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BUSINESS  
BY  
Dorothy V. Knibb

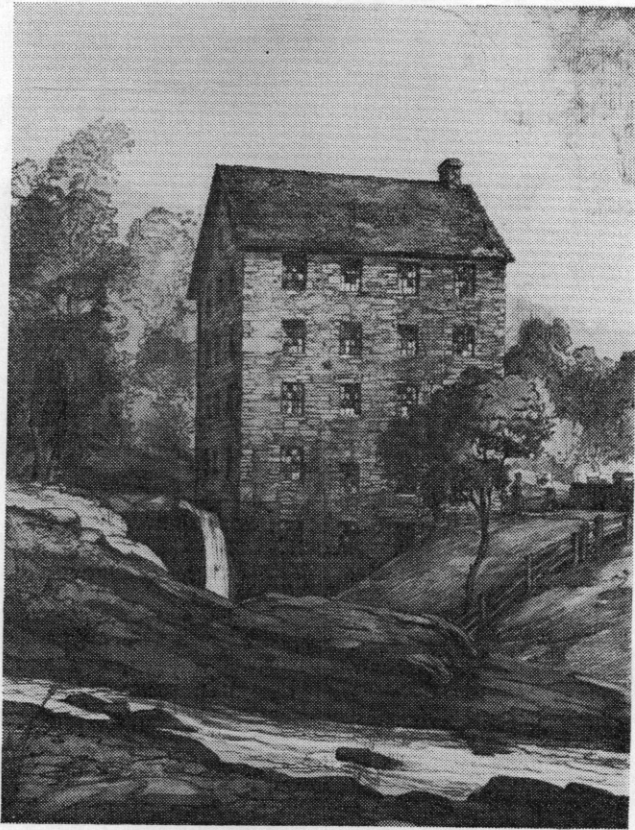
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# BEVERLEY MILLS

Broad Run, Va.



**WATER GROUND CORNMEAL**  
**SINCE 1760**

Prince William Public Library  
Manassas, Virginia

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# 185-Year-Old Mill Is Still A Going Small Business

By DOROTHY V. KNIBB

Industrial Projects Unit, Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce  
(Reprinted from Domestic Commerce for December 1945)

Small business can be flexible, profitable and permanent. Beverley Mill, established in 1760 on Broad Run Creek in a gap of the Bull Run Mountains, Prince William County, Va., is still in operation and gives every indication of continuing its usefulness for many a year to come. For nearly 185 years, while the pages of history have been turned from the days of George III and the Continental Congress to the opening of the atomic age in 1945, this mill has ground cornmeal and stock feed with almost unbroken continuity. Flexible enough to suspend some operations or assume new ones as conditions warranted, this business has stood the tests of time as an integral, stable part of community and regional economy.

From the first, the mill has been operated in conjunction with farming activities carried on by its owners, grinding grain grown at home and supplying food for household and farmyard. Likewise from the inception of the business, the mill has served many other farmers in the surrounding area, requiring toll for its services. Through sale of toll and products yielded in some quantity from materials purchased in bulk elsewhere, the mill has been the source of considerable cash income. Its owners have lived in good homes, dispensed wide hospitality, given their children a good education, and left sizable amounts of money and property to their heirs.

## Really Small Business

Today the mill gives full employment to six people and half-time employment to a seventh. The present miller, who was associated with the business for forty-odd years as owner, believes that it has employed the same number of people since the late 1880's. Approximately 100,000 bushels of grain are ground annually, the amount generally being divided about equally between corn and wheat. Volume of business runs from \$8,000 to \$18,000 a month.

Soon after Jonathan Chapman received a grant of land from Lord Fairfax in 1760, he began the construction of two mill houses on Broad Run Creek, where, in a distance of only 1,300 feet, it flows with an 87-foot fall through Thoroughfare Gap in the Bull Run Mountains. Employing slave labor to carve slabs of stone from the mountainside for the foundations and quarry construction stones from the creek bed itself, he is

believed to have completed the two houses within the year. One, the meal and feed mill, was constructed on the site of the present building. The other, where burr flour was to be ground, was located some 100 yards to the northwest, farther up the mountain. Operations in both sites were powered by a wooden water wheel, which utilized the normal flow of the creek over the falls, no storage of water being necessary.

### **Covered Wagon Days**

Time and a fire which destroyed records of the mill in the courthouse at Brentsville have molded history into legend, and only a few details about actual operations in the early days are available. It is known that six generations of the Chapman family owned the mill and, in great measure, lived by it. At least four generations of the family occupied the spacious, comfortable home close by. A manager was employed to oversee the work, most of which was done by slaves; and it is most probable that a trained millwright made one of the labor force.

Covered wagons brought in wheat and corn and hauled out meal, flour, and feed, some of them making the long and muddy trip to more distant points in Prince William, Fauquier, Loudoun, and Fairfax Counties.

Twice the mill was destroyed and rebuilt. No dates can be affixed to the first destruction or reconstruction. The second destruction was by fire, which burned the wooden inner-structure and simple conveyor system. The outside walls, however, were left standing; and these were utilized in the construction of the third building between 1856 and 1859 at the site of the original corn mill. It is this building, towering six stories high, that houses milling operations today. The flour mill was not rebuilt after the second destruction, and it appears that flour grinding was not resumed for more than 40 years afterward.

