Millville Highlights

The first buildings in Millville went up in 1835 and 1836, when the Burbridges and John R. Smith erected a house and a sawmill on the south bank of the Apple River at its confluence with the South Fork. Settlers arriving in the area readily bought up the milled lumber.

In 1838 the first Millville post office opened, with mail delivery by stagecoach once every week. One stage line is said to have had a horse barn in Millville.

Local historians estimate the population in Millville around 1838 was 330, a figure that likely includes regional farms. The 1840 census for the village, which wasn't platted until 1846, records only eight households near the postmaster's and a total of 62 people. Besides the post office and the mill, there were one or two stores present in 1840. The federal survey for the original land sales within the township wasn't conducted until 1840, nearly a decade after Euro-American settlement in the township had begun. John Smith platted the town of Millville in 1846 and was able to purchase the land the next year. For a number of years, Millville was "the only town of any importance between Freeport and Galena."

The "grocery," where liquor could be sold by the drink and consumed on the premises, was a going concern in the late 1840s in Millville. Many of the patrons who frequented Millville's groceries were miners who worked in lead mines north and east of the town. Saturday night fights were a common occurrence and gave Millville a reputation as a rough town.

In 1847, the Burbridges tore down the old sawmill and erected a new gristmill on the same site. This change suggests a depletion of sizable timber or a depressed market for lumber and an increase of local grain production. In essence, the shift from sawmill to gristmill signifies the change from pioneer conditions and their extractive focus, to a more settled post-frontier farming economy.

By 1850, there were several commercial enterprises in Millville. The occupations listed in the census are two blacksmiths, two millers, two millwrights, three miners, two farmers, one grocery keeper, one carpenter, two storekeepers, one stonemason, one wagon maker, and one woodchopper.

Although relegated to the status of a backwater community after the railroad bypassed the town in 1853-1854, Millville had two services that continued into the late 19th century: William Hoover's gristmill and W. Brunner's blacksmith shop, which probably continued to supply tools to the region's lead miners and farmers. As late as 1872, a blacksmith shop is mapped within the village, along with eight other buildings and two additional houses and a school north of the Apple River.

In Nellie Boone's 1885 painting of Millville, one of the floodplain buildings has a false front—a feature typically associated with commercial structures. This building may be William Simmons's circa 1870 store and may also be Powers and Mathews's 1849-1853 grocery.

Millville (1885), by Nellie Boone. The structure on the blufftop may be the Matson House. The building on the far right is likely the Powers and Mathews Grocery. The two smaller buildings in the floodplain may also have been combination dwellings/stores.

In June 1892, seven years after Nellie Boone painted her scenes of Millville, the town suffered a devastating flood. Violent rains caused the Cox Mill dam on Clear Creek, a quarter mile east of Millville, to break. The waters from the mill pond roared down Clear Creek into the South Branch of the Apple River and were channeled through Millville. The few buildings then on the floodplain could not withstand the onslaught of water and were washed away.

Today, a National Register of Historic Places plaque commemorates the site of Millville. Visitors are invited to walk and picnic in the area, but use of metal detectors and artifact collecting is not allowed. Historic and prehistoric sites on public lands are protected by state and federal laws. It is illegal to collect artifacts or engage in digging into sites on public land.

HISTORIC MILLVILLE, APPLE RIVER CANYON STATE PARK, JO DAVIESS COUNTY

Detail of the gristmill in Millville as painted by Nellie Boone in 1885. Original hangs in the Community Building in Warren, Illinois.

This brochure is based on the 2002 National Register of Historic Places Assessment and Archaeological Resource Management Plan written by Christopher Stratton and Floyd Mansberger, Fever River Research, Springfield, Illinois, and funded by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources.

ILLINOIS
DEPARTMENT OF
NATURAL RESOURCES

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During the early 19th century, the town of Millville developed at the confluence of the South Fork Apple River and the main branch of the Apple River within what became, in 1932, Apple River Canyon State Park in Jo Daviess County, Illinois. Millville was an important rural service center positioned near the junction of a stagecoach trail between Chicago and Galena with the north-south Peoria to Galena trail. Millville declined in significance after the town was bypassed by the railroad in the early 1850s. Our knowledge of the town comes from anecdotal recollections, paintings, archaeological excavations, and historical documents--deed records, county histories, historic plats and atlases, tax records, and United States censuses. These sources helped to identify activity areas that were investigated by archaeologists in 2001 and which led to the town site being listed on the National Register of Historic Places on March 3, 2003.

