

Walter Hicks, son of Joseph, who operated and wrote about the mill during the 19th century. Born in 1845, this photo was probably taken when he was a young man of twenty-five.

THE ROSLYN GRISTMILL AND TEA HOUSE

by George L. Williams

Walter Hicks left his home in Westbury at the break of day. He saddled his bay horse or hitched the two big horses to the farm wagon and rode to Roslyn, arriving at the Roslyn Grist Mill for a full day of work. Here he was joined by his brother Ben. The mill had been owned by the family since 1849 when it was purchased by their father, Joseph Hicks. Their youngest brother, Isaac, later joined them in the enterprise and they operated the mill for much of the nineteenth century. It was Isaac who closed the mill in 1916.

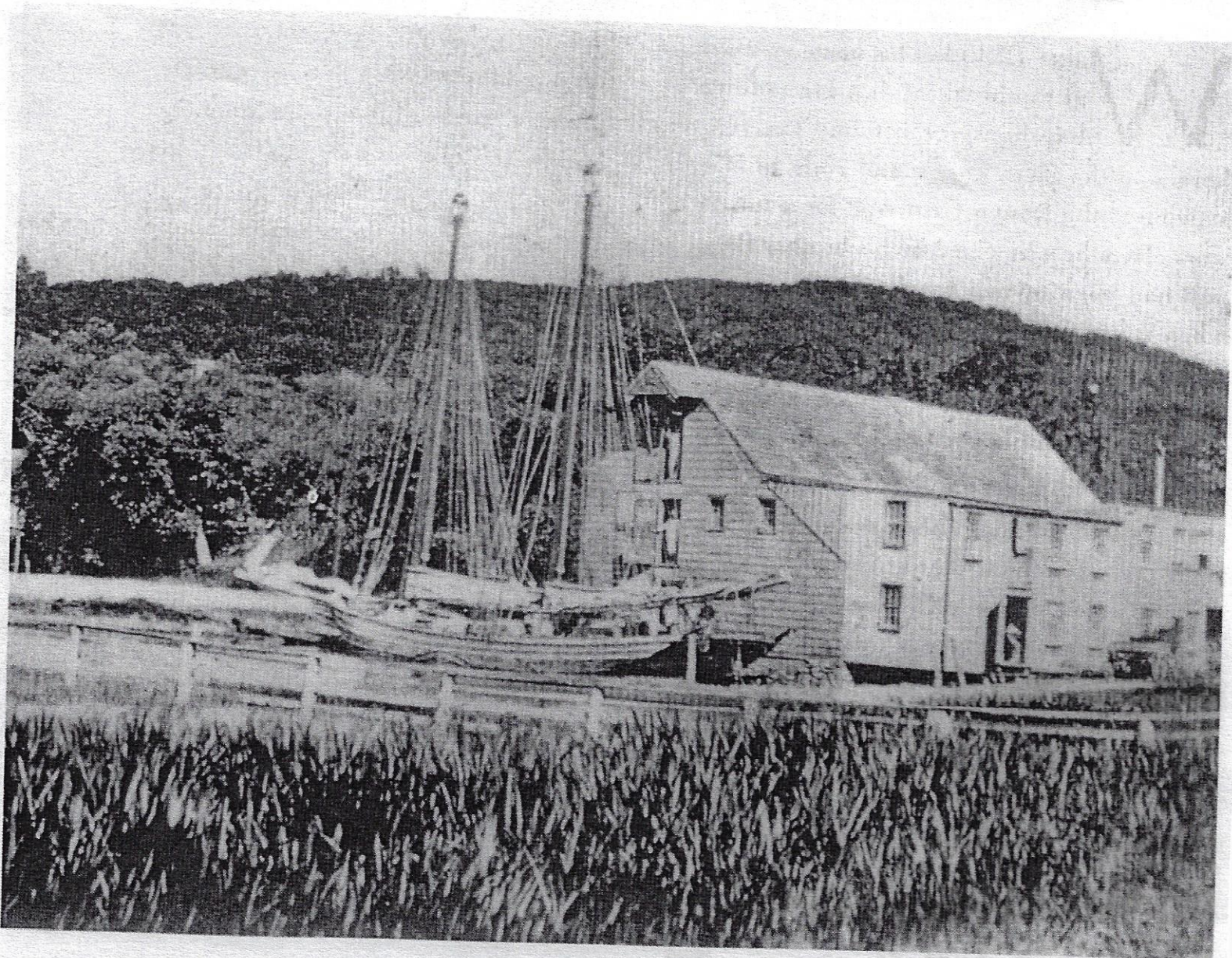
In his 1865 journal, Walter, then twenty years of age, recorded each day at the mill. From his detailed accounts, we can deduce the general operations of the mill. When the grain arrived from the surrounding countryside, it was brought to the upper story of the mill. It proceeded down canvas sleeves into wooden buckets. Hoppers fed the grain onto the millstones. The machinery to operate the grinding process was a delicate one, as the stones would be damaged if they rubbed together. The water from Silver Lake in Roslyn passed through the sluiceway, turning the great spur wheel, generating the power to turn the grain—corn, rye, wheat—into flour. Winnowing, the process of separating the chaff from the grain, was performed by hand in a spacious basket, designed for the task.

Besides supervising the grinding, the fastening of the pulley, the fixing of the machinery, and the placing of the rye or wheat stones, Walter mended the bags, waited on customers, balanced the accounts, posted bills, and swept out the place on a regular basis. Walter would place one hand on the hopper and the other on the sack which he had properly labeled beforehand. It required precision and care as none of the flour was to be wasted.

