

## Bridgeton Mill

Founded: 1823

Location: On the banks of Big Raccoon Creek, Bridgeton

Sometime between 1821 and 1825, most likely 1823, Joseph Lockwood and Isaac J. Silliman erected a sawmill on the Big Raccoon Creek in Parke County. Although Lockwood seems to have operated the mill, and the small village that grew up around the mill became known as Lockwood Mills, the exact ownership of the enterprise is unclear. The mill was built (and therefore the town of Bridgeton was founded) upon a tract of land owned by Joseph O'Neill and James Wasson, and they seem to have had some share in the ownership of the mill. Eventually, however, Wasson consolidated ownership. Little is known about any of these men except for Silliman, who was originally from New England and grew up on a farm in Sullivan County. He farmed and taught school before entering the milling business, and after his time in Bridgeton he went on to become a prominent businessman in Rockville.

The early lumbering community that grew up around the sawmill was rough—so rough that the place came to be known as Sodom. The mill acted as the community's social center. On Saturdays and public days, people gathered at the mill to conduct business and exchange gossip. Whiskey sold for twenty-five cents a gallon, and the townsmen engaged in horse races and sometimes fights. Lockwood Mills could claim a distillery as late as 1840. The mill had been rigged for two saws, although only one was actually installed. At some point, farmers in the township persuaded the owners of the mill to mount equipment for grinding corn. The nearest gristmill was ten miles away and

often was a week behind schedule. Farmers paid for the mill's services with one-sixth of their grain. (After 1853 state law set the toll at one-eighth.) Over the years the mill on the Big Raccoon became primarily a gristmill, producing wheat flour and cornmeal.

Gradually, too, the wild life of the lumbering community settled into the calmer round of a rural milling town.

In 1837 James Searing purchased from James and Mary Wasson for \$1,600 the mill and the original O'Neill and Wasson land tract. Fire destroyed the mill sometime over the eleven-year period of Searing's ownership. The fall after the destruction of the much-needed mill, however, the townspeople staged a "frolic" and built a new log mill. In 1848 Searing sold the mill for \$2,000 to James M. Mullikin and Dr. Henry T. Ketcham, the latter of Vigo County. Ketcham quickly sold his interest back to Searing, but in 1851 Mullikin acquired complete ownership of the mill. Mullikin tore down the old mill and built a new one as well as a general store. Separate buhrstones were installed for grinding corn and wheat. In 1849, the year after Mullikin purchased the mill, a bridge was built across the Big Raccoon Creek linking those who lived on the north side with the south side, where the mill was located. Mullikin renamed the town Bridgeton.

William Beal purchased the mill and the surrounding land in January 1859. In December of the following year, William Blaize purchased the mill and its land for \$8,000. It was bought again, in 1862, by Ralph Sprague. Born in Muskingum County, Ohio, in 1819, Sprague had traded corn for many years prior to purchasing the Bridgeton mill, sometimes making as many as three flatboat trips to New Orleans in a year. He later entered into partnership with his son-in-law George W. Phelon. Sprague's second wife was the widowed daughter of Daniel Kalley, who around 1880 seems to have owned the

deed to the land on which the mill was located. The mill burned in 1869, and Sprague built for \$14,000 a new four-story gristmill, which opened in January 1871. (He did not rebuild the sawmill.)

Sprague and Phelon dissolved their partnership in 1874, and Sprague continued to run the mill. In 1882 Daniel Webster purchased the mill and land from Sprague for \$15,000. Born three miles outside of Bridgeton in 1830, Webster farmed and made a small fortune in coal mining before investing in the mill. In 1886 he hired the Richmond Milling Company to replace the mill's buhrstones with a more efficient series of rollers, sieves, and sifters. The business, which prospered under Webster's direction, became known as the Bridgeton Roller Mills. It produced assorted brands of flour over the years, including Family, Anchor, White Satin, White Oak, Spring Wheat Patent, and Snowdrift.

Webster died in 1895; three years later P. T. Winney of Clay County purchased the mill and its immediate lot for \$3,500. The public-spirited Winney generated electricity for the town from 1906 to 1913, an amenity the town did without upon his death in the latter year. In 1914 Winney's stepson, George E. Brake, purchased the mill for \$2,700 in partnership with Fred A. Mitchell, who sold his interest to Charles Mitchell the following year. Brake and his partners remodeled the mill and completed a cement dam begun by Winney. In 1922 Charles Mitchell sold his interest to Earl D. Miller. Brake and Miller continued to run the mill until 1935, when it was purchased by Hugh W. Knoll, who owned the mill only a brief period before selling it to A. Dale Hough for \$3,000. Hough laid a new foundation in the mill and installed a flour-bleaching system. After his death in 1938, Charles D. Hansel bought the mill.

Hansel had worked at the mill earlier in the century but in the interim had owned a mill in North Terre Haute, which burned in 1938. Hansel brought one of his old employees, Ernest Weise, as well as Ernest's wife, Mildred, to Bridgeton when he acquired the water-powered turbine mill. In 1940 Ernest and Mildred purchased the mill, which they operated as the Weise Milling Company. They sold livestock feed and Snowdrift Flour. In 1957, after the construction of the Mansfield dam decreased the already declining water level of the Big Raccoon Creek, the Weises were forced to end the mill's long history as a water-powered mill and convert it to electricity. They discontinued the production of Snowdrift Flour but continued to grind feed grain. The Weises ended daily operation of the mill in 1969 but sold products to tourists and by mail order year-round. They also operated the mill in the fall for Parke County's covered bridge festival. Ernest Weise died in 1985, his son Bob in 1991, and Mildred in 1997. Mike and Karen Roe purchased the 172-year-old mill (and 125-year-old building) in 1995 and, with the help (and recipes) of the Weise family, continued to operate it for special events.