

68 (Ben's Mill) aka:Thresher Mill

Town of Barnet, Caledonia County, Vermont



Ben's Mill, previously known as Thresher Mill, operates as a museum of "living history," where all the woodworking machinery, which dates from the 1870s, is fully operational and powered primarily by the water powered turbine. Located on West Barnet Road, Ben's Mill seeks to educate its visitors about sawmill and blacksmithing techniques of the past eras.

Some of the first recorded activity on the property occurred during the first half of the 19th century, when the Stevens River was used heavily for milling purposes. In 1836, Bartholomew Carrick constructed an up and down sawmill on the Thresher Mill property. The next year, Carrick leased rights to the sawmill to James Goodwillie. Goodwillie helped supply cut lumber to the Barnet Center church and other buildings in the area. Goodwillie's sawmill continued to operate until 1855, when the older mill building, for reasons still unknown, was pronounced "demolished."

Fifteen years later, in 1870, Alexander Jack, an inventor from Scotland, purchased the piece of land that Thresher Mill sits on. In 1872, Jack built the Mill and started his own print and dye works to take advantage of the booming wool industry in New England at the time. To improve his business, Jack invented several wool dyeing, drying and embossing techniques and patented his inventions related to dyeing and drying cloth and sheepskin.

When Jack passed away in 1887, the entire property, including Jack's house across the street, was put up for auction, which totaled \$1,293.50 in buildings, equipment and household goods. His entire property sold to the auctioneer for \$150, which created somewhat of a local scandal. After the property passed through the hands of various Barnet owners, co-owners Ora Bishop and Isaac Smith commissioned Elmer Ford, a Peacham resident, to build a cider press at the Mill, and the Mill was in operation once more.

Ownership of the property passed on again to Fenton Judkins sometime around the turn of the 20th century. Fenton and his brother, Don, operated a wheelwright and carriage repair business at the Mill until 1905. In 1907, Don began the Pioneer Electric Light Co., and generated electricity for the town of Barnet in the basement of the Mill's blacksmith shop. Don Judkins sold his share of the business in 1927, and it was at that time Fenton was considered the wheelwright for the business.

In 1947, Ben Thresher, an employee of Fenton Judkins, who worked in the carriage repair shop, purchased the Mill property. He made cider until the 1960s and provided sawmilling and blacksmithing services to local farmers into the 1990s. It is Ben Thresher who is credited with

maintaining the Mill's character and techniques from "days-gone-by" when faced with the swift current of U.S. modernization that began in the middle part of the 20th century. He possessed the unusual knowledge that was required to operate a water powered mill. Ben's knowledge of using mill machinery and tools were featured in a documentary taped in the late 1970s for the Public Broadcasting Service, titled "Ben Thresher's Mill." In that documentary, Ben made wooden water tubs, horse drawn sleighs to transport lumber during the winter, demonstrated various ironworking techniques and created tools in the sawmill and blacksmith shops.

In 1999, a few years after Ben's death, Lois and Allen purchased the Mill with the intention to turn the property over to a community non-profit named the Ben's Mill Trust. Restoration of the property began in 2000, and Mill's exterior, roof and foundation were restored thanks to a grant the non-profit received in 2002. The most recent renovation was in 2009 when the turbine penstock (a sluice or gate used to control the flow of water) was reconstructed with local cedar boards that were milled on site. Renovations to Thresher Mill are on-going.

A number of buildings are located on the Mill property including the mill building, the tannery site, the storage shed, a lumber shed, a barn and the dam, which has been in continuous use since 1836. Thresher (Ben's) Mill was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1996.

Sources:

Ford, Dylan. "Past Lives of Ben's Mill." *History*. Ben's Mill. 2010. Accessed 3 May 2013 from <http://www.bensmill.com/history>

National Register of Historic Places. Thresher Mill. Town of Barnet. Caledonia County. Vermont. Reference # 96000386. <http://www.crjc.org/heritage/V18-1.htm>