

Decade by Decade

A retrospective view of Iowa through the years reveals a gradual rise followed by a gradual decline in milling. For the greater part of five decades there was a gradual annual increase in the number of mills, the peak having been reached in the late seventies. Since that time there has been a gradual decline in the number of mills until they are now all but gone.

Prior to 1831 the Federal Government had erected the "Jeff Davis Saw Mill" in what is now Allamakee County. As soon as the Black Hawk Purchase was open for settlement, pioneers began coming into Iowaland, bringing with them such portable mills as they had — coffee mills, jointers and graters, and perhaps an occasional mortar and pestle. Soon thereafter mills began to be constructed of such materials as were available to the pioneers. In 1833 a combined sawmill and gristmill was built near the mouth of Little Turkey River in Clayton County where the town of Millville was later established.

Other mills erected in the early thirties included the Sageville Mill in Dubuque County, Clark's Mill near Buffalo in Scott County, and Moffatt's Mill at Augusta in Des Moines County. About

1836 Samuel Clayton and his sons constructed a brush dam across Chequest Creek in Van Buren County and established the Clayton Mill, one of the famous old mills of that area. It was about this time that Aaron Porter built the "Little Savior" for residents of Cedar County. And the water of the Maquoketa River was harnessed for a mill at Cascade in Dubuque County.

In 1838 William Meek and his sons asked permission to build a dam across the Des Moines River at Bonaparte in Van Buren County, and establish a mill that continued to be prominent in Iowa history until 1900. Five other franchises to build milldams were granted by the first Legislative Assembly of Iowa Territory. In 1839 Benjamin Nye was given authority to erect the first of three mills on Pine Creek in Muscatine County near the site of Old Pine Creek Mill that still stand in Wild Cat Den State Park. It was about this time, too, that David Switzer erected his little mill on Clear Creek at Coralville, near Iowa City, which was to become one of the original pioneer mills of Johnson County.

The decade of the forties witnessed the establishment of the Terrell Mill at Iowa City — the first gristmill on the Iowa River — a mill which operated for fifty years and then gave its water power to the State University of Iowa "for the advancement of science and learning." That period also witnessed the attempt to utilize the wind-

mill for the grinding of grain, an experiment that proved impractical at the Buhrmaster Mill near Burlington. One of the renowned old mills of the decade of the forties was the Wassonville Mill near Wellman, in Washington County. In Jackson County, McCloy's Mill and Tubb's Mill were both established in the decade of the forties, while in the Polk and Warren county region the Parmelee Mill was already serving a large area. But for general interest, for extensive service both in point of years and in area covered, few mills surpassed the Coralville Mill erected in the forties and operated in the fifties by Samuel J. Kirkwood — later known as "Honest Sam," who won wide renown as an orator and statesman, attaining the offices of legislator, Governor, United States Senator, and a member of the President's cabinet.

Prominent among the mills built in the fifties were Fountain Spring Mill in Delaware County, Rock Creek Mill in Cedar County, mills at Monticello and the Oxford Mills in Jones County, mills at Littleton in Buchanan County, at Hardin City, Iowa Falls, Steamboat Rock, and Alden in Hardin County, at Mason City in Cerro Gordo County, at Otranto in Mitchell County, and at the little Bohemian settlement of Spillville in Winneshiek County. Farther to the west was Soper's Mill in Story County, Old Red Mill in Dickinson County, and White Cloud Mill in Mills County. By 1860 Iowa had 333 flour and

gristmills and 540 sawmills. But there were yet many to be erected, and the peak of the flour milling industry was not reached for another decade and a half.

Among the mills that were prominent in the decade of the sixties, although most of them had been established earlier, were the Lowell and Oakland mills in Henry County, the Currier Mill in Mahaska County, the Coppock and Brighton mills in Washington County, and the Larrabee Mill in Fayette County. It was in the sixties, too, that a millrace was built for the Amana mills, and from that day to this Amana has been known for its milling and manufacturing interests.

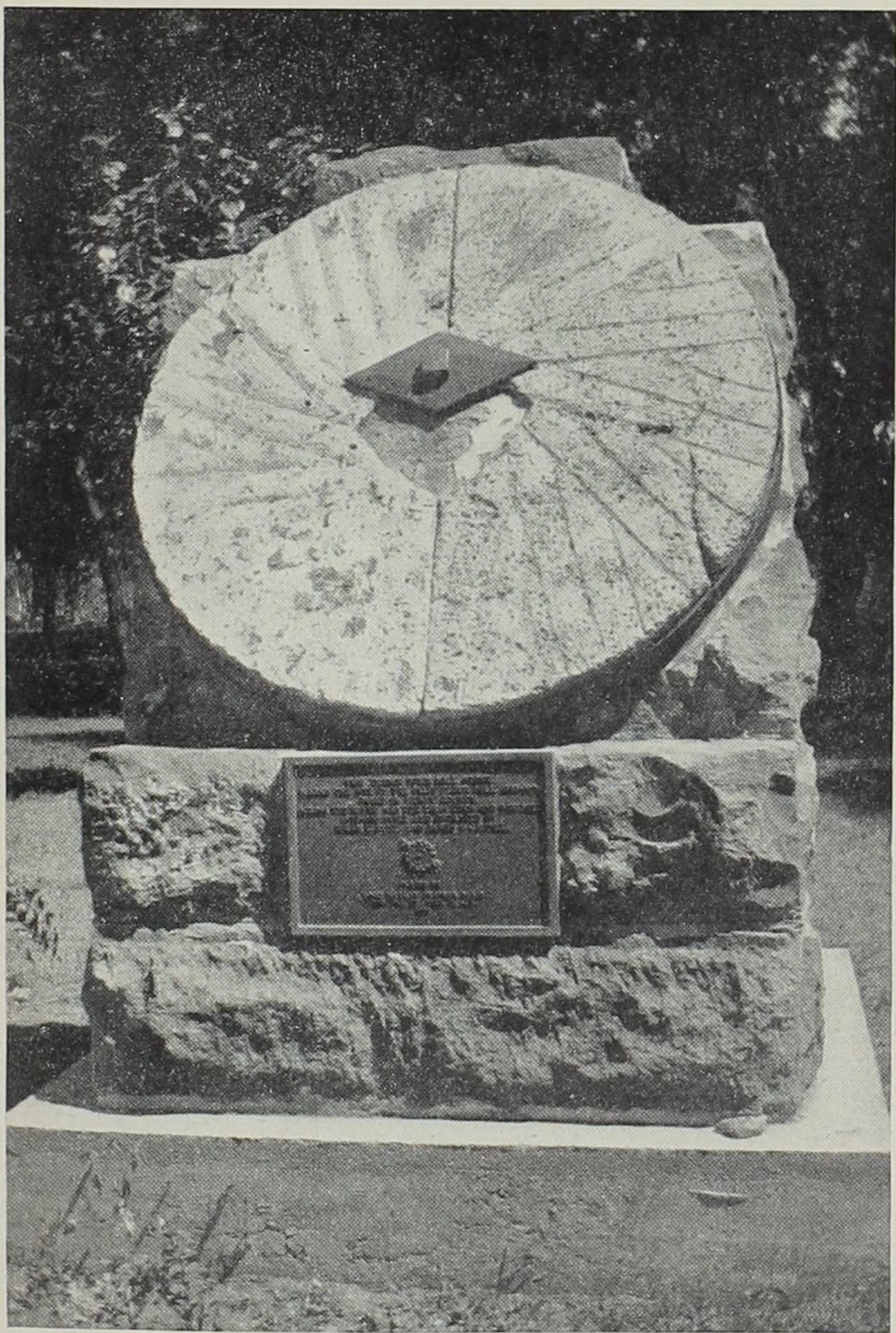
In 1870 the Federal census takers counted 502 flour and gristmills and 545 sawmills in Iowa. The Hawkeye state had truly become a land of a thousand mills. Most of these were operated by water power. In the flour and gristmills alone more than five hundred water wheels were turning and more than a thousand runs of millstones were grinding.

It was in the decade of the seventies that Iowa reached its peak in the wheat-growing industry, with the production of 44,131,807 bushels in 1875. In this same decade the number of gristmills rose to the highest ever attained. In 1880 Iowa had 713 flour and gristmills, with 2,121 runs of millstones, operating by more than a thousand water wheels which were supplemented by 287 steam

engines. Iowa also had 328 sawmills, with forty-eight water wheels and 320 engines. Thus, sawmills had decreased in number during the seventies and many of them had adopted the use of steam. Flour and gristmills, on the other hand, had increased in number, and for the most part they had retained the use of water power. In addition to these, there were thirty-four woolen mills using twenty-two water wheels.

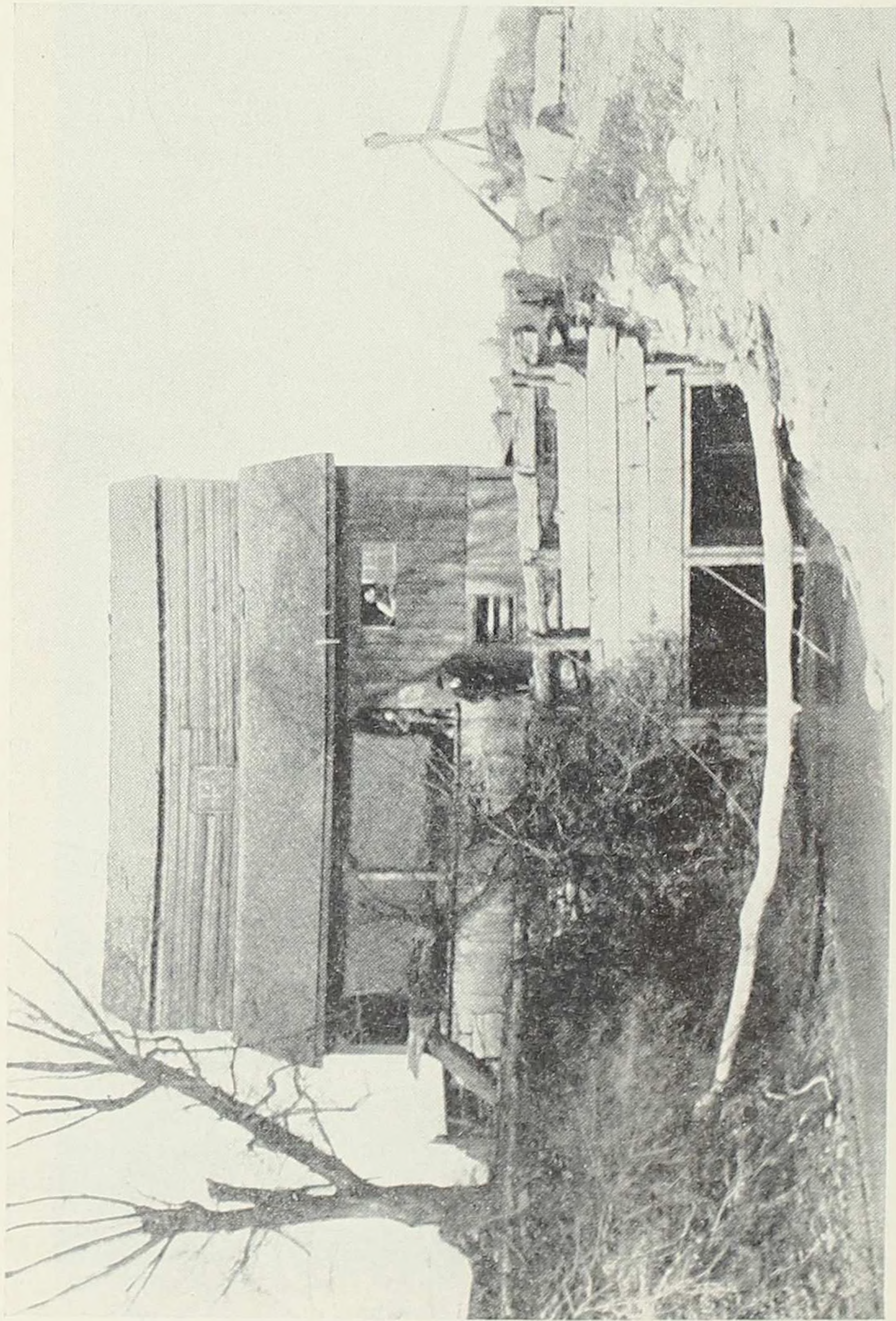
The establishment of a thousand mills was visible evidence of a wide-spread interest in local milling, to avoid the necessity of making long and tiresome journeys to more distant mills. But there came a day when the interest in local milling declined. In some cases this was due to the building of larger and better mills that were reasonably accessible. In other cases, time was taking its toll. Mills were destroyed, dismantled, or abandoned in greater numbers than they were built, restored, or replaced. Perhaps floods, fires, and ice jams were the chief causes for the destruction of old mills. The famous old Moffatt Mill on the Skunk River was destroyed, and a carding mill, a sawmill, a furniture factory and a distillery — all the property of Levi Moffatt — went down stream in the flood of 1851. Many less renowned mills suffered a similar fate.

