Early history of logging in Potton

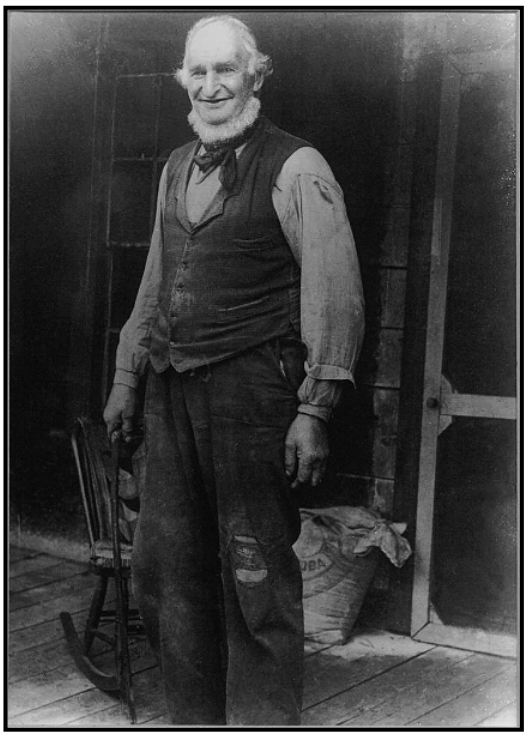
By Sandra Jewett

Although the primary subject of this issue of HPH is a man of our time – it also seemed natural time to investigate the earlier history of logging in Potton and of any industries related to it, primarily the connection with Singer Manufacturing of the early 1900's.

It is fortuitous that in 1976-77, Marion Phelps, then curator of the Brome County Historical Society, aided by Maria Bray, wrote a comprehensive article called *Dunkin, the Picturesque Potton Township*. It appeared in 1977, Volume 3 of Yesterdays of Brome County. In one of the segments was a collection of memories from five life-long residents of Dunkin and, as luck would have it, one of the contributors was Pete Aiken – the very one to whom we have devoted this issue of Histoire Potton History! From it, we present certain excerpts:

"*… Logging has been important to the people of this area through the years both during the late 1850's and early 1900's. An old map of 1864 shows three saw mills along this (Ruiter) Brook which has its farthest north source in Fullerton Pond. … smaller mills that were run by water power. At the turn of the century and earlier, Osmond Titus (see photo opposite) is said to have made shingles at his mill. Later on in the early 1900's stood the Mill and Sash shop of Leon Truax, which was swept away in the 1927 flood, it too was a water mill. Lee Brown built a new mill on the site … water power was still used at Brown's mill in 1930. The abundant supply of lumber accounted no doubt for other early industries such as E.H. Record's Sash Factory and Jacob Brown's Wheelwright shop.*

It was in the early 1900's that large logging companies moved in to lumber on a large scale. The Missisquoi Lumber Company of Richford and Sutton had wood lots and mills in several places and lumbered along the Ruiter Brook around 1911 and some years before the Singer Sewing Machine Company of St. John's, Quebec operated on the largest scale between 1918 & 1926. The Blair Veneer Mill of North Troy, Vt., Sweat & Comings of Richford, Vt. and the Atlas Plywood of Richford, Vt., carried on logging until late 1960's. (more information on next page). When the logging operations were there business improved in Dunkin and local people had jobs. During the depression years of the 1930's men found work here when they couldn't find it elsewhere. Most mills took all kinds of timbers, the plywood mills used mostly hard woods. The logging companies in most cases bought up the wood lots."



Osmond Titus
Archives APP

The Orleans County Monitor, November 8, 1916 edition notes:

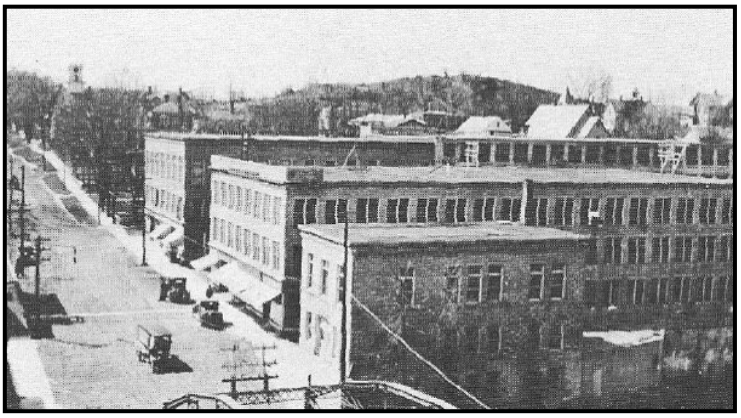
"The Blair Veneer Company of North Troy has just concluded two large purchases, being all the timber except spruce on hundreds of acres of land in and around the township of Potton, Canada, some being located around Fullerton pond and on adjacent territory. It is called the Heath tract and was bought of Escanaba Manufacturing of Mich. (Michigan) By the terms of the sale, at least 500 000 feet of timber must be removed each season, but it is expected that much more will be cut.''

