr. was graduated with the Class of 1831. It states: "Nathan Benjamin, son of Nathan and Ruth Seymour Benjamin, was born in Catskill, N.Y., December 14, 1811. His widowed mother removed to Williamstown in April 1814." From this we learn Nathan Benjamin, Sr., was deceased by 1814 and apparently died at Jefferson. This may well explain the Austin purchase of the paper mill and acreage in 1813. At the time of purchase the Real Property Record Book for Greene County lists the land and buildings for taxation purposes at \$9,000.

Two pieces of evidence are available to indicate a possible sale price. Ruth Benjamin held notes in the amount of \$7,500; Elisha Williams of Hudson also lent the Austins \$4,000. It is possible that part of the Williams money might have supplied the Austins with working capital. In after years Abner Austin would write to Ruth Benjamin:

I have long been sensible that my purchase here was a bad one, and I find my judgment in that respect supported by my friends in Catskill, who fully think I gave too much for the property – it being then in a very bad State but eluded my discovery.

And in a letter to Elisha Williams, a major creditor, we read under date of April 13, 1822:

. . . . In the first place I gave too much for the mill. I expected a Sound mill & a powerful Stream of Water & that industry applied with energy would carry me through with the payments – instead the Mill immediately proved unsound & Water short by reason of the Dam not being sufficient to command it. Repairs to the mill in 1814 \$756.45; 1815 \$249.83; 1816, 17, 18 \$1091.11; 1819, 20 \$220.55; and 1821 \$651.73 – total \$2969.67.

The Austin brothers' partnership terminated in 1816, Abner Austin noting in his journal:

[continued on Page 5]



Val Kriele Photo

A. Austin & Son letterhead engraved by William H. Spencer of Athens in 1827.



Mill Dam at Natural Dam Site, Austin's Glen



Hope Mill in Its Final Years Before Demolishment

INDEX

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Numbers indicate volume, issue and page

- A. M. Osborn Hose Company 5-2-9
Adams, Edna Ingalls 4-2-1
Adams, Reed Collection 3-1-9
Allen, Joseph Family 5-2-1
Ashland Institutes 1-2-1, 1-3-6, 1-4-4
Austin Family Papers 5-4-9
- Bagley,**
 Hon. John H. 3-4-10
 George W. 5-3-1
 John, Memorial 3-3-9
- Baker Family 2-1-8
Beach Memorial Collection 5-1-9, 5-2-9
Beardsley Family 5-4-3
Bedell Family 2-3-1, 3-1-9, 5-4-8
Beecher, Raymond 2-1-1, 2-2-1, 2-2-3, 2-3-2, 2-3-5, 3-2-6,
 3-4-1, 4-1-1, 4-4-1, 5-1-2, 5-1-4, 5-2-8, 5-3-1, 5-3-8, 5-4-1,
 5-4-4, 5-4-6, 5-4-8
Beede, Clifford 5-2-9
Bell Foundry 2-3-1
Black Rock at Athens 1-1-5
Boarding Houses and Hotels 1-1-2, 1-2-3
Boats, Hudson River 1-1-7, 1-1-8, 4-1-1, 4-3-6, 4-3-9, 5-4-1,
 5-4-5
Borthwick Family 1-1-7, 1-2-1, 1-3-6, 1-4-4
Bridges
 South Cairo 2-3-1
 Woodstock (Cairo) 1-4-1
Briggs, Horace 1-1-7
Britt Family 4-3-9
Bronck Homestead 3-3-1, 4-2-3, 4-4-1, 5-1-1, 5-1-10
Bronk Family
 Susannah Hoghtaling 1-3-1
 Edwin Ely 5-3-1
 Jan, Commertje 4-4-1
 John L. 3-3-9
 Leonard, Jr. 5-3-1
 Peter, Hillitje 4-4-1
Bullock Family 3-4-9
- Cabinetmakers
 Peter Curtis, Jr. 1-1-8
California Gold Rush 2-3-5
Catskill High School 5-2-9
Catskill Mountain House 5-1-6
Catskill Mountains 5-1-1
Catskill Village Water Supply 2-3-2, 2-4-1
Cauterskill
 See Kaaterskill
Cement Industry 3-1-6
Cementon 3-1-1
Cemeteries
 Coxsackie Mansion Street 1-2-6
 Earlton Community 1-1-7
 Overbagh, Kykuit 1-4-3
 Hoghtaling 3-4-10
 Mountain-Top 4-3-9
 Reed 3-4-9
Chadwick, George H. 3-4-10
Chair Factory
 Hunter 1-1-8, 5-4-5
Chase, Emory (Judge) 5-2-9
Christian, Patricia H. 2-1-2
Churches
 Cairo Presbyterian 4-1-5
 Christ Church, Coxsackie 5-4-9
 First Reformed, West Coxsackie 1-2-5, 5-4-9
 Jewett Heights 3-3-5
 Methodism 1-2-1
 Trinity Episcopal, Athens 5-4-9
 Zion Lutheran, Athens 5-4-9
Civil War 5-3-9, 5-4-6
Clark, Delber W. (The Rev.) 5-4-9
Clay, Cornelia Fletcher 5-1-1
Clegg, C. A. 5-1-4
Cochran, Tunis 1-1-7
Cole, Thomas 2-2-1
Cole's Grove 4-3-6
Collier, Gerrit 1-4-7, 2-1-4
Coxsackie High School 3-4-9
Crandell, Henry 1-4-7
Croswell Family 1-1-7
- Day Family** 5-4-9
Decker, Katharine Coll. 1-1-4
Dies Family 1-2-6, 1-4-7
Dietz, Frances 3-4-9, 5-3-8
Dolan Memorial Collection 2-2-7