But there is yet another story. Many old mills stood year after year, decade after decade, defying the elements and only slowly weathering



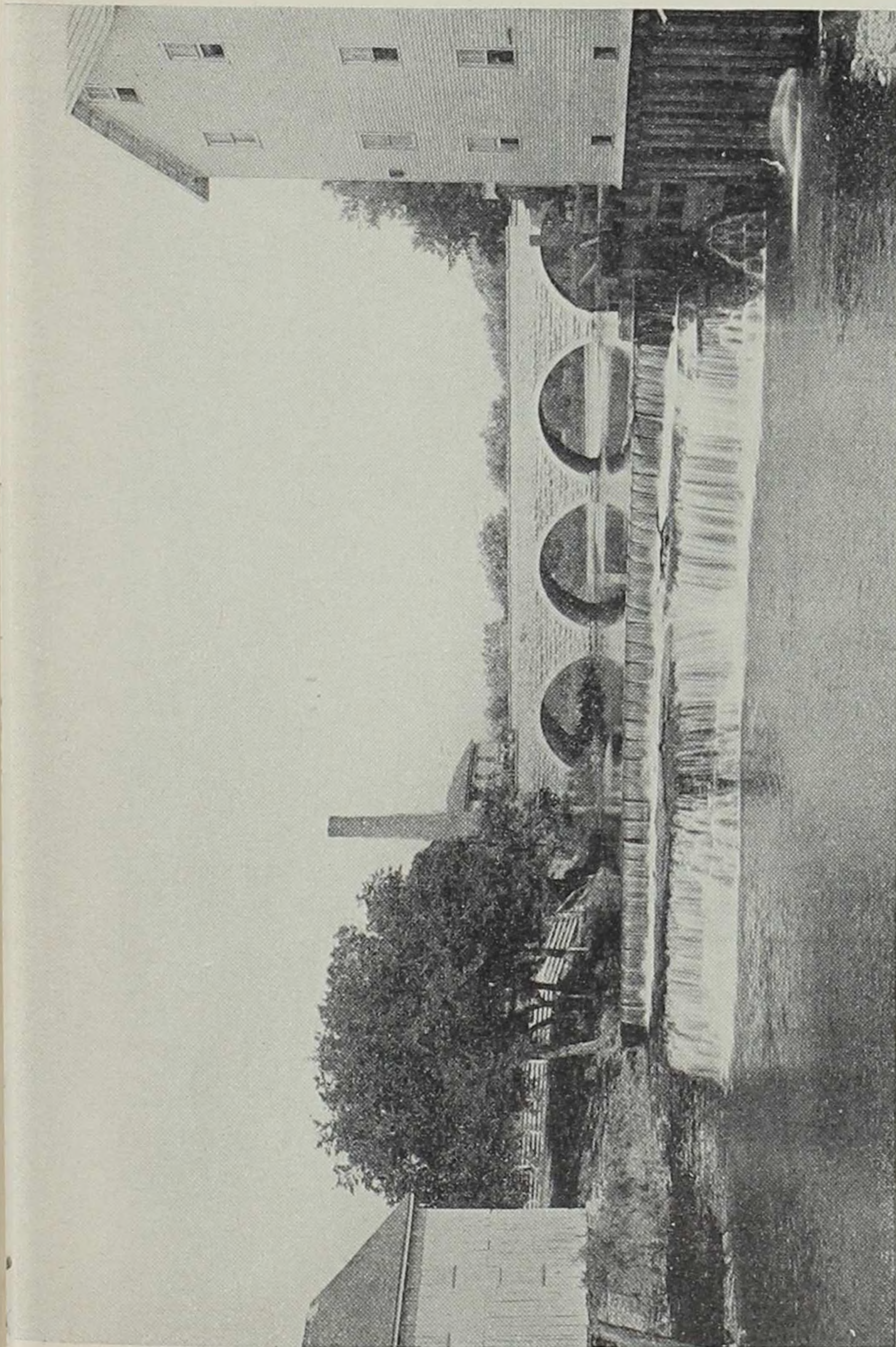
Photograph by Russell Paul

An old French millstone has been mounted in an attractive manner and preserved as a significant historic landmark at Lowell in Henry County.



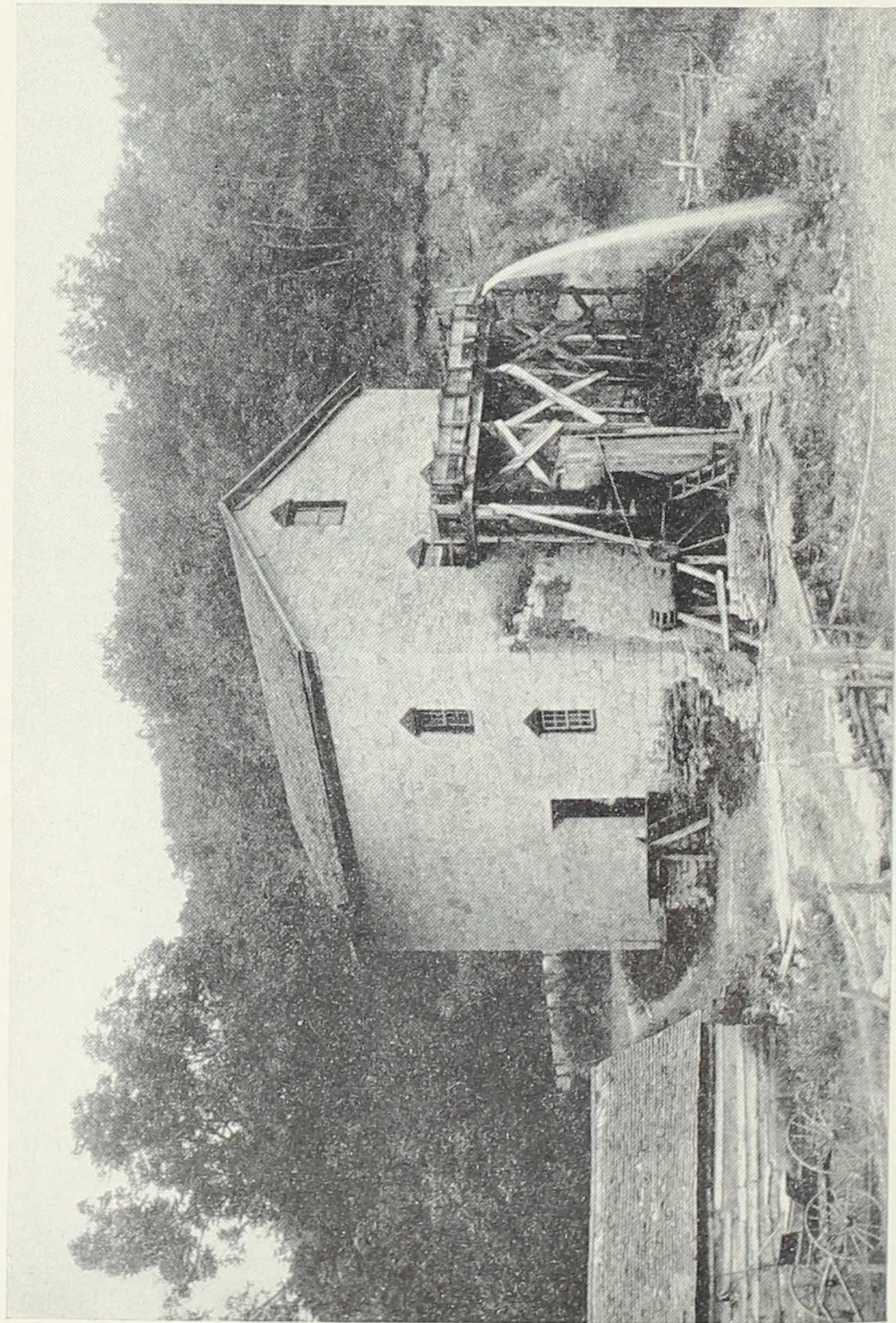
Moffatt's Mill on the Skunk River in Des Moines County was one of the first and most widely patronized mills in southeastern Iowa. One of its millstones is preserved in Crapo Park, Burlington.