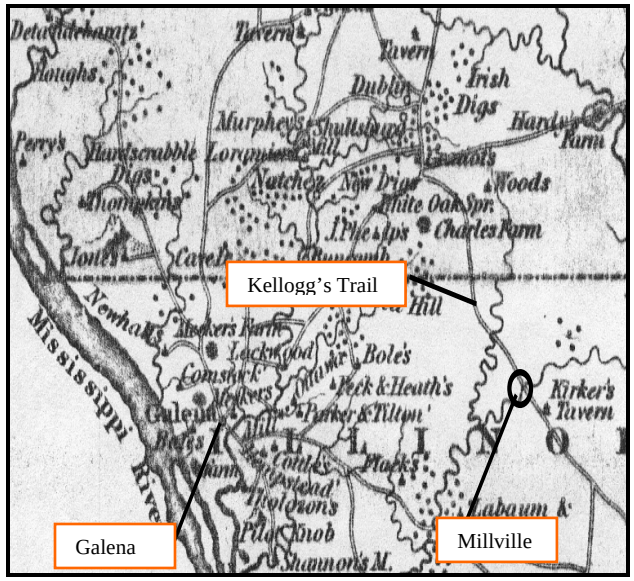
Lead Mining District

The history of Millville is intricately tied to the frontier history of northern Illinois–in particular that of the Lead Mining District of northwestern Illinois and southwestern Wisconsin. Miners began entering the Fever River area (now called Galena River) around 1816. Thousands of miners flocked to Galena between 1824 and 1827, and other entrepreneurs followed. Due to the military importance of lead, the federal government retained ownership of the region and did not open it for public sale until 1847.

Early Transportation Corridors of Northern Illinois

Aside from travel on the Mississippi River, the most direct route to the lead mining district was overland from Peoria. Since the early 1820s an established network of roads ran from Peoria south to the well-populated American Bottoms. It wasn't until 1825 that a trail was blazed from Peoria north to Galena. This route became known as Kellogg's Trail (after it's founder, Oliver Kellogg) or Sucker Trail, in reference to the many miners who traveled to the Lead District in the spring and returned home in the fall, a behavior comparable to the seasonal migration of the sucker fish. Illinois miners were nicknamed "Suckers" and in time Illinois became known as the "Sucker State." Other roads into the district were also called "Sucker Trail."

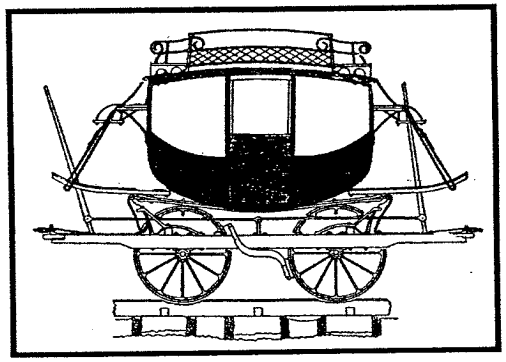
The eastern transportation corridors into the Lead Mining District developed later than those originating in the south. In 1829, Galena businessman J. G. Soulard transported a wagonload of lead from Galena to Fort Dearborn (Chicago), reportedly "the first wagon to pass between the Mississippi and Chicago." A more northerly route was taken by General Scott and his troops as they traveled from Fort Dearborn to the Rock River Valley during the Black Hawk War in 1832. This "Galena Road" opened the upper Rock and Pecatonica River valleys to unparallel settlement in the mid 1830s.



Detail of the Chandler 1829 map of the Lead Mining District with future town of Millville circled. The dots on the map are areas of lead "diggings."

Stagecoach Travel and the Development of Millville

The development of overland transportation corridors played a dramatic role in the early frontier development of Millville. The first post office within this part of Illinois opened at Galena in 1826. John D. Winters ran one of the first successful stage lines, taking mail from Peoria to Galena between 1830-ca. 1840. Millville was strategically located along this stage route near its juncture with the Galena Road, which saw regular traffic to Chicago beginning in the mid-1830s. Winters contracted with Frink and Trowbridge in 1838 to offer Galena to Chicago as a three-day trip of 168 miles, which was nearly the same distance and time as his Galena to Peoria route. Frink and Walker eventually put Winters out of business. In mid-1840, they ran an ad in northern Illinois newspapers stating that they were running "Four Horse Post Coaches of the Troy build" from Chicago to Rockford "through in one day." The Troy Coach, built in Troy, New York, was in use at least by 1839 in Illinois. The Troy mail coach was a flat-topped, spring-seated light carriage for 9 to 12 passengers, including the front and back seats on the coach roof. The Concord Coach, which could carry more baggage and freight in part because there was no rear facing top passenger seat, became more common at a later date and is typically pictured in TV Westerns.



