

MADISON DUNLAP, DAVID LOWMAN AND MILLER'S MILL

By Nanalou Sauder

Presented to the Ignorance Club, October 1994

IT WAS NOT ALWAYS KNOWN as Miller's Mill. Indeed that name is only about sixty-five years old. It was known for much of its early history as Lowman's Mill and, like Buffalo Forge, though on a smaller scale, it symbolizes the nineteenth century in Rockbridge County. A mill was a thriving and necessary enterprise for most of the last century. Farmers needed their corn ground into usable meal. For more than a hundred years, Lowman's Mill did just that for the Kerr's Creek area. Indeed a small settlement for local commerce grew up near it along the old Midland Trail, and a small community grew up around that. Successive Highland Belle schools were located nearby (until 1960), and the cross-

Nanalou Sauder lived in the Dunlap House — now called the Dunlap-Sauder House — from 1965 until 2010. A teacher at Lexington High School for twenty years and then at its successor Rockbridge County High for four more years, in 1979 she also became the first woman elected to the county Board of Supervisors.

roads area was the site of two stores, a blacksmith shop, and several dwellings, most of which survive.

The general area was, until very recently, the business center for the community. Several twentieth-century houses have been built in the area, evidence that the community spirit lives on, although the only commercial enterprises left in 1994 are B&G Trucking,¹ an auto repair shop, and a sometimes-open antique/junk shop. When the first version of this paper was written,² the building where the antique shop is located was a thriving gasoline station and country store. This is progress?

The property on which the mill stands, in the Kerr's Creek Valley, has a long and sometimes complicated history. Francis McCown first patented 727 acres on August

1 Still there in 2020.

2 In 1979, as part of an unsuccessful effort to attract grant money to preserve Miller's Mill.



The Dunlap-Sauder House today.

Hamilton is listed as living in Kanawah.⁵ In 1818, the property was transferred to Archibald Stewart, who is credited with building the first mill. Indeed, he had probably already built it.

Evidence of a mill on the property first appears in a deed for a separate parcel — 3.57 acres (“3 A, 1 rod & 17 poles”) sold by John Gilmore to Archibald Stewart — dated September 19, 1816, and recorded in the Rockbridge County Clerk’s Office. The property is described as

crossing “said Stewart’s mill race,” and from old plats in Mr. Dunlap’s possession, the location can be determined. The three acres, valued at \$8 in 1817, lie just west of the bridge over which County Road 638 (Muddy Lane) crosses Kerr’s Creek.

It is worth noting that the sign that some of us remember on the mill gave the *name* as Miller’s Mill and the *date* as 1816 — somewhat misleading. In 1820, the first year when building valuations were given in the county records, Stewart’s property was listed at \$6,246.00 (up from \$430 due to a reassessment). The land was valued at \$18.66 per acre and the buildings were worth \$200, a standard sum at the time for a plain house and necessary outbuildings, particularly when the assessor frequently didn’t come to call.

The value of the buildings shot up dramatically two years later, in 1822, when the total property was valued at \$8,058.27 and the buildings at \$1,951.78, a large sum for the era. This valuation indicates a sizeable structure — most likely a merchant’s mill.

Since Archibald Stewart is listed as a resident of Augusta after 1820, he must have hired a miller and left

him to run the mill. The land books of 1833 give no indication of who that might have been.

Stewart died before 1833, and the property passed to his heirs, who in 1837 are the owners of record of 350.57 acres. The value of the property in that year was \$8,232, of which \$2,126.27 were buildings.