Courtesy of Moffatt E. Finck



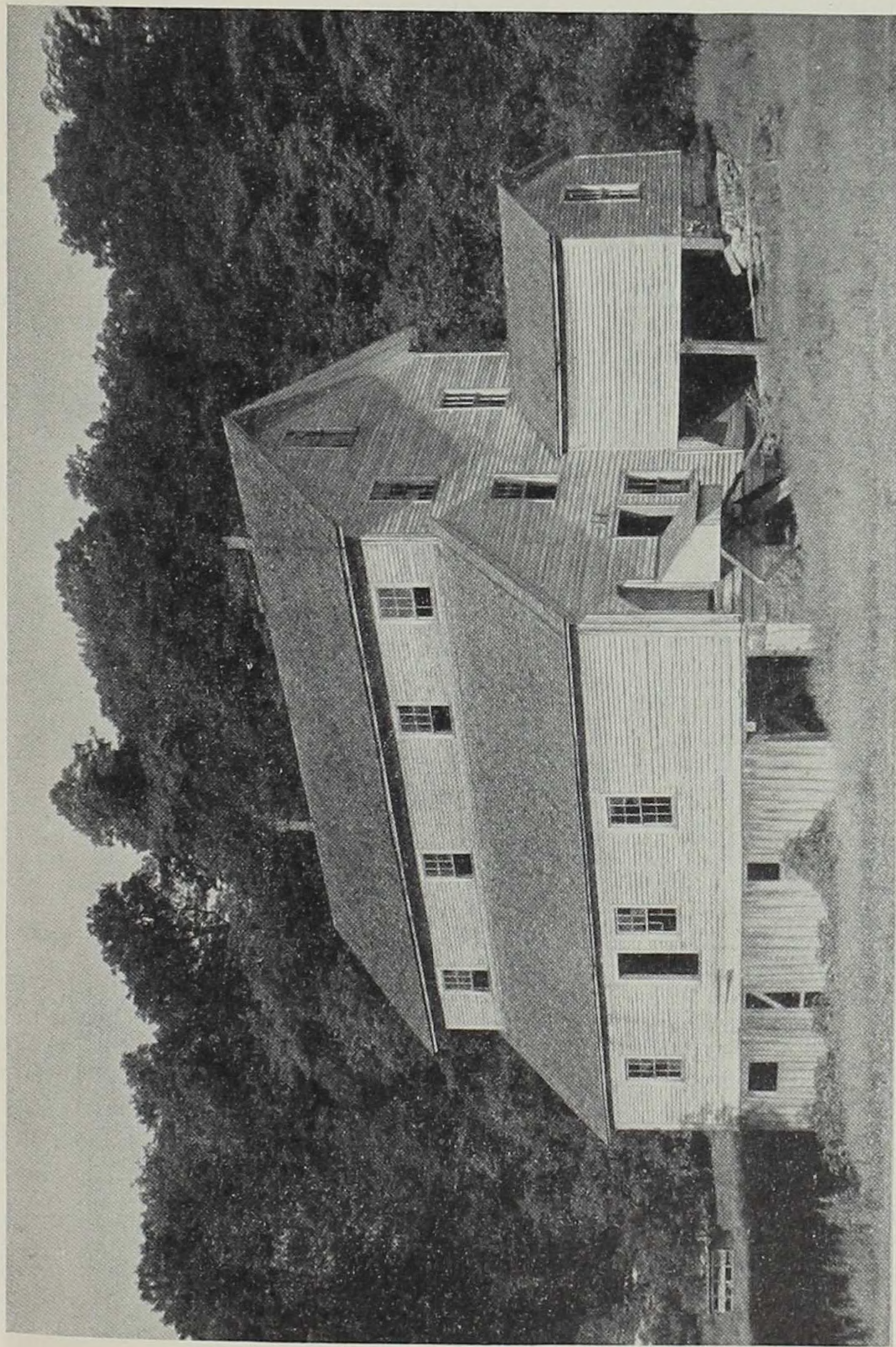
From the Floyd A. Nagler Collection

A fall of nine feet in the waters of the Maquoketa River gave the town of Cascade its name and its water power. An old mill there withstood the floods of 1856 and 1925. The dam was later removed as a flood control measure. But the old mill remained.



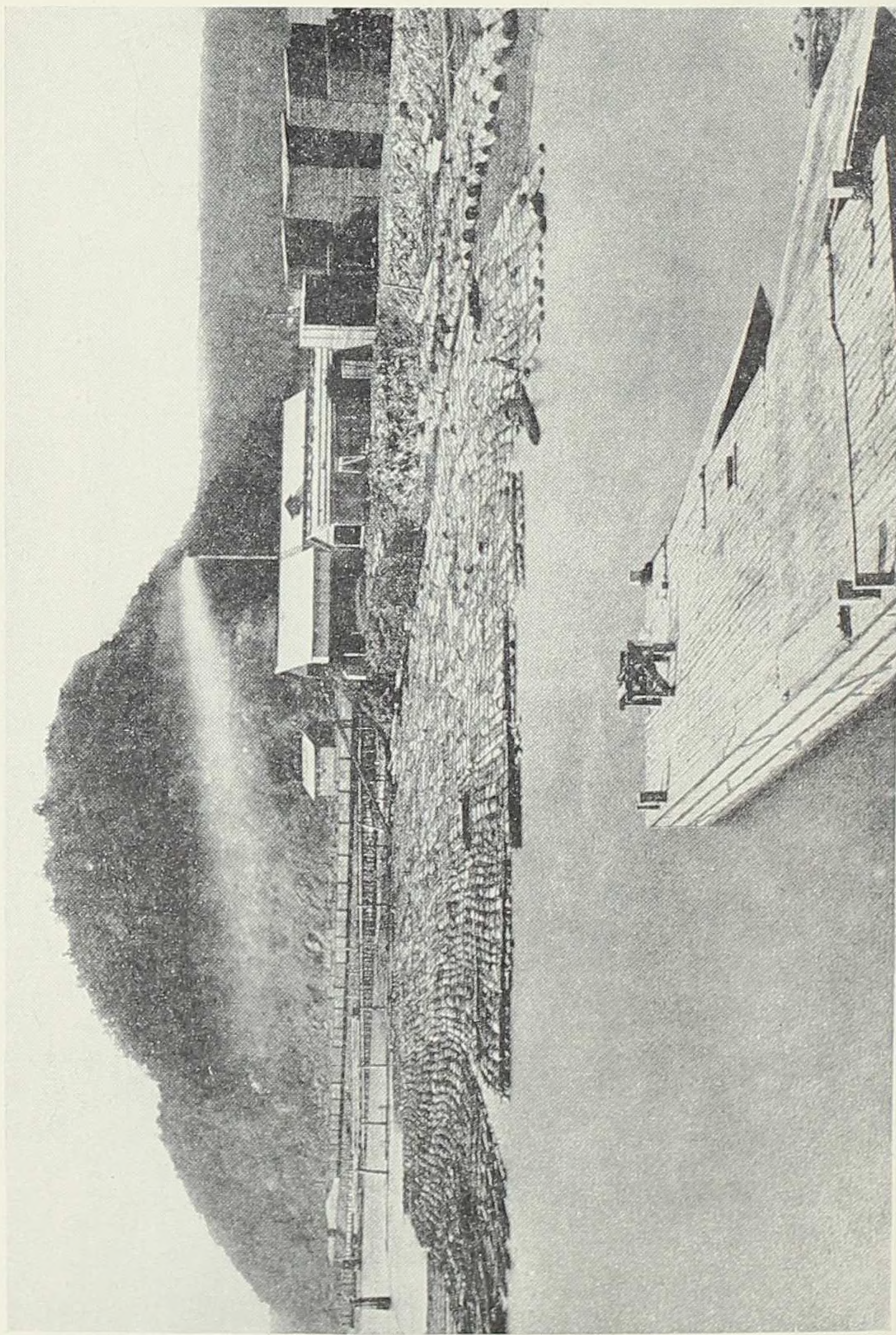
Photograph by Samuel Calvin

Fountain Spring Mill near Greeley, in Delaware County, had a millrace and flume carrying water from a spring down the slope of a hillside to an overshot mill wheel in the valley below. A 1907 picture shows the original wheel in place, but badly broken.



From the Floyd A. Nagler Collection

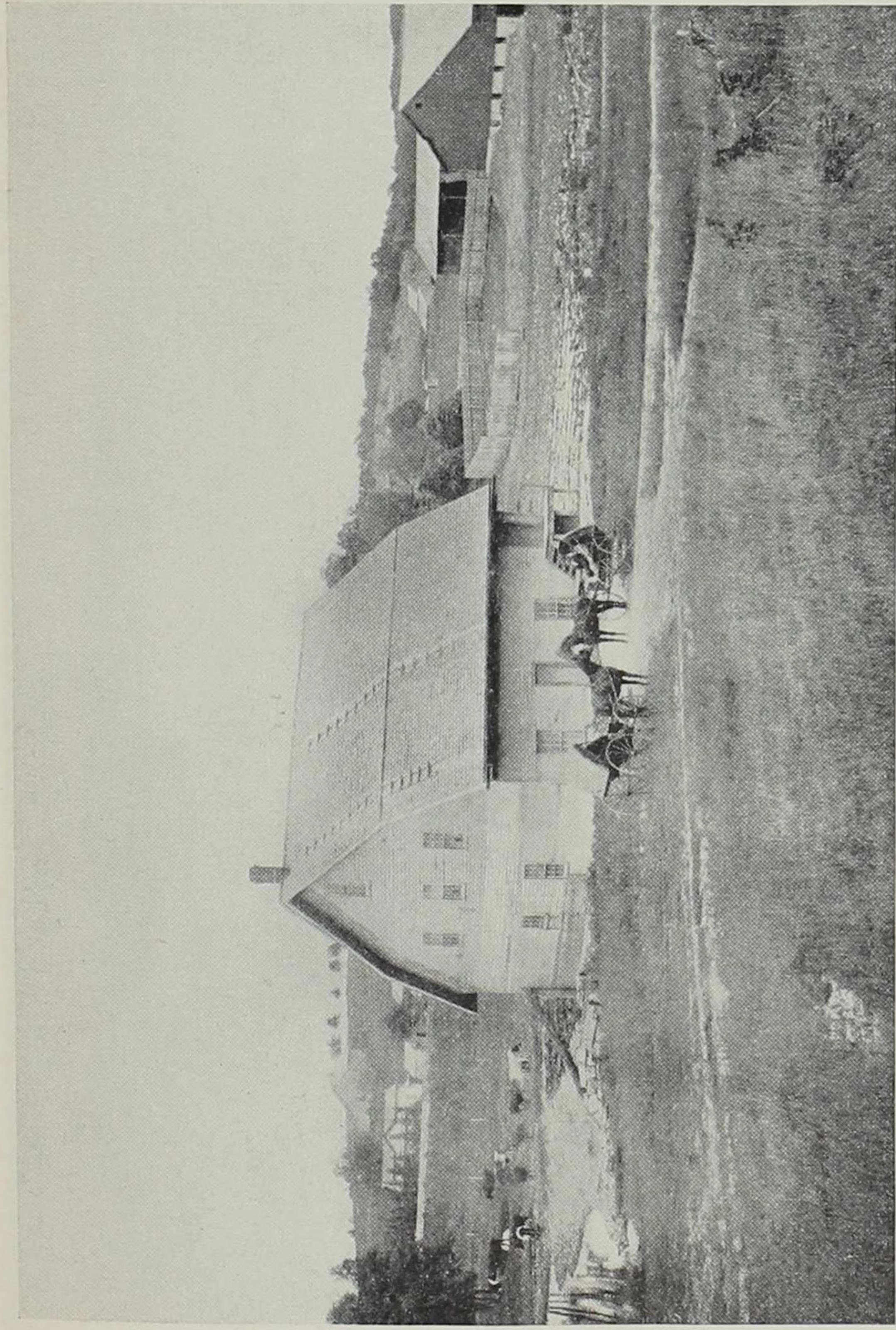
William Werhan, the first postmaster at Forest Mills in Allamakee County, was the owner of the first sawmill and gristmill in this area. In 1865 he built this larger flouring mill which served the pioneers for many years.