Because of the abundance and good quality of the timber near Richford, woodworking in its various branches is the town's main industry, nearly 500 persons being employed in the furniture, plywood and veneer mills. The largest of these mills is in the center of the village adjacent to the falls that supplied the power for the necessary grist mill of the early settlers.

The Blair Veneer* Company was established around 1904 in North Troy, Vermont and produced chair seats, furniture panels, box shooks**, and bent work. It was the only company in New England that turned out sound boards for pianos, as well as other musical instruments.

- *A **box shook** is a set of parts for assembling a cask or barrel or a packing box, dismantled and packed for shipment.
- ****Veneers** are produced by holding a log firmly at each end in a lathe and rotating it against a knife. The veneer exits from the lathe knife in a continuous ribbon that is clipped to desired widths or to eliminate defects. After drying, the veneers are sorted into sets, each of which will form a plywood panel of the desired thickness and size. Alternate sheets are coated with glue that forms a waterproof bond when subjected to high temperature and pressure in a hot press. The rough plywood panels are then trimmed and may be sanded.

The Sweat and Comings Company was first established in Richford 1875 as Sweat & Powell, to manufacture blinds and sashes, then evolving into a maker of high quality furniture for which customers were willing to wait a year or more for delivery of a bedroom or dining room set. After a fire swept through Richford in 1907, destroying part of its downtown and the Sweat & Comings factory complex, the factory complex was rebuilt in 1909. The plant closed in the early 1990's after there was no resolution in a dispute with the town.



Sweat and Comings, Richford, VT.

The Atlas Plywood Company is described as a box material manufacturer – essentially plywood shipping crates. It was located in Richford, Vt and was formerly called Richford Industries. The company was in existence in 1945. Fire destroyed the plant in 1954. Details about this company are scarce.

The Singer Years

Arguably the most famous of the industries which used Potton hardwood in massive quantities, was that of Singer Manufacturing, the makers of Singer sewing machines for the domestic and industrial market. The heyday of "Singerville" appears to have been between 1918 and 1826 Oak and Maple were sought after for the cabinets of Singer sewing machines.

Singer sewing machine
Singer-featherweight.com

In 1996, the Heritage Association published a pamphlet, composed by Gérard Leduc and commemorating the bicentennial of the founding of West Potton – 1796 – 1996. The following is extracted from that document.

…*"Another important component of Dunkin's industrial history is, without doubt, Fullerton Pond and its dam. We have there a superb example of an industrial heritage site. A Mr. Boright owned the surrounding land and supposedly built the dam to control the headwaters of Ruiter Brook to facilitate the floating of logs. The dam is a remarkable example of heritage engineering. It measures 175 m (about 400 feet) long and is built with masonry, some stones weighing close to a ton each. To waterproof the dam an earth bank was laid alongside the entire length. …*

We continue by quoting again from the article in Yesterdays of Brome County – Dunkin, the Picturesque …

"The Singer Sewing Machine Company created a little village where they carried on their logging operations on a road forking west off the Ruiter Brook Road, and it was referred to many a Singerville. They erected a bunk house, stables, blacksmith shop, saw mill, cook house and a refrigerator (by cutting large blocks of ice to be stored all summer in an ice shed) The Singer company did not run their logs down the Brook, they took out their wood in the form of lumber by team. Leon Truax was the sawyer for Singer's and ran their saw mill."

Singer's lumbering
Archives APPHA

To continue in the words of the late Merrill Sherrer, who contributed to the original 1977 article.

"The logs had to be brought down the mountain to the Missisquoi River and some companies would run the logs down the Ruiter Brook. To control this operation a dam was built at the head of the Brook on Fullerton Pond. This gave the loggers a longer season and made them less dependent on the whim of the weather. Here water could be stored and released as desired to convey the logs downstream. The brook descends several hundred feet in about five miles and has eroded a path between the hills in some places sixty feet deep, its bed strewn with boulders some as big as a small house and a lot heavier.

About 100 teams of horses on the way to the Singer Co.
Collection APPHA

"It is into this Brook that they rolled the logs, several hundred board feet[1] at a time to be sent down the Brook to the River. A company having logs at Ruiter Brook and also logs above Mansonville would start the two drives to reach the mouth of the Brook at the same time and so become one drive down to the mill. A drive lasted several days and took fifteen to twenty men to manage it, certain areas along the banks of the Brooks were dyked to prevent erosion by the logs. There are still remnants of logs and cables visible today.