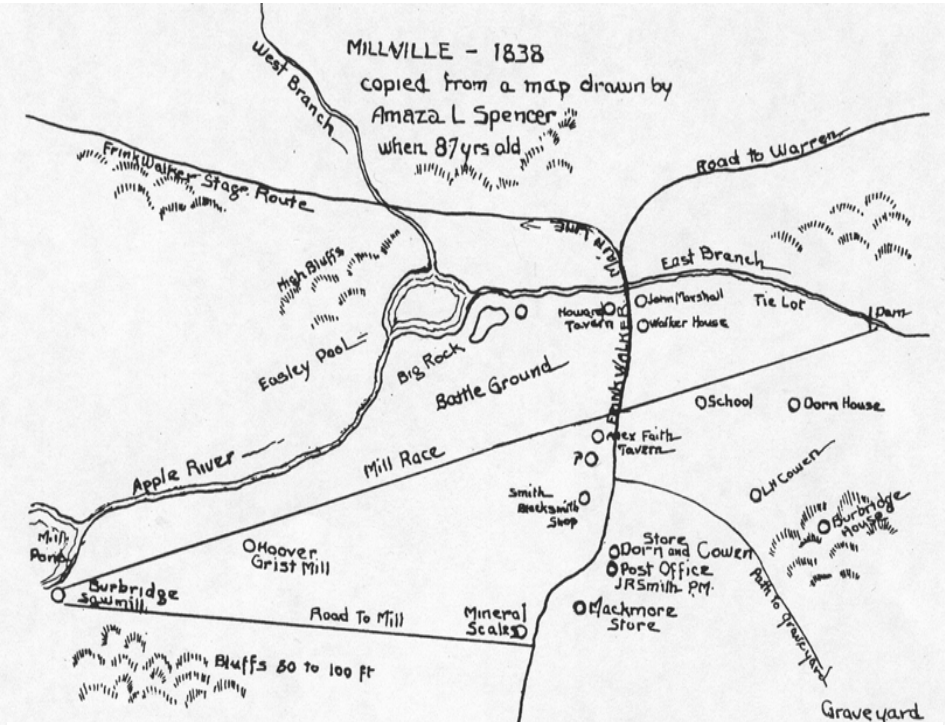
The Troy-Albany Style Coach
(from Galena Trail Newsletter, Oct. 30, 2003)

Rail Travel

The stagecoach was ultimately surpassed in importance in Jo Daviess County, as elsewhere, by the railroad, which reached the eastern edge of Jo Daviess County in 1853. The main branch of the Illinois Central Railroad was started in 1854 and completed in 1856. The Jo Daviess County towns of Nora (1853), Warren (1852), Apple River (1854), Scales Mound (1853), Council Hill Station (1854), and Dunlieth (1853) all were platted along the railroad route. These new towns naturally drew off trade from pre-existing towns—Millville, which was four miles from the nearest track, being a prime example.

Historic Recollections

One valuable resource on historic Millville is a sketch map of Millville drawn in 1925 by Amza L. Spencer and depicting the community as he said it appeared in 1838. The map, although not to scale, gives the locations of buildings, principal streets, and land-



Map drawn by Amza L. Spencer (b.1838) in 1925, showing Millville of his youth, probably ca. 1850 rather than 1838. (Warren Historical Society 2001)

scape features. Aside from the distorted perspective, the Spencer map presents problems. To begin with, Amza Spencer was born in Pennsylvania in 1838 and only moved to the Millville vicinity as a boy. Hence, Spencer's memories of the town, as published in a 1910 newspaper article, probably began about ca. 1850. His map, which he drew at age 87, seems to represent his recollection of buildings in town over time rather than a snapshot of the town in a certain year.

In 1885 a local resident named Nellie Boone made two watercolor paintings of Millville. These paintings, which hang in the Community Building in Warren, Illinois, provide the only images we have of buildings in Millville. One painting, looking toward the town center, shows four buildings, three on the floodplain and one on the bluff. The second painting is of the gristmill. The town was in decline by this date, and Boone may have painted the scenes out of a sense of nostalgia.