THE BUILDER

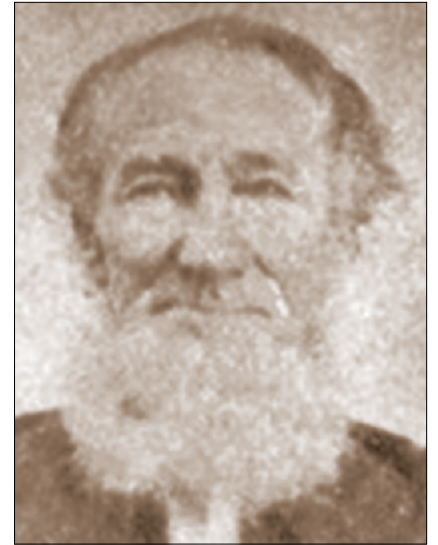
WE COME NOW to the man who bought the land from Stewart’s heirs, sold off the existing mill and 16 acres (at a good profit), built the house I live in, fathered ten children, lived for most of the 19th century, supposedly built each of his ten children a brick house, and was the ancestor of the Dunlaps of Kerr’s Creek: “M. Dunlap (is noted to be) in possession,” says the 1837 Rockbridge County land book.

Let us look at Madison Dunlap and his real estate. Dunlap first appears in the deed books in 1835 as the purchaser of 118.75 acres of land “on the waters of Kerr’s Creek.” This he bought from Robert A. and James H. Bane; it is now the Hattan farm, on the south side of the creek, off Muddy Lane. Evidently Dunlap had literally higher ambitions, because by 1837, as we have seen, he was “in possession” of the Stewart land, and it was on that tract that he built his house on a hill overlooking Kerr’s Creek. By a deed drawn up in November 1840 and admitted to record in 1841, Madison Dunlap acquired the three parcels, totaling 350.57 acres, for \$8,000 “lawful money of Virginia.”

Dunlap seems to have been in a land-buying mood because he also purchased other parcels in 1840 and 1841. Between 1835, when he purchased the Bane property and 1844, he is listed as the grantee for eleven transactions. The copy of an 1854 plat shows that he owned “five hundred and forty one acres two roods and thirty four square perches,” less sixteen acres sold to David Lowman and ten to Wm. C. Gilmore.⁶

⁶ A rood is about a quarter of an acre. A perch and a pole are the same measure: 16.5 feet. An acre is 160 poles; hence “x acres and y poles” means x acres plus $y/160$ acres.

Dunlap married Martha McKee on January 18, 1834, just before his first land purchase is recorded. Family legend has it the Dunlaps lived in a log structure just across the present highway from the hill on which he built his substantial but unpretentious house. When we first moved



Madison Dunlap

to the house in 1965, there were a number of old structures on that side of the road including a log barn, since sold and demolished, and a smaller log building, but nothing that I would consider a log dwelling.

I think Madison Dunlap had a sharp head for business. Evidently he had plans for financing his purchase of the Stewart property. At the same time he bought it, he contracted with one David Lowman to purchase part of it at a price that was over half of what Dunlap was paying the Stewarts — \$4,300 for sixteen acres and the mill. This purchase was completed in 1848 and included water rights for the existing mill race. Madison began building his brick house and it seems to have been finished by 1849, when the value of the property was increased by \$800 due to buildings.

THE HOUSE

THE DUNLAP HOUSE is a large brick dwelling — the Dunlaps had ten children — and is a modified form of the I house. Until it was remodeled by Don Clayton in the 1950s, it had twelve rooms and three porches. Clayton removed a ramshackle porch on the northwest side of the house and replaced it with a brick patio. We have recently built a porch over the patio. The garage is cinderblock and was added in the 1940s. The downstairs consisted of a kitchen, a dining

³ Hamilton also patented another 120 acres in 1768.

⁴ Rockbridge County Land Books 3, 4, and 5.

⁵ In what is now West Virginia; the county seat is Charleston.



Dunlap House; watercolor by Maxine Foster

room, a parlor, a living room, two smaller rooms and a hall. The upstairs is divided into two parts, each of which is accessible only from the downstairs. The upstairs front had four bedrooms and a hall. The “backstairs” has a large sloped ceiling room over the kitchen and a smaller room that was used as a schoolroom, according to family tradition. Its ceiling is very low due to the fact that it is over the dining room, which has higher ceilings than the kitchen.