"There was a boom[2] just below the Brook's mouth across the River to hold the logs in case of a slight misjudgement."

"Occasionally logs that had been brought down off the mountain by team were also rolled into the River here. The logs going to the farther destination were run first to Richford, to Stevens Mills, to East Richford last. Any logs belonging to a company downstream were punched under the boom and allowed to go on downstream, logs belonging to a mill above had to be hauled back or sold. Each company painted the ends of their logs for identification. Sometimes a log would catch between the boulders, others would pile up behind it, the water pushing them even higher and spilling over the top or worse still going around and carrying logs across someone's fields. This has resulted in big damage claims …

Of course, only soft logs were run, hardwood logs would not float well enough, no logs were ever run to mills located on the Ruiter Brook, the Brook was too swift and I don't think they could ever stop them at a mill. The last big run of logs was back in 1910 or thereabouts …"

"At one time the present road from Highwater to Dunkin was a secondary road used only at flood time, the main road was on the south side of the River past the Highwater station down past the Baker Talc and the old Fred Crowell place. Dunkin is situated near where the Ruiter Brook flows into the Missisquoi River

[1] A **board foot** is **equal** to the volume of a piece of wood that measures one **foot** long, one **foot** wide, and one inch thick or 144 cubic inches.

[2] A log boom is a barrier placed in a river, designed to collect and/or contain floating logs. Booms were themselves large floating logs linked together end to end, like a large floating chain connecting foundations or anchors on the river banks, or in the river, while strategically guiding the transported logs along their path.

and is protected on the west by the Sutton Mountains."

"*There was an old wooden bridge called the Crowell Bridge that crossed the Missisquoi River a little bit south of Dunkin, and this was used to transport logs by four horse teams using sleighs in winter. This was after the logging companies stopped using the Missisquoi River and the logs or lumber were brought over the old bridge to Crowell's siding on the South side of the river to the Canadian Pacific Railway where it was loaded on flat cars and shipped to the Singer Co. in St. John's . In later years trucks were used to transport the logs. The old bridge was rebuilt three times and it finally broke up in the 1950's."*

One of the abutments of the Crowell Bridge is still visible in the Missisquoi. Best appreciated from the River, it is often photographed by kayakers.

Abutment of Crowell Brige
Canoe et Cie

"It is believed that logging kept Dunkin on the map in the 20's and 30's as it was the mainstay of the people as well as farming''

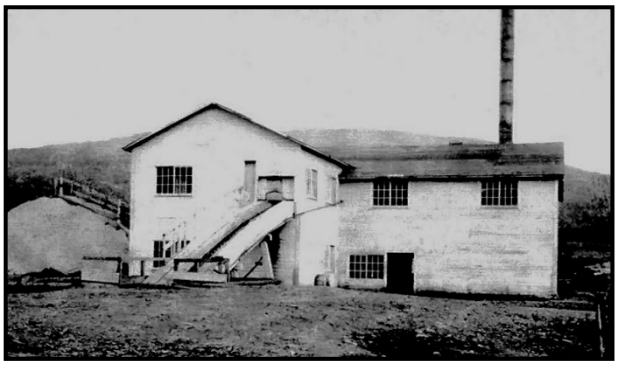
Brief history of Singer in St. Jean

Singer manufacturing plant
Archives APP

The Singer manufacturing plant opened in 1906 and produced sewing machines, most of which were encased in hardwood cabinetry, derived from hard wood cut off the mountain which eventually bore its name. The site of more than 18 separate fire-proof buildings, with a floor area of over 12 acres and 5 miles of railway track … in the 1950's and 1960's, it employed around 3000 people; however, like its namesake in Potton, Singer Manufacturing exists no longer. The Company thrived in St. Jean-sur-Richelieu, as a major employer, until the 1980's when prolonged and bitter labour disputes precipitated its hostile closure. All claims were settled in 2006. Condominiums are to be built where the massive factory once bustled.

A century has passed and all vestiges of the former Singerville logging site have long disappeared; however Potton Heritage is fortunate to have in our archives two photos showing the place and some of the Singer facilities.

Lumberman camp | Singerville | Circa 1920
Archive APPHA



Sawmill | Singerville | Circa 1920
Archivess APPHA

Logging on a large scale ended in the Dunkin area in the 1940's with the exception of some farmers cutting pulpwood in the 1950's and 60's. … The Singer wood lots were sold to Canada Paper in the 1960's and now belong to Dominion Tar and Chemical. (Domtar) The Boright woodlots now belong to the Champigny Brothers of Mansonville. Blair Veneer sold theirs to the same company …

Perpetuation of the tree growth is assured by the fact that these mountain lots have young growth coming in all the time and do not need replanting. The same land can be cut every 20 to 30 years. At that rate logging could be resumed here safely by the 1990's."