Archaeological Evidence

Fever River Research conducted archaeological testing in 2001 to ascertain the significance and integrity of a sample of archaeological resources. From post-1847 tax records, the archaeologists listed lots likely built upon during the 19th century and targeted these sites (Nos. 1-17) for investigation. On the blufftop, the remains of Site 1 (Lots 5 & 6, Block 5) are a small cellar and a dense midden of artifacts. The Jacob and Mary Ellston home may have been on this site before 1847. There may also have been a second house built as early as 1856 or 1857 and owned by Royal Durfee. Nothing is present by 1893.

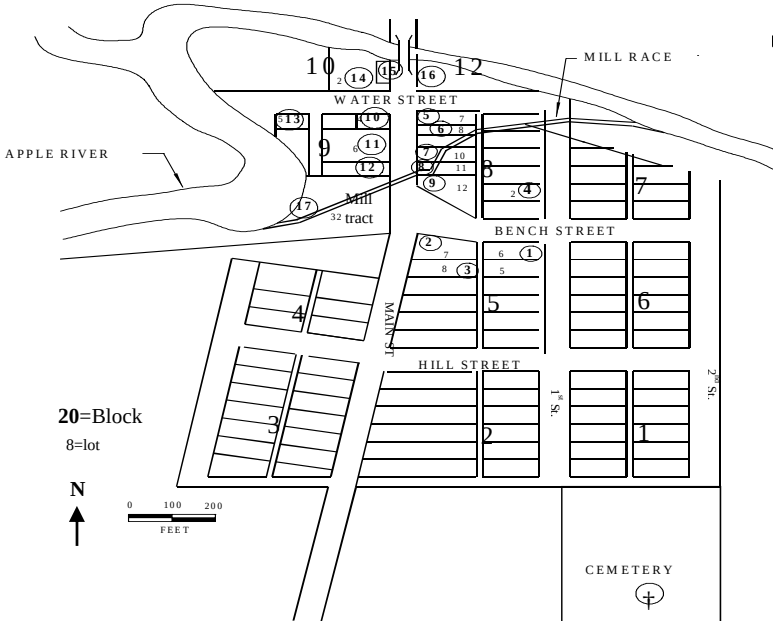
Site 4, also on the blufftop (Lot 2, Block 8), contains a large (18x20') stone-walled cellar with flagstone or bedrock floor that may have been associated with the ca. 1850 Matson House. Tax records suggest this was gone (or unlivable) by 1870. Yet, there is a structure mapped in the vicinity on the 1872 plat, and Nellie Boone drew a house on the blufftop in this area in 1885.

Hillside excavations revealed Site 2, consisting of two 8"-thick brick walls set 8' apart and built into the hillside, probably as an outbuilding.

Sediment laden floodwaters have, over the years, buried historic artifacts, foundations, and other features in the floodplain area of Millville, serving to protecting them from erosion and curio collectors. These deposits were examined with backhoe, shovels, and even hand-trowels in 2001.

Archaeologists found a cellar straddling historic lots 4 and 6 in Block 9. This may be correlated with documentary Site 10, an unknown house or outbuilding possibly dating to around 1853, or Site 11, the Thrasher House, which may be slightly older. Thrasher left for the California Gold Rush in 1849, and the house may have been used by the subsequent owner (Faith) as a saloon. An artifact midden that emanates from the cellar has mostly household debris but also contains items that might be related to blacksmithing (horseshoes, metal fragments, farrier's files). There are surprisingly few fragments that could be construed as alcohol bottles. Farther south on the lot lies Site 12, the ca. 1870 John Ernst blacksmith shop.

The backhoe trench excavated across the mill tract (Lot 32) exposed what are believed to be the north and south foundation walls of a mill (Site 17), 75' apart. The north foundation wall is 20" thick and is formed of large limestone blocks, one course wide. The south foundation wall is at least 3 ft. wide. Nearly twice as thick as the wall on the north, it was probably built to withstand the millrace waters that ran along this side of the building. Within the mill, the 1840s ground surface was found buried beneath 31" of water-deposited sediment. This structure could be either the Smith and Burbridge 1836 sawmill or their 1847 gristmill, which operated under various owners at least until 1880. According to an 1880 industrial census, the mill had a



Millville blocks and lots; site numbers are circled.