Sometimes Walter transported the flour to Glenwood and Cedar Swamp. And there were the frequent trips to the blacksmith shop to shoe the horses. His brother's sloop, the *S. Jackson*, transported flour to the City. During the winter, sleighs were used to carry the produce. Walter worked six days a week—typical for the 19th century. In the evenings, he read history and philosophy books. On Sunday, he attended the Quaker meeting at Westbury. But for the most part, his life was absorbed in the mill which still stands in the very heart of historic Roslyn. Currently, it is in a state of disrepair. This led to the formation of the 1701 Roslyn Grist Mill Committee to support Nassau County's efforts to restore the mill. The county has owned the mill since 1975.

The existing mill was built by Jeremiah Williams sometime after 1715. It measures 25' wide and 50' long. The entire building is of oak. Its most unique feature is its utilization of Old World Dutch construction style. The colonial builders utilized the style of mills once built in Zeeland in the Netherlands. However, such mills no longer exist in Europe. John Stevens, noted authority on Dutch architecture in America, wrote that the Roslyn mill is one of the last known Dutch type water mills in America, and it appears to be the key building through which this type of structure can be studied, as well as one of the keys to comprehending Long Island's unique Dutch/ English architectural heritage. It is not entirely surprising that such a structure is found in Roslyn as present day Nassau County was a transitional zone in the colonial period where Dutch and English cultural patterns intermixed.

The third floor of the mill contains many of the original boards and the machinery dates to the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. Much of the machinery, such as the hopper, crane, hopper



*The schooner Martha Amanda alongside the grist mill.
This is an early c. 1860 photo of the rear of the mill.*

boy and damsel date from the early eighteenth century. Even the millstone enclosures remain intact and visitors may observe the mill stones skillfully fitted together with the cemented joints and bound with iron bands. Parts of the bolting equipment survive and grain elevators survive as well.

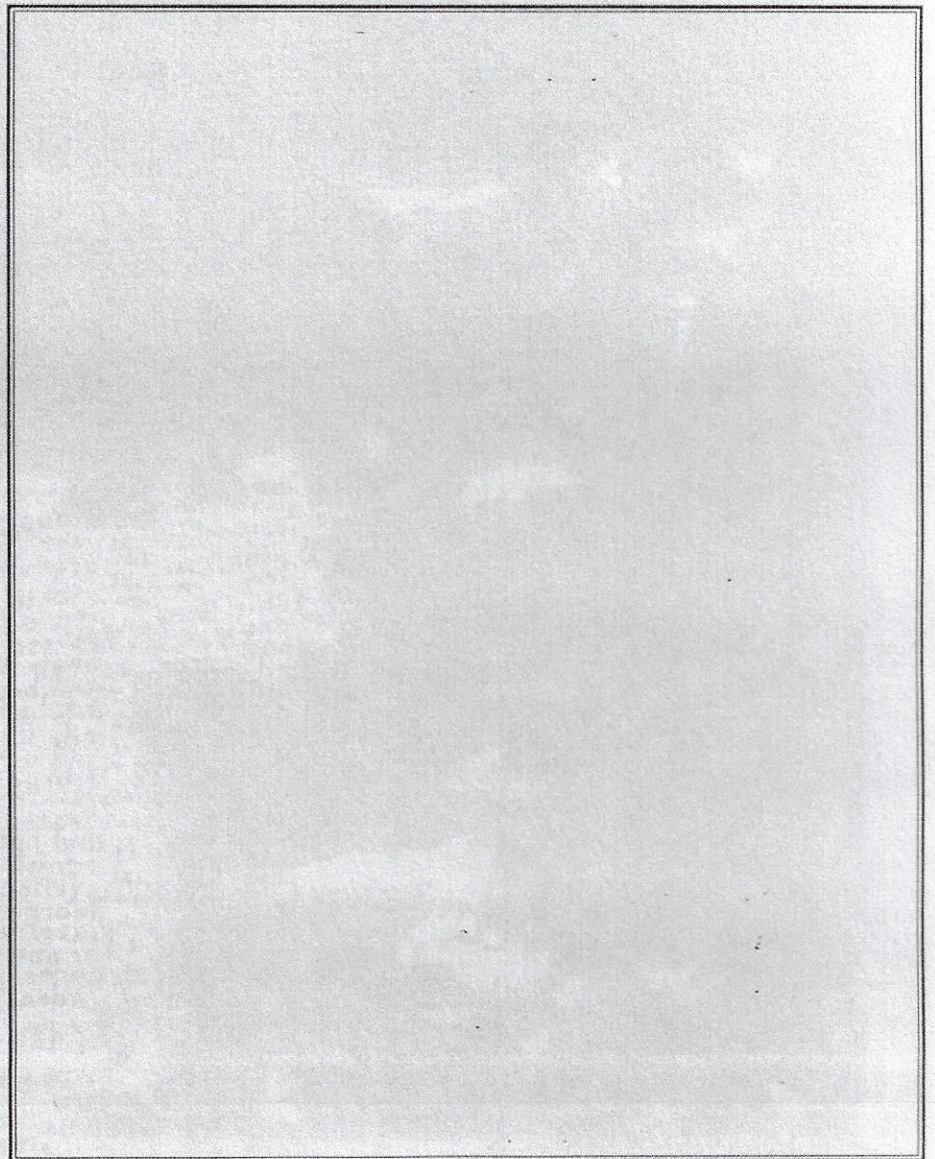
Hempstead Harbor, renamed Roslyn in 1844, was a farming community until the beginning of the twentieth century. The mill served as the center for the economic life of the village. Grain was brought from Westbury, Herricks, Searington, Albertson, Hempstead, and even Connecticut. Nearby Cow Neck, now called Port Washington, built its first mill in 1781, but until then the farmers transported their produce for refining to Roslyn. The flour, in turn, was sold for such products as: iron shovels, axes, threads, fabrics, tea, butter, candles and spirits.