Courtesy of Florence L. Clark

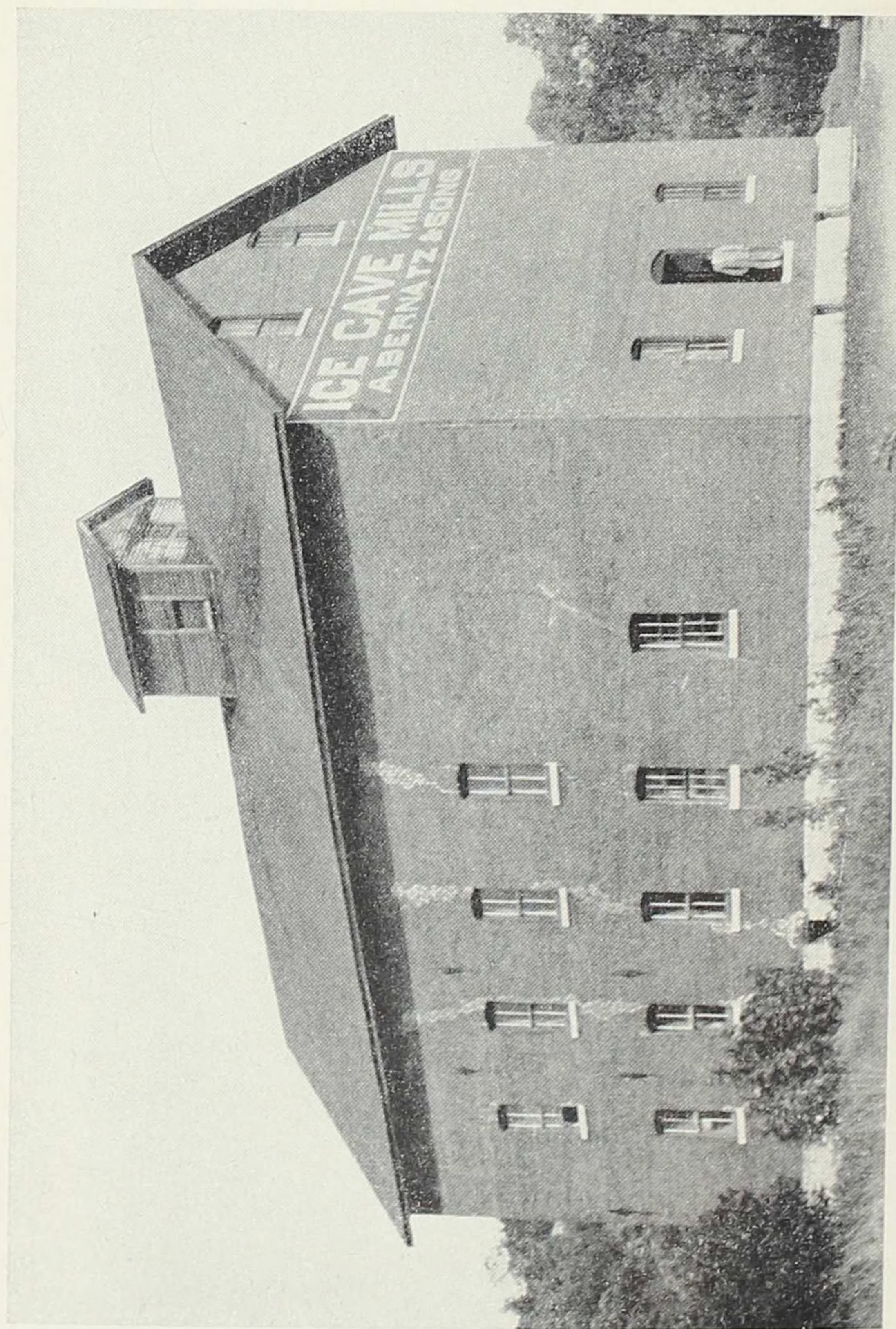
The Fleming Sawmill and Log Raft began operating at Marquette, in Clayton County, in the decade of the sixties. In 1882 they were doing 'an immense business, employing 120 men, and having a pay-roll of \$5000 per month.

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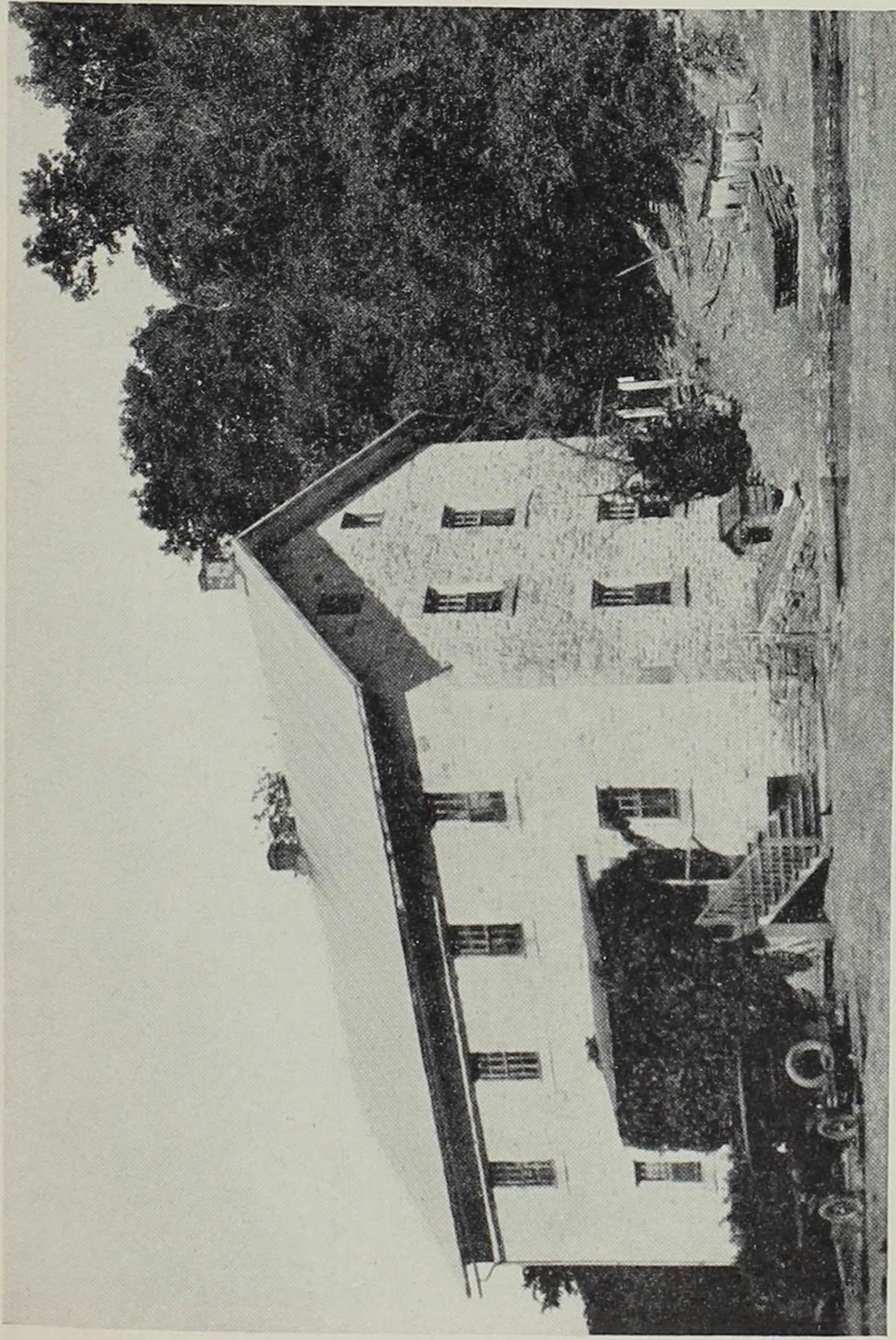
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One of the two old mills that served the pioneers of Vernon Springs in Howard County. This picture with its typical rural setting shows the old mill as it appeared in horse and buggy days.



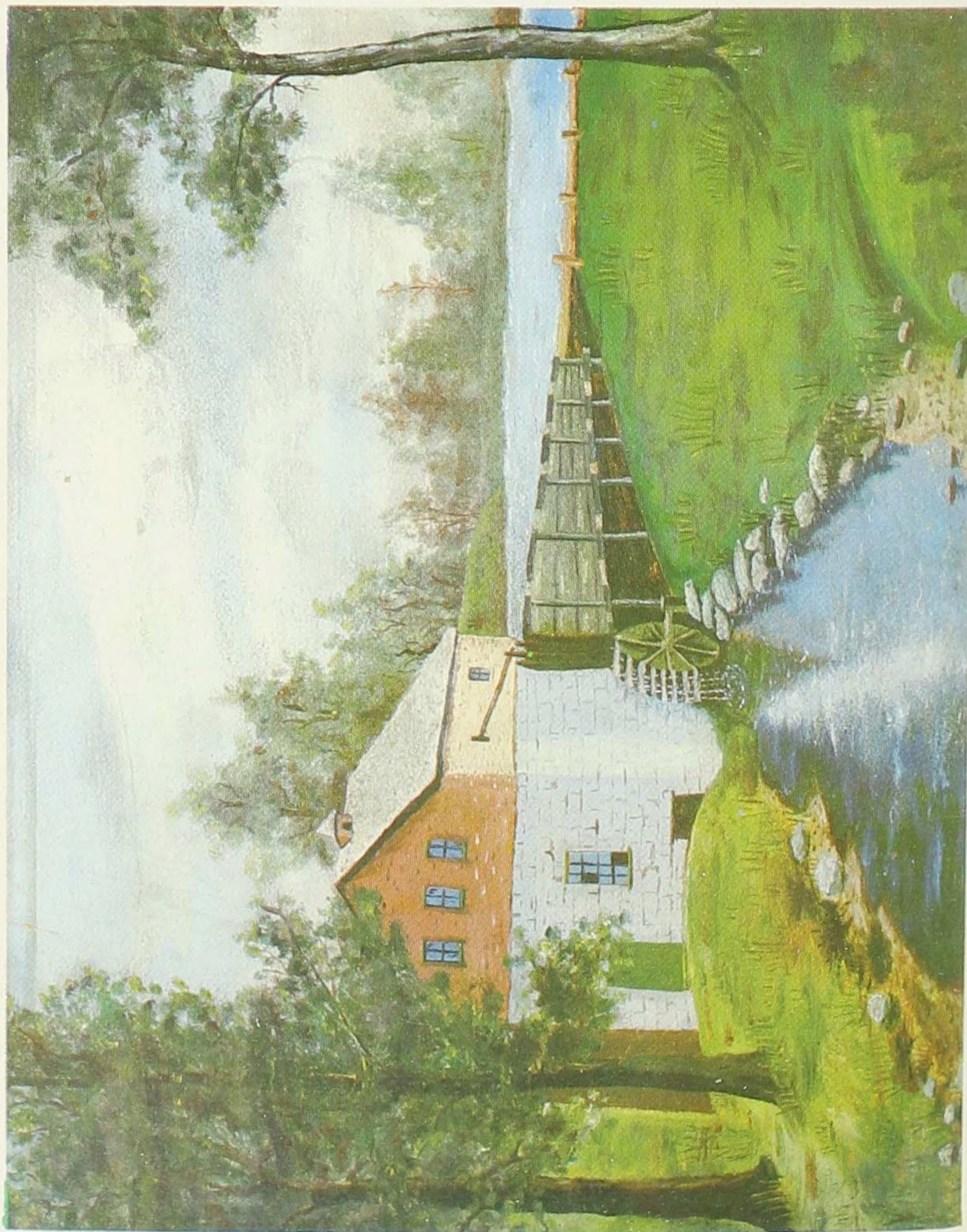
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Decorah was for many years a milling center, obtaining grain from both northern Iowa and southern Minnesota. Ice Cave Mill on the Upper Iowa River was a pioneer landmark in that area.



