

# Powder Mills in the Glen

## 1823 - 1870

Between the period of Native American use of the Glen and the private picnic period there was an industrial use of the Glen.

In 1823 Marshfield Parsons built a gunpowder mill on Allens Creek upstream of the glen near Linden Avenue. In the early 1830's he moved his gunpowder manufacturing to a more secluded site here in the glen.

*Of late time I have been together with my family and Powel's Mill as am making preparation for building a large Barn this coming season as in doing the said mill attached to the Glen Mill with all the my conclusion that I shall be pretty much employed at any rate this summer. But as my health together with Elisa's is good, we don't think it much.*

"Together with my farming and the powdermill and am making preparation for building a large barn this coming season and running the saw mill attached to the grist mill with all you may conclude that I shall be pretty much employed at any rate this summer. But as my health together with Elisa's is good, we don't think it much."

Excerpt from a letter Parsons wrote to his sister in May 1838 mentioning some of his many enterprises.

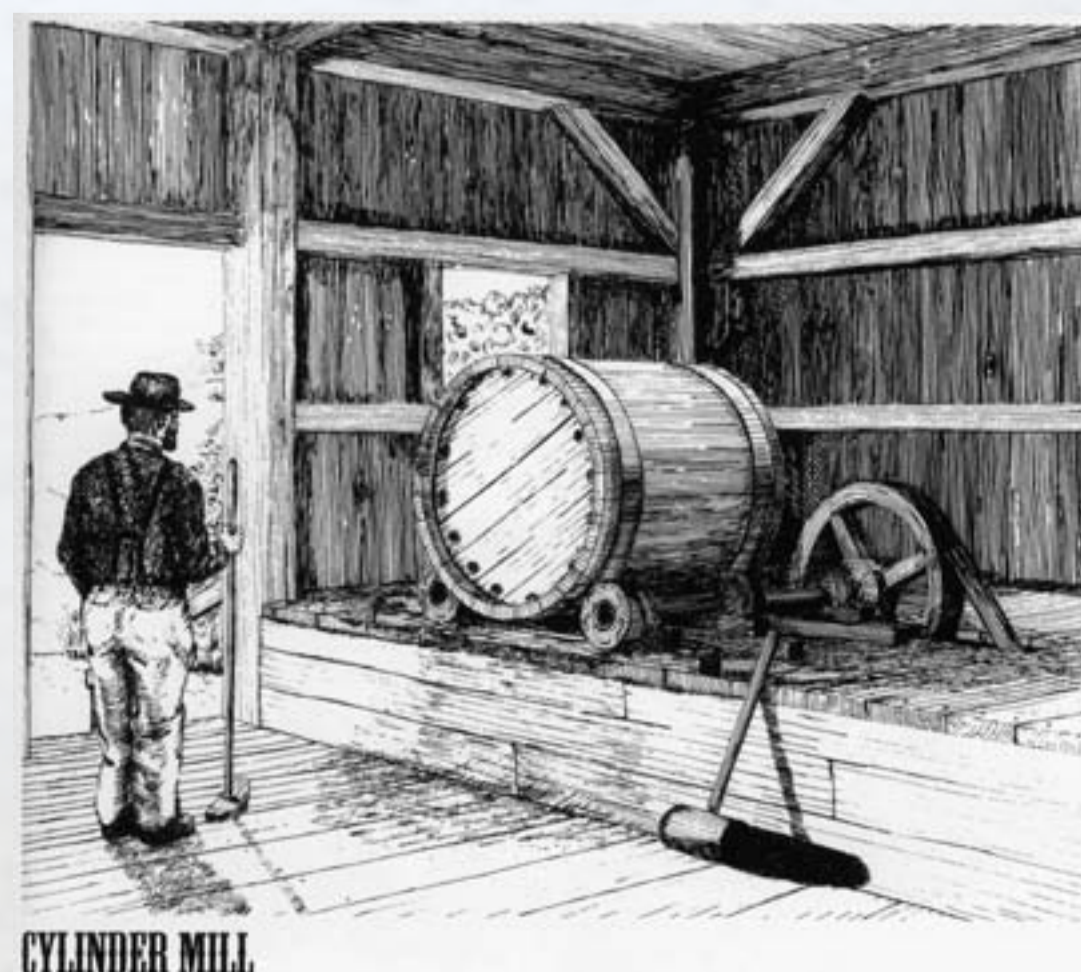
Up to 1500 hundred pounds a day were produced and sold mostly as blasting powder for the construction of railroads, canals and various quarrying and mining operations. Secluded sites with reliable water power like the Glen (Powdermill Park and Palmer's Glen were others) were sought out for this dangerous process. Explosions were not uncommon, many with loss of life.