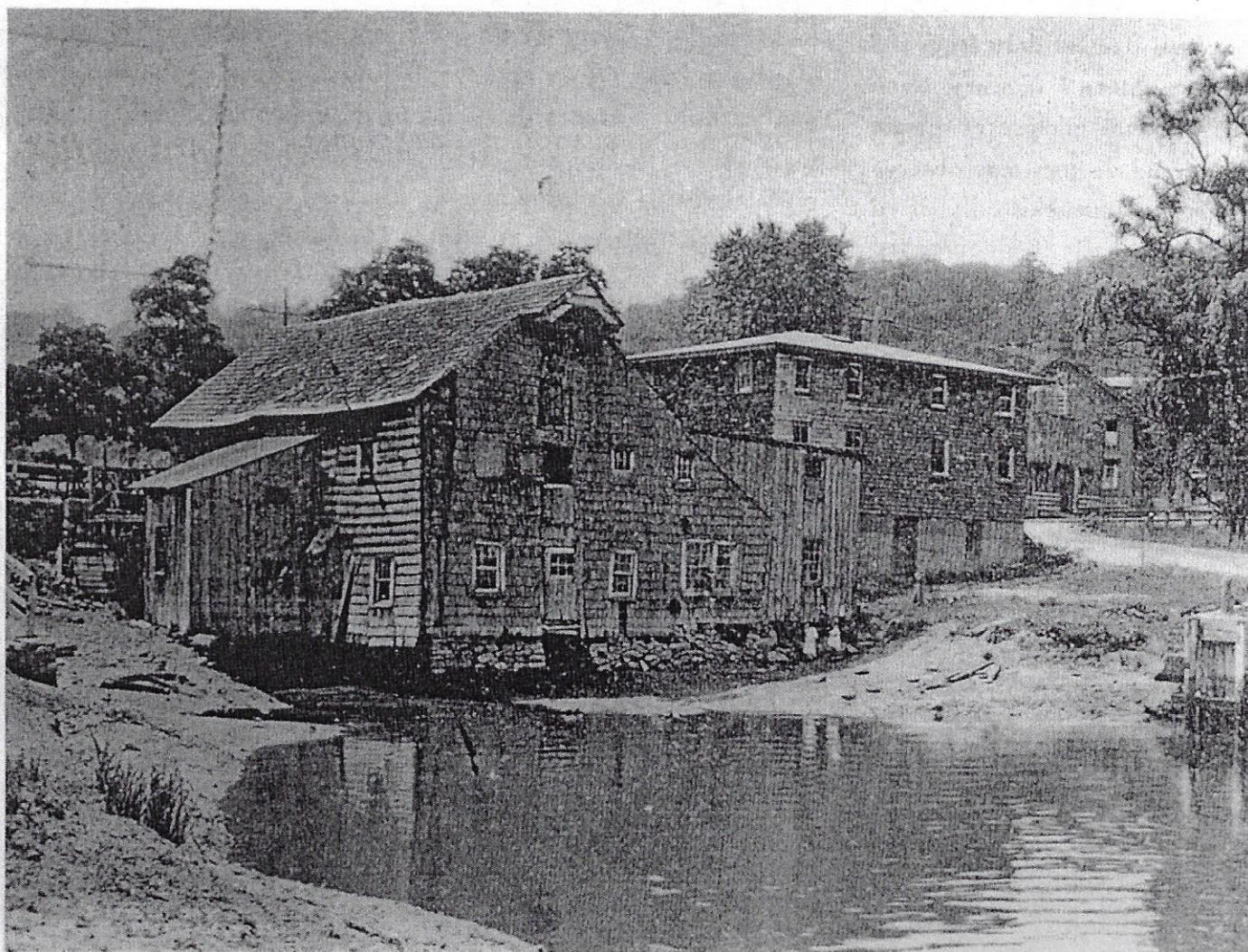
A survey of prices for food items and labor indicates that in 1770, common laborers were paid twenty-five cents a day and carpenters forty cents. By 1790, wages had risen to thirty-seven cents and fifty-six cents. Twenty-five years later, the rate was \$1.00 for laborers and \$1.50

for carpenters. As for the prices of wheat, Indian corn and rye per bushel, the costs in 1770 were \$.50, \$.30, and \$.37 respectively. In 1790, the prices were \$.75, \$.30, \$.37, and in 1815, \$2.00, \$1.12, and \$1.25. Flour, therefore, was a costly, but absolutely essential commodity.

The miller was usually paid a percentage of the amount that

was bagged. Several of the Roslyn millers also owned stores where they sold different products. These items had been secured from the selling of flour. During much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the farmers used the flour for themselves and little was sold to others. But between 1855 and 1865, there was a surplus production of produce which was either sold