Not one of us will ever see the canopy of an Eastern Canadian old-growth forest, or glimpse any of the several species doubtless rendered extinct as a result of its disappearance.

Note: The so-called Singer woodlots sold to Canada Paper and to Domtar, are now the property of Nature Conservancy of Canada. The Fullerton Pond, dam and environs are part of the Appalachian Corridor and Fiducie de la Vallée Ruiter.

Owned by Mr. Borigth | Circa 1930
Archive APPHA

The Fullerton Pond and dam
David Brisson | 2016

Logging near Vale Perkins

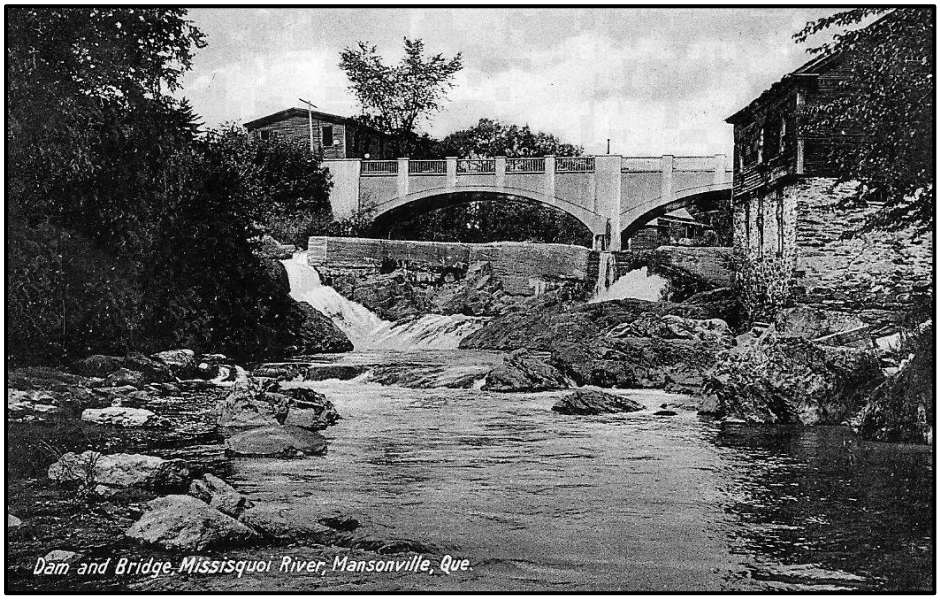
Principal in the network of waterways that criss-cross our territory is the Missisquoi River, which has its headwaters in Vermont and flows westward through Potton to eventually empty into Lake Champlain in the area south of Swanton, Vermont. One of its main tributaries is the North Missisquoi which flows north through central Potton and joins the mainstream at Highwater.

Chemin George R. Jewett | 1908
Collection Minnie Smith

Mansonville is the site of one of the only significant waterfalls on either branch of the Missisquoi River which could be harnessed to run saw and grist mills required by the settlers is the site of Mansonville. For the most part, the Missisquoi and that part of the Missisquoi North in Potton are both approaching grade.

The south flowing Ruiter Brook enters the Missisquoi near Dunkin; however, Ruiter Brook, on the other hand, is a much smaller and more youthful stream having a gradient of approximately 1 foot in 35 feet over its eight mile course, and a relatively narrow valley.

Had the stream which flows into Lake Memphremagog at Vale Perkins been larger and able to support large scale mills, Vale Perkins, with its access to the Lake would probably also have developed into a sizeable town[3]. (At one time it did have two small saw mills and a grist mill in operation on it.) Some things are just not meant to be!