Because of the danger, tools were generally made from wood without metal fasteners. Workers wore shoes without metal fasteners or went barefoot. The buildings were well spaced to limit the destruction from explosions.

Gunpowder could be made by combining just three ingredients: saltpeter (KNO<sub>3</sub>), charcoal, and sulfur in the approximate ratio of:

- 75% saltpeter
- 15% charcoal
- 10% sulfur

The three ingredients were combined by pulverizing them together in an "incorporating mill" of which there were two types in use in this period; cylinder mills and wheel mills. A drawing of a cylinder mill is shown below.



CYLINDER MILL



Two of the many brass cylinder balls that have been found over the years - the result of frequent explosions at the mill.

It is believed that powder mills in the glen used only cylinder mills which consist of a wooden cylinder, about four feet long, containing many brass balls which when revolved, crushed and combined the powder's components.



Detail of an 1852 map showing the location of Parsons Powder mill in the Glen.

Marshfield [Parsons] owned much property in Brighton and was considered a wealthy man. At one time he owned an inn and its adjoining farm on Monroe Avenue. This is now called The Spring House and is a well known restaurant.

He also owned the area which is now called Corbett's Glen. On that property he built a powder mill on Allens Creek. The mill proved to be a success financially. However, in 1848 the mill blew up when some sand blew into the rollers causing a spark. One mill hand was killed. In the August 14, 1848 Daily Democrat, a Rochester paper, an article stated:

*"the mill belonging to M. Parsons Esq. in Brighton is again in operation and the proprietor is ready to furnish the "villi a no us saltpetre" to all customers at No. 30 State St."*

The powder from this mill was used in enlarging the Erie Canal.

Excerpt from a memoir by Ruth Porter, great granddaughter of Marchfield Parsons



An undated photo of the powder mill in Buckfield Maine. Two management individuals (?) talk with three mill workers who are covered in charcoal dust. Note that two workers are barefoot.



This undated photo of the powder mill in Buckfield Maine shows the wooden walkways that mills used to avoid possible sparks caused by stones on the path.



