

History of the Kaehlers Mill Settlement

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At the intersection of present day Covered Bridge and Kaehlers Mill roads in the town of Cedarburg was the local crossroad community of Kaehlers Mill. According to Uhlig family history, the Carl Uhlig family emigrated from Saxony, Germany, in about 1847. The family had been millers in their native town. Upon reaching the port of New York, Carl passed away in Buffalo, NY. His widow and five children left, settling on 80 acres in the town of Cedarburg, which encompassed almost one quarter mile of Cedar Creek.

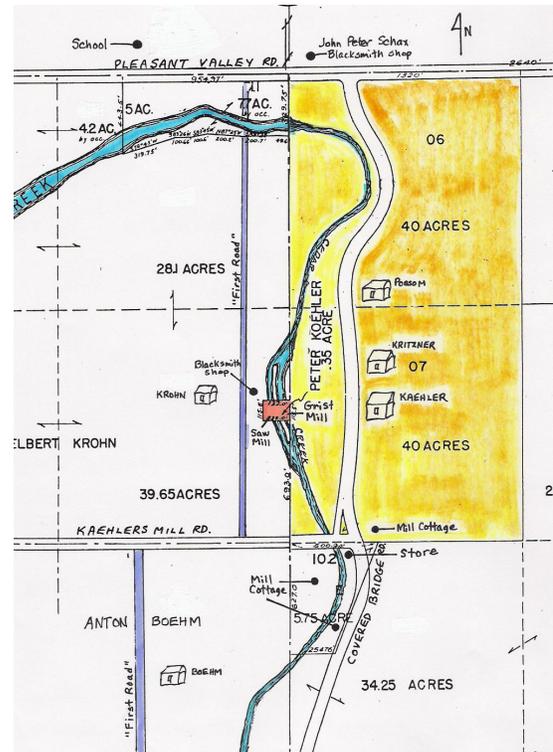
Uhlig family history is unclear whether son, Carl F., actually built a grist mill which was destroyed by fire, or if he went bankrupt before the completion of it.¹ His occupation is listed as “farmer” in the 1850 Federal U.S. census and there were no “millers” to be found in the immediate area leading this author to believe that perhaps he did begin building a mill, possibly met with a setback and decided selling out was the more prudent option.²

Johanna Sophia Uhlig (Carl sr.’s widow) sold the west 1/2 of the northwest 1/4 of Section 10 to J. H. Kaehler (1795-1875?) for \$4,000 on 14 October 1851. The family is then said to have moved to Nebraska.

Map showing location of mills, homes, businesses and “First road” which was established to bypass the creek before a permanent bridge was built. Area in yellow was owned by Kaehler.

John Henry Kaehler is said to have immigrated to the United States from his homeland in Schleswig-Holstein (near Denmark) about September 1851 with his wife, daughter, and two sons.³ With the purchase of the 80 acres John began improving and farming the land. Within the next few years his daughter, Caroline, would marry and build a home just north of her parents. Sons Peter and William moved to Port Washington and began working for Barnum Blake, a well known entrepreneur, who owned several piers, a ‘shook shop’, and lumber yard, just to name a few.

In April 1858, he married Adelaide Blake (1841-1935), the daughter of his employer, Barnum Blake. An ambitious man at an early age, Peter Kaehler aspired to become a merchant in Port Washington having established a store there in 1859. It is said that he petitioned the legislature for permission to become a merchant before the legal age of 21.⁴ In April of 1859, he left for New York



¹ Personal correspondence dated 8 July 1998 from Ralph D. Harrity, West Caldwell, NJ - Uhlig descendant

² United States Federal census 1850 Washington county, Wisconsin, Town of Cedarburg

³ Petition for Naturalization records, Ozaukee County Courthouse

⁴ Cedarburg News, (Cedarburg, WI), 24 December 1902

City “to procure a stock of spring and summer goods” for his store.⁵ By 1860, he had established a profitable thriving merchant business in downtown Port Washington, employing two clerks. One was his brother, William, and the other was a young Luxembourger.

