

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

(I have been writing about William Wickham Mills II and the magnificent Greek Revival Mansion that he built from 1838-1841 at Mills Pond. He was to live in this house from 1841 until his death in 1865, a period of time when William Wickham Mills became one of the most prominent men in Suffolk County.)

“The descendants of William Wickham Mills II make a gift of the Mills Pond House to the people of Smithtown...” by Bradley Harris, Smithtown Historian

The Mills Pond House was completed in 1840 and William Wickham and Eliza Mills moved with their eight children into their new home. Their ninth child, Josephine, would be born in the house on April 18, 1842. The big house with 34 rooms was rapidly filled by members of the Mills family and their domestic servants. The large house was impressive and “the creation of such a house in a rural Long Island community in 1838/40 was a considerable task and served to underscore Mills’ prominence.” The house “is the earliest, documented architect-designed structure in the vicinity, a fact that certainly escaped no one’s awareness at the time.” (Zachary Studenroth, “Historical Analysis of Mills Pond,” Part 2, p. 21; part of a larger report, “Adaptive Reuse Report” of the Mills Pond House prepared for the Smithtown Arts Center in 1977.)

To enhance the beauty of his new home, Mills “purchased numerous fruit trees and other ornamentals from Wm. R. Prince and Co. of Flushing, L.I. in 1847.” Mills ordered “two or three specimens each of, among others, European and American Mountain Ash, Spanish and White Horse Chestnut, American Elm and Cypress, Catalpa, European Alder, Sugar Maple, and many varieties of plum, pear and apple trees. Some of these original plantings have been identified on the grounds” of the Mills Pond House today. “In addition to the unusual trees which were planted for their romantic and aesthetic effect,” Mills had “extensive orchards on his homestead farm” with over a thousand apple trees, “in prime order, and many of them of the best grafted fruit.” (Zachary Studenroth, *op. cit.*, p. 25.)

From insurance policies that covered the mansion and its dependencies, we know that the house had an attached kitchen, a washhouse, a barn with “cow-houses attached,” a carriage house, and a cider house that “once stood at the edge of the pond.” (The barns and cow-houses that stood to the west of the house were standing in 1977 but are gone now. See the accompanying photographs.) Other than these outbuildings, “there was no other dwelling within eight rods of the house.” Although the house that Mills built was quite large, the supporting dependencies were modest in size. Even so, Mildred Smith, William Wickham Mills’ great grandchild, described him in the following way:

“He was one of the most prominent men in Suffolk Co., known as a man of great discretion, of sound judgment in the management of his varied interests, and one of the largest and most successful farmers and stock breeders on Long Island.” If this was true, Mills must have relied upon tenants to work his lands and raise his stock. He owned over 1750 acres of land and he depended upon the income from his lands, as well as his “investments,” to sustain his house and family. The fact that William Wickham Mills’ estate at the time of his death “was valued at about \$400,000, excluding land,” shows that he derived a substantial return on his properties and investments. (Zachary Studenroth, *op. cit.*, p. 27-29.)

In addition to being a wealthy man and an extensive land owner, William Wickham Mills was a man of social prominence within the Smithtown community. In 1838, when he was building his new home at Mills Pond, Mills was nominated for Smithtown Supervisor. He was elected and served as Supervisor from 1838 to 1841. “He was also one of the first officers of” the St. James Episcopal Church when it was founded in 1853. As far as Mildred Smith was concerned, her great grandfather Mills’ involvement in town government and in the Episcopal Church show that he was a man who was “always entrusted in whatever pertained to the public good and his influence was ever on the side of right and that which tended to promote the welfare of the community.” (Zachary Studenroth, *op. cit.*, p. 28.)

