

# Lives, Loves, and Laments of the People of St. James

*(I have been writing about the grand estates that once dotted the landscape throughout St. James. Last month, I wrote about Timothy Mills and the early settlement of the Mills Pond area by his descendants. This article deals with William Wickham Mills II, the man who was responsible for transforming the Mills property into a grand estate in St. James.)*

## ***“William Wickham Mills II inherits a large estate in Mills Pond...” by Bradley Harris, Smithtown Historian***

Not long after I moved to St. James, I visited the Mills Pond House that the Town Board acquired in May of 1976 as a “gift” in the memory of Josephine Elsworth Smith and Frances Mildred Smith. The “gift” of the house and associated property came from the nephews of these two ladies, Edward H.L. Smith, Jr., William Wickham Mills Smith, and DuBois Tangier Smith. It was their wish that the Town of Smithtown would take title to the house, would purchase some additional land around the house, and would restore, rehabilitate, and adapt the house for public use so it could be used as a multi-purpose arts facility for the people of Smithtown. For the most part, these wishes have been carried out by the Town of Smithtown and the house is today the home of the Smithtown Arts Council.

Actually, I did more than just visit the house since in 1978, the Town Board saw fit to place the office of Town Historian in the Mills Pond House and they gave me a room on the second floor of the west wing. The room turned out to be a little bit bigger than a broom closet with a sloping ceiling that came down to a “belly window” which admitted the only light into the room. (A belly window gets its name from the fact that you have to lie down on your belly to see out the window.) The shape of the room made it practically impossible to stand up straight. Eugene Cannataro made all the arrangements for furnishing the office, and the Parks Department found a wooden desk, a chair, and a filing cabinet to stuff into the room, and the Town Historian was in business. Of course nobody knew where to find me which was fine since there wasn’t much for me to do. With time on my hands, I turned my attention to digging up the history of the Mills Pond House and the origin of the name “Mills Pond.”

That’s when I discovered that Zachary Studenroth, an architectural historian and preservation consultant, had completed an “adaptive reuse plan” for the Mills Pond House and had done an excellent job in researching the history of the Mills family and their association with the area known as Mills Pond. (Zachary Studenroth, “Historical Analysis of Mills Pond,” Part 2, pp. 6- 35, part of the larger report, “Adaptive Reuse Report” of the Mills Pond House that was prepared for the Smithtown Arts Center in 1977.) This is what he discovered about the Mills family in St. James.

Timothy Mills (1667-1751) was the first member of the Mills family to settle in the area. Just when he moved to Mills Pond is not known, but in 1705, we know he purchased 100 acres of land from Samuel Smith at a place called "Stony Brook neck near the road from Smithtown to Brookhaven." We also know that he had two wives. His first wife, Elizabeth, gave him two children who were born in Jamaica, Isaac and Miriam. His second wife, Sarah Longbotham, gave him eleven children: Deliverance, Jonas, Jonathan, Sarah, Samuel, Martha, Ruth, Mary, Elizabeth, Timothy, and Jacob. I suspect that Timothy and his prolific wife Sarah moved to Smithtown sometime after the first wife died, and sometime after 1705, when he bought 100 acres of land from Samuel Smith. (Zachary Studenroth, op. cit., pp. 10-11.)

Sarah and Timothy certainly must have had their hands full with 13 children to care for. But Timothy still found the time to work his productive farmland and soon became a "prominent member" of the Smithtown community. "He is recorded as providing Smithtown with its first book of records in 1715 and was appointed a town assessor in 1719." Then in 1732, he expanded his 100 acre farm by buying 521 acres of land from Jonathan Smith, the grandson of Richard Smith and the son of Jonathan Smith I. This purchase made Timothy Mills "a major landholder and farmer" of the land that surrounded the pond. The pond became known as the Mills' Pond, or simply Mills Pond. (Zachary Studenroth, op. cit., pp. 10-11.)

When he died in 1751, Timothy Mills' will provided for the equal division of his extensive acreage among his six sons. Of Timothy's six sons – Isaac, Jonas, Jonathan, Samuel, Timothy and Jacob – Jonathan "emerges as the most successful member of his generation." Born October 23, 1710, Jonathan was "married twice." His first marriage on April 3, 1737 was "to Ruth Rudyard of Perth Amboy." She died on "December 16, 1748, at the age of thirty-four" leaving Jonathan with six young children. Jonathan had better luck with his second wife, Dorothy Miller, who he married on January 25, 1756. They enjoyed 42 years of married life together until they both passed away in 1798. Dorothy and Jonathan had two sons, William Wickham (b.1760) and Jonathan II (b. 1761). As they grew up, the six older children married and moved away leaving William Wickham and Jonathan at "Mills Pond to carry on the extensive farming and land speculation" their forebears had engaged in. Both of these Mills boys became farmers and worked their father's land. (Zachary Studenroth, op. cit., pp. 12-14.)

When their father died in 1798, William Wickham Mills inherited his father's homestead at Mill's Pond and, presumably, Jonathan Mills received half of his father's extensive lands. Apparently in 1805, both William Wickham and Jonathan Mills decided to build new homes near the pond on land they inherited from their father. Then in 1806, just after a "new commodious Mansion" was completed, Jonathan Mills died at the age of 44. His wife, Rachel, died five months later on January 9, 1807, at the age of 39, and their ten young children were

suddenly orphaned. William Wickham became the ward of Jonathan's 10 children. "Little is known of these children except that, as they became of age, their uncle settled their inheritances" and William Wickham came into possession of a great amount of land that had belonged to his brother. (Zachary Studenroth, *op. cit.*, pp. 12-14.)

To his new house at Mills Pond that had been completed in 1806, William Wickham Mills brought his wife, Deborah Scott, and their daughter, Eliza Ann (b. December 24, 1801). It seems probable that William Wickham took his brother's children into his own home since he had plenty of room in his new house, but he may not have done this. In fact, as the years went by, William Wickham and Deborah Scott realized that they were not going to have any more children of their own, and William began to worry about finding an heir. "His brother's children, his wards, did not qualify." And so, "William Wickham Mills invited a son of his half-brother Jacob, then living in Orange County, New York, to come to live at Mills Pond. The boy was his uncle's namesake, William Wickham Mills." (Hereafter referred to as William Wickham Mills II.) (Zachary Studenroth, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-15.)

"Born November 3, 1796," in 1808 William Wickham Mills II, then "about the age of twelve," came to Mills Pond to live with his uncle. "Of all the full and half cousins" who could have been chosen, "he was singled out, perhaps because of his age, and certainly because of his name." He grew up in his uncle's house along with Eliza Ann. William Wickham was five years older than Eliza Ann, but age difference didn't seem to matter, nor were they concerned about being cousins. As the years went by, they fell in love, and on March 27, 1822, William Wickham Mills II married his cousin Eliza Ann Mills. Together they would inherit the entire estate of William Wickham Mills I. (Zachary Studenroth, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-15.)

"William Wickham Mills I died February 2, 1825, aged sixty-five. Two years later, William Wickham Mills II inventoried the estate, now jointly owned by him and his wife. The estate then comprised 1698.3 acres." It was a sizeable inheritance that the young man from Orange County held in Smithtown, and he would take that inheritance and build it into an impressive fortune. More about William Wickham Mills II next month....