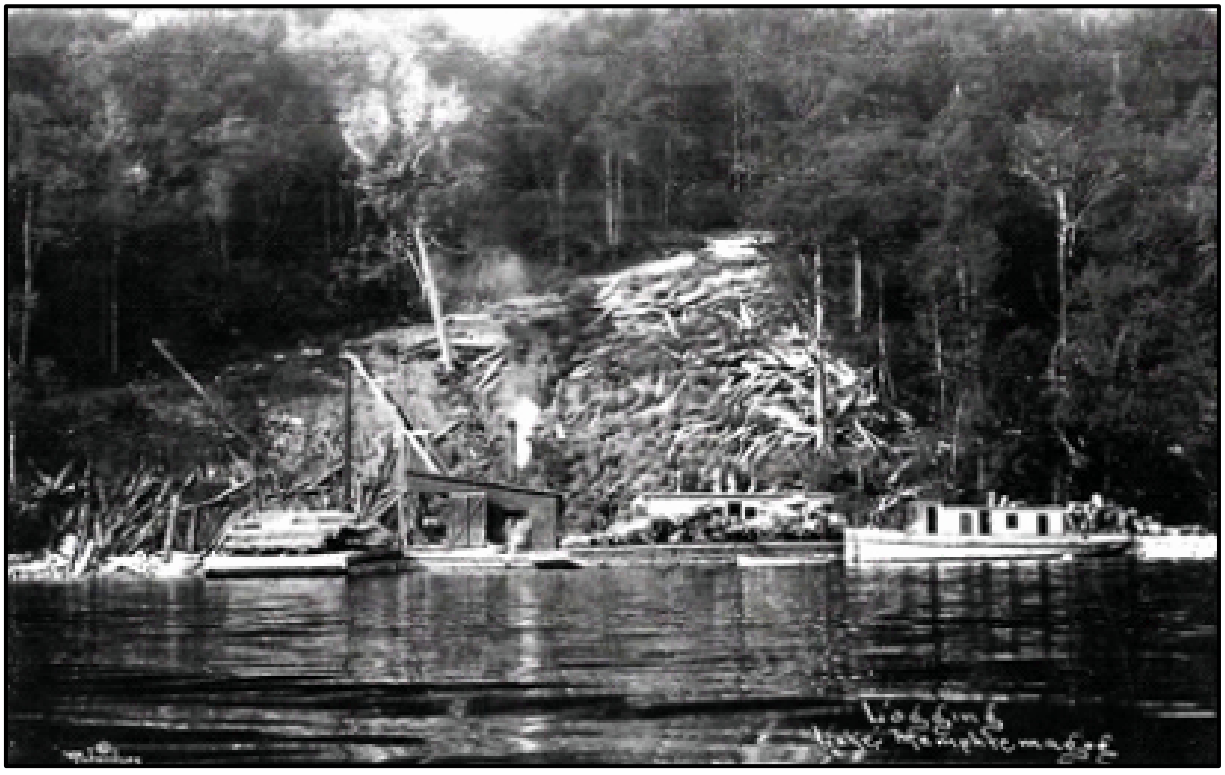
Waterfalls | Mansonville Bridge
Archives APP

[3]The above is paraphrased from "An Historical Geography of Brome County: 1800-1911" by John Derek Booth, 1966 available on line.

From Volume I of *Beautiful Waters* by William B. Bullock, this quote from W. C. Perkins regarding Perkins Landing: "*About 1840 my grandfather built a sawmill on the brook (then a small river) which empties into the Lake at the Landing. Some 25 years later the late Capt. George w. Fogg built a saw mill further up the brook, also built a small landing for the Mountain Maid."*

As a child in the 1950's growing up beside the Vale Perkins Brook, I do remember the remnants of a platform in the brook that I understood was where the Magoon family had once operated a mill.

Below is an undated photograph showing a logging site at a very steep area just to the north of Perkins Landing, likely on property belonging to Carlton J. Oliver from Mansonville. This site later became a popular campground. Logs were tumbled into the lake, and corralled in the water by loggers, who were housed in the white boat visible on the right. On the right, a crib of logs. The boat was identified as the Oscar Sea, by a lady whom I have known all my life, Ann Stanger Hruby, who has summered on Lake Memphremagog for many decades. Ann is the granddaughter of S. Carl Carpenter from Richford, VT., one of a handful of original 'cottagers' with camps north of the Perkins Landing wharf, among whom Carlton J. Olivier and Claude Boright, from Mansonville, as noted in *Beautiful Waters* in 1926.



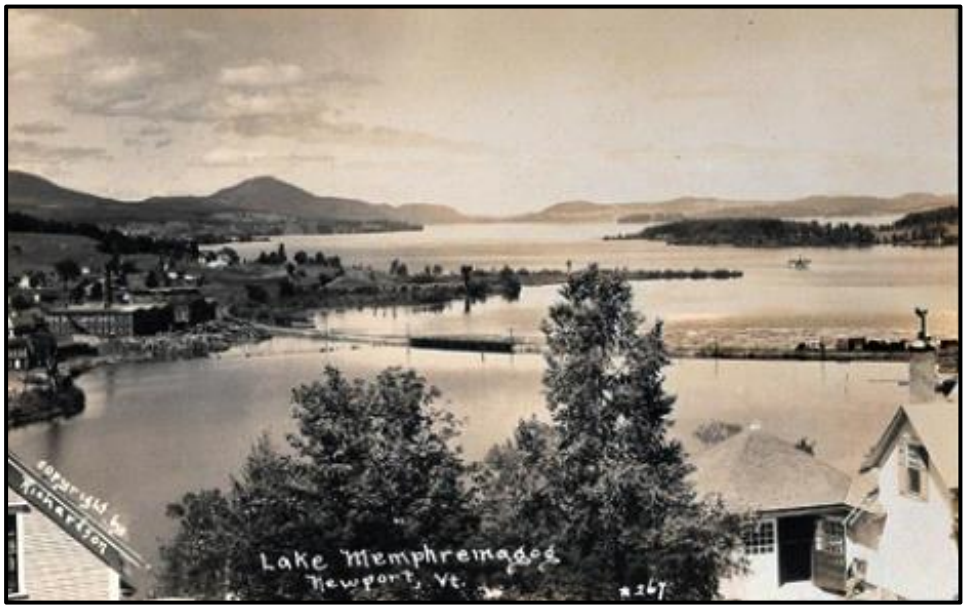
Logging site | Memphremagog Lake
Archives APP

