

Sunday, March 21, 2024

Bill Sterling

### **Sterling Mills in New England**

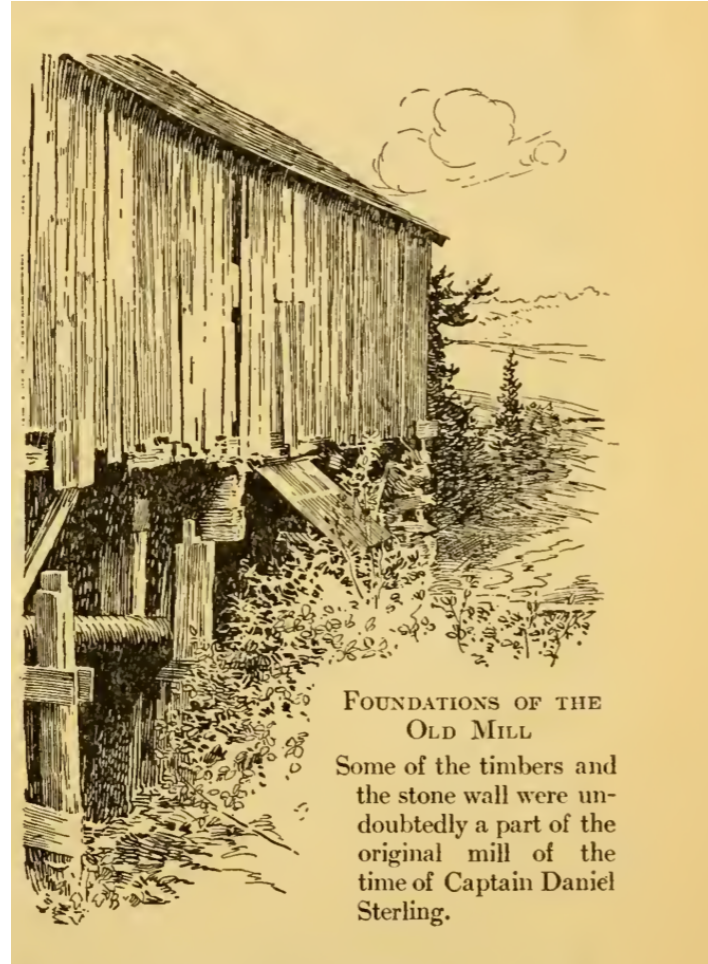
Owning and operating a grist mill in the 1600's was a part time job. The mill was only used seasonally for grinding wheat seeds and corn into flour. Mill owners also grew crops on their farms, and raised cattle and sheep. However, building and operating mills was a trade that was passed on through several generations of our direct ancestors.

Albert Mack Sterling published the Sterling Family Genealogy over a century ago and included a sketch of the Sterling grist mill that he tracked down in Lyme, Connecticut.

### **Mill Builders and Operators**

The earliest mill that William Starlin (The Mariner) built in America was a corn mill in Rowley Village (now Haverhill), MA.

The Sterling Genealogy describes how William negotiated the purchase of 10 acres of land from the settlement in exchange for building a grist mill on that property in 1684. He was also deeded another 10 acres about one mile away for his own use to build his family a house and use as farm land. He sold the mill and house to Thomas Duston in 1697 and moved to Lyme, CT.



The old mill sketched in Lyme, CT is what remained of the original mill built by William Starlin and his sons Daniel (24) and Jacob (19) soon after arriving in Lyme from Haverhill (1697 +/-). As shown in the sketch, it was a post and beam wood frame structure, a common practice for early mills. However, raging flash floods were known to do serious damage to such a structure.

A newer stone mill (1778) by the same family still stands upstream just below a mill pond and family cemetery. The stone structure for the 1778 Lyme mill was restored and used as the foundation for a new residence in the 1980's.



