

# The Story of Old Wells Mills

BY MICHAEL T. MANGUM

The region surrounding Wells Mills has always been blessed with large stands of Atlantic White Cedar. Though there were never more than nine occupied dwellings at Wells Mills, the tiny hamlet was the hub for cedar logging in the area. The timber was used for ship building, fences, and every possible element to build a house. Even the young saplings were used to mark shellfish lots.

In its heyday, two cedar mills operated at Wells Mills. Timber and lumber from Wells Mills was floated down Oyster Creek and the adjacent streams to the docks at Waretown and Forked River. The lumber was loaded onto schooners and shipped from these ports across Barnegat Bay and out Barnegat Inlet to all points north and south.

The early history of Wells Mills has been dimmed by time, however, some facts have survived the centuries.

Ephraim Tuttle owned Wells Mills in the early 1700s. Elisha Lawrence, the last colonial sheriff of Monmouth County (Ocean County was part of Monmouth County until 1850), was another early land owner. He raised and commanded a loyalist battalion for the British during the Revolutionary War. This did not sit too well with the local patriots, so they took his land from him for fighting on the side of the British.

About this time, James Wells came into possession of the land. He was probably the first settler to dam Oyster Creek and build a saw mill on the site. This seems to have occurred in the late 1700s.

According to a letter written by Stokes Collins to the New Jersey Courier in 1915, "James Wells, the original owner was considered an honest, industrious man, although very eccentric and, as was

common in those times, a sincere believer in witches. Many amusing anecdotes were told of him, one of which was that once his sailboat did not perform to his satisfaction, where upon he carted it home, put it in his barn, and locked the door to keep the witches from it."

Another interesting tale about the dangerous days surrounding the revolution and James Wells was published in a 1915 issue of the courier: "James was of Quaker origin, and during the war (of the Revolution), having occasion to go off on some business, he put on the uniform of an American soldier, which had been left at his house. This came near causing him to be killed, for the refugee, John Bacon, saw him and was about to shoot him when he discovered who it was. He was well acquainted with Wells, and warned him not to try such an experiment again."

The land eventually passed through a succession of owners until the 1870's when Christopher Estlow acquired the property. Christopher and his sons Francis R.,

Godfrey, and Jesse built a second mill and expanded to a two mill operation. They also built additions to the original Wells house.

The Estlow family was an ingenious clan. They invented a device to ease the job of rowing a boat, a turnip planter and a

network of wires connecting the various buildings at Wells Mills, allowing for communication with a unique system of coded rings. Francis R. invented and patented the turbine type water wheel in the mill. This invention was a major technological step forward and allowed for a more efficient operation of mills wherever they were installed.

The property eventually passed on to Francis R. then to his son Francis Tilden. Tilden ran the cedar mills and worked the forests for a living. He gathered moss, cut wood, and even held a local record for making shingles.

Tilden also mined clay from the property. The clay was taken by wagon to the Tuckerton Railroad and shipped to Trenton where it was made into fine china. No record exists of an official school at

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Myrtle and Alvin Estlow at Wells Mills



Francis R. Estlow stands with his daughter-in-law Lydia Estlow in front of the Estlow Sawmill at Wells Mills in 1919.



Photo courtesy Homer Dill

From left to right: Joe Albert, Frank Albert and Tilden Estlow in front of Estlow home in Wells Mills.

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After the original Conrads passed on, most of their heirs either lacked interest in the property or lived too far away to enjoy its virtues.

Cliff Oakley, Charles's grandson, was the only family member who made use of Wells Mills on a regular basis. So in the late 1970s, with dramatic increases in property taxes, the family sold Wells Mills' approximately 200 acres to the New Jersey Conservation Foundation.

In 1985, the Ocean County Board of Chosen Freeholders bought the property from the New Jersey Conservation Foundation for a county park. Through their foresight the freeholders have now acquired almost 900 acres. The park, which opened to the public in 1991, is now one of the jewels within the Ocean County Department of Parks and Recreation's park system.

The park offers passive recreation to the public. A nature center, picnic area and

more than twelve miles of hiking trails allow for exploration of this unique Pine Barrens Habitat. The cedar swamp surrounding Wells Mills Lake make it one of South Jersey's most scenic locations.

The Conrad cabin, Wells Mills Lake, and the wintering Ring Neck ducks are highlighted in this year's decoy show print. The lake is home at various times of the year to whistling swans, wood ducks, teal, coots, loons and an occasional Bald Eagle along with the ring necks. Wells Mills County Park is on Route 532 in

Waretown. If you would like information about the park, you can call 609-971-3085. Naturally, visitors are always welcome.

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