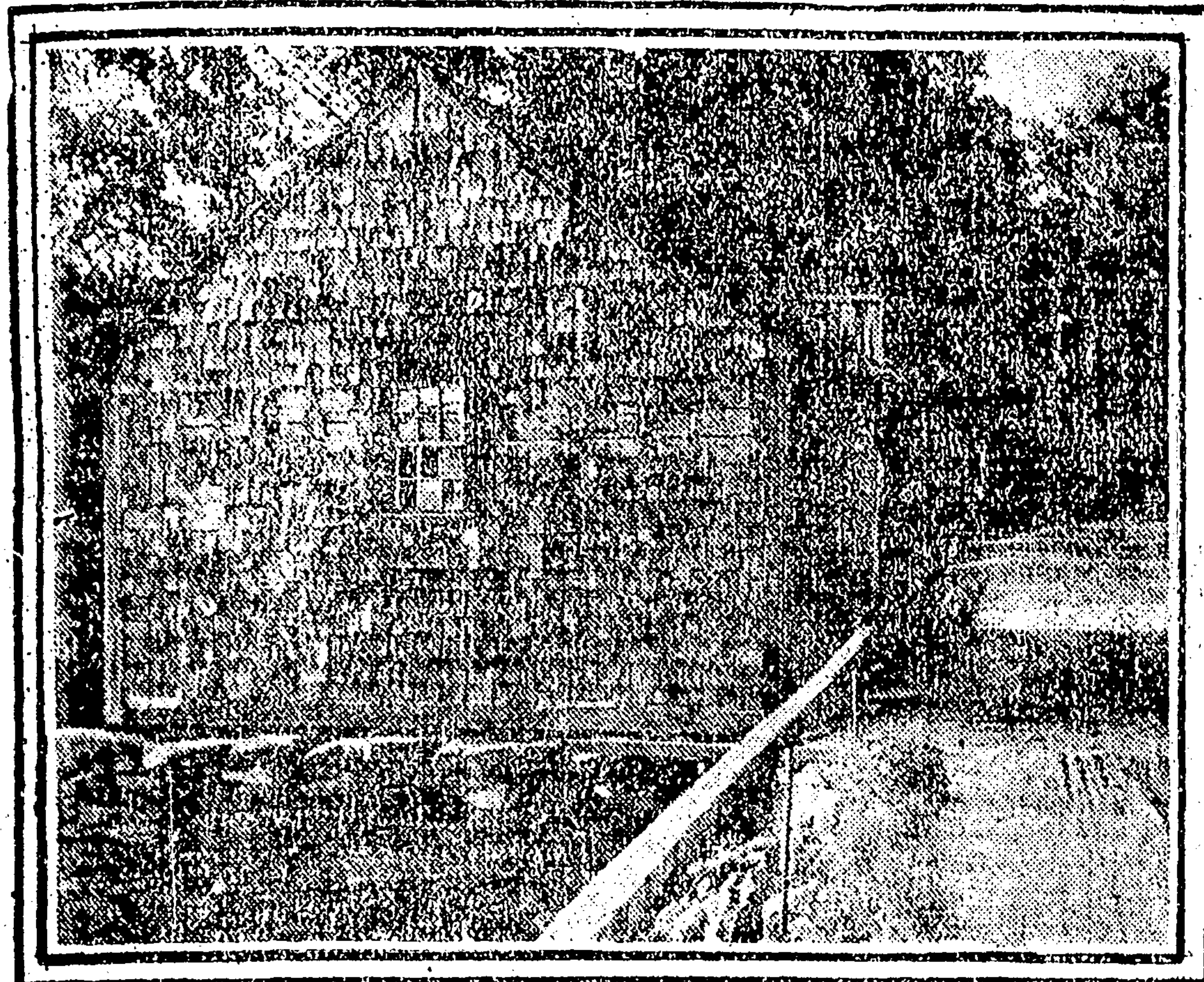


LAST OF THE OLD JOHNNY CAKE MILLS



A Time Scarred Veteran of 200 Years.

ONLY A FEW SURVIVE, QUIANT CONTRASTS TO MODERN METHODS.—THE OLDEST MANUFACTURING PLANTS OF THE STATE

ALITTLE more than a mile north of the quaint old village of Wickford, where Mill creek becomes lost in the estuaries of Narragansett bay, is the old "Tide Grist Mill." Standing close beside the main highway leading from the Post road to the State camp grounds at Quonset Point, it is one of the most picturesque landmarks of the South County and each year is visited by hundreds of tourists.

The weather-beaten relic of colonial days is one of the oldest industrial establishments in the State; it is one of the few buildings which stands to-day in the same form and place as it did when the ancient planters of King's province were wont to encourage their slaves in holding mock elections and canny natives resorted to the old English "shift-mariages" on lonely cross roads in order to rid themselves of the obligations of paying the debts of their chosen consorts.

