

# CALLOWAY COUNTY, KENTUCKY WATERMILL FEATURE

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Pioneer settlers upon reaching Calloway County soon after the county was founded in 1823 immediately visioned the energy potential footloose in the streams that traversed the area.

Clarks River with its tributaries along with a few streams that emptied into the Tennessee River possessed a flow and volume of water necessary for watermill operation. There is little doubt that construction of mills followed as soon as the citizens saw the need in a community. The exact date the first mill started its giant wooden wheel churning the water of any given stream is not known by this writer. Information available indicates that a few mills were in operation by the early 1830s. Research of public records proves the construction of additional mills in the late 1830s and 1840s.

Mills were usually known by the name of the owner, and usually as ownership changed, so did the name. According to the information handed down by members of families who settled or were living in the county when the mills were built, logs were driven into stream beds and were somewhat reinforced by the rock available. Debris was decoyed away from the water-wheel by a method that was designed to trap the brush and other material and float the debris over the dam.

Floating objects were of little consequence during the early days of watermill operations. Timber stands were scarce. Communities cleaned stream beds by removing trees, burning drifts, stumps, and any other materials that impeded the flow of water. Overseers were appointed to supervise the work in a manner similar to those who were placed in charge of road maintenance.

Many years ago an elder citizen explained how a waterwheel transferred power to the mill house for grinding grain or sawing lumber. The wheel turned on an iron rod some two inches in diameter. Each end of the iron rod was anchored in bearings attached to a wood piling or base. A pulley attached to one end of the rod turned a belt which led to another pulley rod on a higher elevation which reached the machine doing the work. Speed and power of waterwheels depended upon a certain volume discharged against wooden buckets which were constructed on the wheel's outer perimeter. Operators controlled the amount of water by raising or lowering a wood gate by the use of a suitable lever. Sheep tallow was used to lubricate bearings and gate tracks.

At least four mills were constructed on the West Fork of Clarks River; however, Calloway County lost a mill when Marshall County became a separate entity. One mill located near the confluence of Cook's Branch (formerly Ezzell Branch) near Coldwater was in operation by 1839 or shortly thereafter. Lawson Dunnaway sold the mill site and other property to one Rowland Stone (reputed to be a soldier of the American Revolutionary War) on August 27, 1839. Later Stone sold the mill to Elijah Haneline. Haneline separated the mill site from his parent tract when he sold it to Andrew and A. A. Williams. A proviso in the deed permitted the new owner to flood the parent tract in order to maintain a four foot headwater at the dam.

A feature of construction provided a reinforced river bank adjacent to and down stream near the water wheel pool. Timber and rock were used

and in some locations may still be seen reposing where they were placed nearly one hundred and fifty years ago.

Locating a watermill in a community was usually followed by a general store, blacksmith shop, post office, and lodging facilities. Mills were a favorite jumping off place for wagon trains heading west beyond the mighty Mississippi. Provisions were available including pure water for filling barrels. Blacksmiths could fit shoes on teams and yokes of oxen, repair wagons, and perform many tasks vital to those seeking their fortunes elsewhere.

Bazzell Wool Carding Factory, located at the base of the western slope that leads to the present Asbury Cemetery, was surely one watermill that contributed much to the welfare of Calloway citizens. Prior to Civil War days more than fifty slaves were employed to card wool and cotton. The batts were spun into yarn and cotton thread by Clarks River water power. This mill closed down sometime after the War ended.

Some watermills fell by the wayside. Others converted to steam. Brandon's mill located on Blood River continued according to reports using water power well into the third part of the century.

Many amusing anecdotes woven around watermill incidents linger in the mind of descendants of pioneer people. One of the more exciting recalls involved a lad of seventeen years. It seems his father had prepared a turn of corn (a sufficient amount when ground into meal to provide bread for a family over a certain period) and had selected his seventeen year old son to drive the family oxen to mill some seven miles distance. There were no indications of flooded streams when he departed on a bright warm spring day. After traveling about six miles where he had to ford a creek and upon reaching the stream which was running swift and almost bank full, the oxen apparently sensing the danger, came to an abrupt stop at the water's edge.

The young man was infuriated. He then vociferously enunciated a yeoman's command along with some unprintable words. The oxen's skins being stung with a pop of an eight-platt, the obedient yoke plunged headlong into the swift current. Seconds later, the driver, cargo, and wagon were under water. Luckily, the loosely fitted wagon frame floated clear of the carriage and began to move down stream with the fast flowing water. The fact that the cargo and all floated free of the carriage probably averted a serious disaster as the oxen pawed, clawed, and swam with great difficulty to reach the opposite bank.

Seasoned to the hardship of frontier life and being an excellent swimmer, the seventeen year old managed to float to the bank where he grabbed on to an overhanging tree limb and finally reached safety. Recalling his experience for the benefit of mill hands a few days later, he told of approaching the faithful oxen standing unconcerned awaiting his return after being dumped into the creek.

"I'll never forget the look in old Tom and Bill's eyes as I walked closer to them." Whereupon a grizzled pioneer retorted, "Shucks son, them thar cattle was atryng to tell yuh what a fool yuh was!"