At 15 feet by 20½ feet, the dining room is the largest room in the house. It is peculiar in that it has two windows and *eight* doors and also because half of it is in the back part of the house and half in the front. No architect designed this one! After the kitchen, it is the nicest room in the house. The larger two rooms, located on the front, measure about 18 feet square, and the smaller ones more than 9 feet. Upstairs, the front bedrooms are also 18 feet square, but the smaller rooms are larger than the ones downstairs — about 9 feet by 13 feet. The halls are nothing much, and the staircase is unremarkable.

The Dunlaps built seven fireplaces: a large one in the kitchen with a flue on one side; another in the dining room on the same chimney; a third, smaller one in the room over the kitchen; and four on two chimneys in the parlor, living room, and two front upstairs bed-

rooms. All of these still work except one that had a more modern damper put in before our time. It smokes. [The author's son] Lee Sauder designed and constructed a nice sliding damper for the kitchen fireplace, and we installed a wood-burning fireplace in the dining room. The other fireplaces have wooden sliding “dampers” to keep out the cold air. We use the kitchen fireplace regularly in the winter, but do not use the others much at all.

Madison Dunlap is reputed to have built each of his ten children a brick house. I do know where two of them are. One is on the north side of Interstate 64 and was cut off by that highway. It was occupied by Halstead Dunlap's father, Clarence, when I first came to

Kerr's Creek. The other one I know about is farther west on Route 60 and is owned by Hunter Ayers.

In an interview with Mildred Coe, who was a Dunlap relation and visited the Dunlap house as a child, I learned some interesting things. She remembered that there was a large brick-drying yard outside the kitchen and, behind that, a three-seat, one-door outhouse made of brick. There were other buildings that included an icehouse about halfway down the hill to the west (long since gone, although the bricks were saved); a log smokehouse, still there but going downhill rapidly; and a log barn by the spring branch, which is still in use but does not belong to us. Others remember the house in the 1930s, including, of course, Lois and Halstead Dunlap and Dot Newman, who remembers going to parties when the dining room was used for dancing.

But I am getting ahead of my story. Madison Dunlap (b. 1808) lived and worked and was involved in lawsuits until 1883, when he died. He left the house to two of his sons, Oklela Beverlin Dunlap, known as O. B., and Walter Dunlap. In 1885, O. B. deeded his interest to W. M. Dunlap. Shortly before she died in 1984, Rachel McNeel Robinson told me that, as she remembered it, there was no door between the kitchen and the dining room but rather a pass-through for food. I find it hard

to believe that for fifty years the Dunlaps went outside on the porch to get to the rest of the house, but Mrs. Robinson was definite in this description. She also remembered the school room as being over the kitchen.

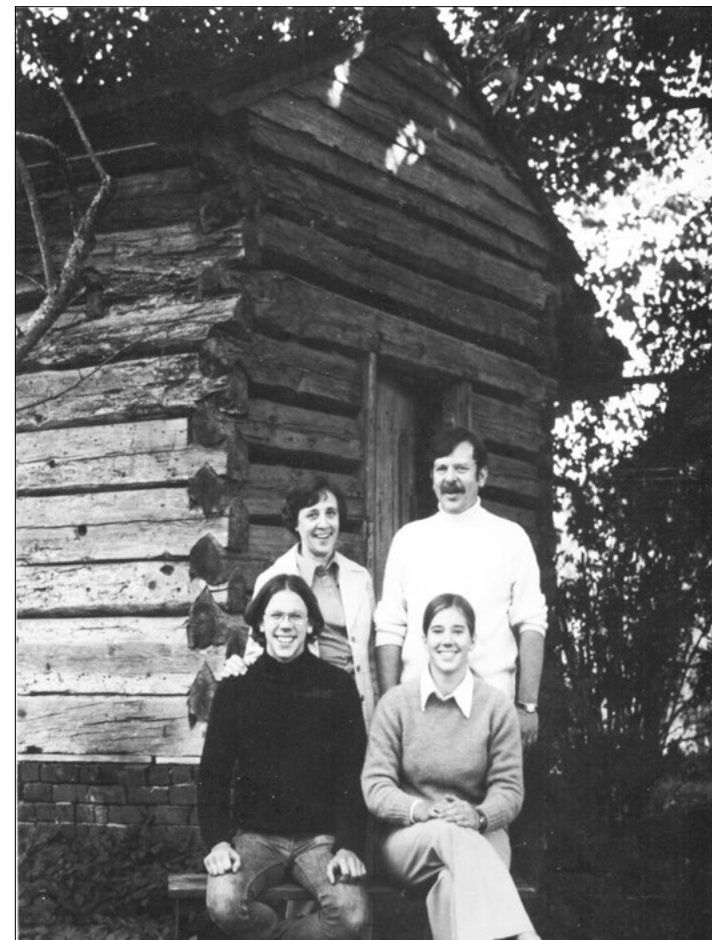
Now began the first spurt of rapid turnover in owners. John McNeel sold the property to Levi Gay, of Pocahontas County, West Virginia, in 1899. In 1900, Levi Gay sold the property to P. M. Engleman; in 1914, W. L. and Norville Engleman sold it to N. L. Whiteside. In 1917, the property returned to the Dunlap family when Samuel McKee Dunlap and George Tucker Dunlap bought it from Mr. Whiteside. Two years later, S. M. Dunlap conveyed his half interest to G. T., whose family lived there until the 1950s.