His real estate was valued at \$12,000 and his personal property at \$6,000. This was an extraordinary sum of money for someone who was just 22 years old at the time, placing him among the wealthiest citizens in Port Washington. Consider that his next door neighbor, Joseph Goldsmith, who was 50 years old and also a merchant by occupation, had real estate valued at \$12,000 as well, however his personal property was \$25,000! Only three other people owned real estate valued higher than Peter: his father-in-law, Barnum Blake, who was 44 years old, owned \$30,000 worth of real estate; Lion Silverman, a 41 year old tavernkeeper, and Edward Dodge, a 46 year old blacksmith, each owned \$20,000 worth of real estate. By comparison, the only banker in the city at the time, James Vail (who was 33) had \$10,000 in real estate and just \$2,000 in personal property. The average farmer’s land was valued at about \$800-\$1,000.⁶

Probable location of grist mill

During the late 1850’s and into the 1860’s, at least one grist miller and one saw miller tried to establish business in the settlement area. By 1860, Charles Müller was working in the grist mill, while Anton Boehm, a Bohemian immigrant, was running a sawmill. It is not currently known when Kaehler took over ownership of both mills.



Probably upon the death of his mother, Sophia (1800-1865?), Peter moved his young family to his father’s Town of Cedarburg property. At some point Peter acquired one third of an acre from the Krohn family on Cedar Creek. This is the land which is believed to have been the site of the grist mill. Wheat and rye were the staples of life for nearly all inhabitants as these were the grains which needed grinding to become the integral ingredient in bread.

After the move, Kaehler became active in local politics and civic enterprises. He was on the executive committee for the Ozaukee County Agricultural Society which was responsible for operating the annual county fair. He provided services for the town and lumber for many area building projects.

Peter Kaehler home circa 1950

⁵ Ozaukee County Times, (Port Washington, WI), 14 April 1859

⁶ United States Federal census 1860 Ozaukee county, Wisconsin, Town of Port Washington

He owned prize winning livestock, garnering blue premiums for draft horses, sheep and pedigreed Shorthorn cattle, as well as yellow oats and yellow dent corn.⁷

At some point it is said that he established a general store on the corner of present day intersection of Kaehlers Mill and Covered Bridge roads since he had previously operated such a business in Port Washington. The store may also have functioned as post office for local residents to send and receive mail. Several mill cottages are said to have been located near the intersection as well.

The decade of the 1850's saw huge increase in wheat which was rapidly becoming a popular cash crop for farmers. Ground flour could be sold to merchants who would, in turn, sell and ship it out to points further west. At the close of the 1860's, wheat production and sales began a decline. Soil depletion began to take its toll. When the Panic of 1873 hit Wisconsin its residents experienced a depression worse than the one which had occurred in 1837.

Gradually, the market for wheat began to collapse with the arrival of 'wheat rust', a nasty fungal problem, which devastated yields for several years, along with smut. The final blow inflicted was the chinch bug. Slowly, the disproportionate reliance on wheat led to the rise of the growing dairy industry, which required the cultivation of different crops.⁸

*Sawmill at Wade House,
Greenbush, WI*

Mills powered by water have always been at the mercy of nature and Kaehler's were no different. When rainfall was scarce, the amount of water moving through the creek bed was usually not sufficient to power the gears. With the advent of too much rain or melting snow, there was always the risk of the dam collapsing, mill races washing away. Such were the vagaries of the mill business.



Sometime after the Civil War, John Peter Schlax, a Prussian immigrant, settled on a small plot of land at the present day intersection of Covered Bridge and Pleasant Valley roads. He established a blacksmith shop which served area residents north of the creek repairing plows, making sure horses were properly shod and creating many other useful items such nails, hinges and doorlatches. John was a veteran of the war having served in company C of the 129th Illinois infantry. He died under tragic circumstances when an area farmer and his son noticed smoke and flames coming from his home.

The mills fell into disrepair after the Kaehler family moved to Chicago in the late 1880's following a very lengthy and nasty court battle over property taxes. He established a grain, feed and flour business and left his wife a sizable estate when he passed away in 1902.

⁷ Port Washington Weekly Star, (Port Washington, WI), 9 October 1880

⁸ Current, Richard E., *The History of Wisconsin, Volume Two, The Civil War Era, 1848-1873*; State Historical Society of Wis., (Worzella Publishing Co., 1976), p. 452-458

The last traces of the mills disappeared in 1903 when the lumber and metal were salvaged and sold off.⁹ The only buildings remaining from this settlement are the blacksmith shop (located on the former Krohn homestead) and the store which has since been converted to a single family residence. The mill race is still visible in winter months.

Advertisement for Kaeblers dry goods store. Note that he was just 19 years of age when this ad was taken out. From the Ozaukee County Democrat dated 7 Nov 1857.



Want to learn more?

**** *What was a 'shook shop'?***

**** *What occupation did many blacksmiths evolve into, especially after 1900?***

**** *What type of sources could businessmen use to power mills? One was discussed in this article.***

Next issue will chronicle the one-room schools of the Town of Cedarburg

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⁹ Cedarburg News, (Cedarburg, WI), 2 December 1903