

The First Mills



Peru was officially incorporated as a township Dec. 28, 1792. At that time, there were no buildings in the location where Peru Village now stands. John Cochran, known as the founder of Peru, constructed the first house here on the east bank of the Little Ausable River in 1795. Realizing the potential water power the river could provide, he also built a gristmill and another house for his miller, Thomas Morse. Cochran next erected a sawmill on the other side of the river. “Two houses, a grist-mill and a saw-mill made quite a settlement in those days and the place soon became known as Cochran’s Mills” (from Hurd’s History of Clinton & Franklin Cos. 1880). Prior to this time, the early settlers of the area had to travel all the way to Plattsburgh for their milling needs.

The gristmill and sawmill were eventually sold to John Hackstaff and the place then became known as Hackstaff’s Mills. The mills and surrounding property passed to the Heyworth family who, in turn, leased them to Albert Mason in 1883. Mason moved his bee-hive business from Goshen, NY, to this location and started A. Mason & Sons Lumber Co. The sawmill expanded many times over the years but the gristmill was mainly used for storage and as a horse barn. Mason’s teams of horses were housed there right up to the 1940s.

The gristmill and original sawmill burned down in 1967.



The gristmill, where farmers would bring a wide variety of grains, including buckwheat, oats and corn, to be ground into flour or animal feed. Milling was a three-story process. The grain was lifted in sacks onto the top floor of the mill by hoist. The sacks were then emptied into bins, which fed the grain down through a hopper to the millstones on the floor below. The grain then flowed through a sloping trough into a hole in the center of the top stone. The milled grain (flour) was collected as it emerged through the grooves in the bottom stone from the outer rim of the stones. The flour was fed down a chute to be collected in sacks on the ground floor. Photo Credit: Town of Peru Historian’s Collection.



The sawmill, as part of A. Mason and Sons Lumber Mill, circa 1925. Note the stone arch on the river that’s still visible today, where water that had carried the logs to the mill flowed back into the river. Photo Credit: Town of Peru Historian’s Collection.



Up until 1890 most of the flour in America was made using millstones. The bottom stone was fixed to the floor, while the top stone was turned by the main shaft, driven by the waterwheel. The distance between the stones could be varied to produce the grade of flour required; moving the stones closer together produced finer flour. Photo of a Henry Ford Museum display by C.A. Shield.



Ad from The Plattsburgh Sentinel, 1876.



Armed with only axes and cross cut saws, farmers would head into the woods in the winter with their teams of horses to cut and haul logs back to the saw mill. Photo Credit: Town of Peru Historian’s Collection.



In the sawmill, the first cut; turning logs into lumber circa 1900. Photo Credit: Town of Peru Historian’s Collection.