

## GUILFORD PRESERVATION ALLIANCE

P.O. Box 199 • Guilford, CT 06437



### REMINDER

Don't forget to renew your membership. To renew online or more information about GPA activities, please visit [www.guilfordpreservation.org](http://www.guilfordpreservation.org)

Non-Profit Org.  
U.S. Postage  
PAID  
Permit #559  
New Haven, CT



# GUILFORD PRESERVATION ALLIANCE

Newsletter

Fall 2007

## A Taste of Old Guilford

From the outside, the small red barnlike structure on River Street, just north of the intersection with Broad, is indistinguishable from countless other barns and outbuildings that dot Guilford's post-agricultural landscape. To step inside, however, is to enter a time capsule, for this exceedingly ordinary-looking building houses a rare surviving example of an early nineteenth-century cider mill.

The mill stands on land owned by members of the Stone family since 1749, when Caleb Stone built the recently restored colonial-style residence at the northeast corner of River and Broad. The present proprietor, Robert Sperry, traces his lineage back fourteen generations to John and William Stone, two of Guilford's original band of settlers in 1639.

Sperry has bequeathed the mill to the Guilford Preservation Alliance, with the long-term goal of opening it to the public as a museum, and steps are being taken to stabilize the post-and-beam structure and preserve its contents.

A sprightly eighty-six years of age, Sperry still rises early every day to milk and tend the goats he has raised on the pasture surrounding the mill for the past thirty-odd years. Although he's too young to remember the mill when it ground and pressed its last batch of apple cider, sometime around 1910, he has vivid memories of visiting his grandfather, William L. Stone, a farmer who operated the mill in the days when practically every farmstead in New England had its own orchard, and cider, both "sweet" and "hard," was still the American national drink.

According to historian Joel Helander, the Guilford Keeping Society has cash receipts from the Sperry mill dating back to 1833. William Stone, however, generally conducted his business on the old-fashioned

barter system. Farmers from outlying areas would cart their apples into town for pressing and Stone, who had no apple trees on his own property, set aside a portion of the cider as payment. Before a permanent bridge over the West River was built, Sperry says, coastal schooners would tie up at a dock across the way from the mill and take on barrels of cider bound for the big-city market. By the time it reached New York, fermentation had already begun transforming the unfiltered apple juice into a tangy alcoholic beverage with a rich amber-gold hue

and a distinctively fruity bouquet.

The early colonists brought their taste for hard cider with them from England, which abounded in apples with such colorfully eccentric names as Brown Snout, Tremlott's Bitter, Foxwhelp, Bloody Turk, and Slack-Me-Girdle. To these Old World fruit stocks were soon added varieties native to New England, including the crisp, dry Golden Russet, destined to become the cider apple of choice in these parts. Today, the Russet has all but disappeared from the trade, although it's still used in a fine hard cider produced by Clyde's Cider Mill in Old Mystic, which bills itself as the oldest steam-powered mill in the United States.



William L. Stone standing outside his cider mill, ca. 1900 (courtesy of Robert Sperry)

## Penny Colby is GPA's New President

Penny Colby has taken the helm as the GPA's new president. Penny had previously served on the board and has been involved with the Education Committee and working with the community and the town of Guilford on the blight ordinance.

Penny's involvement with the GPA is really an extension of the work she conducted during her professional career. She initially taught drama in the Guilford Public Schools and then moved on to the library where she worked in circulation. She returned to school and received her master's degree in Library Science, becoming a Reference Librarian in 1992.

Between 1992 and 2004, Penny worked exclusively in the Reference Department of the Guilford Free Library. In 2004, upon the retirement of current GPA Board Member Nona Bloomer's retirement, she took on the additional responsibility of Historical Room Librarian. In 2006, Penny retired after almost 27 years with the library.

In retirement, she has continued to enjoy those things that made her job so appealing. While in the position of Reference

Librarian, Penny became a resident expert on many subjects relating to Guilford's history, and shared that knowledge through lectures about subjects such as Civil War diaries in the Historical Room to the Hurricane of 1938. She recently authored a short book about the hurricane that is available through the Guilford Free Library. Retirement has also provided time to enjoy her other hobbies — gardening, sewing, and knitting — and her five grandchildren.