### **Railway Comes In**

In 1853 construction was begun on a branch line of the Southern Railway from Manassas to Strasburg, which connected with the Orange-Alexandria main line completed in 1852. Forged along the side of the mountains at the very back door of the mill, this branch line, which was completed beyond the Thoroughfare Gap in 1854, meant that transportation of raw materials and products could be effected with more convenience and efficiency. And it made possible the opening up of another milling operation, plaster grinding.

Plaster grinding was actually the pulverizing of limestone which, containing semidecayed matter other than lime, was used as a soil conditioner. This limestone was imported from Nova Scotia, coming by ship down the coast and up the Potomac to Alexandria, where it was loaded on freight cars and brought in by rail to the mill siding. Plaster grinding was not substi-

tuted for meal and feed production; rather, it was an additional operation, which seems to have been a lucrative one, particularly in later years. So far as is known, the mill continued as a grist mill throughout this period.

#### **Civil War Activities**

During the War Between the States, the mill served briefly as a meat-packing plant for the General Commissary serving the Southern armies. Since its site is almost contiguous to the Manassas battlefield area, actual fighting ebbed around the mill. Once, in direct line of fire between the Northern armies north of the Gap and the Southern position south of the creek, the top stories were pierced by bullets, and one tip of the chimney was blown off.

During the early part of the war the railroad was almost destroyed—rails and rolling stock were removed for use elsewhere in Virginia. In 1866 a resolution to rebuild the railroad passed the Virginia Assembly, and presumably reconstruction was carried out within several years' time, since the line is known to have been in operation some time before 1872.

#### **Grinding of Byproducts**

Plaster grinding was suspended for some years during this period, and war may have interrupted all milling activities for a brief time.

In 1870, after the death of John Chapman, who left no children, the mill became the property of Robert Beverley and his son, William, who was in charge of operations and eventually received the mill and a nearby homestead, Millbrook, as a gift from his father. Known from this time on as Beverley Mill, the business flourished for some years, particularly the plaster-grinding activities.

A copious diary, meticulously kept by William Beverley, reveals many details about operations. Management of the mill was in the hands of one Hugh White, an excellent wheelwright, who supervised construction and repair of the water-wheel and also acted as a traveling agent representing the mill's interests in other sections of the country.

#### **Byproducts Dropped**

Extracts from the diary show that in 1877 William Beverley was shipping plaster by rail to Baltimore, Richmond, Lynchburg, Norfolk, Alexandria, Manassas, and Warrenton. It is believed that he did considerable business also in North and South Carolina and Georgia. As many as seven 14-ton boxcars were on the mill siding at one time to be loaded. References to paying off the mill hands indicate that there were four grinders, three packers, one miller, and a manager. Meal and feed were produced throughout this period, for frequent passages refer to sales of these products, which still went by covered

wagons across the hills to Warrenton, Manassas, and Alexandria.

Sometime during the late 1880's the mill stopped grinding plaster, presumably because continued production would not have been economical; and in 1896 the business was sold by the widow of William Beverley to Messrs. Hornbaker and Wolverton. In 1896 facilities for grinding flour were added. Considerable improvements on the roads in the area meant the mill drew patrons from still more distant points in the surrounding counties.

The mill was sold in 1901 to a William Jordan, and again in 1903 to Messrs. Furr and Kerr. Mr. Furr continued as part owner of Beverley Mill until September 1945, when the entire business was bought by other interests. At present he is acting as miller.

#### **Modernization**

About 1900 the present 29-foot metal waterwheel replaced the wooden ones formerly used. Waterpower is still used for all activities in the mill, except for about 15 days a year when the stream is too low. Then the auxiliary power unit, a Diesel engine, is utilized. Lighting is provided by electricity. In 1940 new and thoroughly modern flour-grinding equipment was installed, but virtually all other equipment in the mill has been there for many decades.

Today corn and wheat are brought to the mill much as they were when the farmers in Northern Virginia were subjects of an English king, except that good roads and motor transportation make the trip a morning's job rather than a week's arduous task. Toll exacted for grinding flour is the wheat offal, subsequently sold by the mill. In addition to corn offal, some of the cornmeal itself is kept by the mill as payment for grinding, since this product has less value by unit than flour.

#### **Local Products Used**

Some quantities of wheat and corn, from local sources, are brought to yield products sold directly by the mill to markets in Washington, Baltimore, Fredericksburg, Alexandria, and other cities within a radius of a hundred miles or so. Delivery is made chiefly in the trucks operated by the mill. When quantities of grain not obtainable locally are needed, shipments are received by rail from the Middle West.

Last summer all hands were busy preparing an order of 6,000 100-pound bags of flour for shipment to a company in Baltimore for ultimate use of the armed forces, then battling through their home-stretch in the Pacific.

Despite its historical and legendary associations, its old stone masonry, and hand-hewn oak beams, Beverley Mill is not pervaded by an air of museum mustiness. It has rather an aspect of seasoned usefulness and time-defying virility. The

present scene is characterized by purposeful activities—trucks pull up to load bags of flour and meal from the storage-room chute, belts swish over the pulleys, conveyors rattle up and down the eaves.

The mill manager, a young veteran of 60 air missions over Europe with the Eighth Air Force, is on his job in the small office on the second floor, just up a flight of ancient stone stairs. Beverley Mill will continue to hold its place in the community it has long served. Older than the United States of America, this small business—along with thousands of others—is an important part of our country's economic strength.

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