16’ drop, was driven by a Leffel turbine (invented in 1862), had three run of stone, and could produced a maximum of 144 bushels per day. The turbine was 3’ in diameter, made 280 revolutions per minute, and generated 24 horsepower. In 1880 this mill, which had a capital investment of $5,000, was open only six months out of the year. In contrast, the Cox Mill on Clear Creek was open year round and represented an $18,000 investment. An associated feature of the Millville mills is the 10-foot-wide millrace that extended diagonally through town from the South Fork of the Apple River to the mill. In order to maintain a constant supply of water and increase the vertical drop (or head) to the millrace, the Burbridges and Smith constructed a dam across a narrow point of the South Fork valley. The fact that the 1871 survey map of Section 4 refers to another dam and an “old mill pond” located downstream from the millrace dam suggests that the millrace may not have been the original source of waterpower for the sawmill. Instead, the sawmill may have been powered by water dropping directly from the dam at the “old mill pond” or through a short millrace adjacent to that pond. The installation of a long millrace would have significantly improved the mill’s water wheel, since it directed the water with greater force.

The site of Elbridge Howard’s house and tavern, in Lot 2, Block 10, near the South Fork at the northern end of town (Site 14), has long been considered a distinctive landmark, due to a prominent mound that presumably covers the stone foundations for the tavern. Howard purchased the lot from the Smiths in 1847, but was already a squatter on the tract, with local elections being held in his house for the first time in 1846. Howard’s holdings are mentioned in the 1878 county history. “Mr. Elbridge Howard erected quite a large house and opened a very good tavern.” None of the historic sources say whether the house and tavern were in the same building, as was common for frontier-era tavern keepers. Howard kept this property, as well as a stable down the street, into the 1850s. The house may be the same structure illustrated on the 1872 atlas under owner J. Fenn.

Lot 2 also had at least one structure in the northeast corner (Site 15), possibly built as early as 1848 or 1849. James Powers and William Mathews probably ran their grocery on this lot, possibly living in the same building. Powers sold out in 1853 to a neighbor, Julius Gibson, who was a farmer by occupation. This is likely the one-story, front-gabled, wood-frame commercial building shown on Nellie Boone’s 1885 painting of Millville.

Just east of the current bridge over the South Fork is Lot 1, Block 12, which was bought by John Marshall from the Smiths in 1847. Marshall likely kept his dry goods store here (Site 16) through at least 1857. The 1872 atlas maps a structure at the store location, but it is not shown in Nellie Boone’s 1885 painting and may have been razed by then. A bridge replacement done in 1991 exposed numerous artifacts in this area, and the vicinity holds high probability of other buried historic deposits.

Some structures recorded in historic documents have yet to be accounted for, either on maps or in the ground. The blacksmith shop run by James McCaslin and Stephen Dickins is one example. This ca.1850 shop employed two men, had two forges, and represented a total capital investment of $200. Production for the year ending June 1, 1850 included 75 sets of horseshoes (valued at $150), 12 sets of wagon irons ($480), 100 picks and gads [mining tools for breaking ore] ($100), and 200 sets of miscellaneous irons ($400). The shop had consumed three tons of iron (costing $360), 2,800 bushels of charcoal ($30), and 200 bushels of soft coal ($50). Neither man is reported as owning any real estate in the 1850 census, which suggests that they were renting not only their home but also their shop. As such, they may have occupied one of the blacksmith shops already accounted for (Site 12 or Site 9, which is possibly under the modern park road). Site locations garnered from the documents but not yet field investigated include the Satterly House (Site 3) and Elbridge Howard’s Stables (Site 13). Unfortunately, the area where most of the commercial buildings (Sites 5 to 9) would have been (three stores [or two stores and a tavern], a grocery, and a blacksmith shop), is under a parking lot.

Pratt Pony Truss bridge erected across the South Fork during the late 19th century, looking north. The WPA stencil dates this photo from the later 1930s. The bridge was demolished shortly after that time. (Photograph from State Park files)

Hand excavation, following backhoe exposure of 19th-century deposits. (FRR August 2001)

The Millville Cemetery is located on private property outside of the state park. In 1922, twenty-two headstones were reported to be in the cemetery. By 1971, the number of visible stones had been reduced to three, although archaeologists working in the area in 1983 found several headstones lying on the ground.