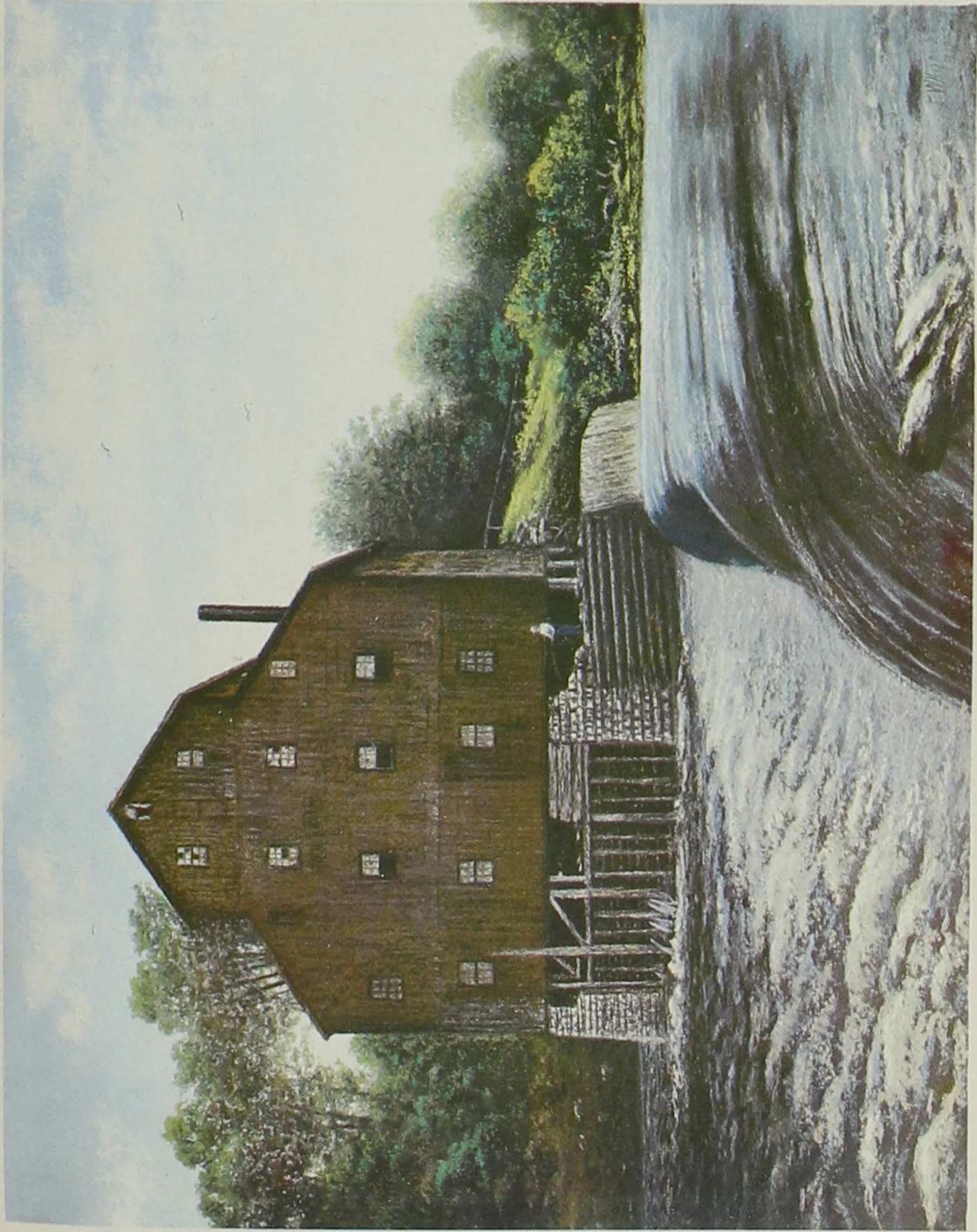
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The Staudinger Mill near Monona, in Linton Township in Allamakee County, was operating in 1868 and was used in later years as a dwelling.

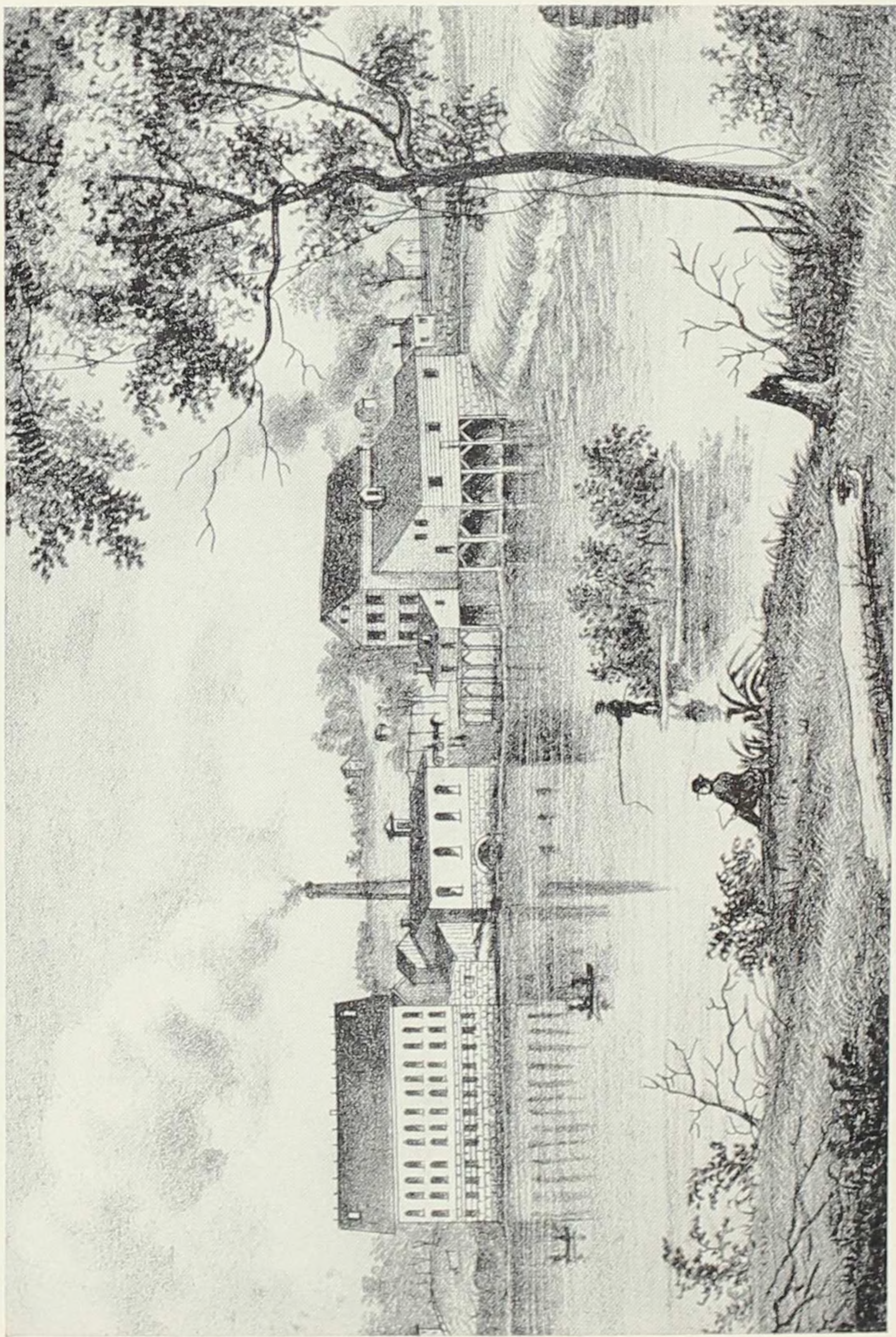


Lulu Guengerich

Wassonville Mill (Washington County)

