

Newsletter

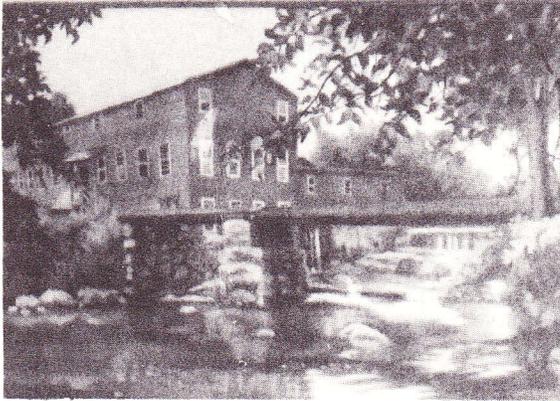
Historical Society of Shawangunk & Gardiner

Volume 10, Number 1

Winter 2013

140 Years of Continuous Operation by the Crowell Brick Mould Factory

By John A. Ross



The Crowell Brick Mould Factory

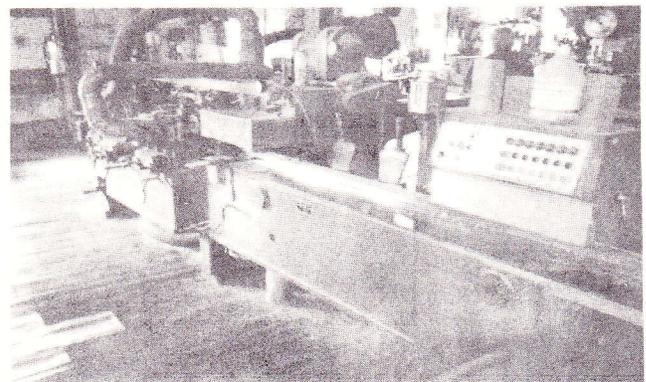
Here in the midst of our community is the James B. Crowell and Sons brick mould factory, operating continuously since 1872. That was just a year after the Great Chicago Fire and only four years before Custer's disastrous encounter with the Sioux Indians. The firm began when Robert Benjamin Crowell purchased 300 acres from a Mr. Bates in 1858 (possibly a foreclosure) for property on both sides of the Dwaarkill stream. A sawmill and a churning house were part of the property, and the first products, starting in 1870, were sleighs, harrows, ox bows, cherry drop tables, and other wood products. In 1872 wood brick moulds became the main product, hence the 140th anniversary this year. Over the decades management of the firm passed from the founder Robert Benjamin Crowell to Robert Burns Crowell, to J. Addison Crowell, then to James Burns Crowell and presently to Wendy Crowell, his daughter.

Wendy is the 5th generation of the family to head the firm. As a child she and her sister played around the factory but she never thought of working there. She is a trained gerontologist (study of aging) and was a staff member of the New York State Department of Social Services, but made a career move to join the family firm in 1997 and began an apprenticeship in the shop, doing hard work along with the men.

The company produces no bricks, only the moulds that make them. A brick mould is a precise device, made of hard maple, about 5 feet long and the width of one brick, with 10 compartments. The edges are protected by steel strips to protect the wood from repeated use over many years. The bottom wood in each compartment has an engraved design that is transferred into the clay for each brick, unique to the pattern wanted by each client. Each order can specify a different size of brick, which requires a re-figuring of every dimension for the joinery among the wood parts, and requiring a re-calibration of all the machines. In earlier years the firm held patents on several aspects of the moulds.

Moulded bricks are a specialty and therefore a niche venture, but the company has weathered the economic ups and downs over the decades. Natural disasters have also caused trouble; most recently during the Irene hurricane when the Dwaarkill rose about 15 feet and flooded the main building. They used a sledge hammer to knock an opening in the wall and drilled large holes in the floor to let the water out.

The Crowell plant is filled with exotic machines, most of them installed many decades ago and some invented by Wendy's grandfather. One, a gigantic device to make large boards perfectly flat (see photo below), was imported from a German company, whose president traveled to Wallkill to assemble and install it. (*Cont'd. p. 3*)



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Letter from the Co-Presidents

Dear Members and Friends,

Best wishes to all for a happy and healthy holiday season. We are eagerly awaiting news from our application for a matching grant from the New York State Environmental Protection Fund to help us with a major need for the Andries DuBois House, the stabilization of the existing roof and installation of a gutter system. During this traditional giving season, we also hope for the generosity of our members, local businesses, and community leaders to help restore the house as a museum for the entire community to enjoy.

As we announced in our last issue, the Society has recently acquired the Knights of Pythias House in downtown Wallkill. Under the direction of board member **Bob Mooney** and others, we are clearing the house and making necessary repairs, not the least of which was to remove a tree that fell on our roof in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy (with minimal damage to the house, thank goodness!).

We welcome your comments and participation as we continue to work towards our mission of preserving local history.

Carolyn Crowell and Toni Gagan, Co-Presidents



Co-President **Toni Gagan** presents tribute to retiring Trustee/Boardmember **Mary Wright** (see article below)

(Cont'd. from p. 1) Another machine, which cuts large planks lengthwise came from the same company that later produced the casket for JFK. The most modern machine, a CNC (Computer Numerical Control) required Wendy to learn its programming from scratch, to make the wood engravings that are mirrored in each brick. The operation is thought to be the oldest in the country engaged in the manufacture of moulds for specially designed bricks and is considered the only one in current operation.