Dunlap House; painting by Nell Cook Byers

IN 1955, ANOTHER SPURT of rapid turnover began when G. T. Dunlap sold the farm to Robert A. Shields. Robert and Mary lived in the house for three years, but could not face the upheaval necessary to put it back in good condition. In 1958, they sold the house and 2.75 acres to Robert Urie and built a one-story house close by. The Shields family kept all of the outbuildings except the log smokehouse. Urie began to modernize, somewhat unfortunately to my mind. He is responsible for putting in the oil, hot-air furnace and placing the downstairs registers so that they cut into the baseboards. The placement makes furniture arrangement very difficult and the hot air system is not efficient. We still have no heat upstairs. (We use electric blankets.)

Urie was transferred from the Rockbridge area and sold the house to Donald B. Clayton in 1961. This was the second house that Don, later to become a leader in local historic preservation, worked on in Rockbridge County. Some of his efforts here were more successful than others, but he installed modern kitchen and bathroom facilities, including two hot water tanks; put on a new tin roof, removing the shingles that had been hidden by the old tin roof — a mistake); and rewired the house and put in new light fixtures. As noted earlier, the rotten porches were removed, one of them replaced, and the other turned into



The Sauder family at the smokehouse: Nanalou, William, Lee, Anne. Photo by Sally Mann

the brick patio that is now a porch again, using the bricks that had been salvaged from the old ice house.

In 1963, Anne and Bill Hamilton returned to the Kerr's Creek area when James Lees & Sons, the carpet manufacturer, sent Bill back to the Glasgow area. They had previously lived at Red Mar, loved Kerr's Creek, and knew this house, so they bought it from the Claytons (who moved into the empty Barclay house on Lee Avenue). The Hamiltons moved in on New Year's Day 1964 but Bill died three months later. Anne and their two children found the house more than they could handle and put it on the market.

William Sauder [the author's husband] and I were looking for a place to buy. At first we thought the pictures in the window at Tilson's Real Estate looked nice, but we did not even look at the house because it was right on Route 60, which was then the major east-west highway and had *much* truck traffic. After a time, Otis Mead, who had been looking out for our housing needs, got the listing. He called me one day and said, "Nanalou,

I've got a house I want you to look at. I think you will like it." We travelled to Kerr's Creek, walked in through the kitchen door, and I fell in love with the kitchen — still am. We bought it, moved in November of 1965, nearly twenty-nine years ago, and have been there ever since. It is not an easy house to live in: It has been a challenge and a pleasure, and it is home.

LOWMAN'S MILL

The original Madison Dunlap property, as I have noted, contained the sixteen acres that held Kerr's Creek's landmark mill. Remember that David Lowman agreed to pay \$4,300 for those sixteen acres, a merchant mill, miller's house and other buildings and the water rights for the existing mill race. Lowman was required to keep up the fences — as are the owners of the mill to this day. The present owners still have the water rights as well.

