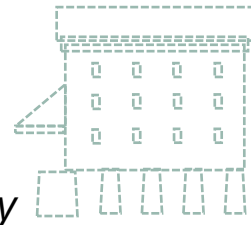


# Grist for the Mill:

## Indiana's Archaeology of the Early Mill Industry

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Indiana's early Euroamerican farmers relied heavily on mills to process their grain. Most of these mills were strategically located along rivers and streams to harness waterpower and provide transportation routes, influencing settlement patterns. Communities often formed around these sites, which provided more than just milling services—they were commercial and social centers. Many grist mills offered additional services like blacksmithing, distilling, or general stores. Sawmills were often built along with grist mills. Mill ponds became recreational spots for fishing and swimming, while waiting for grain to be ground provided opportunities for storytelling, games, or other social interactions. Some mills even hosted post offices, further cementing their role as community centers. Many towns owe their origins, names, and early growth to the presence of a grist mill.



*Stockdale Mill, Wabash County from DHPA files*

We can trace the evolution of milling technology and industry from the historical record. Early mills relied on buhr stones powered by horses or wooden waterwheels. These can be characterized as small, rural mills that mostly operated on toll systems where the miller would take a portion of ground grain as payment. In 1840, more than 23,000 toll grain mills were in operation across the United States, serving a population of more than 17 million (U.S. Bureau of Census 1840). Wooden waterwheels were replaced in the mid to late 1800s by iron and brass water turbines that were easier to maintain. The late 19th century introduced steam power and roller mills, which increased efficiency and output. As merchant mills ultimately centralized grain purchase and flour production it led to the decline and importance of rural mills. Improvements in transportation, roads, and railroads also opened up new markets. By 1912, Indiana had more than 500 commercial flour mills and towns like Evansville, Indianapolis, Terre Haute, Vincennes and Madison dominated commercial markets (Nord 2020, Nolan 1991). Primary historical records that may contain information on individual mill sites include land surveys, deeds, court records, census data, and photographs.



*Buhr stones at Stockdale Mill, Wabash County from DHPA files*

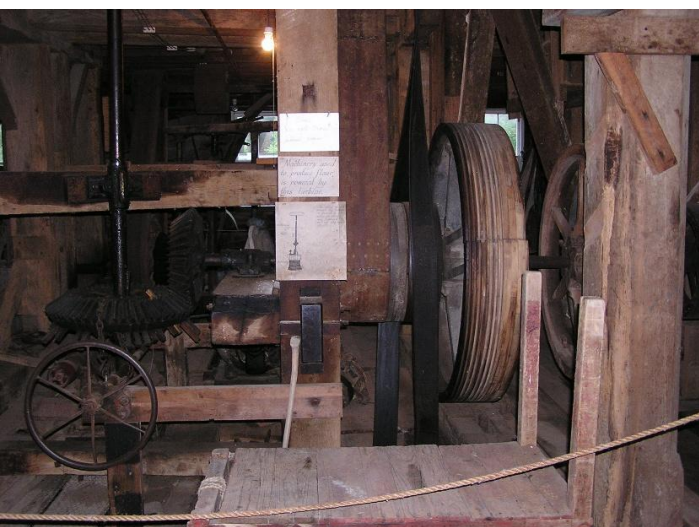
Despite their historical importance, mill sites pose challenges for archaeologists and by their nature complicate cohesive study. Even identifying the location of some of Indiana's earliest mills is problematic. Many early rural mills were identified by now-forgotten landmarks or locations were only designated from generalized maps or atlases. Ownership and