[continued on Page 4]

INDEX [continued from Page 3]

- Du Bois, Frederick N. 4-3-9
Du Colon, Claude 1-4-7
Dunn, Esther 2-1-1, 2-2-2, 5-1-5, 5-2-1
- Egbertson Family 1-3-9
Ellis, Scott M. and Elgirtha I. Coll. 3-2-9
Ely Family 1-1-7, 1-4-8
Erdmann, David and Susan 1-1-3
Everitt, Roberta 1-4-3, 3-4-6, 5-4-10
- Fishing Industry
 see Cementon
Fitch Family 3-4-9
Flint Family 1-3-10, 2-3-2
Fulling Mills 2-4-1
- García, Reuben 1-4-1, 2-1-10, 2-3-1, 3-1-2, 3-2-3, 4-3-10
Goslee Family Memorial Coll. 3-1-9, 3-3-5
Greek Cause 5-4-4
Greene County Historical Society
 Annual Meeting 1981 5-3-7
 Capital Endowment Fund 5-3-6
 Capital Fund Drive 3-2-1, 4-4-10
 Election of President 1980 4-3-10
 50th Anniversary 3-1-2
 First Year (1929) 3-1-1
 Inaugurates *Quarterly Journal* 1-1-1
 President's Report - 1981 5-4-3
 Quarterly Journal Manuscript Policy 5-2-10
Greene County Teachers Institute 1-3-6
Greenville
 Academy 3-2-9, 3-3-9
 Church Calendar, illustrated, 1977 1-1-8
 Industries 4-2-1
 Teamsters 4-2-1
Griffin Family 1-1-7, 5-3-9
Grimes, Charles M. 3-2-1
Grocery Stores
 Ritz, Coxsackie 3-2-4
Gun Factories 3-2-1
- Hallenbeck Family 4-3-9
Hammond, Joseph W. 4-4-1
Hartwig Family 1-1-7
Hat Factory, Ashland 1-2-7
High Falls (Catskill Township) 4-1-3, 4-2-8
Homicides 2-1-1, 2-2-3, 4-2-1, 5-1-2
Hordines, John and The Rev. Ida 2-2-1
Hotels
 see Boarding Houses and Hotels
Howland Memorial Collection 5-3-9
Hudson River School of Art 2-2-1
Huguenots 4-1-3
Huyck, Cora 5-2-9
- Ice boats 1-1-8
Ice Industry 3-4-1
 see also Cementon
Indians 4-2-1
Ingalls Family 4-2-1
Inventors
 Bedell, Otis T. 5-4-8
 Bullock, William 3-4-9
- Jennings Family 4-3-4
Jewett Heights 3-1-5
- Kaaterskill
 Creek 3-4-6, 4-2-8
 Falls 5-1-7
Kamenoff, Mary Vedder 3-3-1, 3-4-4, 4-1-5, 4-2-4, 4-3-9
Ketchum, Clarissa E. 2-2-7, 4-3-9
King Family 3-3-1, 3-4-4, 4-1-5, 4-2-4, 4-3-9
Klinkenbergh 4-3-1
Korotev, Mabel Lampman 4-3-9
Kriele, Shelby 2-4-2, 3-1-9, 3-3-9, 4-1-1, 5-1-1
Kriele, Valentine III 4-3-10, 5-4-3
- Lake Kiskatom Waterworks and Electric Power Company 2-4-1
Lawrence Family 4-3-9
Lime Kilns 2-3-9
Loonenburg Patent 4-3-1
Losee Family 5-1-9
Lumber Industry 2-1-1, 2-2-2
- Mack Family Papers 4-3-4, 5-1-9
MacKown, Mildred Estes 5-2-9
Maps
 Burr, Greene Co. 5-1-9
 Fountain Flats 1788 3-3-9
 Jeffrey's Atlas 1772 3-3-9
 Seton Patent, (Durham) 1810 3-3-9
 Tolley 1812, (Athens) 5-2-9
- Marble Cutters
 Baldwin, Israel H., Catskill 2-1-2
 Baldwin, Charles, Catskill 2-1-2
Mead, Moses 3-4-9
Messinger, Louise S. 5-1-8
Military Brigade Dets., Amer. Rev. 1-3-4
Miller, William, Family 5-2-1
Mills on Cauterskill Creek 4-2-8
Minerley, Edith S. 5-4-3
Motion Pictures
 Icebound 3-2-3
 Molders of Troy 2-4-2

