

Grinding a living

The windmills of Edwards County and Burnt Prairie

By Curtis Mann

Travelers in certain parts of Illinois can see hundreds of the tall, powerful turbines that make up the wind farms of today. But finding a windmill in the state 200 years ago would be almost impossible unless you knew where to look. Windmills had been used by French residents in the Illinois' colonial time period but none were still in operation by the time Illinois became a state in 1818.

Efforts at building a windmill in Illinois in the nineteenth century began with the founding of the English Settlement in Edwards County. Morris Birkbeck and George Flower cofounded the colony of English settlers in 1817. A dispute between the founders caused them to go their separate ways. Birkbeck founded the village of Wanborough and Flower the village of Albion. Elias Pym Fordham, a relative of Flowers who had traveled to the United States with the Birkbeck family, was an excellent engineer. One of the many duties assigned to Fordham upon his arrival in the settlement was to build a windmill for the community. Fordham noted that all of the settlers in the area were excited about having a mill because they were having to travel 25 miles in order to get their corn ground. This windmill was apparently never constructed.

About a decade would pass before a windmill was constructed in the Settlement by William Clark. Acquainted with Morris Birkbeck, Clark and his family came to Edwards County in June 1819 from Surrey County, England. The Clarks resided in Wanborough for a short period before relocating to a farm northwest of the village in an area of the county called Burnt Prairie. Among the improvements that Clark made to his farm was the construction of a windmill. Edwards County at this time probably had a total of five mills for grinding wheat and corn. Four of these



De Immigrant mill in Fulton, Illinois, is a new construction dating from 1999. Windmills are known to have operated at nearly 50 sites in Illinois since colonial days.

mills were animal-powered and the other was water-powered. While animal-powered mills could operate all year round, they were slow. Customers could wait for days for their turn to grind their grain. A water-powered mill could produce more flour and meal but could not operate year-round because of low water levels or freezing. A mill powered by wind that could produce more and operate longer had to be a boon to the community. This is the only known windmill in the entire state at this time.

Other mills would follow starting in the 1840s. According to illinoiswindmills.org, at least 55 windmills have existed in Illinois.

The site has profiles about each mill including the Fordham and Clark mills. Five windmills still exist in Illinois and three are reported to be operational.

The exact date of its construction is not known but was probably built between 1825 and 1830. In his history of the English Settlement, George Flower mentioned the windmill's architect was David Hearsom, a local engineer. The first account of Hearsom's skill as an engineer was recorded by former Wanborough resident William Hall in 1825. Hall was involved with an organization called the Wanborough Joint Stock Company. The company was interested in building a sawmill and hired Hearsom to determine the



The Fabyan Mill, constructed in 1915 and located in Geneva, Illinois, is considered the tallest in the state and is open and operational. Caption



Prairie Mills in Golden, Illinois, dates from 1873 and is open for tours. Photo by William Furry.

possibility of placing a sawmill seat on Village Creek. Hearsam found the creek not suitable for a mill. The group then leased the animal-powered mill in the village. Hearsam was later employed by the states of Illinois and Indiana during the 1830s and 1840s. He assisted with large public works projects such as construction of railroads.

Two of William Clark's sons, David and Joseph, are known to have been operating the mill by 1831. In a description of Burnt Prairie that appeared in 1837 *Gazetteer of Illinois* the windmill was noted as doing good business as a grist mill. This indicates the mill was either grinding wheat or

corn. William Clark kept the mill in running order and passed it along to his sons David and Joseph at the time of his death in 1842. A year later Joseph sold his interest in the windmill and the land it stood on to David.

In 1844 David agreed to lease the mill to an Albion merchant named Henry E. Harwick for \$100. Harwick and his wife Mary had moved to Albion from England after getting married in 1838. Harwick was also a schoolteacher and portrait painter. In the agreement Clark leased the mill and one-half acre of land with the provision that Harwick would grind one hundred bushels of wheat or corn

annually for Clark or pay \$4 annually if Clark chose that option. Harwick kept the lease until 1848 when he transferred the mill lease to August J. Emeis. Emeis came to the United States from Schleswig Holstein in 1845. He first settled in Edwards County but left the area around 1854. No other information is available about the windmill. The Clark family regained ownership of the land.

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