Circa 1850 tintypes of Marshfield and Elisa Parsons

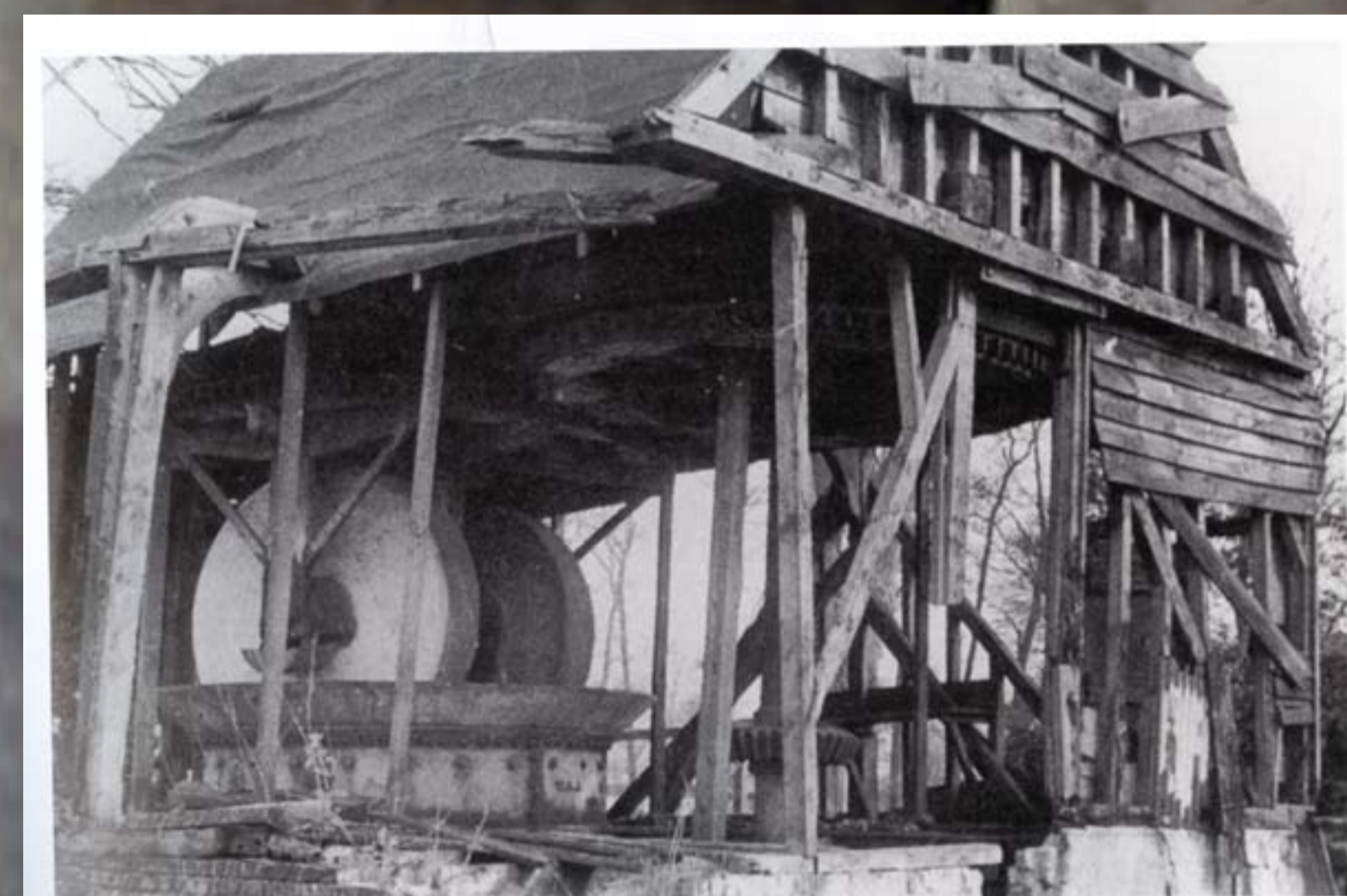


Photo of a wheel mill. While common in the period, it is likely that mills in the glen used only cylinder mills.



Ruins of the drying house at the Nitre Hall Gunpowder Works which operated for nearly forty years on Cobb's Creek in Delaware County, Pennsylvania from 1800 to 1840.

### Excerpts regarding the Parsons Powder Mill on Allens Creek from the Diary and Log Book of Calvin Wooster Owen, held by the Penfield Local History Room.

#### Saturday August 27, 1853

Parsons Powder mill at allen creek in Brighton Blew up about 6 1/2 P.M. One person killed. A man had just left before the explosion took place. I heard the report & could see the smoke from my house, some 2 1/2 miles distant. The same work Blew up some 4 1/2 years ago. I think it was in March of 1849 when one man, Archibald Ross was killed. This is the third Blow up of the same works that I have known. The first time I believe a man and boy was destroyed.

#### April 21st, 1854

Last night about 9 oclock the Powder works at Allen Creek some 2 miles west of Penfield exploded for the 5th time to my knowledge. I have just returned from the ruins, the two grinding mills is what blowed up & sit fire to an old building in which was stored some 2 or 3 thousand emty powder kegs, all burned. No person hurt, as none was present at the time. It is kept running nights alone, when they are grinding the powder. I was told that about 1/2 ton of powder was destroyed this time. 9 months ago it blew up.



#### Wednesday Jan' 3rd, 1855

Fair & thawing pleasant as spring day. Explosion of the powder mill 2 miles west of me on Allen Creek own'd by Burbank. Yes, it was one of the grinding mills, no lives lost. The workman had just step out a moment before. It happened about 1/4 before 9 A.M. I see the smoke rise immediately after hearing the report it is said that some 800 pounds of powder was burned. On hearing the report my first thought was that it was a heavy piece of cannon discharged.

#### Tuesday May 8th, 1855

It snowed some last evening, & this morning it is raining fast, wind east, cool. Am painting some on my house, & making other repairs on my house. P.M. It began snowing about 8 this morning and continued to fall fast till about one oclock this afternoon when it turned to rain again & continu'd to snow & rain 24 hours quite steadily. About 5 this afternoon the Powder mill at Allen creek & in sight of here Exploded Killing 5 men employed therein. The same works blew up on the 3rd of last January, none was hurt at that time. This is the 4th time these mills have blown up within 6 years, and about 8 times since 1824. Arch' Ross was killed there 6 years ago this spring.

#### Wednesday September 12th 1855

The Powder Mill or works on Allen Creek in Brighton which is in sight of Penfield Blew up this afternoon about 6 oclock. There was four sharp explosions, caused by the several shops or works. It had not been rebuilt long since the blow up on the 7th May last; This time there were no workmen killed, for the reason that they have left off work. This is, I think, the 7th time that it has blew up since my knowledge it, and is believed is the sixth time within 7 years.