[continued on Page 7]

AUSTIN MILL [continued from Page 2]

Having dissolved partnership with my Brother Russel Austin leaves me alone to manage the concerns of the Farm & Paper mill, and being unused to the management of farming — I contemplate considerable difficulty & many mistakes being made, but with health & strength hope to surmount them.

The Catskill *Recorder* for April 24, 1816 carries the public notice of dissolution with debts payable to Abner Austin. Additionally the need for rags was stressed:

Dissolution

The partnership between the subscriber in the paper manufacturing business, under the firm of RUSSEL and ABNER AUSTIN was by mutual consent dissolved on the first instant.

The business of the late firm will be settled by the subscriber, who purposes [sic] to continue the Papermaking business, and wants Rags and Cash.

If the quality and quantity of rags could be secured, the manufacturing of rag paper was a simpler process than that utilizing wood pulp which began to supplement rags after the Civil War. Both cotton and linen are relatively pure cellulose needing little chemical treatment.

At Hope Mill the rags were brought in sacks, hauled down the steep mill road to the rag room. Here the female employees were paid at the rate of two shillings two pence the day to sort and cut the rags. The names of some of these earlier female employees survive, a few being the wives of the workmen also in the Austin employment: Nelly Van Bergen, Hannah Fiero, Polly Bogardus, Nelly Overbagh, Rachael Kellogg, Anne Pollock, Gertrude Dubois and Harriet Crane.

The incoming rags were sorted into nine categories. In an average purchase of 400 pounds on August 10, 1814, Abner Austin recorded the following breakdown:

No. 1 grade	95 lbs.	23 $\frac{3}{4}$ %	\$2.97
No. 2 grade	18 lbs.	4 $\frac{1}{2}$ %	.40 $\frac{1}{2}$
No. 3 grade	27 lbs.	6 $\frac{3}{4}$ %	.47 $\frac{1}{4}$
No. 4 grade	33 lbs.	8 1/3%	.33 1/8
Light Blue	33 lbs.	8 1/3%	.33 1/8
Dark Blue	22 lbs.	5 $\frac{1}{2}$ %	.11
Press Papers	148 lbs.	37%	2.22
Red Calico	3 lbs.	1%	.02
Wrapping	21 lbs.	5%	.05
	400 lbs.	100%	\$6.91

One may discern from this that the better quality white rags were the most desirable for the finer papers but the coarser material had its use for press and wrapping papers. Colored cloth presented problems and was valued accordingly.

It was the task of the female work force to cut the rags into pieces the size of the human hand. Then by means of a traveling felt belt, two cylinders and a duster unit, dirt and lint were removed. At an early stage in his paper mill operation Abner Austin built

a washing house but there is no indication the rags were actually washed prior to vat boiling. Nor does Abner Austin list any such costs in the manufacturing process, at least not in 1814.

In the next stage, the rags were taken into the vat room. Here in large iron kettles heated by wood fires, the rags were reduced to slurry by the boiling process and the addition of caustic soda. From then on the rag pulp was subjected to washings, beatings, and a solution of chloride of lime.