Ann has kindly allowed us an authentic peak into the past by sharing the following photo. The slash from logging stayed prominent on the steep landscape for years. Barely visible in the photo is the Oscar Sea, however, remember the photo was probably taken 100 years ago.

Oscar Sea
Collection Ann Stanger Hruby

Further north, at the mouth of the Chateau Brook, then likely called Revere Bay, another landing site was used by Prouty and Miller logs. Once sufficient logs were collected into a manageable cribs on the lake, they would be tugged south to Newport to Prouty and Miller, a lumber and building supply company, which still operates in Newport, although the logs today are trucked in!

Note the mill visible on the far left below and look closely at right side mid-photo where a boom may be seen behind Bay Street which crosses the bay. In spite of our efforts to enhance the photograph, the image remains unclear. It is judged to be circa 1940.



Newport
Prouty & Miller
Archives APP

Excerpted from an unpublished manuscript entitled "Border Crossings - Potton Township" authored by M. E. Bailey of Mansonville for the Operational Services of Revenue Canada in 1982 is the following: *"Usually the Lady of the Lake made her first trip each year around April 20th. However, in 1887, the first trip was on May 10th. She arrived in Newport, towing two rafts of logs, some 800 000 feet, for the company of Prouty and Miller."*

Mr. Bailey indicated that this practice continued until the 1930's.

Did you know?

The figure of speech ***''High and Dry''*** describes and unsuccessful log drive. Maximum river flows typically coincided with the runoff from snowmelt, and was sometimes augmented by water released from dams. If logs were started downriver when there was not enough water to move them all the way to the sawmill, the investment made in cutting timber might be stranded ***high and dry*** in the shallows along the stream bed for a year until the next spring's snowmelt!

The phrase '***Come hell or high water'***, used when one is determined to get something accomplished no matter how hard or whatever difficulties one may face, originated in the race to get logs into the brooks and streams so they could reach rivers while the water was high enough to float the drive

The Willard Shoe Last Company

The Willard Shoe Last Company, owned by George Willard, which was established around 1906 was also a buyer for hardwood produced in Potton. Plate 89 of Potton d'antan shows this enterprise, located at McNeil's Crossing on Traver road. It too was established in roughly the same time frame that saw Singerville and Blair Veneer in full operation. (You will notice the presence of two boys in this picture. One of these was a lad by the name of Hughie Baird whose parents ran the boarding house for a time. To my knowledge Potton children were not subject to child labour!!)

The history of George Willard's business was recorded by Marion L. Phelps, then curator of the Brome County Historical Society, and was reprinted in the April 20th 1967 edition of The Eastern Townships Advertiser, a weekly paper out of Knowlton published by C.M. Black (Yes!– that would be Conrad Black!!)