William Wickham Mills died suddenly on January 6, 1865. He was 69 years old at the time of his death which seems to have been caused by "a cold." His wife, Eliza, "inherited the use of the homestead farm and the interest from a trust of \$50,000 during her lifetime." Each of the Mills eight children "received an equal share of the balance" of their father's estate, except for Theodore (2nd son) who received a trust fund of \$20,000 and Oscar (the 4th son) who received a trust fund of \$15,000. "Mrs. Mills was in poor health at the time of her husband's death" and she passed away "on July 9, 1865, at the age of sixty-four, six months" after her husband's death. "The estate was still unsettled, and her death only served to aggravate a long standing animosity amongst the children." Mrs. Mills had "drawn up her own will" in February of 1865 and her will gave \$3,000 to Washington Mills (the eldest son), \$1,000 to Theodore (2nd son), \$3,000 to William Wickham Jr. (the 3rd son), and \$3,000 to Oscar (the 4th son). "The residue was divided equally among the other four" children – Amanda, Horatio W., Wilfred J. and Josephine – and Amanda's husband, Edmund Thomas Smith. This will was immediately challenged by Washington and William Wickham Jr. who felt their mother did not give them their rightful share. The challengers lost their case in court and the will was upheld. The estates of William Wickham Mills and Eliza Mills were divided according to their wishes. (Zachary Studenroth, op. cit., pp. 30-31.)

The Mills family home was inherited by Amanda, Horatio W., Wilfred J., and Josephine. Amanda and her husband were living in in their own home in Nissequogue. Horatio, Wilfred, and Josephine shared the Mills Pond home, until Horatio died in 1880, and Josephine died in 1888. Then the house became the "sole possession of Amanda Mills Smith." Amanda and Edmund Thomas Smith had three children: Minnie, b. June 21, 1850; E. DuBois, b. June 26, 1854; and another son, Wickham Mills, who died in infancy. "E. DuBois presumably began residency at Mills Pond shortly after his marriage to Frances Amelia Elsworth on Feb. 22, 1881." E. DuBois Smith became "a realtor with offices in New York City" and "speculated in Long Island real estate" and "continued with extensive stock breeding on the farm." E. DuBois and his wife, Frances, had five children: Edmund Thomas, Malcolm Elsworth, Josephine Elsworth, Frances Mildred and Dorothy Miller. E. DuBois Smith was 73 when he died at Mills Pond on December 11, 1927; his wife continued to live in the house at Mills Pond until her death on February 7, 1939. The Mills Pond House and "property then passed to their five children." (Zachary Studenroth, op. cit., pp. 33-34.)

Of the five children, "Josephine (b. December 15, 1884) and Frances Mildred (b. May 3, 1886) remained unmarried and continued to live at Mills Pond." Their siblings "conveyed their interests in the property" by deed to Josephine and Frances. "Josephine and Frances Mildred Smith led a comparatively quiet life at Mills Pond, the former operating a small catering business at the house, and the latter becoming active in the Smithtown Historical Society after founding it in 1955. When Josephine died on October 10 1969, her share of the property was bequeathed to her nephews Edward H. L. Smith, Jr., William Wickham Mills Smith, and DuBois Tangier Smith (sons of her sister, Dorothy Miller, who had married a Smith)" with a life estate given to her sister, Frances Mildred Smith. When Frances Mildred died on March 16, 1972, her will bequeathed "her share of the property to the same nephews." (Zachary Studenroth, op. cit., pp. 34-35.)

The three "Smith brothers (great-great-grandsons of William Wickham Mills II) conveyed the house and 2.85 acres of land to the Town of Smithtown in May of 1976 as a memorial to their aunts; the Town acquired about three contiguous acres in December of the same year, bringing the property to a total of 6.12 acres including part of the pond itself. The Town acquired the house and grounds with the intention that community organizations such as the Smithtown Township Arts Council would occupy the property as an arts-related facility." And now, almost 40 years later, the Town of Smithtown leases the Mills Pond House to the Smithtown Arts Council which uses the house and property as multi-purpose arts facility. The best part of this arrangement is that the Mills Pond House and its surrounding property will remain as a testament to William Wickham Mills II's vision of how a simple country estate in Smithtown ought to look. And we get a portal into the past of eighteenth century life. (Zachary Studenroth, op. cit., pp. 34-35.)