

Waterborough Historical Society The Johnson Mill



Photo courtesy: Dave Lowe

Dennis Johnson (1756-1838), a revolutionary war return, bought a large tract of land from Jeremiah Brown on September 8, 1808. He came from southern York County with his wife Mary. They had several children, one of whom was Joseph (1794-1880). Joseph was the first to establish a shingle mill on the site of the present mill. It is identified on the 1856 map of Waterborough as a shingle mill and he is shown to have lived just north of the mill site.

Between 1862 and 1864 Dennis Johnson (1838-1925), one of Joseph & Mary (Batchelder) Johnson sons, acquired deeds allowing him to change the course of Cunney Brook. Changing the course of the brook flooded swampland across from the mill site creating the millpond. This allowed logs to be dumped into the pond and moved through a sluiceway to the mill. Thus the Dennis Johnson Lumber Company Sawmill became an industrial fixture in Waterboro from at least 1869 to 1963. The mill passed on to Frank Johnson (1877-1961) and to Donald Johnson (1920-2008).

The change from shingle mill to sawmill was probably gradual and it was operated as both for some time. The Maine Business Directory identifies it as a shingle mill between 1871 and 1875 and after that as a sawmill. In 1870 it produced 40,000 pine shingles from a 20 horsepower water system. Ten years later a circular saw and mulley saw were in operation.

In 1920 the bridge in front of the mill was entirely rebuilt by the Town of Waterboro and Dennis Johnson. The design of the bridge, with its high arch and abutments that act as and extend further to form the sluiceway was obviously designed to facilitate the transportation of logs into the mill. As such, the Johnson Bridge is a significant part of the functional history of the mill.

The Johnson Mill is also important as one of the few structures in the entire town of Waterboro to avoid being consumed by devastating wild fires in the fall of 1947. Concerted efforts managed to save the sawmill structure, and the house immediately to the northwest, but over a million board feet of sawn lumber stored in the yard to the north and east were lost to the flames. In order to process the large amount of standing timber scorched by the fire portable sawmills were set up. After the 1947 fire, the local timber supply was depleted. As a result, timber had to be hauled from greater distances. The mill remained open for another 16 years, but as a result of aging machinery and more stringent safety regulations Dennis Johnson's grandson, Donald, chose to close the mill in 1963. In 1974, Jim and Judi Carll donated the building to the Waterborough Historical Society. The Society then completed minor modifications, including repairing broken windows and sash and securing the building from vandals. All of the machinery remains in place and it is the hope of the Historical Society to eventually restore the building as a working mill museum.

In 2007 the Dennis Johnson Lumber Company Mill was placed on the National Register of Historic Places.