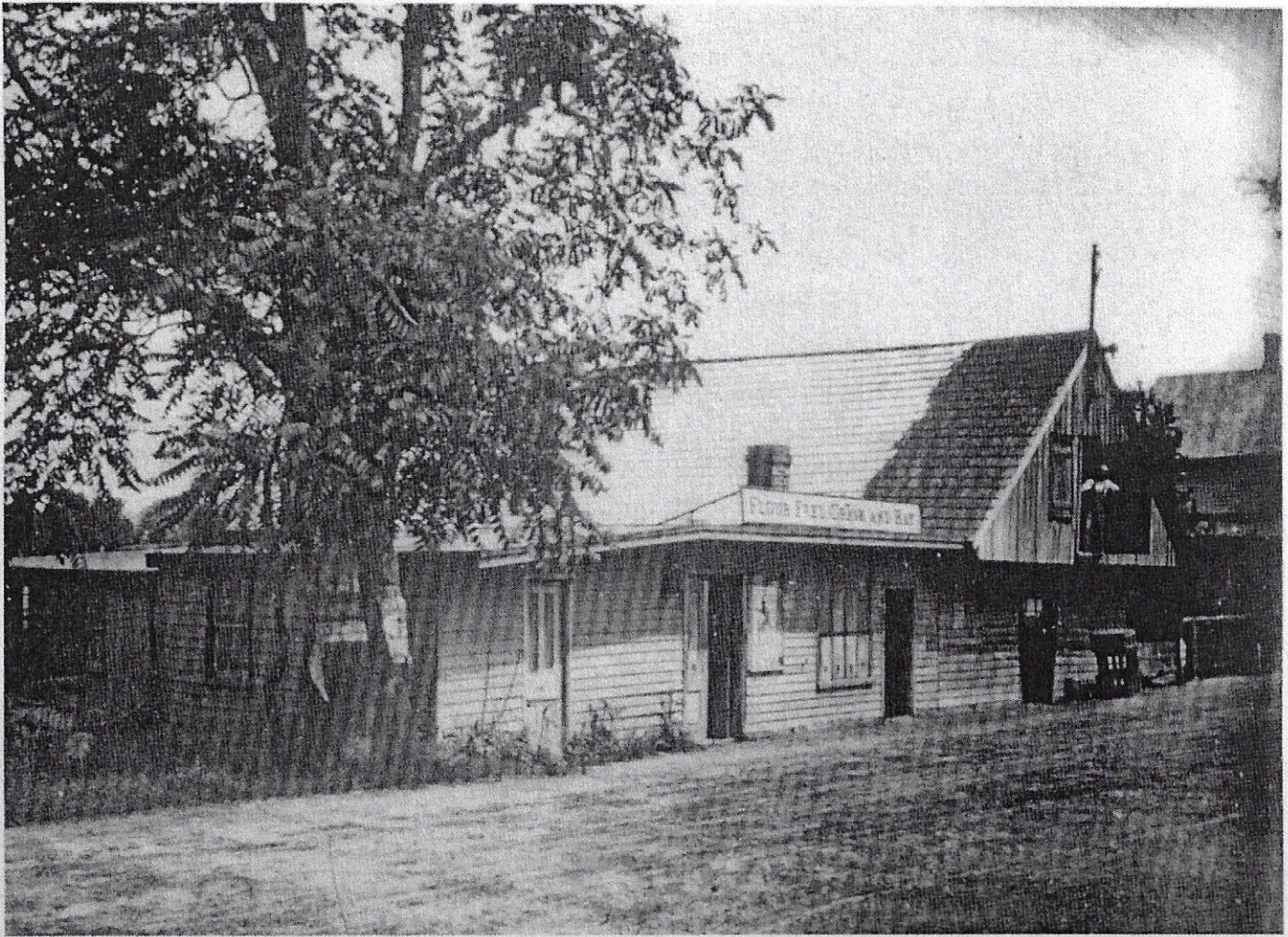


The Roslyn Grist Mill as it appeared early in this century (c. 1912) without dormer windows.

locally or transported to New York City. During the Civil War years, the prices for farm products increased dramatically and the farmers as well as the millers prospered. Sloops such as the *Lark*, *Martha Amanda*, and *Rambler* docked at the wharf near the mill.

In 1758, the mill was sold to Henry Onderdonk who also bought extensive property in the village including a paper mill and house, where the George Washington Manor operates today. In 1790, Onderdonk entertained President George Washington for breakfast and proceeded to show the President both the paper and grist mill, visits which are duly recorded in Washington's diary. Onderdonk

had prospered in the pre-Revolutionary period, served in the New York State Assembly, and opened a store in 1773. He was a leading supporter of the separation of North Hempstead from the Town of Hempstead in 1785, and his brother Adrian became the first supervisor of the new township. Onderdonk sold the mill and substantial property in 1801, and almost fifty years later, it became the



A photo of the grist mill with store for flour, feed, grain, and hay. The mill and store were operated by the Hicks family for most of the 19th century into the early 20th century. Isaac Hicks was the last of the owners when it operated as a mill c. 1900.

property of Joseph Hicks, a wealthy Quaker merchant.

It was Joseph Hicks' youngest son Isaac who was the last miller and owner. In 1916, he sold it to a board of five trustees. They promised to restore the mill to its original form in order that it might house a museum of industrial arts. The task was undertaken by Harold Godwin, grandson of the writer William Cullen Bryant, who lived in

Roslyn. Godwin had the beams reinforced and installed concrete bases to support the foundation. Concrete was placed on the exterior to appear like the original boards in color and, fortunately, the hewn beams in the interior and the grinding machinery were left intact.

The trustees collected numerous antiques and articles such as: spinning wheels, farm implements, Quaker dresses and bon-

nets, a Revolutionary war drum, a four-post bed of ruddlewood, whale oil lamps, as well as the mantle from George Washington's headquarters in Trenton, New Jersey, and the large front door came from the studio of William Cullen Bryant. The museum opened on June 30, 1917, with a ten cent admission. Attendance, however, was sparse. It was then decided that more was needed to attract peo-

ple to the mill and so, in 1918, the mill was leased to Alice C. Titus. She converted the old mill into a tea house on the first floor with the museum continuing on the second.