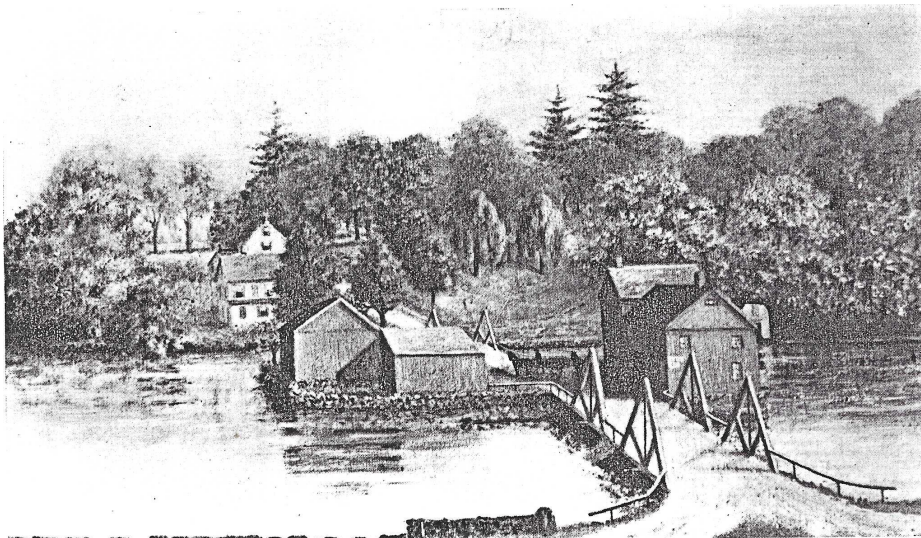
Sterling Mill in Lyme, CT 1778

William Starlin (The Mariner) had 19 children. His second son, Richard (b.1663) started a long line of carpenters, designers and builders ending with the present day firm of Sterling Associates, Architects. Richard had helped his father and older brother William (of Bradford) build the mill on what is now Frye Pond in Haverhill and then probably maintained and operated the Bradford mill. One major task required of them annually was to dismantle the stone dam to allow spawning fish to swim upstream to the pond every spring. Then they would have to rebuild the stone dam once the fish had spawned. The site of the old mill on Frye Pond can be speculated as one of the two present day house lots on either side of the retaining wall spillway where the former "Fishing River" flows from the pond. For more mill information, see Starlin Buildings in Haverhill.

William (the Mariner's) children worked for mere room and board with no chance for sharing in any profits the father may gain. This is apparent from William's will that included only a few of his many children, Hannah being one of them and Daniel another, but not Richard nor William. Soon after Richard got married (some time before 1686) it may have occurred to Richard that he no longer work for subsistence with no chance of owning property himself. By 1688, his older brother William also left Rowley Village for Boston where he signed on as a ship carpenter and went to sea.

Richard and his wife left Haverhill (by 1688) and eventually (by 1694 ) moved to Bristol, RI which at the time was a refuge for settlers who sought religious freedom. So it may be that either Richard or his wife, or both, had had enough of the severity of strict religious family life style in the theocracy of the Puritan

Plantation of Rowley Village. Because of the generations of mill builders and operators that followed him, it is very likely that Richard either built, managed or operated a mill in Bristol. His son, William (of Bristol b. 1695) and grandson, another William (of Fairfield b.1716), owned and operated a tide mill on Paul's Neck in Southport, part of Fairfield, CT. Richard's son, William (of Bristol) lived there and his son, William (of Fairfield),



Charlotte Lacey—1906

Old Tide Mill

#### Sterling Tide Mill 1906

and 4 grandsons continued to own and operate the tide mill until William (of Fairfield) moved to Wilton, CT). They all moved to Wilton CT about 1760 where William (of Bristol) died in 1771. The family continued to own property in Paul's Neck until 1824. These were the last mill owners and operators in the immediate Sterling family line.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, carpentry and mill construction trades often stayed within families for generations until the industrial revolution led to massive

mills operated with unskilled labor. The mechanical complications of designing and building small custom mills certainly was not likely to be self taught. For example the Town of Sandwich, MA solicited and hired an outside specialist to design and build their grist mill in 1800.

It is a testament to the quality of construction that the Paul's Neck tide mill's stone structure still stands today supporting an office building above the original stone foundation.



Presumed Sterling tide mill site, Paul's Neck, Southport CT

The line of carpenters and builders continued with Nathaniel Sterling (b. 1780 in Wilton, CT). Besides local houses and barns, his most notable design/build project was the Baptist Church on Pompey Hill in Lafayette, Onondaga County, NY. Nathaniel's son, William Wiltshire Sterling (b. 1819 in Lafayette, NY) learned carpentry from his father, built himself a house while homesteading in Wisconsin, but later earned his living as a salesman of sewing machines and organs. Nathaniel's grandson, Fred Miller Sterling (b. 1849 in Lafayette, NY.) became a carpenter, architect and builder in Sioux City, IA. F.M. Sterling taught all of his sons the various trades needed to build homes. Uncle Ralph (b. 1888) was the master framer and finish carpenter who could do all the math in his head and just call out dimensions to the other carpenters to cut. Uncle Walter (b. 1873 at Red Oak, IA) was the heating and plumbing mechanic and Howard (b. 1878 in Sioux City, IA) was the painter. Howard taught his oldest son, Allen (b. 1908 in Burge, NE) to paint houses, but Allen used this skill to pay his way through Northwestern University and the University of Iowa Medical School. In 1980, Allen's son, William (b. 1943), founded Sterling Associates, Inc. Architects in Boston, then Cambridge and now Wayland, MA.



For several years F.M. Sterling's boys all worked together as a family business developing new neighborhoods in Sioux City. F.M. Sterling's architectural design/build career in Sioux City is described in a separate bio.



Fred Miller Sterling surrounded by family in 1897, Sioux City, IA  
Howard on far left edge  
Photograph presumed by Hoyt Sterling (F.M.'s brother)



F.M. Sterling Home 1705  
Rebecca St.