It is one of the many pioneers of Rhode Island industry built up in the long ago along the banks of streams in the hilly country. During the past century the old grist mill with its cumbersome water wheel and great circular stones, placed one above the other, was a familiar object in many Rhode Island towns. Nearly every river of any considerable size furnished motive power for one or more, and so thickly were they located that the early tillers of the soil had little difficulty in finding a place near at hand where their grain might be converted into flour and meal.

On the Island of Rhode Island and in some of the lowlands along the shore where the waterfall of the brooks was insufficient to turn the stones, the queer old Dutch windmills sprang up and their great sweeping sails supplied the power. But with one or two exceptions these have disappeared with the overland wagon trains and old stage coaches.

Of the old water-power grist mills some have been destroyed by fire. Many have been removed to make way for

the more profitable cotton and woolen factories and with the exception of one in the town of Gloucester, the "Tide Mill" in North Kingstown and perhaps one or two others, the few which remain are regarded largely as curious relics and are falling to decay, neglected, cobwebbed and dusty.

But in no part of the State did the old mills retain their usefulness longer than in the South County. Less than half a century ago grist mills were very common in nearly all the towns. Their presence in such large numbers is easily explained. The inhabitants until very recently were almost wholly made up of descendants of early settlers. In colonial days, they maintained great farms, patterned after the plantations of the South, and because of the fertility of the soil devoted their entire attention to agriculture. They were men of great wealth and large landed possessions. Farms of 1500 acres were common and the man who held less than 500 acres was regarded as being a scale below the ordinary farmer.

These great tracts were cultivated by laboring Indians and slaves. A considerable trade was carried on between the planters of King's province, as it was then known, and those of the West India Islands.

The articles imported consisted of dress goods and such luxuries as could not be raised at home, for the colonists derived their foodstuffs from the soil. The descendants of these early planters clung tenaciously to agriculture, and while the valleys in the northern part of the State have been converted into sites for busy factory villages the settlements devoted exclusively to manufacturing in the South County are more widely scattered, and with few exceptions are scarcely more than hamlets consisting of a single mill and a few houses each.

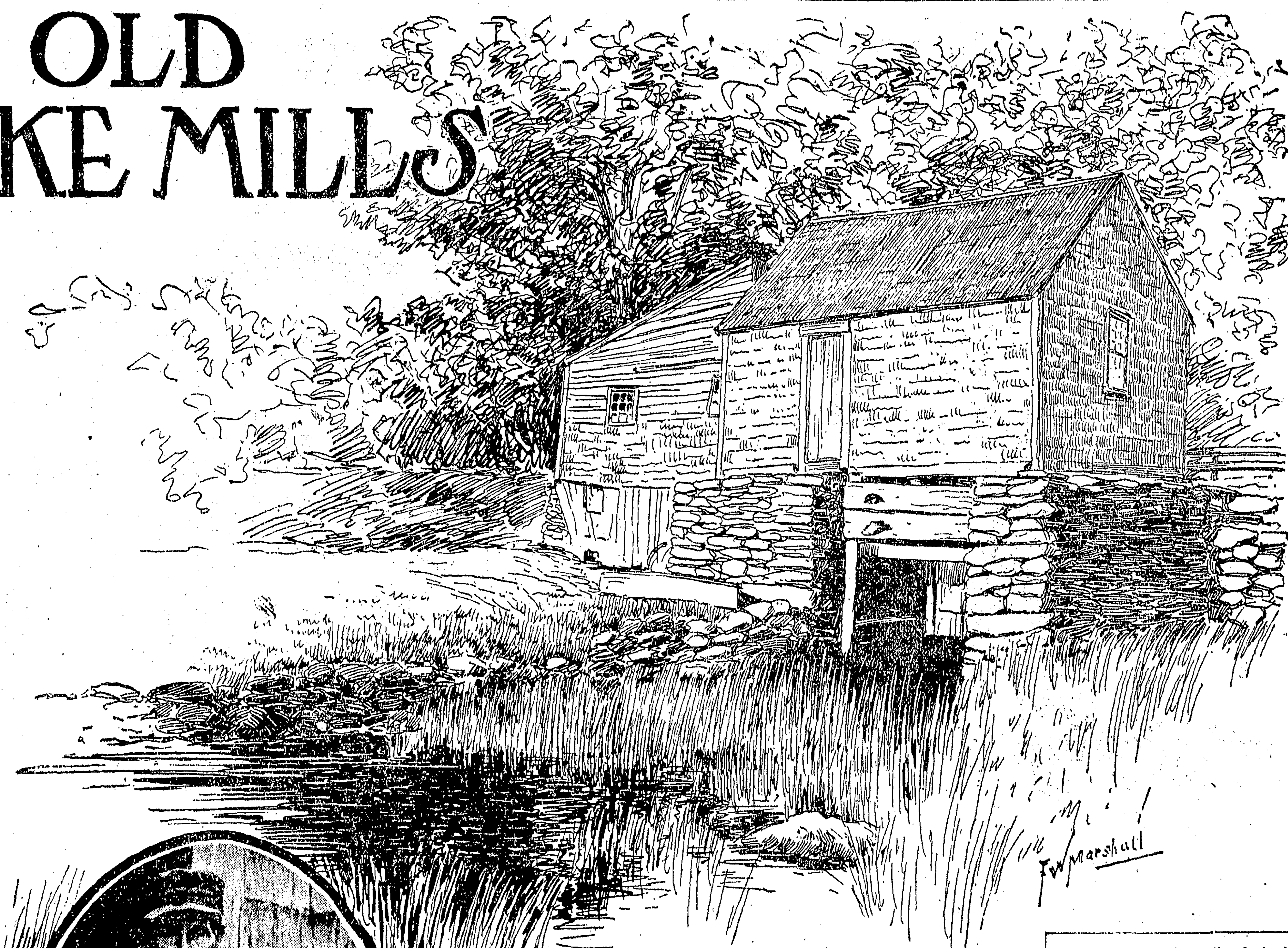
And so the grist mill was a necessity. But with the introduction of modern transportation many of the South County