Alice Titus began her enterprise with a kerosene stove which she later upgraded to gas. "Ever since my childhood," Miss Titus recalled:

I had visions of running a tea house...Mr. Harold Godwin [a trustee of the Roslyn Grist Mill] was playing golf one day with my uncle and was lamenting the fact that though the Grist Mill had been restored [in 1916] by him... and an interesting museum had been collected and attractively arranged in the mill, there appeared to be no means of keeping it open for public.

A suggestion was made that perhaps a tea room would help attract patrons to the museum.

Her uncle telephoned Alice to come to Roslyn. She recalled,

"The next day when Mr. Godwin turned the seven-inch long key in the massive door of the mill and I beheld the great beams and the blue water of the creek and Hempstead Harbor through the rear windows, I knew this was it." The mill with its hand hewn beams, mill stone, canvas sleeves, wood burning fire place and the rushing water created an ambience that attracted thousands of patrons.

Miss Titus' guests registered in a book at the entrance. The actress Jane Cowl who starred with Rollo Peters in a Broadway production of *Romeo and Juliet* proclaimed that it was her favorite tea room, and soon the Tea House became one of the best known tea rooms in the world.

There was no heat in the mill until 1926, and it was closed

Roslyn Mill Tea House 1710-1920

AFTERNOON TEA IN
AN OLD MILL

WHAT AN ADVENTURE!

Steaming hot tea -
muffins that melt in your mouth -
all sorts of good things to eat
beside the fragrant wood fire
after the chilly motor ride along
the Island.

Oh, how cozy!

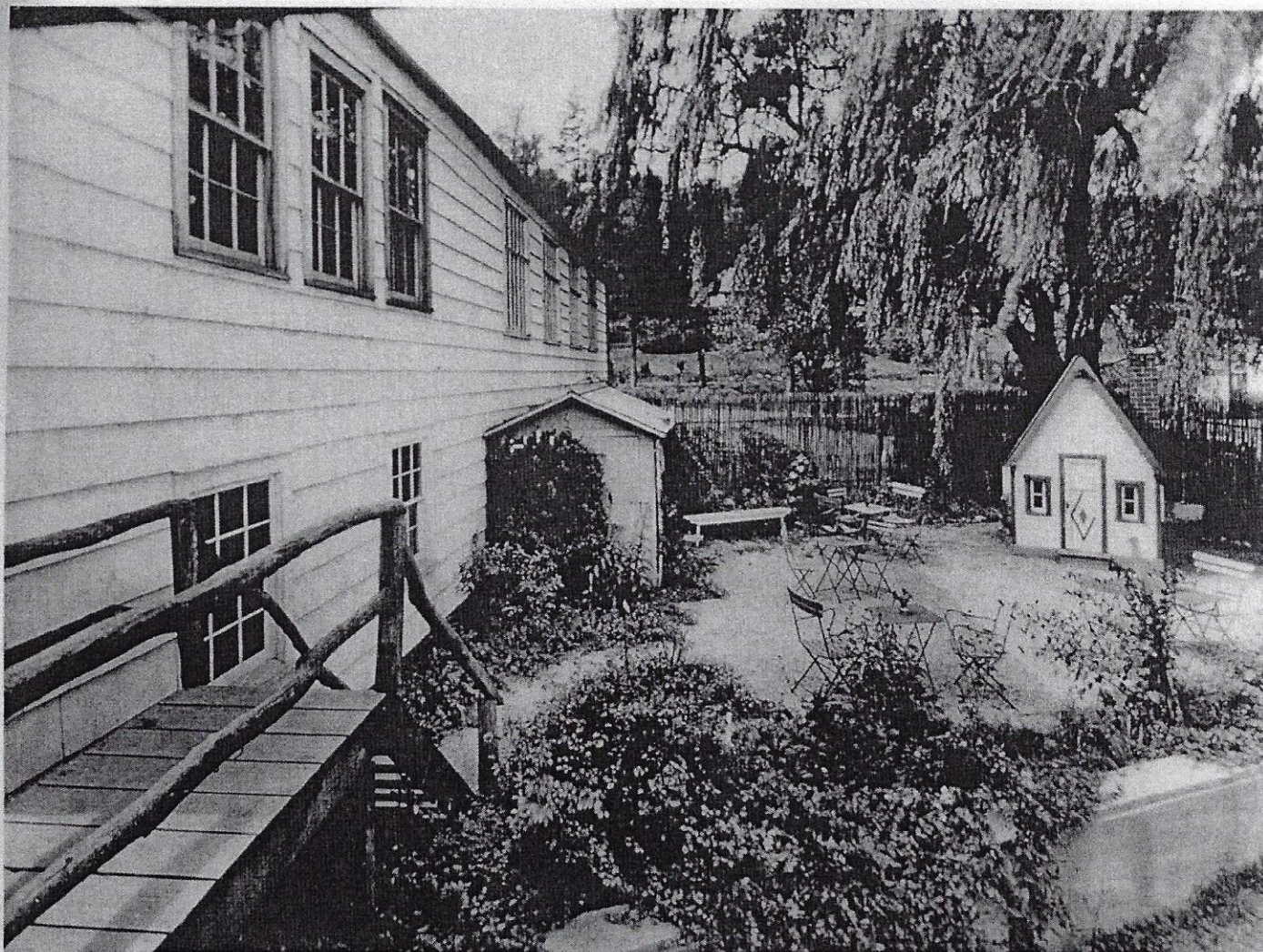
Or, on a hot day, there's the cool
salty breeze off the Sound; the
string of boats lazily drifting
with the tide and the splash of
water to mingle with the clink
of the tea cups.

And then the secrets of old times
revealed to those who know how
to conjure them from old eaves,
old rafters and
the strange old things around.

A fascinating place, too, for a
luncheon party, merry and modern
against a background of
quaintness.