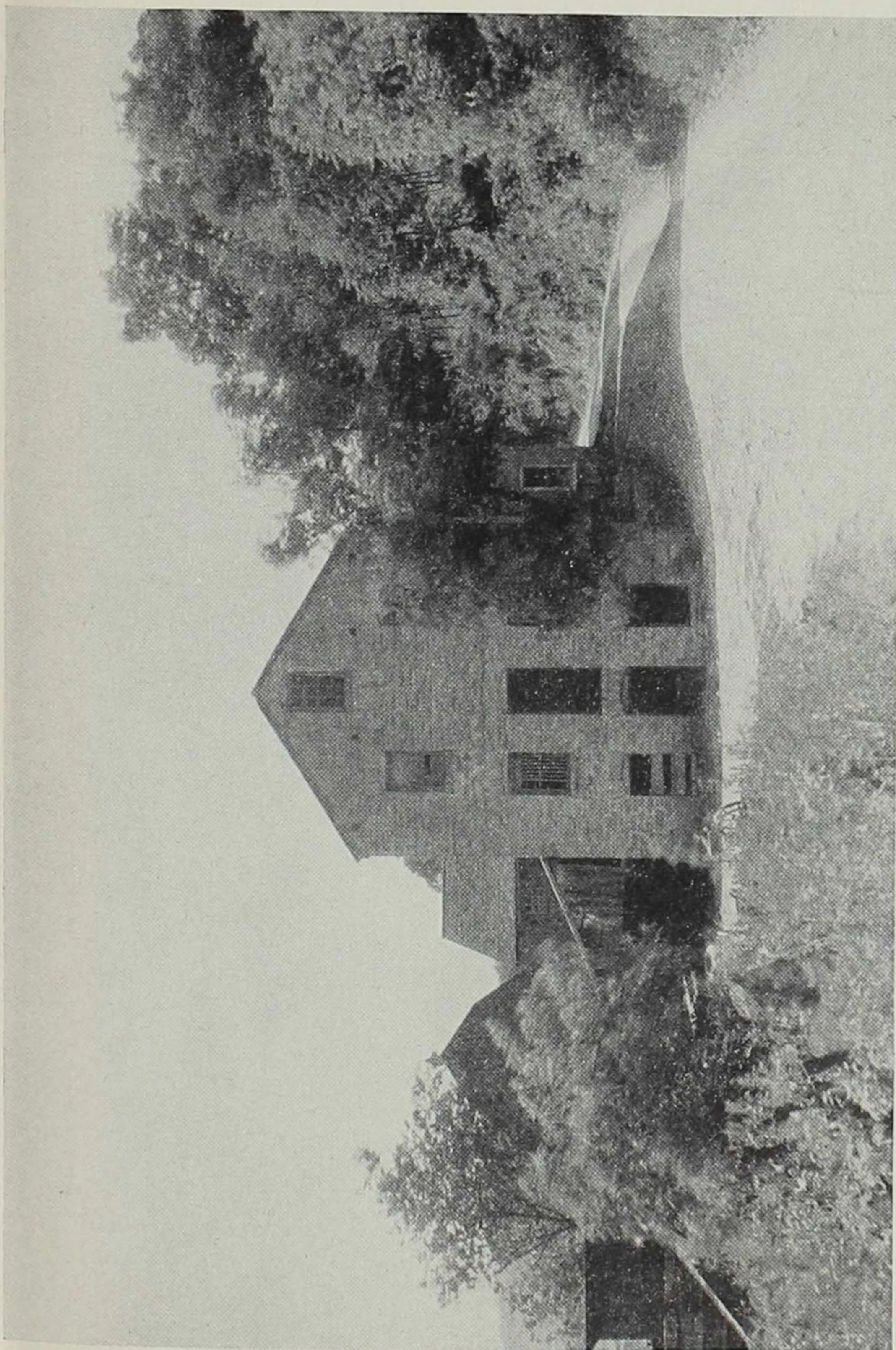


Brighton Mill (Washington County)



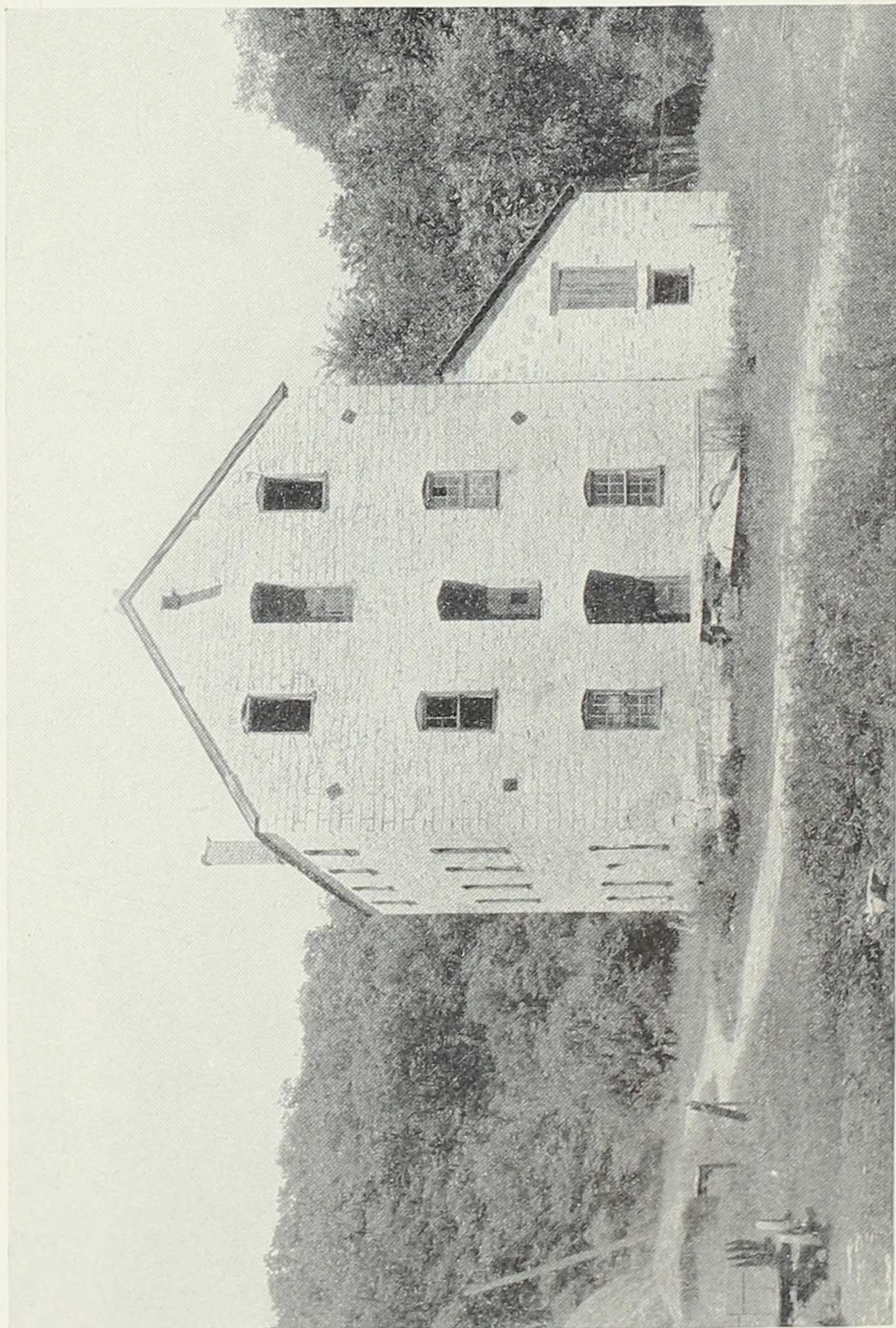
Courtesy of Mae Osborn

The mill dam at Coralville was used not alone for the grinding of wheat and corn, but for the operation of a sawmill, a paper mill, a woolen mill, and an oatmeal mill. Later it was used to generate electric power.



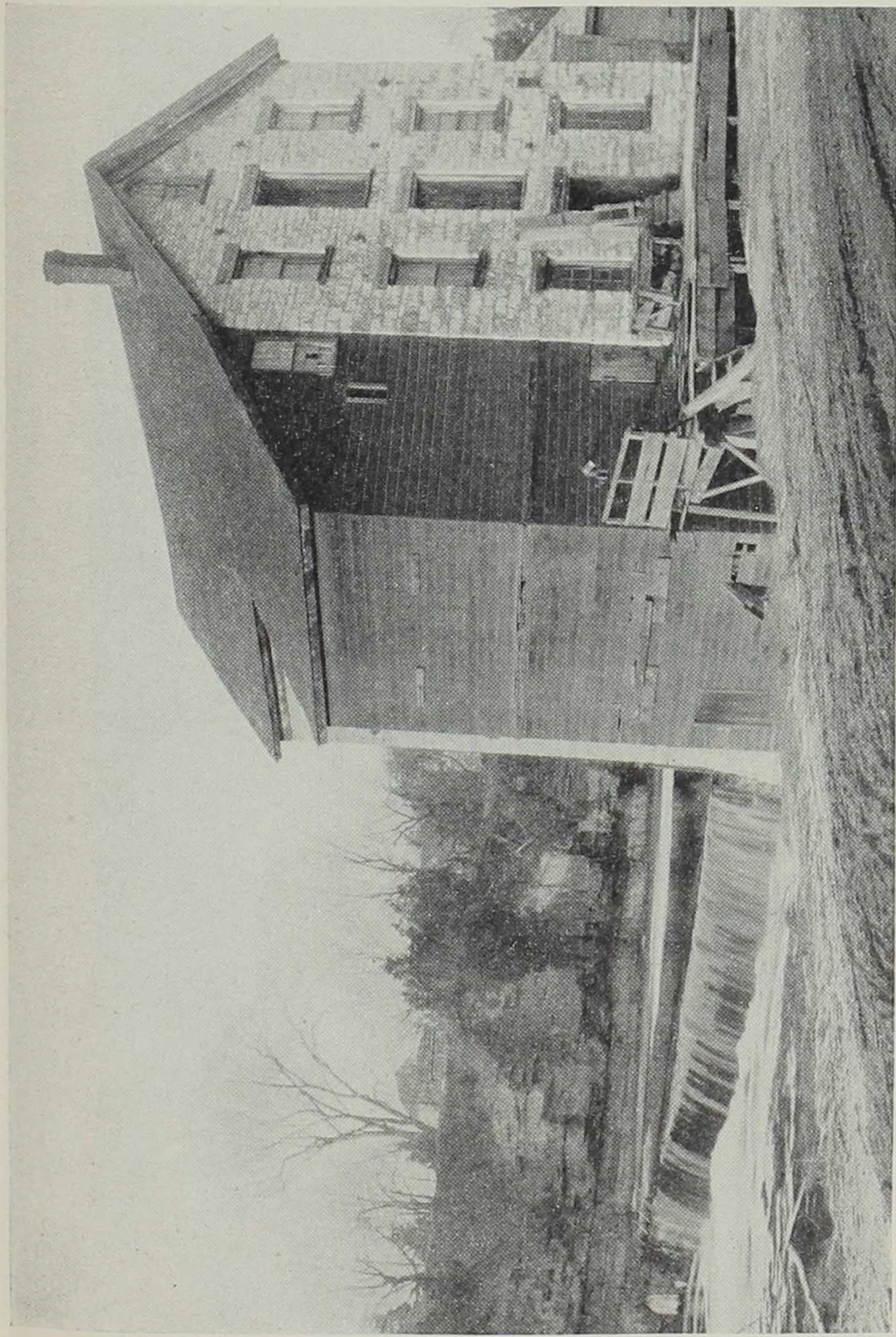
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The Pelzer Mill near Guttenberg, in Clayton County, was a three-story limestone structure, with two runs of burrs. It was built in the decade of the forties and served the pioneers for many years.