*Turbine at Bonneyville Mill,  
Elkhart County from DHPA files*



*Markle Mill site (12VI893),  
Vigo County from DHPA files*



*Adams Mill machinery, Carroll County from DHPA files*

subsequently the name of mills frequently changed, convoluting the historical record. The physical remnants of mill sites are typically incomplete due to dismantling, salvage, or decay once a mill ceased operations. Archaeologists are left to rely on discarded artifacts, dam remnants, or foundation fragments to reconstruct their operations. Mill sites are complex industrial sites and understanding the function and operation of fragments of machinery from mill sites can require an archaeologist with specialized training in industrial archaeology. Additionally, water powered mills require an understanding of the hydraulic components (dam, pond, wheels, races, headgate, etc.). Mill sites have also been characterized as examples of “vernacular engineering” (Cowie 2015), since there was not one set design for construction. Besides the mill building, dam, pond, and race, the mill property sometimes encompassed other industrial buildings in the mill yard including sawmills, wheel factories, woolen mills, cider mills, distilleries, cooper shops and storage buildings so there can be an entire complex of industrial landscape to untangle from a confusing canvas of the remnants left behind. While challenging, archaeological investigations of these sites can highlight the interplay between technology, community, and the environment. For mills with longer duration, historical and archaeological data can explore how mill complexes were expanded, rebuilt, reconfigured or otherwise altered in response to technological, economical or natural factors.

The Indiana State Historic Architectural and Archaeological Research Database (SHAARD) contains records for 519 mill sites that have been recorded as archaeological sites. The database does not categorize the type of mill but reviewing additional data fields the majority represent water powered grist mills. The sites have been recorded through a combination of archaeological field surveys done for compliance with state or federal regulations and research investigations that do not always have a field component. For example, a project that reviewed General Land Office survey notes identified and recorded 30 archaeological mill sites, but none of these locations were field verified. A few county level surveys have gathered historic documentation and recorded mill sites but again, only a few locations were field verified. There are also several mill sites in the state that are known, for example **Cataract Mill** in Owen County, but have not been investigated by an archaeologist and have not been recorded as sites. Very



*Adams Mill, Carroll County  
from DHPA files*



*Bonneyville Mills, Elkhart  
County from DHPA files*



*Beck's Mill, Washington County from DHPA files*

few mill sites/complexes have had an archaeological investigation beyond the identification level. Examples with more advanced investigation include **Carnes Mill** (12CR190), **Yount's Mill** (12MY668 and 669), **Koontz Mill** (12ST136), **Monitor Mills** (12T891) and **Test Mill** (12WY356). There are 17 mill properties listed in the Indiana Register of Historic Sites and Structures and/or the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) spanning 1817 to 1968. Each of these properties has aboveground building(s) and only Yount's Mill has been documented for its archaeological potential. The others are recognized for their significance in the areas of agriculture, commerce, engineering, industry or social history under National Register of Historic Places Criterion A and/or under National Register Criterion C for architecture. **Adams Mill** in Carroll County, **Bonneyville Mills** in Elkhart County, **Stockdale Mill** in Wabash County and **Beck's Mill** in Washington County still conduct limited operations for tourism. While not listed in the NRHP, the **Cuthbert and Thomas Bullitt grist mill** at Spring Mill State Park in Lawrence County also operates on a seasonal basis. The associated pioneer village exemplifies the community that would often take shape around early grist mills.

Former Division of Historic Preservation & Archaeology (DHPA) staff compiled a list of mill sites for each county. Some of these are recorded as archaeological sites, but the majority are not. Detailed information such as locational coordinates or information source are not recorded, so this is being undertaken. Potential mill locations will need to be field surveyed to determine the information potential, if any exists, for these sites. It is anticipated that some of the early mill sites will lack sufficient integrity to provide much data beyond what the historical record can tell us. It is hoped that others will provide avenues for future research and build an archaeological context to evaluate the significance of these resources.

While mills have largely vanished from the landscape, their legacy endures in place names, historical records, and the stories of early Euroamerican settlement. Identifying and studying mill sites is an important but complex endeavor. Archaeological exploration of mill sites has the potential to enrich our understanding of these vital hubs, bridging the gap between historical narratives and material evidence.

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