When it was judged the slurry was ready, the appropriate wire screen was dipped into the mixture in the vat; this process collected the fibers suspended in the water. The mould or screen was then lifted horizontally from the water leaving a mat of fibers on the metal screen. These screens were held by a wood frame called a deckel, the two together being called the mould. These needed frequent repair or replacement and at first Abner Austin sought help from the Shaker establishment at New Lebanon at a cost of from \$18 to \$25 each. Later he purchased deckels of various sizes from Abijah Dunnell and Thomas Shrimpton.

The coucheur was the next journeyman to participate in the Austin papermaking process. It was his task to turn the paper onto a piece of felt and continue this process until several layers of paper and felt were stacked. These were then subjected to strong pressure in a screw type flat press in order to remove surplus moisture and compact the paper fibers.

Final stages required the separation of the felt from the paper sheets, hanging to dry, treating certain types of paper with a glazing solution to cut down absorption of ink, cutting, sorting into grades, packaging and labeling. Not all types of paper required hanging and/or glazing.

Wages paid to the journeymen amounted to eight shillings (one dollar) the day; apprentices earned little more than room, board and clothing. To his credit Abner Austin was frequently to be found in the mill providing extra labor as required. As his sons matured, they also became involved.

Water power from the wheel was utilized to provide energy in the manufacturing process. The record book refers to two engines — the brown and the white; their purposes are unspecified.

The direct costs of making the various types of paper during the first years of the Austin operation is detailed in Abner Austin's handwriting in his business diary of 1814. He began with the expense for making press paper at a volume capacity of two gross the day:

132 pounds rags, including 6 pounds
pounds wastage for dirt, trimming,
etc. at 6 cents

\$7.92

[continued on Page 6]

AUSTIN MILL [continued from Page 5]

Sorting 132 pounds rags @ 1 shilling per hundredweight	.16
Cutting rags 132 pounds @ 2 shillings, 8 pence per hundredweight	.43
Engineer's wages – beating the rags, 1 day's work	1.00
Paper maker and coucheur, 1 day each @ 8 shillings	2.00
Laying off paper sheets worth	.23
Parting sheets and pressing twice	.50
Hanging up sheets [to dry] ½ day's work	.50
Taking down sheets	.12½
Picking over at 1/19 the gross	.45
Rolling 2 gross – 20 doz. a day's work	1.20
Glazing 2 gross – 18 doz. a day's work	1.33
You may add for keeping glaze in repair which will shorten the day's work	.50
Laying Over, say 1/6	.19
Cutting and tying up 2 gross	.50
Washing felts, soap and grease	.12½
Wood for vat, one day	.25
[2 gross press paper]	17.45

It was Abner Austin's conclusion that his direct manufacturing cost was \$8.72½ the gross; in deducting the cost of the rags, the Hope Mill manufacturing process could be valued at \$9.53 or at \$4.76½ per gross. In a similar manner Austin estimated the cost of manufacturing hanging paper at the rate of 4 reams output the day was \$4.85 the ream; for coarse print, small Royal at \$3.73, Fools Cap at \$3.02 the ream; writing paper No. 2 at \$2.09, and No. 3 at \$1.87; blue Cap between 90 cents and a dollar, wrapping paper at \$1.02½. Writing paper was the most profitable item provided it could meet with a ready sale. The Austin mill output of paper products in cost dollars for the period between 1814 and 1829 amounted to \$46,034.91.

The Hope Mill output sold both locally and in the metropolitan areas. Austin made contacts with the various wholesale paper houses, particularly in New York City. He even went so far as to measure the sizes of the various newspapers there in order to tap that market. The account books are replete with entries for shipments made to New York. Abner Austin made on the average six trips down river the year to push his paper sales and to make purchases of rags and supplies for his store. On these trips he combined business with pleasure as is indicated by his expense sheet in 1817:

April 18	
Expenses at L'hommedieu's [hotel]	.88
Passage in Paragon [sloop]	6.00
Boot black & brandy	.25
Portage for Trunk, NY	.25
Meeting, twice [Church]	.12
¼ ticket, Milford's Owego [lottery]	8.00
Theater [tickets] twice	2.38
Board 8 days @ 10 shillings and blacking [shoes] [2 short days]	10.50

Portage – Trunk on board	.25
Passage up – Chancellor L[ivingston]	6.00
Boots Black	.13
Cartage Trunks to Botsford [inn]	.25
	<hr/> \$35.01

Shipments of Austin paper carried the Hope Mill label affixed to the wrapping. It is also known that M. Crosswell & Son of Catskill printed a large quantity of such labels in 1818. And in 1827 Austin had William H. Spencer of Athens both engrave and print letterheads with an early view of the mill and the mill pond. There is no indication Abner Austin ever used a watermark.