A ring on the telephone, Roslyn
213-W will settle all your
luncheon or supper plans. Miss
Alice C. Titus will answer your
questions, as the old miller won't
be able to- he is busy up on the
sign outside pointing the way.

Open
May 15, 1920



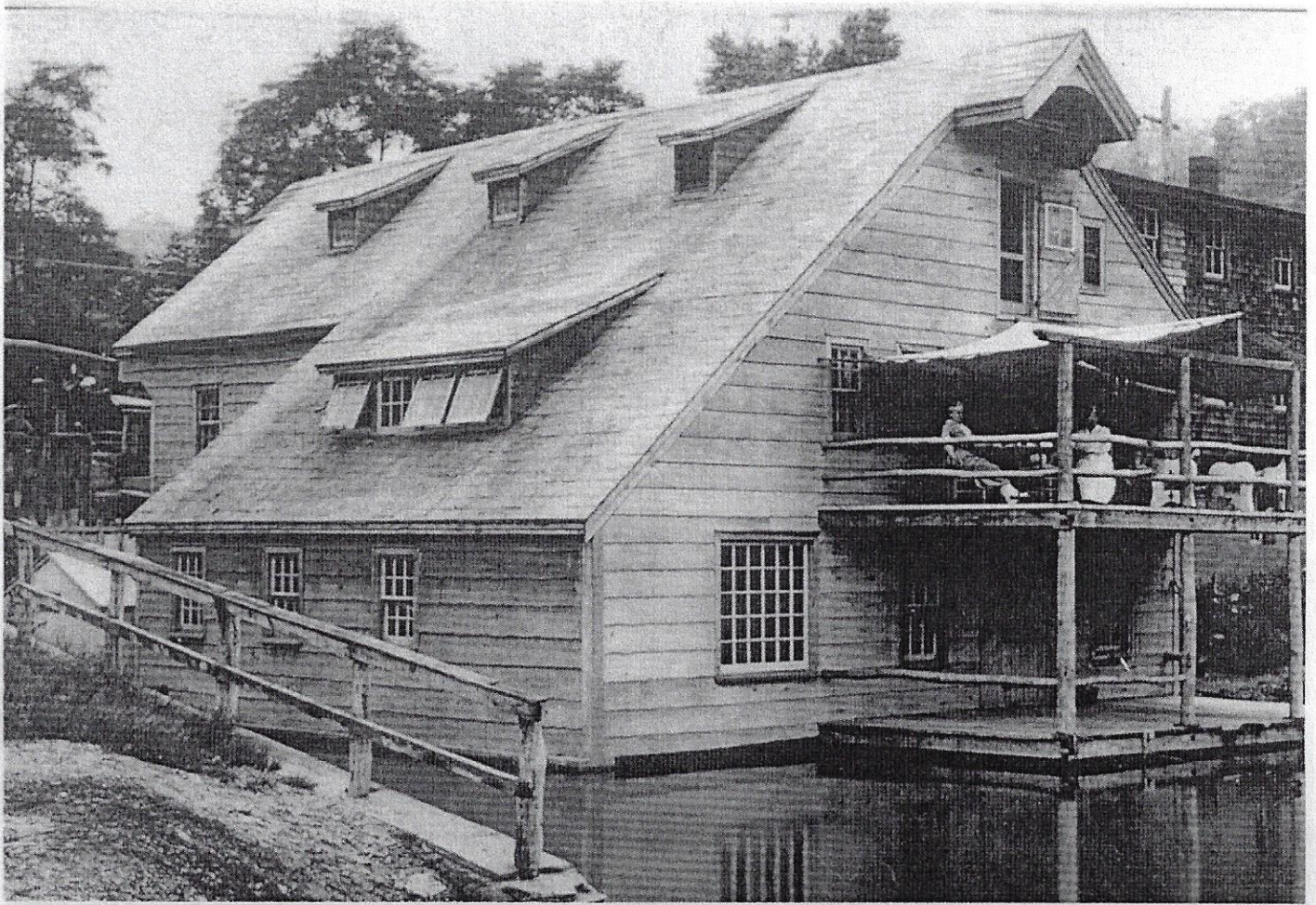
The garden used for luncheon parties by the clientele of the Roslyn Mill Tea House c. 1923.

during the winter months. Miss Titus astutely observed that, "It seemed to be because of a lack of modern conveniences rather than in spite of them that neighbors and friends came from everywhere to enjoy luncheon, tea and desserts by candlelight." Jean Chapman, who lives in Roslyn and sometimes helped out in the tea room, remembers the "homemade vegetable soup and the English muffins dripping in butter."

Guests were served inside the mill or on the rear porch which overlooked the creek. A garden, which contained a giant weeping willow, had been added to the grounds and was reached by a quaint bridge that lay across the water from the porch. Schooners, private boats and yachts tied up at the deck near the mill and the passengers would stop at the tea house for some refreshments. In the after-

noons, muffins, toast, cakes, and dainty orange pekoe were served at the tea tables.

Miss Titus herself was one of the tea room's attractions. She often played a guitar as young people gathered for ice cream. Among the specialties, was her own apricot and pineapple ice cream. She organized large tea parties and booked entertainment including the Milano Trio which sang operatic selections.



The grist mill used as a tea house. The rear porch was used for al fresco dining during the summer months.

They strolled among the guests and accompanied themselves with string instruments. On other occasions, music was provided by the Neapolitan Troubadours. By 1927, she advertised the Roslyn Mill as the center for teas, luncheons and suppers in the house and garden. The tea room became famous for its chicken a la king. Soup, salad, desserts and coffee, of course, were part of the menu. The original price was \$1.00 for lunch and \$.50 for tea.