Like Madison Dunlap, David Lowman began to build a substantial dwelling. The house by David Low-

man is situated just north of the mill across the old route for U.S. 60 on the "little road" known as Miller's Mill Way. Lowman's house was completed in 1851, according to the date on its pediment. It is constructed so that the eastern side is entirely without windows. The local story, according to the late Eugene Engleman, had it that Mr. Lowman did not want his pretty daughters caught unawares by the men who frequented the nearby store, so he made the appropriate wall solid. Subsequently, a bay window was attached to the eastern side of the house. It looks oddly out of place



Lowman's — later Miller's — Mill. (WPA photo, courtesy of Washington and Lee University Library Special Collections)

from the outside but no doubt adds to the ambience of the parlor.

From all accounts, Lowman operated a prosperous mill throughout the middle years of the nineteenth century. The property included an enlarged mill, a wooden store building to which a small brick house was attached, Lowman's large brick dwelling, a smaller log or frame house west of the big house, a stable and several other outbuildings.

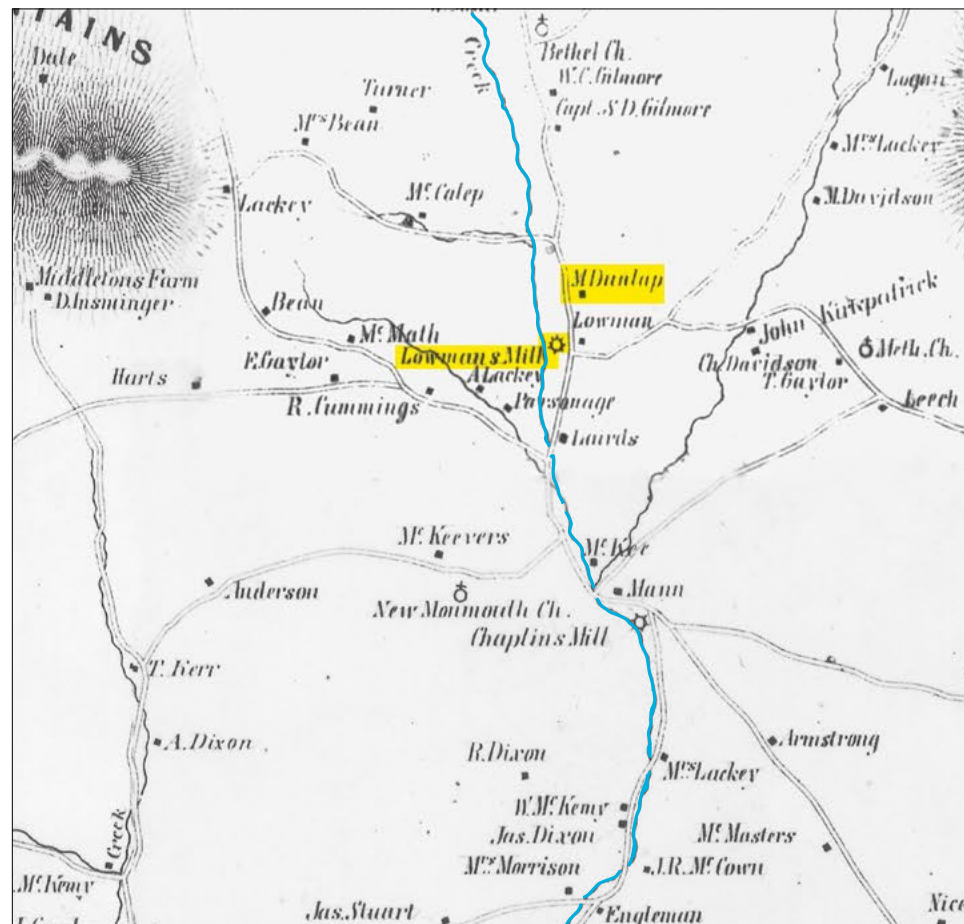
Prosperity was evidently too rich for David Lowman's blood, and he succumbed to the lure of expansion and possibly to delusions of grandeur as well. In the words of the late E. V. Engleman, who was interviewed in 1978 when he was in his nineties, "Lowman was flying too high." In the late 1860s he contracted to purchase another mill, the Big Spring Mill, from J. H. McKemy. The purchase price was to be \$6,600 paid in three installments. Lowman paid the first two installments with the help of a loan from the Bank of Lexington, but he failed to pay the third when it came due. In the meantime, he had begun to build a splendid new mill on the Big

