

## **Mills Pond House: Historical and Descriptive Data**

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Department of the Interior, Washington, D.C.*

### **Significance:**

The Mills Pond House is the nucleus of a small rural hamlet settled and long inhabited by the Mills family. This area provides an unusual survival of a small agricultural community once common on Long Island. The prosperity of the Mills family is evident from this substantial Greek Revival house built for William Wickham Mills in 1838-40. Designed by New York City architect, Calvin Pollard, the house is one of the few high-style structures of this period on Long Island. The extensive original documentation which remains in a family collection provides an unusually complete picture of the construction of a mid-nineteenth century house.

### **Historical Information**

Date of erection: The house was built between 1838 and 1840. A letter dated June 1, 1838, from the architect to his client, William Wickham Mills, reads: "I have just finished Your Plans & Details." The family occupied the new house in 1840. Architect: Calvin Pollard (1797-1850). Largely self-trained, Pollard began to work in New York City with his brother, Otis, a carver and carpenter. He was listed in the New York City directories in 1826-27 as a builder, but by 1840-41 it changed to architect. Working mostly in the Greek Revival style, he designed churches and theaters in New York, the Brooklyn City Hall in 183<sup>^</sup>, the Hustings Courthouse in Petersburg, Virginia circa 18<sup>^</sup>0, and several other large houses.

Mills Pond is a conservative design for Pollard, probably due to Mills' influence. Mills Pond and the courthouse in Virginia are the only known extant examples of Pollard's designs.

**Original and subsequent owners:** Timothy Mills purchased land in 1705 from the Smith family, the original settlers of the area. His son, Jonathan Mills, purchased additional land in 1738 from Nathaniel Smith. It is this tract of land on which the Mills Pond House was built. Jonathan Mills had two sons by a second marriage, William Wickham, born 1760, and Jonathan, born 1761. These two brothers remained to farm the land. When Jonathan died in 1808, his ten children were left with William as their guardian. Since William had only one child of his own, a girl named Eliza Ann, he needed to establish a male head of the family. He did not choose one of his ten wards, but instead he invited the son of his half-brother, Jacob, to come to Mills Pond. The boy was his name sake, William Wickham Mills, born in 1796, five years older than Mills' daughter, Eliza. The two were married in 1822 and together they inherited her father's estate when he died in 1825. It was this William Wickham Mills who constructed the Mills Pond House in 1838. Mills died January 6, 1865 and his wife Eliza died July 9, 1865-The estate was contested by several of their nine children, but the house became the sole property of the eldest daughter, Amanda Moscrop Mills Smith, by 1880. Her son, E. DuBois Smith, resided in the house following his marriage in 1881, and after his wife's death in 1939, the homestead passed to their five children. Josephine (1881|-1969) and Frances Mildred (1886-1972), the two unmarried daughters, were given the house and were the last direct descendants of William Wickham Mills to reside at Mills Pond. Title to the property was bequeathed to their nephews (Edward H. L. Tangier Smith, Jr., William Wickham Mills Smith and DuBois Tangier Smith), great-great grandsons of William Wickham Mills, by whom it was given to the Town of Smithtown, along with 2.85 acres, in 1976.

**Alterations and additions:** Alterations include conversion of the original coal-burning fireplace grates into hot-air flues, installation of plumbing and electrical service in the early 1900s, construction of a small bathroom in the corner of a first-floor room (since removed), and conversion of a small first-floor room to a kitchen around 19<sup>^</sup>0. Rooms in the kitchen wing have been altered for use as a custodian's apartment in 1977.

### **Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:**

The Mills family, early settlers of the Town of Smithtown, developed a rural agricultural community around Mills Pond. Occupied by the prosperous Mills family until 1976, this area is a rare survival of an agricultural hamlet once common on Long Island. William Wickham Mills inherited the family land and began to construct the Mills Pond House in 1838. He was a man of wealth and social prominence, being a successful farmer, stock breeder, and business man. He invested extensively in land and novel enterprises, such as the Long Island Railroad. Mills Pond House is the earliest documented architect-designed house in the area. The construction of such a house in a rural Long Island community in 1838 was a considerable task and serves to illustrate Mills' prominence. The house represented his position in the community while it provided his large family with all the most current amenities. The architect of the Mills Pond House, Calvin Pollard, was also prominent in his field. He gained a considerable reputation for his designs of urban churches, theaters, civic structures, townhouses, and country estates. This house is one of only two Pollard-designed structures still extant.

William Sidney Mount, a renowned nineteenth-century painter, was a frequent visitor to Mills Pond. He was related to the Mills family through his mother and lived most of his life in the Hawkins-Mount Homestead in nearby Stony Brook. Mount remained unmarried, notwithstanding Amanda Mills' attempts to introduce him to eligible young women:

A cold, rather than the gout, caused William Wickham Mills' death in 1865\* The artist Mount noted in his diary. "Wm. Wickham Mills Esq. died Friday evening about 9 o'clock— caught a cold— and interred Wednesday 11th of Jan."

### **Architectural Information**

**Architectural character:** The Greek Revival-style Mills Pond House is one of the few high-style structures of this period on Long Island. While William Wickham Mills hired a New York City architect, Calvin Pollard, to design his house, he employed local "builders. This local building tradition is evident throughout the house, where decorative Grecian ornament is applied to a conservative five-bay house.