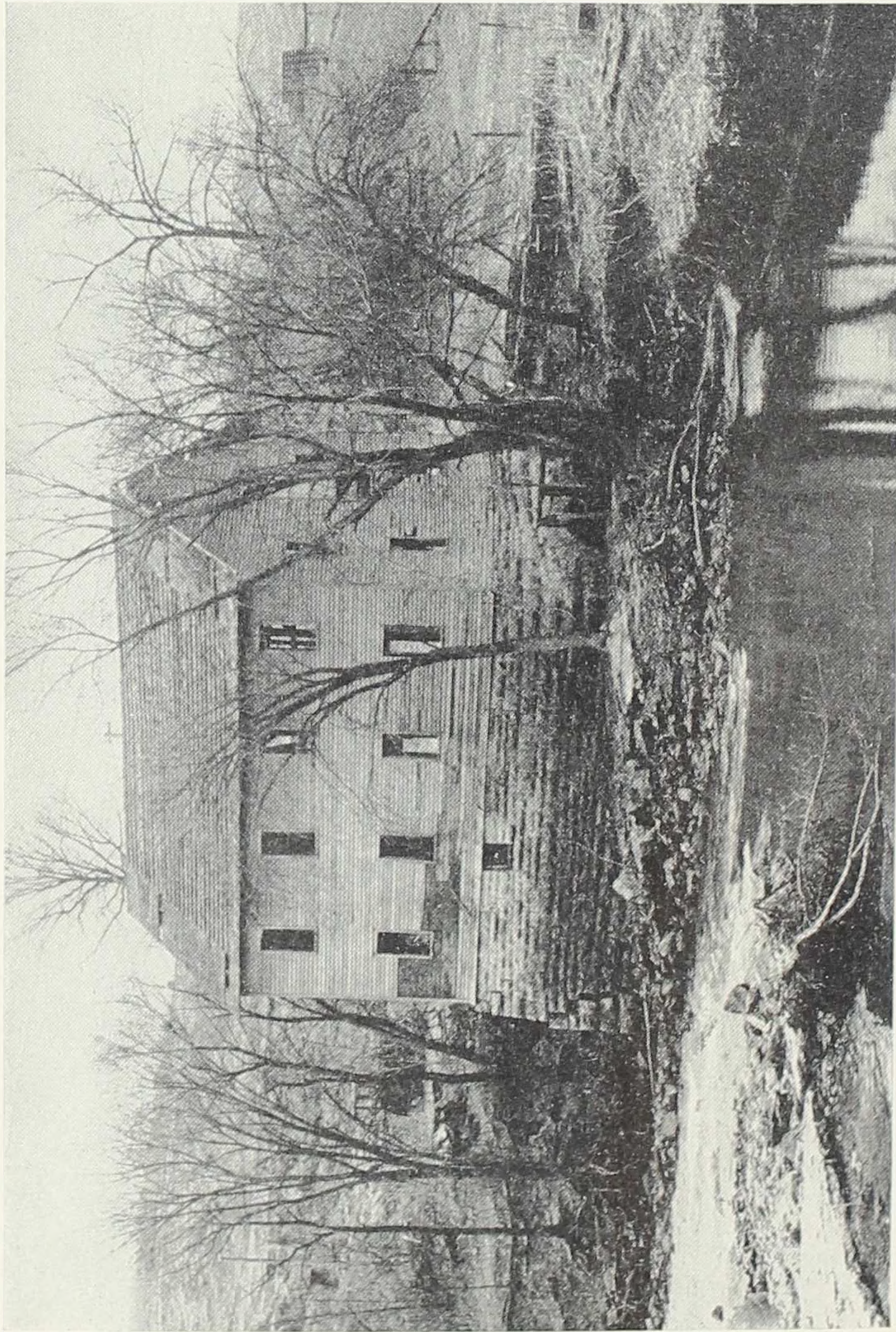
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The Kleinlein Mill near Strawberry Point was operated by water supplied by a series of springs along Spring Creek. The mill and a brewery were "in successful operation" in 1882.



Courtesy of Mrs. O. K. Dick

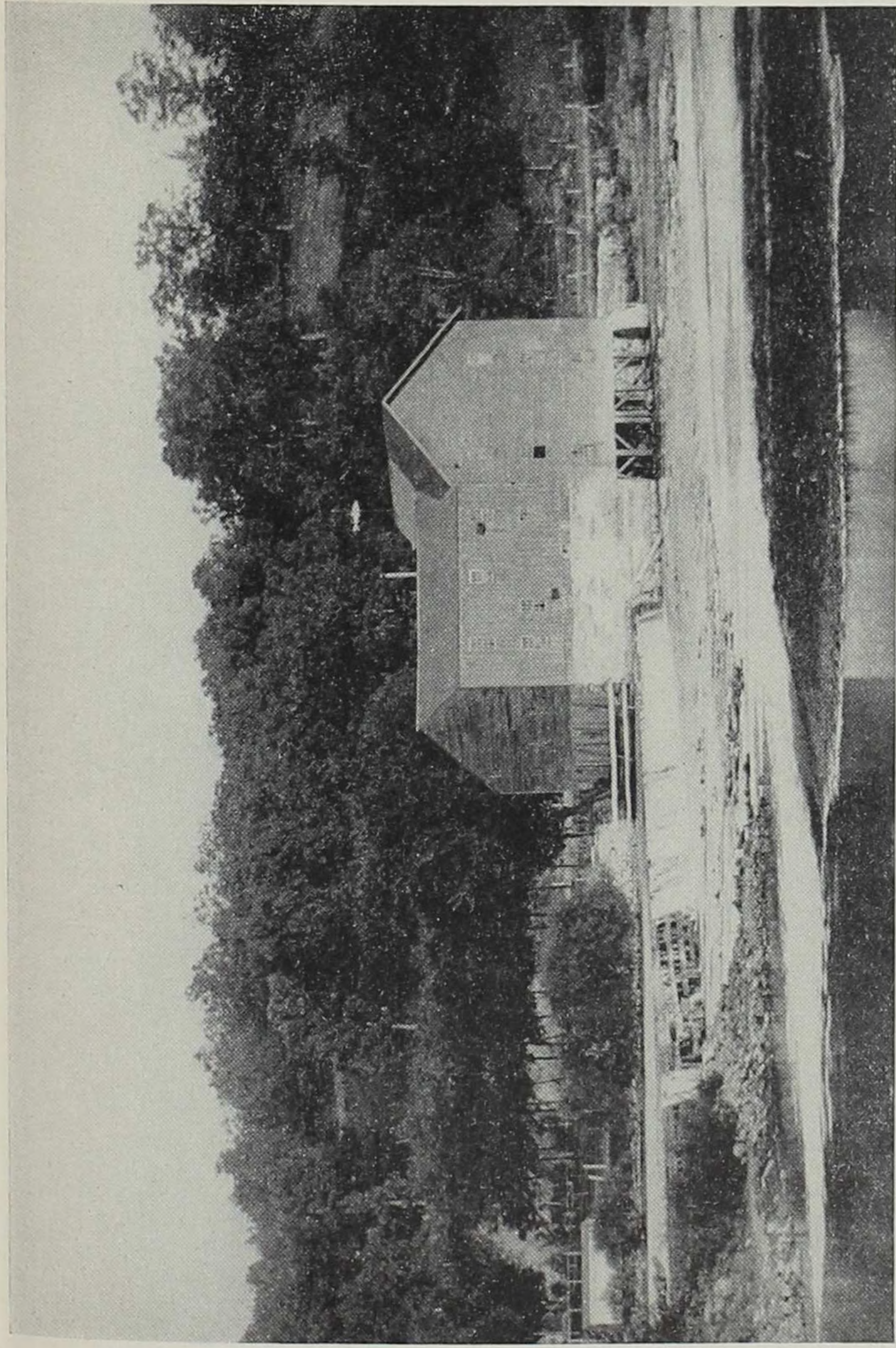
The Iowa Flouring Mill was a substantial limestone structure twenty-eight feet in dimensions, on the banks of the Iowa River at Iowa Falls, Hardin County. The mill was built in 1857, and served a large area in Northwest Iowa.



Courtesy of Susie Webb Wright

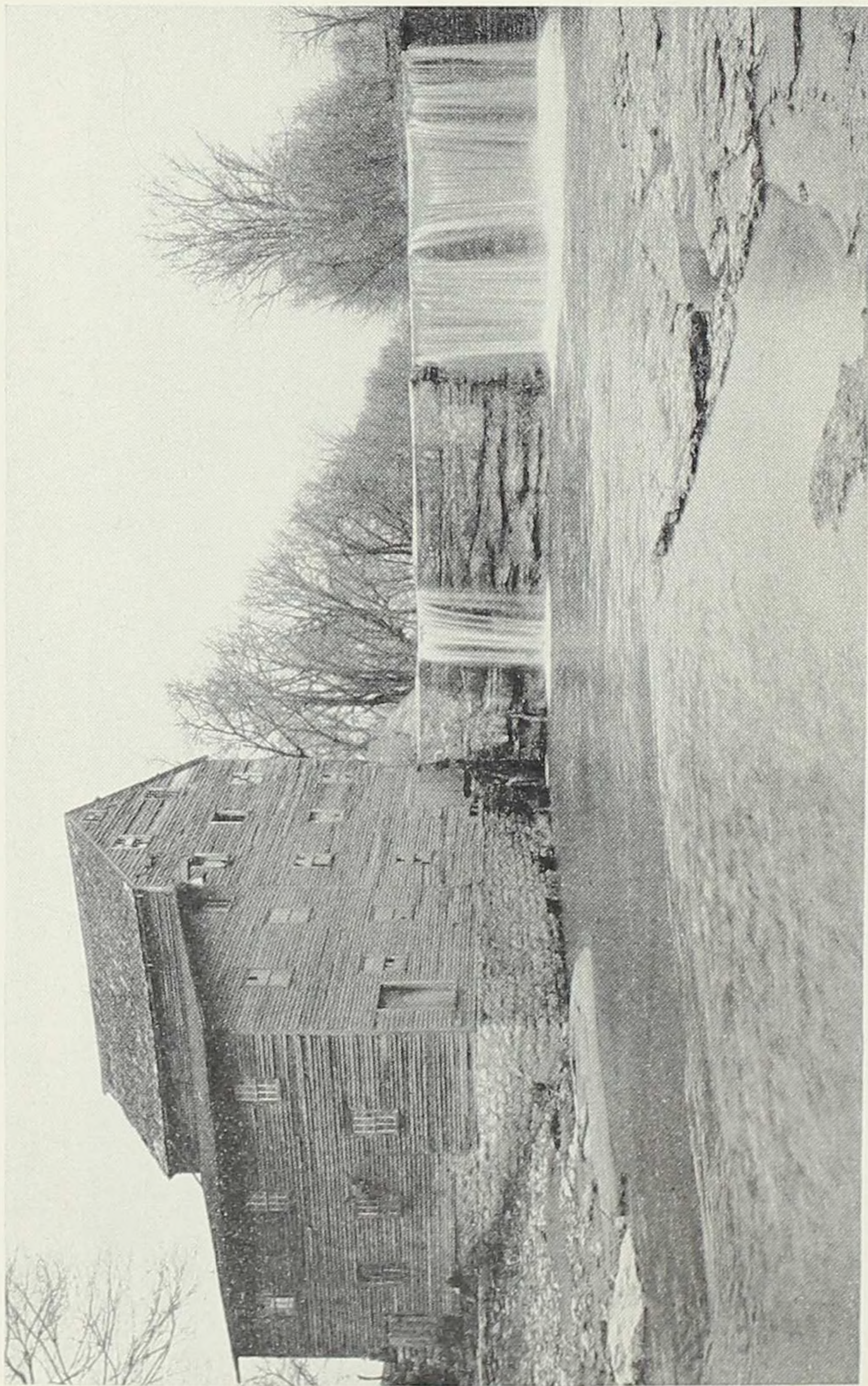
The Wassonville Mill on the English River near Wellman in Washington County had a long and noteworthy record of service. The old building withstood the winds and snows of ninety winters.

