

Van Hornesville Feed Mill

By Cathy Woodruff
Community Volunteer

One of Van Hornesville's earliest 19th Century mill buildings has endured well into the 21st Century.

But now, with the apparent conclusion of the stone grist mill's nearly 200-year career producing feed for area farm animals, community members are considering what its next chapter should be.

"I believe it should be preserved somehow because it's part of what Van Hornesville is, in my opinion," said Rick Bronner, who retired in 2020 after several decades as general manager of the Van Hornesville Milk Producers Co-op, which operated the mill.

"It's a shame it couldn't stay as a feed mill," he added. "The building is in great shape. It really is."

But while the building is structurally sound, it could need substantial renovations if it is to be made suitable for a different use.

The mill property is owned by the Van Hornesville Community Corp., a non-profit educational and charitable corporation founded by benefactor Owen D. Young in 1938. The VHCC is hosting two weekend "community conversations" on May 3 and May 4 to hear and discuss ideas for future use of the mill, millpond and other community assets owned by the corporation.

The mill ceased operation around 2022 amid pandemic disruptions to the feed industry and changing farm economics. It is the first time local farmers have gone without a local feed

supplier in many generations.

Milling in Van Hornesville has its roots in a sharp-eyed discovery by two enterprising New Jersey soldiers who passed through the area during the Revolutionary War and noticed the potential of water power on a section of the Otsquago Creek in what is now the southeast corner of Herkimer County.

Abram Van Horne and his cousin returned after the war and built the first feed mill for surrounding farmers in 1793, according to accounts published in a 1989 issue of the Herkimer County Historical Society's *Legacy* magazine.

According to the *Legacy* account, the current mill was built on the site in 1836 by Daniel Van Horne — though a carved stone above the front door bears the initials D.V.H. and a date of 1833.

Farmers from earlier settlements on higher ground surrounding Van Hornesville — known then as Pumpkin Hook, The Chyle and The Squawk — welcomed the arrival of the first Van Horne grist mill and its successor to grind their grain into feed for their livestock.

The 1833 (or 1836) mill operated on



A view of the Van Horne Mills in Van Hornesville (ca. 1932)

Photo from the Van Hornesville Community Corporation Archives, Van Hornesville, New York

water power until 1961, when it was converted to electricity.

One of the Van Hornesville mill building's recent fans is a relatively new community resident, Susan R. Williams, whose home overlooks the historic structure. The fact that she and her husband settled here in their retirement years involved a touch of serendipity.

Williams's academic subjects of doctoral study included vernacular architecture, which she describes as the study of "ordinary buildings," and the history of technology.

"The two of those converge in that building," she noted.

The Van Hornesville mill is modeled on a design invented by American engineer and businessman Oliver

Evans, Williams said. Evans was a pioneer of industrial innovation and developed a milling process called "vertical integration," which moves the grain to a top level, directs it down through a series of tubes and chutes as it is ground, and brings the finished feed to the bottom, where it is bagged and carted away.

"This was very innovative, but not unusual for this region," Williams said. "This is just a beautiful, well-preserved example. ... That mill has a lot of potential, both for its historical significance as something that transformed industrial production of grain and also because it was the engine that drove the economy of Van Hornesville."