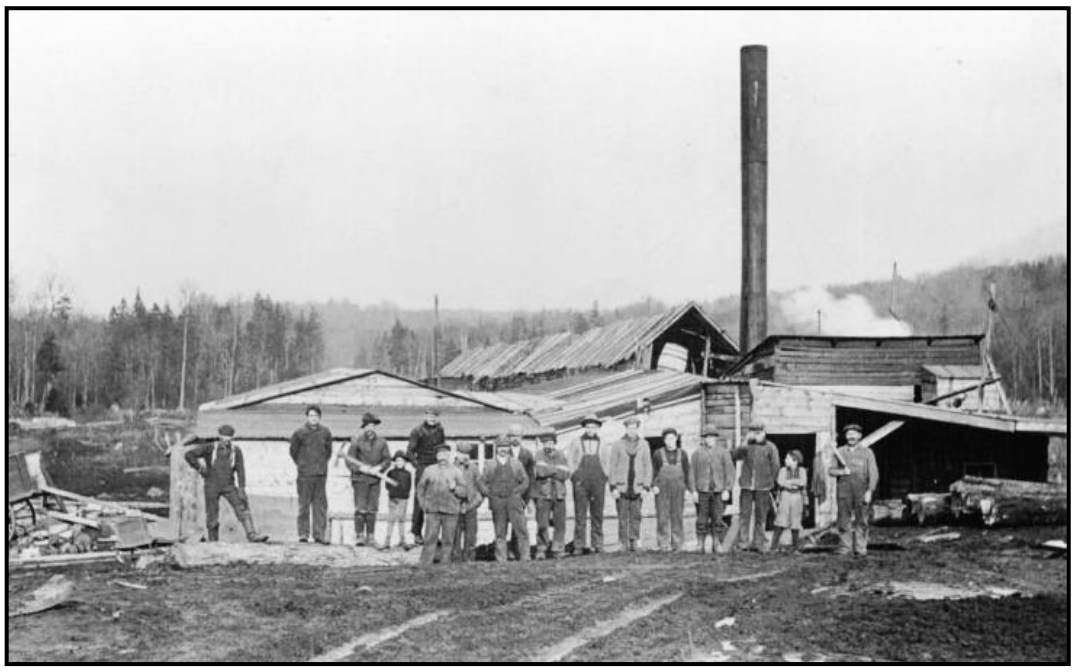
George Willard was the grandson of Samuel Willard who was the leader of the group of settlers from the vicinity of Newfane, Vermont who first took up land in the Township of Stukely around the year 1800.

The *shoe last*[4] factory, located at McNeil's Crossing on Traver Road in our municipality, began business in Potton in 1903-05. Opposite photo shows several workmen posed in front of the buildings in 1907 in which two types of block lasts were produced.

[4] *Shoe lasts made at that time began life in crude form, either from hewn blocks or from lathe turned blocks* are wooden forms of the human foot, over which shoes (generally high end!) are made! Shoe "lasting" is the shoemaking operation that sets the final shape of a shoe and holds it in place so the outsole can be permanently attached. What Mr. Willard produced was the raw form.

Below are excerpts drawn from the original longer article by Miss Phelps entitled: *The Wooden Shoe Last Factory, Traver Road.* The excerpts are intended here to describe actual lumbering techniques in Potton a century ago. Additional historical notations or explanations are signified by an asterisk *, inserted by me, and did not form part of Miss Phelps' article.

"The Orford Mountain Railway had just extended in 1906 their line from Potton Springs to Mansonville and one of their stopping places was to be Traver Road. This was to solve a transportation problem for Mr. Willard, since the last blocks could be shipped on the O,M,R, by box car to Eastman, and from thence on the CPR, those destined for England would be taken to Montreal and those destined for Granby could be shifted to C.V.R. at Farnham.



George Willard Last Block Mill
at McNeil's Crossing | Circa 1907
Archive APPHA

About a million feet of maple was used each year to fill the orders. They used only the straight grained maple and it had to be free of knots. The hewn blocks went to the Miner Rubber and those turned on a lathe went to England. They were sold at a so much per thousand blocks.*

*Miner Rubber company was located in Granby. It was founded in 1911 – after taking over Granby Rubber, a company founded in 1891. Miner Rubber specialized in making rubber boots, galoshes and some rubberized clothing. The Company was put out of business in 1982, when foreign products flooded the markets after tariffs fell in 1974.

The (Willard Shoe Last) factory was open and working only in the months from April to October. During the winter months from November to March, the men were in the woods getting the maple logs. These would be mostly the same men who had been working in the factory in the summer. As soon as the factory closed at the end of October, logging camps were set up in the Potton woods wherever a stand of maples had been bought. The number of camps depended on the size of the contract which they had to fill. The tar paper shacks complete with bunks and cook were soon ready to accommodate the twelve or fifteen men in each camp.

They figured having the logs all cut by New Year's and from then on to March, the logs were drawn out by log team back to the factory. It depended on how far the logging camp was from the factory as to how many trips the log teams could make each day but is was usually two or three trips. This winter logging was a hard kind of work for teamsters, horses and foremen. This was in the days when trees had to be chopped down and sawn by hand. It was a rough life and work had to be done the best way they could get it done.

It took about twenty teams to haul these logs so that horses and stables were a necessary part of this establishment. Just before Christmas, a carload of horses would arrive from the McDonald Construction Company in Montreal which did not use their horses in the winter. They were unloaded in Mansonville, since there were facilities there for so doing. The first thing the horses had to be sharp shod in Mansonville for the mountain teaming. There were barns on the farm near the factory where the teams were kept. Repairing shoes or sleds was done in a shop there also and a blacksmith and three men were employed working all night to be ready for the next day. The horses were shipped back to Montreal always around March 10th.*

*Sharp shod indicates a type of horse shoe to permit more grip or traction on rough or inclined terrain.