Spring site and had incurred a number of debts, chiefly to the Rowland Francis Company, which had contracted to replace the existing "shakey" buildings.

After a complicated and long drawn-out lawsuit and a trustees' sale that was voided by the court, Lowman was forced to sell: first the upper Kerr's Creek (Miller's) mill property and then, when that brought an insufficient sum to pay his debts, the Big Spring property and the new mill. The original Lowman's Mill, the store, outbuildings and small miller's house were auctioned off in 1876 and bid in by James D. Lowman of Millboro for \$5,702. He paid in installments, and the deed was recorded in 1884 when the final payment was made.

In the early 1890s, James D. Lowman's nephew, Charles, operated the mill and lived in the small frame house attached to the front of the frame store. His aunts, the Misses Sue and Mary Lowman, kept the post office in the frame building. In 1900, the mill was sold by James D. and his wife, Nanny, to Robert L. Grady.

Between 1908 and 1915, the mill property had a succession of owners: I. L. Tucker and E. M. Smith; O. E.



The Kerr's Creek community, 1860. (Gilham map, courtesy of Washington and Lee University Library Special Collections)

King of Buena Vista; and J. W. Mitchell of Bath County (and later Augusta). In 1915, the property was bought by H. H. Wade, who ran the mill until the mid-1920s, when he sold it to his father, H. W. Wade.

In 1929 the elder Wade sold the mill to Haiskell J. Miller — and thus the name Miller's Mill. The Wades moved to Collierstown and bought another mill which has recently been returned to working condition by Thomas McCaleb.

Mr. Miller operated the mill on a limited basis, but the creek was very low during the twenties and thirties, and that situation, coupled with the deterioration of the dam and the mill race, meant that water power was most often insufficient to do much grinding of grain.

Mr. Miller and his wife and family lived in the brick-and-frame house on the corner which had been combined with the frame store building to provide an attractive dwelling with a delightful back porch, yard, and garden. Mr. Miller died in 1970, and his wife continued to regard this house as home, but ill health made it necessary for her to spend most of her time with her daughters, who lived nearby. After her death the house was rented for a time, stood empty for more years, and is now rented out. The property is still [in 1994] owned by the Miller descendants, Patricia Hall, Pauline Tolley, and Alfred Miller.⁷

⁷ Alfred Miller and Patricia Hall are now, in 2020, deceased. Patricia Hall's daughter and her husband purchased the house and continue to live there.

THE DOUBTFUL FUTURE

IN 1979 I wrote the following ending in an application for a restoration grant:

The mill, showing the ravages of time and weather, stands by its race at the head of the meadow adjacent to old Route 60 West at its junction with State Road 627. It is really two buildings, each one measuring 31 x 46 feet (a combined 62 x 46 feet). The metal 22-foot wheel is located on the end facing the road. The two stories (plus loft) are supported by 24 columns and the building sits on a stone foundation. However, like many other old structures, it is in need of major repair. Investigators have determined that it can be restored if action is taken soon, but the building will not survive many more hard winters.

Just what do we learn from this, I wonder? One thing is to make a will and make sure that one person is responsible for a particular piece of property.

In 1979, the mill was still salvageable. Some thought of turning it into a restaurant — an intriguing possibility at the time. Certainly something could have been done to save it if there had been a willingness, somewhere, to spend \$30,000 or so. But things dragged on and the thing just fell down in pieces. Unfortunately, the records of the mill are still in the ruins.

Maybe someone will have the courage and ability to rescue whatever is left of them. 