

The History of Banister Mill and Dam

by Carrie Crane



Banister Mill

as it looked in the 1890's with a sawmill at the near end and gristmill at the far end.

As one travels through Boylston along Rt 70, heading north from the Shrewsbury town line, one soon comes to a road on the left known as Mill Rd. Why Mill Rd? Well, if you take that left and pay close attention as you cross Sewall Brook, you will see the easily missed side road, Mill Road Circle on the left, and a small pond with a concrete dam on the far side. Next to the dam is a small house built on the site of what was once one of the Banister Mills.

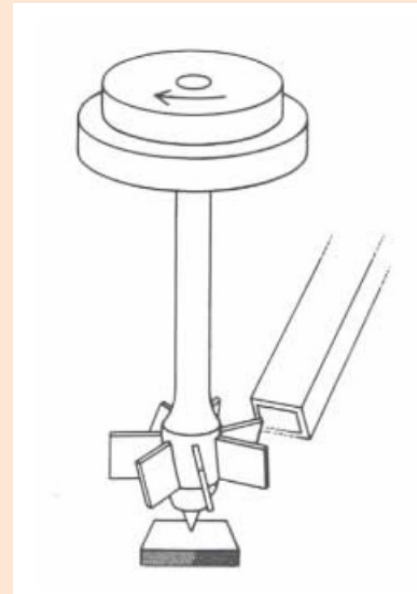
The first records date back to 1760, when the mill was owned, and likely established by Daniel Whitney, who came to Boylston from Concord Massachusetts. He had purchased the property, then known as 101A, from Jason Wait who had previously purchased the land in 1741 for 152 pounds and 40 shillings (or about \$35,000 now). ¹

Nathan Banister (1746-1825) was a young man from Brookfield who came to Boylston (then part of Shrewsbury) in the late 1750s to work for Mr. Whitney. He must have enjoyed his job and taken a particular liking to Mr. Whitney's daughter or maybe he had an eye for a long-lasting business deal. In either case, in 1769 he married Mr. Whitney's daughter, Sarah (1749-1817). Upon Daniel Whitney's death, the mill and property went to Nathan and Sarah.

It is said that the Banisters built mills in three different locations along the Sewall Brook, one near the outlet of Sewall Pond, one at the current location of the dam, and one about halfway in between. The only mill that is in evidence today is at the dam and it has a storied past.

¹ Eric W. Nye, Pounds Sterling to Dollars: Historical Conversion of Currency, accessed Tuesday, April 12, 2022, <https://www.uwyo.edu/numimage/currency.htm>.

Nathan and Sarah Banister had ten children, and while the farmland in the area of Mill Road and other assets were passed on to all the children evenly, records show that only two of them received any financial interest in the mill property. In 1809 Nathan Banister conveyed to his son Seth (1780-1858) land that included the mill and water rights. In 1818, those water rights were shared with Seth's brother Daniel who wished to add a nailor shop (for the manufacture of iron nails) to the back of the existing saw and grist mill.



Left: the remains of the mill mechanism, a Norse or horizontal waterwheel which would have been situated under the mill floor. This image also shows the breached dam caused by the hurricane of 1938. **Right:** A diagram of the Norse waterwheel showing blades and water shoot.

These small, often crude, rural mills were frequently found along waterways throughout the newly expanding country. They would inevitably pop up soon after an area was settled to provide the population with animal and human grain food from the gristmill and building materials for new homes and barns provided by the sawmill and nailor shop. At their peak in the mid-1800s, the federal census counted them in the tens of thousands. "Gristmills and sawmills were among the first community facilities obtained in frontier areas, in most regions taking precedence over schools, churches, and stores, coming well in advance of wagon roads." ² During this period the miller was frequently paid a toll (a portion of the final milled goods, the toll often fixed by local ordinance) of milled grain, wood, or leather, rather than cash.

Seth Banister's son Eli (1810-1874), who had farmed and worked the mills with his father, inherited the mill property. Around this time, the sawmill was closed down, but the gristmill remained in the family until Eli's death at which time his son's sold it out of the family for \$602.50 (about \$15,000 now). A series of new owners reopened the sawmill on the west end of the gristmill and built a house nearby.

² Hunter, Louis C, A history of industrial power in the United States, 1780-1930, Vol. 1, 1979



Mr. Willard Merriam, miller, standing on the log way at the west end of the sawmill.
The gristmill is on the east end. Undated photograph circa 1895.

It was during this period of ownership that Historian William Dupuis recalls the fascinating story in the Boylston Historical Series, by Bruce Filgate...

"...and around 1880-1890 it was acquired by a simple-minded man who fitted the upstairs with living quarters. The story is rather vague, but it seems that the previous owners wanted the land and buildings back, but the occupant refused to sell. The poor soul who lived there began to hear strange rapping sounds and blood-curdling groans in the middle of the night. It so happened that the body of a prominent man had been found floating in the brook about a half-mile south of the mill. The story was circulated that his spirit was haunting the mill area. The owner, by now terrified out of his wits, left and sold the property to the previous owners. It would seem that the latter knew more about these strange occurrences than they were willing to admit!"

Whether that story is true is up for speculation but sometime after this the property belonged to an Albert J Bedard who lived there until his death in 1922. During his ownership, both the gristmill and the sawmill burned in a fire.

A small 3 room house was built in the location of the mill using some of the foundation and it still exists today. The record of ownership through the early 1900s is difficult to trace but the property reappears in the Massachusetts registry of deeds in 1978 when it was sold as three tracts; tract one having a 3-room house there-on. In 1980 the property was sold to William Fay and his wife Elizabeth. As it turns out, Mr. Fay, as described in his obituary, was "a technically brilliant and distinctive hydroelectric and dam engineer. He wouldn't just inspect your dam, he would pull out his shark bathing suit and steel-toed flip flops and jump in the water to see firsthand what was going on." His work on the remains of the Banister mill and dam that he purchased in 1980 are fine examples of this recounting. When he acquired the land, the dam was breached. It had been damaged during the hurricane of 1938 and had never been repaired. Not true anymore. Mr. Fay made it a project.

"I computed complete hydrologic, hydraulic, geologic, and stability analyses of the existing structure. I prepared and submitted a Federal Energy Regulatory Commission ownership exemption from license. I prepared

plans of the new sluiceway structures. The structures are now completed and in place.”³

If you walk past the dam now, it is in fine working order, although it is not driving any millwork. There is a single-pole, still standing in the center of the sluiceway as evidence of the past, and possible hope for the future. The property is now in the name of William Fay’s daughter who, fittingly, is also a hydropower engineer.



Dam and sluiceway in their current state with 1980 rebuilt concrete dam. 2022

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Boylston Historical Series, Bruce D. Filgate, 2012

Boylston Historical Society & Museum Photograph Collection, Boylston, Massachusetts

Editor, Nancy Filgate. Boylston Historical Society & Museum, Director, Boylston, Massachusetts

Harlow collection, Boylston Historical Society & Museum, Boylston, Massachusetts

[https://familypedia.fandom.com/wiki/Daniel_Whitney_\(1710-1779\)](https://familypedia.fandom.com/wiki/Daniel_Whitney_(1710-1779))

<https://millmuseum.org/preindustrial-mills/>

http://www.frenchriveland.com/key_personnel.htm

<http://www.waterhistory.org/histories/waterwheels/waterwheels.pdf>

Hunter, Louis C, A history of industrial power in the United States, 1780-1930, Vol. 1, 1979

Photography by Carrie Crane for Boylston Historical Society

³ http://www.frenchriveland.com/key_personnel.htm