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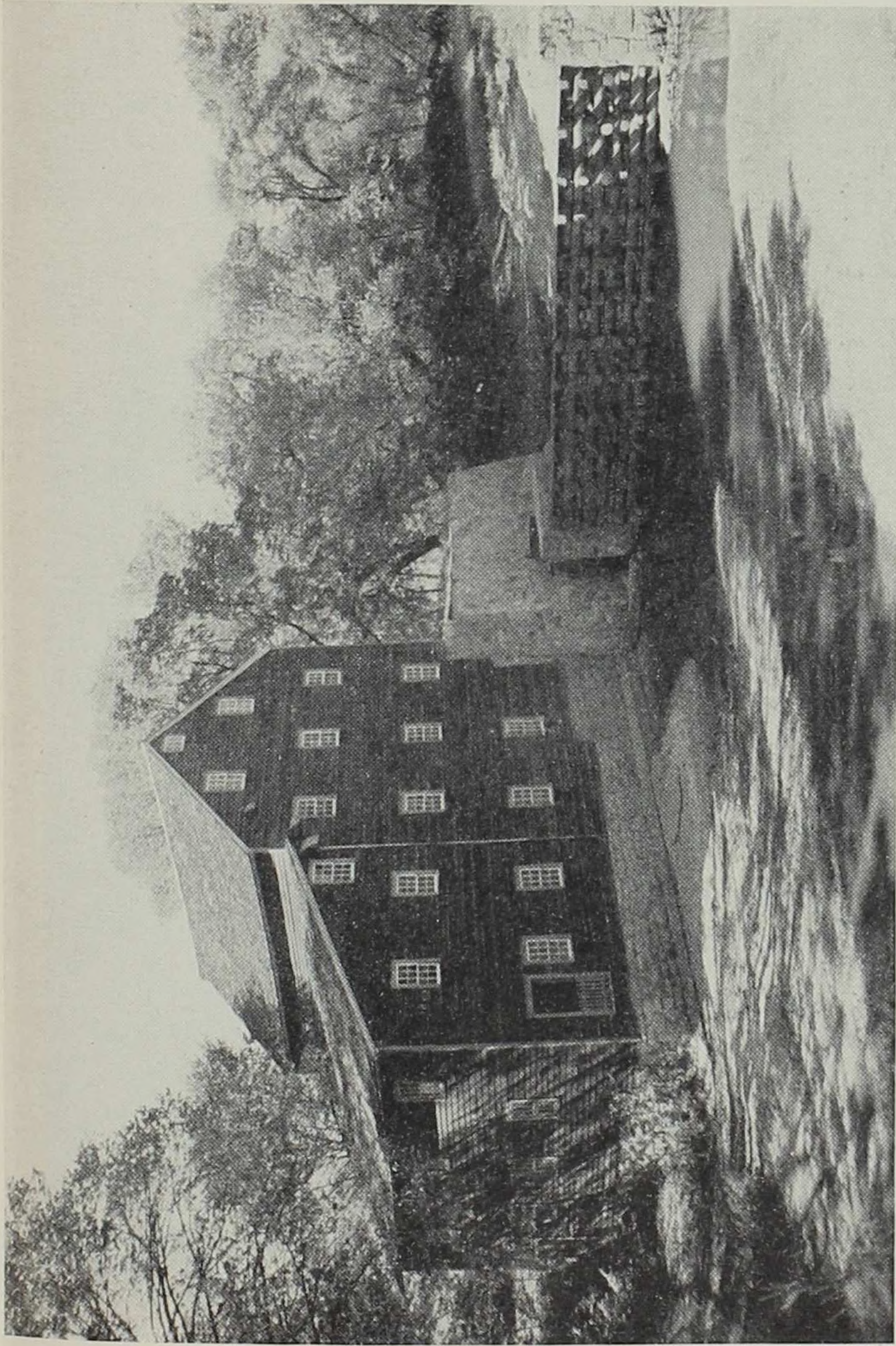
Photograph by Bertha M. H. Shambaugh

In 1840 Walter Terrell was granted permission to build a dam at Iowa City. Three years later he completed the first gristmill built on the Iowa River. After fifty years this water power was given to the State University of Iowa.



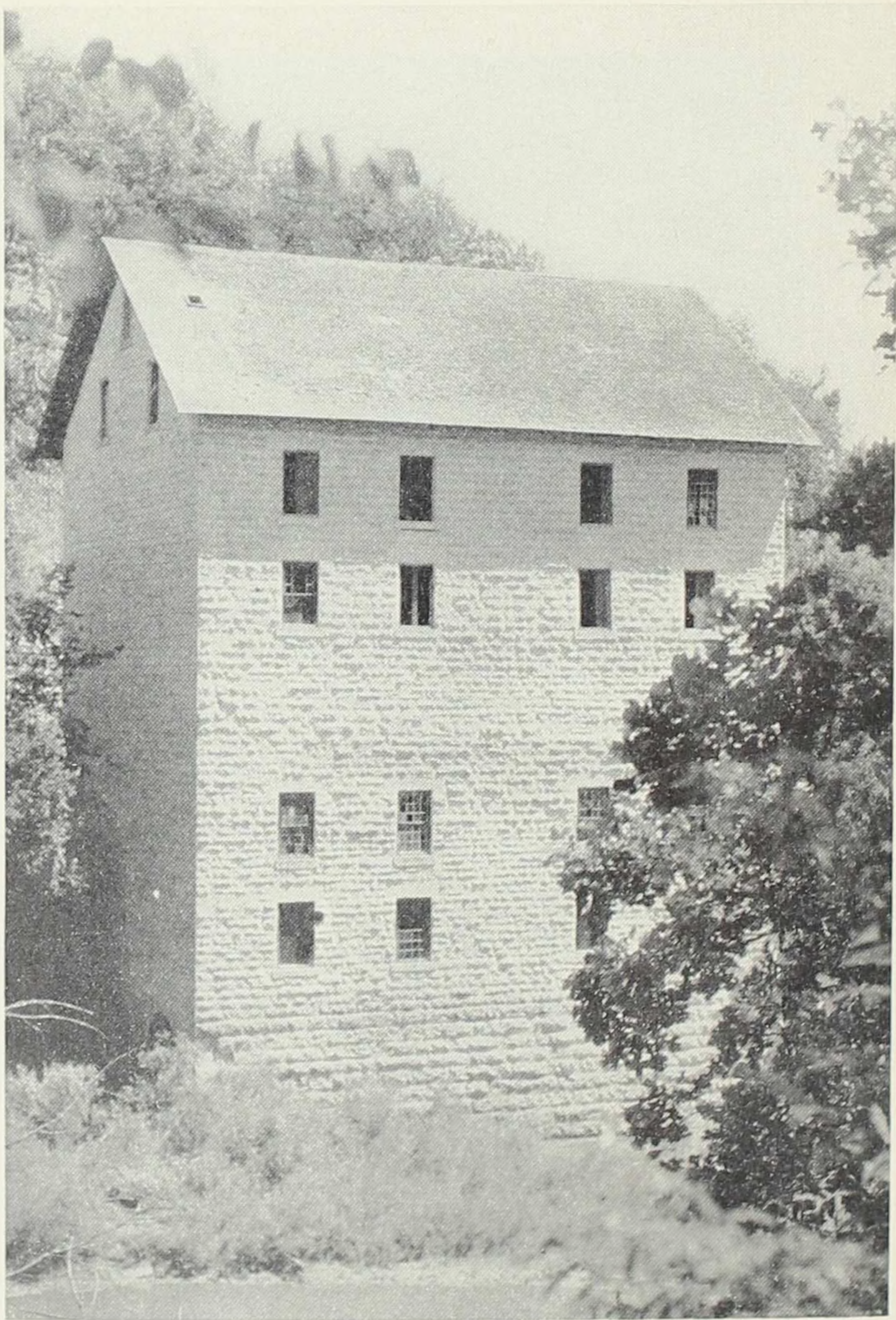
From the Floyd A. Nagler Collection

One of three mills built by Benjamin Nye along Pine Creek in Muscatine County. This is one of the renowned and well preserved old mills in Iowa.



Photograph by John E. Briggs

The reconstructed Pine Creek Mill in Wild Cat Den State Park near Muscatine, bids fair to remain one of Iowa's significant historic landmarks.



From the Floyd A. Nagler Collection

The Motor Mill on the Turkey River, near Elkader, in Clayton County — a six-story stone structure — was built by John Thompson with the hope of founding a town around it. But the chinch bugs and the westward movement of wheat prevented this.

away. There was Pelzer's Mill at Guttenberg, the Garnavillo Mill on Buck Creek, and the Mederville Mill on the Volga River in Clayton County. There was Old Mission Mill and Larabee's Mill in Fayette County. All were renowned but now they are gone.

There was Clark's Mill at Buffalo, Buhrmaster's Mill near Burlington, and Clayton's Mill and the Meek Brothers' Mill in Van Buren County. There was Currier's Mill in Mahaska County; Coppock's Mill, Bunker's Mill, and the Brighton Mill in Washington County; the Oakland and Lowell mills in Henry County; and the Merrimac Mill in Jefferson County. Each of these has a history and a romance not soon to be forgotten.

There was the Switzer Mill, the Terrell Mill, and the Kirkwood Mill in Johnson County. There was the Marengo Mill and the Amana Flouring Mills in Iowa County that have joined the ranks of the mills that are gone. There was the old Soper Mill in Story County, the Old Pottawattamie Mill in Pottawattamie County, the Old Red Mill in Dickinson County, and the Old White Mill in Cherokee County. Through the years Iowa mills have come and served and gone, but they are not forgotten — nor should they be. For they were a significant part of the history and romance of early Iowa.