The restaurant attracted numerous celebrities, in addition to the actress Jane Cowl, who lived in nearby Manhasset. Raymond Massey visited the Tea House, while he was appearing in *Abe Lincoln* on Broadway, as did Norma Shearer, Michael Arlen and Gloria Swanson. One summer, the actor Leslie Howard, best known for his portrayal of Ashley in *Gone With the Wind*, came for lunch every Sunday. He and a friend would ride their horses from Westbury

where the steeds were stabled.

The Academy Award winning actress Joan Fontaine, the star of the movie *Rebecca*, and Lucille Ball, Gregory Peck, Gordon and Sheila McCrea were other entertainers who dined at the mill. Author Christopher Morley, a Roslyn resident, frequently came to the tea room. He was the author of *Kitty Foyle* and a contributing editor to the *Saturday Review of Literature*. Another patron was Fontaine



For over fifty years, the Roslyn Mill Tea House served luncheons and dinners. This is a view of the back porch, enclosed for patrons. Boats would moor nearby and occupants would come to eat at the mill.

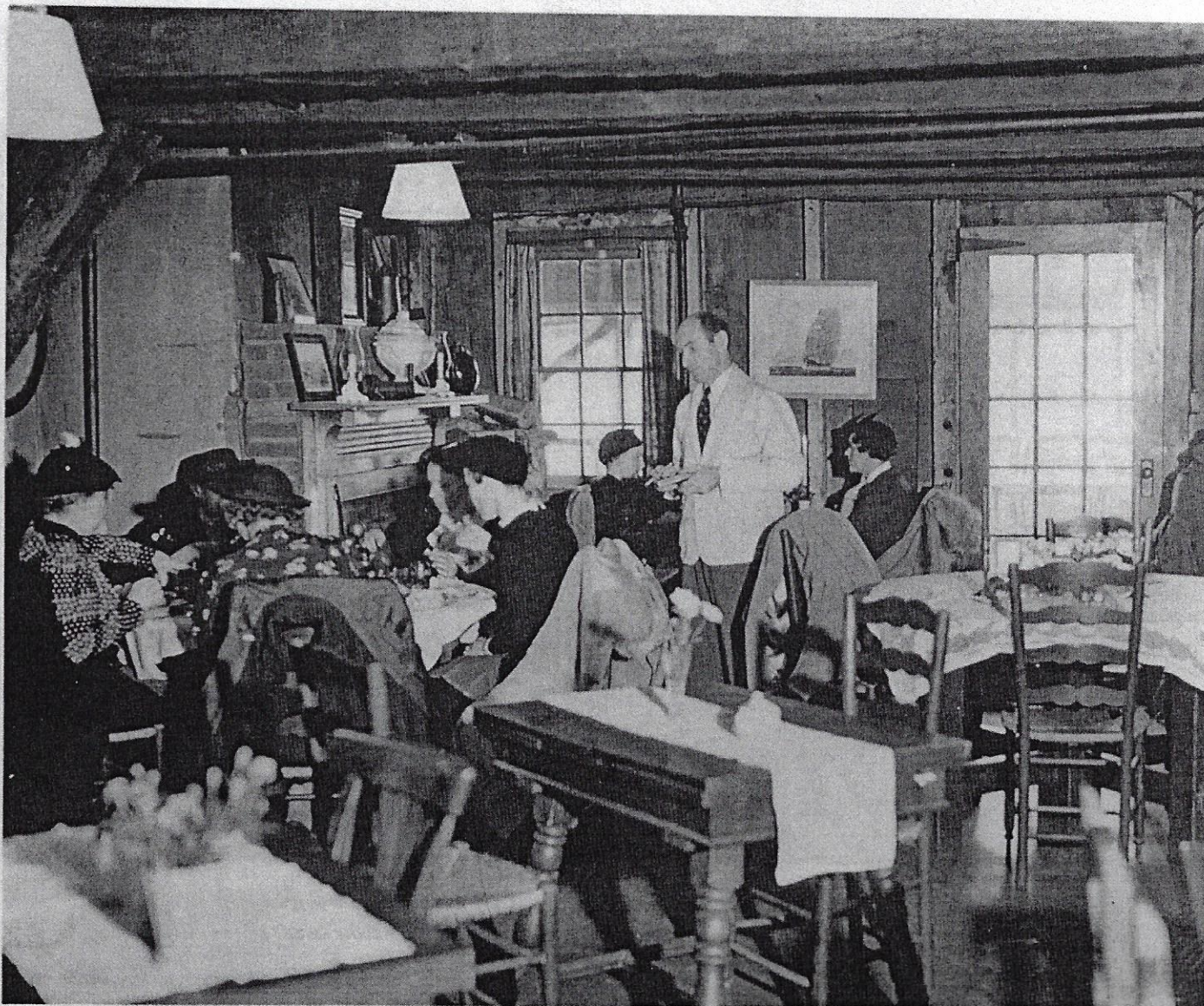
Fox, who lived in nearby Port Washington, and drew the famous "Toonerville Trolley" cartoons. The tea room's clientele was not confined to the era's celebrities, but was a favorite among residents of the North Shore as well. Almost every local civic group or society held luncheon meetings at the Roslyn Grist Mill.

An inspection of the guest book, reveals that customers came from around the world to visit the Roslyn Tea Room.

When Carl Werner, himself the owner of another restaurant in Roslyn, went to France, he was asked from where he came. "Roslyn, Long Island," answered Werner, and the Frenchman immediately replied, "Oh, that is where they have that lovely tea room."