Locally the paper was sold to various merchants; their major demand was for wrapping supplies and for printing paper for the Catskill *Recorder*. We find such merchants' names as: John A. Thomson, Mark Spencer, A. Van Vechten & Col. Nathan Elliott, Mackay Crosswell & Son, Apollos Cooke, Hall & Cooke, Wilkes Hyde, Day & Clark, Doctor Crosswell, Orrin Day, G. E. Palen & Co., Aaron C. Hall, Martin G. Schuneman, Luke Kiersted & Co., as well as some in the outlying areas of Greene County such as Samuel Osborn & Son of Lexington and Levi Callendar and Abijah Reed of Greenville. It was these small local sales which led Austin to note in his record book: "April 1818 – Retail prices under 10 reams hereafter."

In these years much of the shipment of paper to metropolitan areas was by water and one reads of the use of sloops such as the *Edmund, Delaware*, and the *Sally Ann*, Captain Barker's *Charlotte* and the sloop *Packet* of which E. T. Gaylord was the owner and Isaac Van Loan, captain. The paper was hauled up the steep mill road and taken by wagon or sleigh to Catskill Landing. The departure of the sloops depended upon the wind and weather. Abner or his son, Walter, generally accompanied the shipments on the sloops but returned on the faster steamboats such as the *Chancellor Livingston*.

On March 19, 1824 Abner Austin wrote:

Friday S[elf] – got ready & went on board *Delaware*
Saturday, March 20 – *Delaware* could not get out of
[Catskill] Creek, wind so fresh up – after Winds
shifted to N West not enough water on the bar
[sand bar] to go over. I came home Friday morn-
ing.

Monday, March 22 – The *Delaware* not over the bar
at Sunset last evening. S[elf] went to Landing on
foot to inquire about the Steam Boat, how they
run – returned home.

Tuesday, March 23 – Started to N York on Steam Boat
and came up on board *Delaware*. Left N York
Tuesday evening 30th March, arrived on the
morning of Friday 2d of April.

Paper from the Hope Mill was sold either directly or through paper commission houses in the

[continued on Page 9]