farmers believed that meal and flour could be purchased cheaper than it could be raised. This branch of agriculture was permitted to decay and, with the exception of the old Tide Mill, there are

probably less than half a dozen mills of this type in existence at the present time. Perhaps no other is running today as it did a century ago. From all parts of the country for miles



George Tourgee, the Miller



When the Tide Blocks the Wheel

around tillers of the soil have been sending their best corn to the mill to be ground into Johnny cake meal. For, whatever argument there may be in favor of the speed of the modern grist mills with their improved devices for grinding, it is stoutly maintained among the farmers that the slowly moving stones of the old-fashioned methods produce a meal that has a flavor which can be obtained in no other way.

The name by which the North Kingstown mill is generally known is somewhat misleading. A tide mill in the generally accepted meaning of the term is one which derives its power from the ebb and flow of the sea. But, standing close to the travelled way on Camp avenue, which forms a part of the dam, the mill derives its power from the waters of Mill creek. This water is conveyed from the pond through a sluiceway beneath the roadbed to an old-fashioned tub wheel. At flood tide the sea backs up through the cove into the wheel pit and effectively prevents the mill from being operated successfully. Hence its name of the "Tide Mill."

It is a one-story frame building about 15 feet long and 10 wide, with a lean-to addition on the western end almost as

large as the main building. It is covered with weather-beaten shingles and in the setting of great oaks by which it is surrounded presents a picturesque appearance.

North of the mill on the opposite side of the highway Lily pond covers several acres. Its surface, during the early summer months, is almost hidden by a profusion of water lilies, from which it takes its name. Between this pond and the ancient building the highway winds down from a wooded knoll on the west and crosses the dam. Diagonally across the road the hill has been dug away, providing a sheltered nook in which the customers stable their horses while waiting for grain to be ground.

On the east and south is the shallow cove, which at ebb tide becomes an exposed mud flat. It matters little to the miller at what hour the mud flats begin to poke their heads above the water. Their appearance marks the beginning of his day of toil, and from that time until old Neptune again sends his cohort hurtling inland the monotonous rumbling of the mill stones disturbs the quiet valley.

The old mill is in reality a bit of 18th century life in a 20th century setting.

Farmer boys jog down the dusty highway with a bag of grain slung across old Dobbin's back, and farmers' wives and daughters, with sacks of grain, wend their way millward in much the same manner as did their ancestors in the long ago.

There is the same anxious query as to whether the amount of water stored up will be sufficient; the corn is ground in the same way; and after the last of the golden stream of fine meal has been gathered two quarts are taken from each bushel as toll, as it was in the early days.

As far as can be learned there is no record of the exact date when the mill was erected. But according to tradition it was built probably about 1720. According to George Tourgee, the present miller, the mill has been in his family for the past two score and ten years, and he was told that it was built 200 years ago.

Others familiar with the history of the old South County assert that the first mill was built by John Tennant, who obtained control of the property about 1720. Several decades later the property came into the possession of the Pierce family and it was purchased by George W. Tourgee, father of the present proprietor, about 1840.

Since the automobile became a popular medium of travel the old weather-beaten building has been a mecca of many a tour, and there are few States in the Union, which have not been represented in the curious throngs which have peered down through the floor at the ponderous water wheel and have wondered at the lumbering stones as they pulverized the corn into a product that has helped to make Rhode Island famous.