#### **Description of Exterior:**

**Foundations:** Field stone below grade, dressed granite blocks laid in courses above grade.

**Wall construction, finish, color:** Frame with narrow clapboarding with corner pilasters, painted white. Structural system, framing: Braced frame construction with brick nogging. The h" by 12" posts, doubled at the corners, carry girts into which the joists are framed by mortise and tenon joints. Regularly spaced 3" by 10" joists run east-west in the main section, while the wing joists run north-south. The roof is supported by queen-post trusses, each further strengthened by four braces. There is no ridge pole, but two purlins carry the rafters.

**Porches, stoops:** In the center bay on the north (front) elevation there is a wooden entrance portico with four Doric columns supporting an entablature with a balustrade. There is a similar entrance portico on the center bay of the south elevation, except with two Doric columns. The stoops of both are floored with marble squares. The entrance stoop to the wing on the north elevation has iron railings.

**Chimneys:** There are five brick chimneys, four inside end chimneys in the main section and one on the roof ridge at the west end of wing.

**Doorways and doors:** The basement entrances are located on the south (rear) elevation, and provide access to the southwest corner of the large basement beneath the main section and the summer kitchen and pantries beneath the kitchen wing. The main entrance is centered on the north (front) elevation. The single panel door is flanked by pilasters and has side lights and a transom. The central door on the south elevation has six panels and is also framed by a transom and side lights. There are separate entrances to the kitchen wing on the north and south elevations.

**Windows and shutters:** Windows are six-over-six-light double hung sash. The central windows on the second floor of both the north and south elevations have two-over-two-light double hung sash side lights. There are attic windows covered with wooden grilles visible in the frieze of the main section, while woven wire screens cover the vents in the frieze of the wing\* The original paneled shutters were probably fabricated on the site.

### **Description of Interior:**

**Basement:** The "basement is a large, open room "beneath the main section. A large round cistern remains at the west end. The basement beneath the wing is divided into three smaller rooms and finished as a pantry and storage area. Early woodwork which pre-dates the house was reused.

**First floor:** The main section has a wide central hall, with an entrance at either end, flanked by a double parlor on the east and two rooms on the west (originally the dining room and drawing room). Each room has a fireplace centered on either the east or west wall. The kitchen wing contains a large kitchen in the southwest corner and smaller eating and storage rooms (now used as a custodian's apartment).

**Second floor:** The second floor of the main section has a central hall flanked by four bedrooms. The second floor of the wing has a central hall running east-west with a series of small rooms on either side( servant's quarters)

**Attic:** There is an attic only in the main section. It consists of several small rooms with low attic windows.

**Stairways:** The main stairway is located in the central hall of the main section. It is a straight run of steps to the second-floor hall. The balusters and railings are mahogany. A secondary stairway to the second floor is located in the hallway between the main section and wing. Beneath this is the stairway to the basement. Another flight of steps to the second floor wing is located in an enclosure in the southwest area of the wing. Access to the third floor is by way of stairs located in a second-floor hall between the rooms on the west side in the main section.

**Flooring:** The first floor hall has narrow oak flooring; all the other rooms have wide pine planks. The pine flooring was intended to be carpeted. Some original carpeting may exist in the front parlor. The carpet is a floral pattern, Wilton type, possibly from an 18U1 purchase from W. W, Chester and Company of New York City. Some floors have been replaced with new wooden planks during the 20th century.

**Decorative features and trim:** There are three black and gold marble mantelpieces in the principal rooms. The drawing room has an early nineteenth-century mantelpiece, with free-standing Ionic columns, which predates the house. The mantelpieces in the other rooms are wooden of simple design. Decorative plaster "centres" remained in good condition in the parlors, main hall, and drawing room through the 1990's.

### **Mechanical equipment:**

**Heating:** The fireplaces were originally equipped with coal-burning grates, some of which remain. The main section has central, hot-air heat in the central hall and west side, the east side is presently unheated. The wing has electric baseboard heat. There is an early hot-air furnace in the basement.

**Plumbing:** There is a nineteenth-century wooden tub, lined with tin, on the second floor, which is old, but probably not original.

### **Site:**

**General setting and orientation:** The house faces north, set back from State Route 25A, from which Mills Pond Road approaches the house. The house is located on a parcel of approximately six acres, which includes part of Mills Pond. The house and grounds are located in the Mills Pond Historic District, approximately two hundred acres of farm land and woods. There are nine structures included in the district which date, with one exception, from the 18th century through the first half of the 19th century. This is the center of the rural hamlet founded and long inhabited by the Mills family. The district was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1973.

**Historic landscape design:** The grounds surrounding the dwelling are largely intact from Mills' original scheme. This includes the circular drive and numerous exotic plantings. Mills was interested in horticulture and decorative exotic plants. He purchased numerous fruit and ornamental trees in 1837 from William R. Prince and Company of Flushing, Long Island. Some of these still exist at Mills Pond. Mills Pond is adjacent to the house and woodland lies to the east and south. The woods hide a parking facility which has its own access from Mills Pond Road. A white picket fence stretches across the property along State Route 25A. This is a recent reconstruction of the original which had survived until 19773.

**Outbuildings:** Eighteenth and nineteenth century "barn buildings remain, now on an adjacent parcel of land under separate ownership, although they have deteriorated. The original wash-house and carriage house behind the house have disappeared, but the foundations remain.