INDEX *[continued from Page 4]*

- Natural Science Association of the Catskills 3-4-10
- Needlework 3-3-9
- New Baltimore Mutual Ins. Assoc. 5-4-9
- New York, Catskill and Athens Steamboat Company 4-1-1
- Newell Family 2-2-7
- Newkirk - Salisbury Papers 3-2-9
- Newspapers
Catskill Messenger 2-3-5
Catskill Morning Mail 1-2-3
Examiner, Centennial Edition 5-4-9
Palenville Zephyr 1-1-2, 1-2-3
Prattsville Advocate 2-3-6
- Old Homes Tours
1977 1-1-1
1980 4-1-10
1981 5-2-10
- Olney, R. D. (Mrs.) 5-3-9
- Osborn, A.M. Hose Company
see A.M. Osborn Hose Company
- Overbagh Family 1-1-7, 1-4-3
- Paintings and prints at Bronck House 1-4-7, 2-1-4, 2-2-2, 2-3-1,
4-3-4, 5-3-9, 5-4-7
- Palatines 4-1-3
- Palen Family 3-4-5, 4-3-9
- Palenville
Resorts and Industries 1-1-2, 1-2-3, 2-4-6
Rowena School 5-2-8
- Parks Family 2-1-8
- Peck Family 4-3-9
- Photography Collections at Vedder Library
Buckley, Greene County 2-2-7
Courson-Haines Coll. Cairo 3-1-9, 3-2-9
Florence Cole Vincent Mem. Coll. 4-3-6
Van Gelder, James H. 3-4-9
Wells-Van Loan 5-3-9
- Pierson, James Malcolm Coll. 2-1-8, 5-4-6
- Pistol Factories 3-2-1
- Pottery Industry
Clark, Athens 1-1-8
- Pratt, Zadock 1-1-8, 2-2-7
- Prattsville 2-2-1, 2-2-7
- Prevost, Augustine
Prevost's Gore 1-4-6
- Pruyn-Philip Family 2-1-4
- Pulver-Stiefel & Predecessors legal papers, maps 5-1-9, 5-4-9
- Railroads
Canajoharie and Catskill 5-1-9
Catskill Mt. Railway 5-3-9, 5-4-9
Schenectady and Catskill 2-4-6
- Rea Family 2-1-8, 5-1-8
- Reed Family 2-2-5
Luman 2-2-1
Roswell 3-1-9
- Reid, James Family 3-2-1
- Revolutionary War 5-1-8, 5-4-9
- Ritz Grocery Store 3-2-4
- Roads and Turnpikes 5-2-9, 5-3-8
- Rowena Memorial School 5-2-8
- Ryder, Forrest Van Loon Coll. 4-3-9
- Salisbury–Newkirk Papers 3-4-10, 4-3-9
- Salisbury–Van Deusen Papers 3-3-9
Salisbury–Newkirk 3-2-9
- Sawmills 2-1-1, 2-4-2
- Sax (Saxe) Family 2-3-9
- Scott, Samuel Platt 2-2-2
- Scripture, Simeon 2-4-1
- Shipyards 4-1-1
- Silversmiths 3-4-9, 4-1-1
- Simpkins, Marguerite B. 2-1-8
- Slaughterhouses
Wilson, Catskill 1-4-8
- Smith, Dorothy 2-3-10
- Smith, Mabel Parker
County Historian 2-4-8
Society Historian 5-4-10
- Smith Family
Wilbur Chapman 2-2-7
Capt. Samuel 4-1-4, 4-2-8
- Smith's Landing
see Cementon
- Soap Box Factories
Windham 1-3-1
- South Cairo – Bell Brook 2-3-1
- Souvenir Industry 3-2-6
- Spanish-American War 5-3-9
- Spoor Family 4-3-9
- Steamboats
see Boats, Hudson River
- Stephens, Ann S. 1-4-2
- Stevens, James Mem. Coll. 5-3-8
- Stone, Benjamin B. G. 1-1-4, 1-4-7
- Story Family 1-4-7, 4-3-4
Lester 3-2-6
Herman 3-3-9
- Sunset Park 5-1-4
- Tanning Industry 2-2-7, 2-4-8
- Teamsters 4-2-1

[continued on Page 8]

INDEX *[continued from Page 7]*

Temperance 4-1-8
Thomes, Sidney Phoenix 4-3-1
Thomson, Thomas T., Family 4-3-1, 5-4-9
Thorn, May Calder 2-3-1
Tom Thumb 2-4-6
Trading Post at Bronck House 2-1-10, 5-2-10
Tremain Family 4-2-4, 4-2-5, 4-3-9
Trumpbour Family 4-1-3

Van Cott, Maggie Newton 2-4-2, 4-3-7
Vandenbergh Family 5-2-9
Van Deusen Family 3-3-9
Van Dyck (Van Dyke) Family 1-1-4, 1-2-7
Van Gelder-Pine-Wardle-Fiero Coll. 1-1-3, 1-2-1, 1-3-6, 2-3-2,
2-3-9, 2-4-1, 3-3-3, 3-4-9
Van Loon (Van Loan) Family 1-1-5
Van Orden, Barbara and Elsie 3-1-1, 4-1-3, 4-2-8
Van Valkenburg(h) Family 1-2-6, 1-4-7, 3-1-9
Vedder Family 4-3-9
Vermilyea Family 2-1-8
Vincent, Florence Cole Mem. Coll. 5-4-9
Vosburgh, Cornell 4-3-9

Waltz, Joseph 2-1-1, 2-2-3
White Family 2-1-8
Windham 2-4-2
World War I 5-1-9
World War II 5-3-1

ERRATA VOLUMES 1 through 5

1-4-2 Mary Pratt was fourth wife
3-4-1 Increase of 25¢ the day
4-3-1 Thomes, Sidney Phoenix
4-4-9 Bronck Homestead — removal of stone chimney
5-4-10 Roberta Everitt

This index is printed in such a manner as to permit its removal from this issue and to facilitate its placement immediately following Volume 5, Issue 4.

The professional assistance of Frances Dietz, Roberta Everitt and Elizabeth Miller in the preparation of this five-year index is gratefully acknowledged.

The Editor

AUSTIN MILL [continued from Page 6]

metropolitan areas. Austin paper was used widely — along the eastern seaboard and on to New Orleans, westward to the middle states while on the north it was sold in Albany and Montreal.