The Crowell family has shown grit and determination to deal with the unexpected. Due to disastrous fires the factory was rebuilt three times, first in 1896, again in 1899, and finally in 1915. In the 1970s competition increased because much brick manufacture was automated using an extruded process that made every brick identical, and quite boring, so the high-end market survived for designed bricks that architects and builders appreciated. Such bricks are ordered from contractors for private homes, government buildings, and commercial developments, with demand fluctuating with economic cycles. In recent decades many orders have come from the southern states, where moisture and insect infestations threaten wood structures.

Records show that the factory's site was active as a sawmill during the 1700's, when the stream was harnessed by an overshot water wheel. Water power drove the factory's machines until 1948, when the firm purchased electric power to replace hydro-mechanical power. Originally all machines were belt driven, linked to the water. The rather ancient machines still function well. Wendy notes that the advantage of old machines is their quality and simplicity; you can actually see any problem and fix it directly.

Historically, bricks have been a staple along both sides of the Hudson River, from Haverstraw Bay to Albany, using the deep clay deposits that line the river's banks. Demand spiked after 1835, when a fire leveled much of Manhattan, destroying nearly 700 buildings in 52 acres. That led to new rules forbidding wooden construction, and suddenly bricks were wanted in large quantities. Over the decades nearly every town along the Hudson had its own brick factory; by 1907 there were 120, and Ulster County led the state in production.

The firm has had as many as 25 employees. Business falls off in the winter time and as with many companies, orders fell off during the recent recession.

However over the years some staff have worked for over 45 years; currently two old timers are still active. (See the Fall 2003 issue of this Newsletter for more details on the Crowell history. Special thanks to Wendy Crowell for an interview and tour of the factory)

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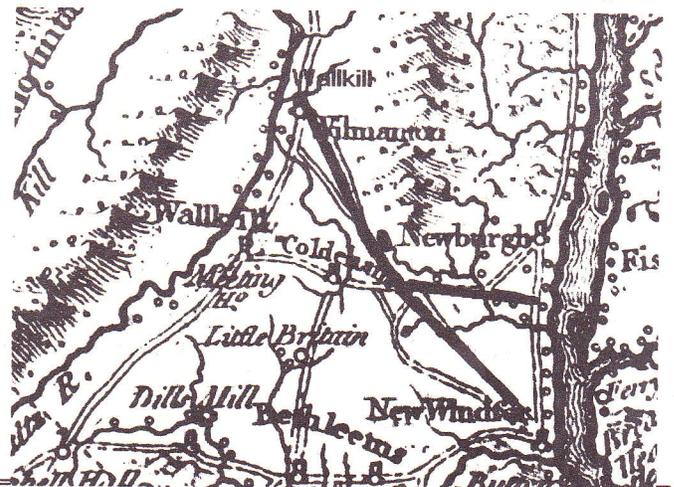
TRIBUTE TO A FOUNDING MEMBER

On November 3 the Shawinigan Town Hall was the site of a very successful **Annual Tea Benefit** sponsored by the Historical Society, raising over \$2000 for restoration of the **Andries DuBois House**. A capacity crowd filled the hall with 13 tables each beautifully decorated individually by a volunteer hostess. The Wallkill High School Men's Choral Group entertained the guests with spirited song and everyone enjoyed the event. We paid tribute to long-time local resident **Mary DuBois Wright** on the occasion of her leaving service as a Trustee and Board Member. A founding member of the Historical Society, Mary managed publicity for Society programs, generously and enthusiastically supported development of the DuBois House, and offered sage counsel. On behalf of the Historical Society, **Toni Gagan**, Co-President, presented her with a plaque of appreciation for her many contributions over the years.

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Revolutionary War local militia

The Town of Shawangunk played an important role in the Revolutionary War by providing a training area for the militia that was isolated from the British controlled Hudson River. The training area was across the Wallkill River on the Colonel Graham farm near the Albany post Rd and Bruyn turnpike. The training area needed access from Newburgh and New Windsor that were the militia headquarters commanded by George Washington. When a modern map is overlaid with this 1775 map the roads are still in use, starting on



Newburgh 17K west until North Drury Lane then on St. Andrews Rd. and finally to Borden Road and into Wallkill. The route from New Windsor is by way of South Drury Lane.

A bridge over the Wallkill was needed since fording the Wallkill River was impossible at times. Several maps show a Banks Bridge that crossed the river near the Lippincott house from River Road.



The bridge was likely to be log cribbing filled with stones and plank road deck. This is further supported by the visit of George Washington who reviewed the militia, stayed at the Graham house and wouldn't be expected to ford the river. (Hal Van Aken, contributor)

Historical Society of Shawangunk & Gardiner
2013 Programs resume on March 6
after our annual mid-winter break

2013 DUES ARE DUE!

- Individual: \$20 Business: \$50
- Family \$30 Patron: \$100
- Supporting: \$50 Benefactor: \$250

Checks payable to Historical Society of Shawangunk & Gardiner. P.O. Box 570, Wallkill, NY 12589

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