The GPA is fortunate to have Penny's experience, charm, knowledge, and passion for our community and its history as well as her leadership.

— Ted Culotta





Steam technology, however, was a late-nineteenth-century innovation. (Clyde's was established in 1881.) Mills of earlier vintage, like the one on River Street, relied on sheer muscle-power. By tradition and preference, cider-making equipment was made almost exclusively of wood. Old-timers held that even the slightest contact with metal would cause the juice to spoil or turn sour. Apples were off-loaded from farm wagons into a wooden hopper whose sloping sides funneled the fruit into a corkscrew-type masher, similar to a meat grinder, known as a "nut mill." Attached to the shaft of the Sperry mill is a long sweep fashioned from the branch of a chestnut tree. This, in turn, would have been hooked to the harness of a horse or ox, which operated the mill by walking around in a big circle.

After passing through the mill, the crushed apples, or "pomace," were deposited in a deep wooden trough, where they were left to "set" overnight. Next day the pomace would be scooped up with specially designed wooden shovels, wrapped in thin layers of stiff rye or oat straw, and stacked up to form a "cheese." This layer-cake-like confection was then placed on the thick plank bed of the press for the final stage of the cider-making process—the extraction of the juice.

Somewhat unusually, the Sperry mill has not one but two presses, each consisting of two massive upright chestnut posts supporting a heavy crosspiece. Into each of these horizontal beams are inserted a pair of iron screws, six to eight inches in diameter, possibly forged in one of Guilford's nearby foundries. Through the top of each screw was threaded a long wooden lever. As the hand-turned screws "ran down," they came into contact with wide boards placed on top of the cheese. The downward pressure slowly expressed the apple juice into large casks known as hogsheads. The pressing could take a day or more, at the end of which the mealy residue was fed to hogs that William Stone kept in a pen built off the east end of the mill. Not a scrap went to waste.

Sperry, who inherited the mill and the family homestead at 22 Broad Street after his grandfather died in 1954, was raised in an atmosphere of Yankee frugality. What he calls the "make-it-do or do-without" philosophy has long been his golden rule. Thanks to his stewardship and generosity, future generations won't have to do without this priceless memento of Guilford's agricultural heritage.

— Harry Haskell



*The cider mill today, with the West River behind*



*Top - "Open house" at the mill, 1956 (Guilford Keeping Society)*

*Above, middle - Robert Sperry*

*Above - Inside the hopper, where the apples were crushed*

*Above, right - The "nut mill," framed by one of two cider presses*

*Right - The horse-drawn sweep that turned the mill*

*Far right - The hand-turned iron screws that squeezed the juice out of the pomace*

*Photos by Ellen Ebert, except as noted*

## GPA Sponsors Candidates' Forum

On the evening of Wednesday, October 3, 2007, the Guilford Preservation Alliance sponsored its first forum in the Community Center for the Guilford candidates to the Board of Selectmen: Carl Balestracci, Sal Catardi, and Veronica Wallace from the Democratic Party and Ken Wilson, Joe Mazza and Cynthia Cartier from the Republican Party.

The questions selected for the forum, and presented to the participants ahead of time, reflected the GPA's concern with topics that look back in time to preservation and forward to enhancing Guilford's man-made and natural landscape. Issues covered included the efficacy of the regulations governing tear-downs, the adequacy of the 90-day Delay of Demolition Ordinance, the restoration of the antique railroad water tower and engine house owned by Amtrak, traffic-calming measures, the proposed Village Walkway, and the Woodruff property. There was just enough time for one question, submitted in writing from the audience, which addressed the subject of how increased train service would impact Guilford.

Patrick Smith skillfully moderated this event which began with the tossing of a coin to determine which side would be the first to answer the questions, while Ed Seibert and Walter Weissenborn, as timekeepers, tracked the minutes with green, yellow, and red cards. Although there was a good deal of consensus from all participants, there were also nuanced distinctions in which a historic-community emphasis could be contrasted with a more emphatic business-economic approach.

Members of the board agreed that the event was a successful first of its kind for the alliance, and offered suggestions, such as allowing more time for questions from the audience, which anticipate the alliance's future participation in this public service.

— Nona Bloomer and Nancy Arnold