Just how strong a dam the Benjamins built is unknown but from Austin correspondence one concludes it was in poor condition and did not hold enough water in the mill pond to adequately power the machinery. In a late winter thaw of 1822, the dam was destroyed by a sudden surge of water and ice. Abner Austin describes the situation in a letter to Mrs. Ruth Benjamin, widow of the former owner:

On the 21st inst. the mill dam was swept away by a freshet & the immense pressure of water, the noise of which was heard at the Landing. I never beheld such thick ice and enormous masses of it — I am now at a total stop [in the mill] — probably for Six months, for I must wait for low water in the Summer before I can rebuild the dam.

The replacement of this Catskill Creek dam was no small undertaking for the time. In an attempt to keep costs down, Austin used his own men to do much of the routine work — David Van Dyck, Seth Jones, Lot Weeks and George Gibbs. Additionally, he called upon his neighbors who came as needed with their hired hands and teams of oxen. It was a dam raising bee of sorts.

Heavy timbers were hauled in, purchased from Jonathan Palen and from the Bagley and Cole lumber mill. Austin and his men tore out the remains of the old Benjamin dam and the spillway. For a more solid foundation in the creek bed they blasted out sections of rock at the natural dam. A large oak timber was put in place from the shore to the large, high rock outside the head of the flume. (Hikers in the glen may still see this interesting high rock formation). The next stage called for the construction of a temporary dam to divert the waters of the Catskill Creek.

Then Abner Austin began to worry — could he and his workmen actually construct a new dam which would stand up to the ice and freshets for years to come? Uncertain, he drove off to Hudson to locate a mill dam expert, one Mr. Stewart. But Mr. Stewart was not available so Austin returned to Jefferson determined to complete the dam with local help. And he was successful!

On June 11, 1822 Abner Austin would write in his diary: "This day began to build the Mill Dam." And for the next several days his entries describe in detail the work in progress. Heavy logs pinned together with wooden pegs, and planking, were used for 'tiers and tyers.' William Schuneman brought his hired man, David W. Hart, as well as his oxen; John Van Vechten came with his negro boy and two yoke of oxen; Eli White and T. Winans each came with a

yoke of oxen. Other area men who gave of their time and effort to the dam's construction were Isaac Penfield, Jonah Foster, Tunis S. Van Vechten, William Wierds, Luke Kiersted, Hiram Crane, Peter Merkel, Dick Merrifield, H. V. Demarest, Jonathan Pollock, M. Goff and J. Gilbert.

Slowly but carefully the mill dam took shape; the logs were put in place; the plate was put in position to pin the plank to, and the planking completed. In the meantime J. Goff and his man Waldron were working on repairs to the flume. By June 24, the dam was virtually completed, the apron in place. Then the graveling process got underway.

One can readily imagine the sense of relief experienced by Abner Austin when he made his diary entry for Saturday, June 29: "Shut down the water gate at Sunset. Water run over the dam at 6 o'clock P.M. Sunday. Have been 16½ days building the Dam, weather very good, lost but ½ day by rain."

The diaries maintained by Abner Austin were primarily an account of business transactions but occasionally we catch a glimpse of family and community happenings — pleasure jaunts to the Catskills, religious participation, educational activities, deaths, fires and court attendance. A few are quoted:

November 17, 1818: This day Ira Day hung himself in his garret — supposed to be occasioned by his failure in business — a most awful manner of avoiding trouble — said to be insane. [Ira Day had a warehouse at Catskill Point selling hogsheads of rum and other items; he also had a large flour processing mill at Leeds.]

January 1, 1819: Went to meeting. Dedication of the Stone Church at Madison [Leeds Reformed Church.]

September 6, 1822: S[elf] & wife went to the Mountains in company of T. S. Van Vechten & wife, H. O. Demarest & wife, Luke Kiersted & wife & child, B. Comfort & wife — Breakfasted at Col. Lawrence's visited Pine Orchard [Catskill Mountain House] & Cauterskill Falls — back to the Orchard and dined. Left there at 4 o'clock & returned through the five mile Woods — arrived home before dark.

Friday, September 17, 1824: V[an] D[yke] [the hired man] & children went to the Village [Catskill] about 6 o'clock to see General Lafayette who landed about 10 o'clock, rode hastily up into the Street & Returned immediately on board the Steam Boat — got home at noon.