During the summer there were usually about twenty-five men employed in the factory, some of whom lived right around the locality. Others lived in a 'boarding house' near the factory which was run by different people at different times. Mrs. Hannah Stanhope and her husband from Sutton ran the boarding house for a long time. She cooked and he looked after the horses at night seeing that they were fed at 4 o'clock in the morning. The boarding house was open all year round. … Among the men who worked for Willard Shoe Last were names of some still found in Potton and environs: Those of Fuller, Baird, Smith, Bracey, Boyce, Woodard, Darling and Metigee are named in the article.

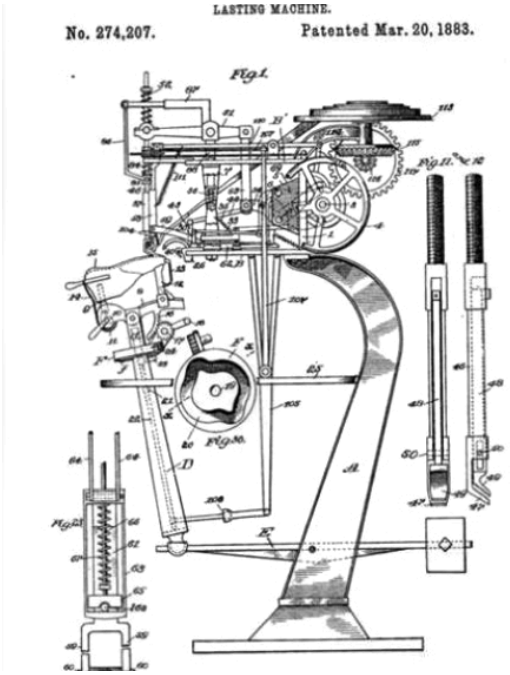
(Several descendants of these families remain in Potton and East Bolton today.)

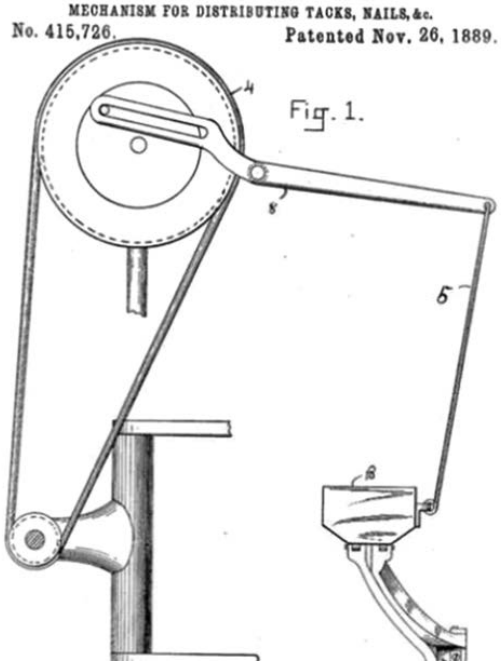
The cost of shipping the last blocks to England was quite cheap since they went as ballast. At the beginning of World War I Willard was forced to stop shipping to England since freight of that type could no longer be taken. Then they began shipping lasts to Lynn, Massachusetts by way of Troy, Vermont via by the Orford Mountain Railway."*

*Lynn, Massachusetts was arguably the shoe-making mecca of colonial America from the 1600's. In the early 19th century shoe making moved from small shops making 5 shoes a day to the factory floor making 50 pairs. Over time, most of the steps required had become mechanized, save one: Artisans still had to hand stretch the leather upper over a last, and nail the leather to the insole.

In 1883, Jan Matzeliger, a cobbler, born in Africa to a Dutch engineer father and a Surinamese slave mother, obtained a patent for a mechanized lasting machine, reproduced below.

When the machine was demonstrated in 1885, "it changed everything. Factory production jumped from 50 pairs a day to 750 pairs a day. The cost of a pair of shoes made in Lynn dropped by half … 234 factories are churning out more than a million pairs of shoes each day; however shoe making waned through the 20th Century. The Great Depression hit the industry hard – and the only remaining shoe factory in Lynn burned to the ground in 1981."


LASTING MACHINE.
No. 274,207. Patented Mar. 20, 1883.


MECHANISM FOR DISTRIBUTING TACKS, NAILS, &c.
No. 415,726. Patented Nov. 26, 1889.
Fig. 1.

By Edgar B. Herwick III | May 30, 2014

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Image | Histoire forestrière de l'Outaouais