Two years after the tea room opened, in May of 1922, Michael Hassett arrived in Roslyn from Ireland. He had worked in the tea lounge at the

Hotel Imperial in London, and studied at the Lewis Hotel Training School in Washington, D.C. Miss Titus invited him to join the mill management, but he was displeased with his living quarters under the eaves of the mill. He decided against the job, and went to the train station to take the train back to the city. But he missed the train, and returned to the mill where he worked with Miss Titus, who ran the tea house for thirty-one years until she retired in 1951.



An interior photo of the dining room of the Roslyn Mill Tea House, showing a waiter serving patrons, c. 1925.

Hassett enlarged the menu to include both lunch and dinner fare. Hassett assumed the management of the mill for the six years after 1951 and served as mayor of the Village of Roslyn for twelve years, becoming one of its most prominent citizens.

In the 1930's, Edie Valentine McQuillan came to work at the

tea room and remained for forty years, succeeding Hassett after he retired in 1958. In January, 1975, she closed the restaurant. Now retired in Florida, Ms. McQuillan visited the old mill in September, 1975, nostalgically remembering its glory days.

After the tea room closed, the trustees deeded it over to

Nassau County on the understanding they would restore it. At that time, many members of the community signed a petition asking that it again become a tea house. More importantly, hundreds of members of the community have recently signed petitions asking the county to restore this historic and venera-

ble mill which served as a local attraction for most of the twentieth century.

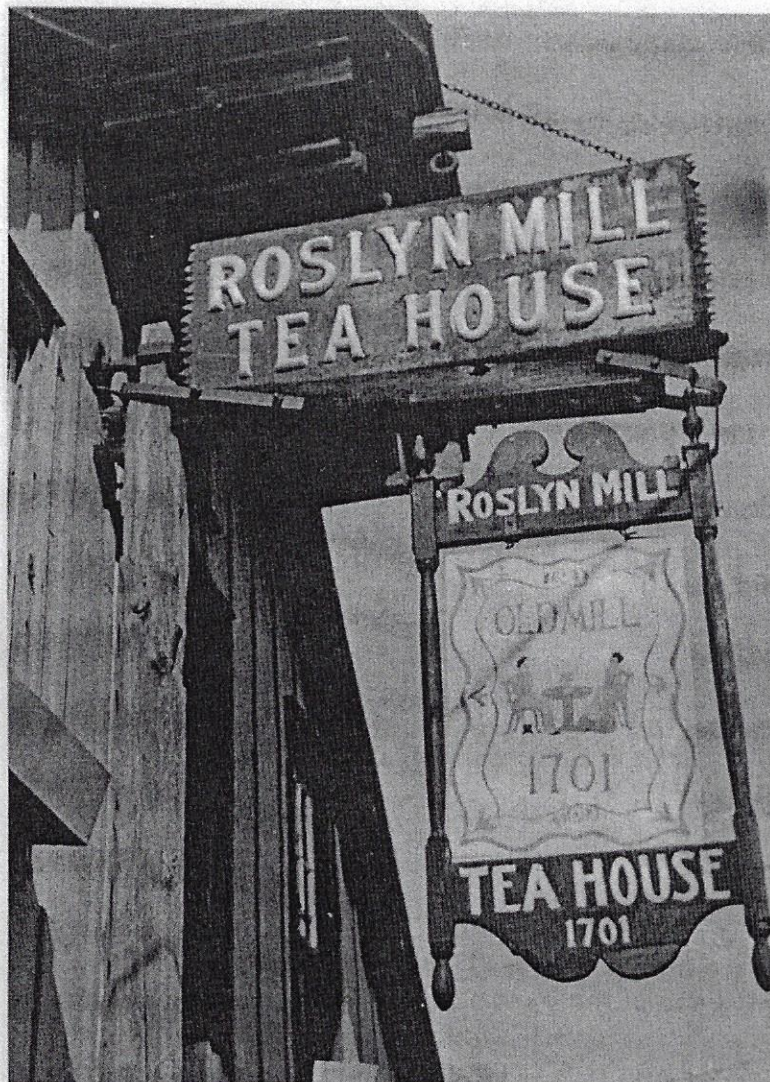
George L. Williams, veteran contributing editor, specializes in the history and tradition of Nassau County's North Shore.

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ENDNOTES

The Bryant Library Sketchbook Collection (BLSC) under "Roslyn Grist Mill" contains numerous articles from *The Roslyn News*, *Newsday*, and other publications as well as original letters and documents including first hand descriptions of The Roslyn Tea House by Alice Titus, its first manager.

Brower, Marion Willetts compiler and revised by Brower and Dorothy Horton McGee. *The Story of Roslyn Grist Mill*. Roslyn, Long Island: Griscom



This is a recent photo of the Roslyn Grist Mill as it appears with historic sign placed over the door. The road, Old Northern Boulevard, is several feet higher than the actual entrance to the mill. The mill is owned by Nassau County.

Publications (for the Roslyn Grist Mill Board of Trustees), 1953.

Comstock, Cline, "The 1873 Beers," *Atlas of Long Island*.

Endo, Emi. "Roslyn's History in the Remaking" Sunday North Hempstead Edition. (April 27, 1997).

A House Tour Guide, Roslyn Landmark Society (June 3, 1989).
Walter Hicks' 1865 Journal, Roslyn Landmark Society.

Original artifacts and memorabilia from the Roslyn Grist Mill, owned by Nassau County, were displayed at the Bryant Library in March and April of 1998 and in the store front, permission of the Roslyn Savings Bank, next to 1400 Old Northern Boulevard, March-May, 1998. For further information on the Hicks family on Long Island, refer to: Williams, George L. "The Hicks Family in Three Villages", *Long Island Forum* (Winter, 1992), pp. 25-34.

All photos are courtesy of the Local History Collection, Bryant Library, Roslyn.