Abner Austin took jury duty seriously although at times he found it inconvenient to be absent from his business:

January 27, 1824: [Tuesday] At Landing on Petit Jury — tried one case — Assault & Battery — Thomas George vs. Nicholas I. Lampman — all of Coxsackie. [Nicholas I. Lampman was the inventor and craftsman who was called in by the Bronks to finish the framework of the 13-sided barn at the Bronck Homestead.]

January 28, 1824: S[elf] at Court — Cause of William Pullen & William Studely occupied the whole day.

[continued on Page 10]

AUSTIN MILL [continued from Page 9]

[Pullen had purchased the Captain Joseph Allen house at Jefferson, now the Moon property.]

January 29, 1824: At Court this day the case of Dewey vs. Drocker was disposed of – and two criminal cases were disposed of – viz The People vs. Abiel Clements, Assault & Battery with intent to commit rape – acquitted & The People vs. Philip Conine for Assault & Battery – Guilty & Sentenced to 30 days confinement in County Jail.

January 30, 1824: Jury discharged at noon – came home and attended School examination.

The Abner Austin operation of the mill, the farm and the trading store continued for the remainder of his life. He was buffeted by man-made situations such as the failure of wholesale paper houses, and by Acts of God such as the late winter freshet which tore out the mill dam, but he managed to survive financially. Working capital was never plentiful; debts to Elisha Williams and to Ruth Benjamin were still outstanding in 1846. In later years his son, Walter, joined the firm and it became known as Austin & Son.

The Catskill *Recorder* carries the obituary of Eliza Austin: "Died at Jefferson on the 6th inst. Mrs. Eliza (Merrill), wife of Abner Austin, aged 65 years." And within a few months in the year 1848 Abner Austin followed her. Strangely enough, for a man who kept careful business records, Abner Austin did not leave a will. Sons Walter and Charles were appointed administrators. Appraisers Luke Kiersted and Absolom Comfort came up with a personal property evaluation of \$7,221.42:

Book accounts	\$6,110.28
Stock & tools	
on farm	668.70
Carpenter's Tools	8.44
Household furniture	385.06
Tools in store	48.94

The stock in the store was not listed nor any in the paper mill. It is assumed both the store and the mill were then being operated by Abner's two sons.

The paper mill on Catskill Creek continued in operation until the mid 1880's. Cheaper paper made from wood pulp provided keen competition. The Austin Brothers eventually produced some paper from straw as did other Greene County mills but until the end they kept up a manufacturing process of quality paper from rags; bonnet board became a specialty – it carried two labels: Hope Mill and Kalkberg. □ □ □ □ □

It is with sorrow we report the passing of Raymond H. Van Valkenburgh at age 92 years. He was born in Catskill of a family whose roots go deeply into the area's history. A well-respected educator and author, he maintained an interest in this society and its museum. Friends have established a memorial fund in his name.

VEDDER LIBRARY NOTES

□◇ Six folders of historical material which reflect the history of the Greenville – Norton Hill – South Westerlo areas during the nineteenth century have come from Mrs. Bernice Hunt Cameron of that area of the county. The gift is a memorial to Alfred S. Hunt. The papers range in date from 1804 to the second decade of the twentieth century.

□◇ A useful, informative piece of compilation: *Melancholy – Awful and Etc., Deaths, Marriages & Other Genealogical Bits From the Ulster Republican* published at Kingston between 1837 and 1839 has come from Shirley A. Mearns of Ulster County.

□◇ Through the kindness of Mr. Frank Crandell of New Baltimore, we now have a substantial body of genealogical information on Browns, Crandells, Grumans, et. al. Several years ago Mr. Crandell donated his grandfather's papers as well as Greene County newspapers.

□◇ *Writings from the Beaver Trail*, published in 1979 by the Albany Public Library, contains five poetical contributions from Aina L. Anderson of Ravena and New Baltimore. A copy of the publication is on the shelves of the Vedder Library.

□◇ Established as a memorial to George Carl of Leeds, a substantial collection of paper items – newspapers, pamphlets, boat line time tables, photographs and postcards relating to the history of Greene County is now being catalogued. The photographs of the building of the Otis Elevating Railway are particularly noteworthy. Mr. Carl was always interested in local history and the gift from Emily Margraf Carl perpetuates this avocation of her husband.

□◇ And we mention the honor bestowed upon Madalin Atwater of Tannersville – The Mid-Hudson Library System's Library Trustee of the Year Award. Mrs. Atwater is also Trustee Emeritus of the Greene County Historical Society.

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