

# Sawn Lumber

by Lynne Belluscio

The early settlers were desperate for lumber. They built their early homes, barns and schools from logs. They rived shingles for the roof and made puncheon floors from split basswood logs. With no sawn lumber, they often went without doors, having to use just a blanket.

More than one account mentions that they tore apart their wagons for a few planks. Often the first sawn boards were produced in a pit saw, with two men on either end of a long two-handled saw. One man stood in the pit and obviously received all the saw dust. The other man stood above on a wooden framework and guided the blade. The log had to be moved every so often as they sawed through it.

It was hard work for a piece of sawn wood. Two men on a pit saw could saw 100 linear feet of planking in a good day. The first water powered saw mills were called "up and down" mills or "sash mills." The blade was similar to the pit saw but was mechanically powered by a water wheel and a water powered mechanism moved the log into the blade. The blade worked at about 80 strokes per minute and could cut about 500 linear feet per day.

In pioneer accounts, the mention of early frame houses is usually a good indication of when a saw mill was in operation, although it seems that pioneers would travel a good distance to acquire sawn timbers. In 1806, William Bush moved from Bloomfield to land 3 1/2 miles south of Batavia. After erecting his log house, "I immediately commenced building a saw mill and had it completed before October ... the first winter I attended my own saw mill ... My saw mill proved a good investment, boards were much in demand at seven dollars and fifty cents per thousand; the new settlers stocked the mill with logs to be sawed on shares."

Caledonia had two frame houses in 1803 and one account mentions that "during this period" (give or take a couple of years) Ganson's log tavern (in LeRoy) was razed and a frame building was erected. I also found reference to a frame



Flouring Mill.

Le Roy Mills

Saw Mill, F.C. Lathrop

school in 1802 in LeRoy. Mr. Wolcott arrived in 1802. He was a builder and put up a frame house for Samuel B. Walley which was listed as the oldest frame building "now standing". The building was moved and became part of A.O. Comstock's house on Trigon Park.

There is also mention of a frame building erected by Richard Stoddard on the site of the Wiss Hotel, which became one of LeRoy earliest stores. All of this led me to believe that LeRoy had an early saw mill. It took quite a bit of searching, but finally I found reference in Turner's History of the Holland Purchase.

Richard Stoddard came to the Ganson Settlement (LeRoy) from Canandaigua in 1801 to survey the Triangle Tract for Joseph Ellicott and he became the first land agent. He bought 500 acres which eventually became the site of the village. He built a log house near the creek and "during the first winter of their residence there, Mr. Stoddard was engaged in tending the saw mill during a night ..." Stoddard also built the first grist and flour mill which was later enlarged by Jacob LeRoy.

Meanwhile, in Batavia, Joseph Ellicott writes to Paulo Busti that "the saw mill I have been erecting at Batavia, which has cost a deal of labor, not being a natural seat, but a place where a convenience of this kind is absolutely necessary, will, the millwright informs me, be in motion by the 10th instant, at which period we

expect to begin to make ourselves and the settlers comfortable with floors, etc which will be a great acquisition to our present situation." Ellicott needed the saw mill to complete a court house in Batavia according to stipulations that Batavia become the county seat for the new Genesee County (that would be formed in 1802). The Wadsworths in Geneseo were supporting the choice of Avon for the county seat. In 1802, Ellicott also offers to loan money to settlers "who would erect saw-mills" in the Holland Purchase. By 1825, there were five saw mills in LeRoy.

Early saw mills were equipped with a single blade but later "gang" blades were rigged with parallel multiple blades. These blades cut through a single log, cutting several boards at the same time. All the boards were random widths. The first cut on the outside of the log was known as "slab

wood" and was usually used for firewood. The next piece was the small-width framing stock known as "scantling." The wider boards came from the center of the log. It wasn't until the 1830s and 40s that dimensioned, even width wood became available.

In 1813, a patent was granted to Sister Tabitha Babbit, a Shaker, for a circular saw blade, but water power did not generate enough power to utilize the circular blade. Steam powered saw mills were introduced before the Civil War, and at the end of the War circular saws, produced thousands of board feet per day. In the 1855 picture of F.C. Lathrop's saw mill on the creek, the image is looking east. The building to the right across the creek is a factory that was on the site of the present St. Mark's Church. In the foreground is Mill Street. I am not sure that this is the site of Stoddard's saw mill but it could be.

## WHAT'S THE OCCASION?

- ✓ HAPPY BIRTHDAY
- ✓ WELCOME HOME
- ✓ CONGRATULATIONS
- ✓ RETIREMENT
- ✓ GRADUATION
- ✓ NEW BABY
- ✓ SCHOOL EVENTS
- ✓ FUNDRAISERS
- ✓ BUSINESS PROMOS
- ✓ CAMPAIGNS
- ✓ ETC.

**We Print Banners, Posters, & Signs**

lpgraphics.net  
585-768-2201  
ONE CHURCH STREET • LE ROY, NY • OPEN: M-F 8-5

FOR EVERY SPECIAL OCCASION IN LIFE!