

Our little England—Baa, Baa, Black Sheep by the Collaborating Cousins, Beth Evans Simmons and Dennis Cass

Most Harbor Creek historians know that throughout the 1800s, the Cass Woolen Mill was a major industry along 6-Mile Creek near where Depot Road crosses the creek, commonly called “Factory Gulch” because of all the mills along the creek in the 1800s. But we’ll fill in some details most don’t know with much of the following information Dennis gleaned from indentures obtained from the Erie Courthouse. Other information came from the original warrant maps for the tracts surveyed by Thomas Rees in the 1790s.

Joseph, Sr. and Olive Backus, who purchased land in South Harbor Creek from the Pennsylvania Population Company in 1808. Joseph Backus, Jr. (their oldest son) apparently had three mills along Six-Mile Creek: one west of Depot Road in tract 192 (which had been given the Scottish name “Dornock” by its original investor, William Simmons), and the other two further upstream along Six-Mile Creek in tract 128, which the original investor, James Burnside, had named “Falmouth” after a town in Cornwall, England. Miller’s History of Erie County written in 1909 stated that the first mill had been built in 1810, as a “carding” and “woolen mill.” Dennis has shown that that first mill built in 1810 was not what became the Harbor Creek Woolen Factory (see the attached maps). On June 6, 1837, Joseph, Jr. and Martha Backus sold their “fulling mill” to Lester Hays for \$500. The transaction was signed by Joseph, Jr.’s brother, Myron Backus, who had purchased part of tract 128.

What is a fulling mill? The wool manufacturing process starts with raw unwashed wool gathered from sheep on neighboring farms. The wool was washed in 180-degree water and then air dried for several days. Carding machines combed the wool, creating batting. Before being made into the final product, the wool was cleansed in a “fulling mill” where wooden hammers, known as fulling stocks or fulling hammers, beat the cloth to remove oils, dirt, and other impurities, producing a tightly finished, flame resistant, insulating, and water repellent fabric shrunk by friction and pressure. Fulling stocks were of two kinds- falling stocks (operating vertically) that were used only for scouring, and driving or hanging stocks. In both cases the machinery was operated by cams on the shaft of a waterwheel or on a tappet wheel, which lifted the hammer. Driving stocks were pivoted so that the foot (the head of the hammer) struck the cloth almost horizontally. The stock had a tub holding the liquor and cloth. This was somewhat rounded on the side away from the hammer, so that the cloth gradually turned, ensuring that all parts of it were milled evenly. The ‘foot’ was approximately triangular in shape, with notches to assist the turning of the cloth. About every two hours, the cloth was taken out to undo plaits and wrinkles. The wool was then spun into thread and woven into blankets and fabric used for clothing. The original hand loom from the mill shown in the diagram of the Harbor Creek Woolen Mill still survives. Susan Helm purchased it at an estate auction in southeast Erie for \$10 and rebuilt it. Her extensive research into the weaving industry led her to eastern pre-Revolution America, but it appears her loom was at least part of the early fulling mill.

On April 2, 1844, Lester and Mary Hays sold the mill to John Thornton, John Cass, John Rhodes, Thomas Rhodes and Joshua Jewett, an Englishman who owned the North East Woolen Factory in 1850. Two other Englishmen, John George and Abraham Crowther, were listed as spinster and cloth dresser in that mill. This was the first and only woolen factory of any size ever operated in Harbor Creek Township. In their 2000 version of the Cass Chronicles, Dennis and his co-author, Perry Smith tells that in the construction that the owners were assisted by local farmers, some of whom were prospective patrons of the new enterprise. The project was soon finished and the new factory building duly initiated with an old fashioned square dance held at the urgent request of those who had helped in its construction. This was a gala occasion. The country folk, young and old, flocked in from the country sides around to see the new building, and to step their light fantastic toes to the accompaniment of the violin music of the Pierce Brothers, Steve (who’s granddaughter Martha Pierce married Elmer Hill, a great grandson of John Cass) and Smith, who were the district’s most accomplished fiddlers.

The 1850 census lists John Cass, born in England, as a manufacturer, age 50, with wife Hannah, and children, Jane, Ann, William R., Elizabeth and a young son, “Summerwell” (Samuel). Value of real estate owned was \$2000 along with Thomas Rhodes, and his wife Mary Ann. Daniel Osborne, living with John Rhodes, also listed as a manufacturer, was identified as a carder and William Gunnison, also born in England was a weaver, and his 23-year-old son, Benjamin, a spinner. Another weaver was Charles Hyman who was living with Himan Manley and Z.L. Hough, both listed as manufacturers. On the census, Benjamin Brumly from England was also listed as a weaver. On November 24, 1851, Joseph and Martha Backus sold more land to John Rhodes, John Cass and Thomas Rhodes. And on April 22, 1854, John and Sarah Rhodes and Thomas and Mary Ann Rhodes sold their share of the mill to John Cass for \$3100.

The 1870 census lists John Cass as proprietor of a woolen mill, with daughter, Jane, and son, William (Roe) Cass, working in the mill. John and Hannah’s oldest son, Edward William Cass, is listed as a nearby farmer with his son, Ephraim, as a laborer. A grand nephew, George Pratt from Beaver County, Pennsylvania, was living with John and Hannah Cass.

John Cass died in 1874 and his will stipulated that his property be sold. John Backus and Edward "Ned" Cass were executors of John Cass' will. Martha Halderman, Joseph Backus' daughter, bought it; the 1876 Harbor Creek Township map shows her name on the mill lot. On March 19, 1878, Edward W. Cass purchased the 40 acres that contained the mill and dam for \$1,200. At that time, Edward William Cass owned a 110-acre farm on Backus Road. The site of the mill dam was owned by the heirs of Joseph Backus (showing there was a mill dam and pond upstream from it) according to the purchase agreement signed by local Justice of the Peace, James Chambers. After Edward purchased it, according to the 1880 census information, Edward's son, Ephraim ran the mill. Another local mill worker was Christian Shultz who owned a large farm south of Station Road that crossed what is now Wales Road.

1880 was considered the most prosperous year the national woolen industry had ever experienced. (North, S.N.D., 1892 Statistics of Wool manufacture, Census Bulletin 169, p. 8.) By 1880, the value of livestock in Harbor Creek was almost \$150,000 but the number of sheep dropped to about 1700, with total wool production to 3500 pounds. The number of sheep farmers dropped to a quarter of what there were in 1850, so the mill profits must have decreased also. As the fruit industry came into its own with the introduction of the hardy Concord grapes, sheep counts dropped in Harbor Creek. The 1880 farm list and map show that the farmers quit raising sheep and had turned to grapes, apples, cherries, and pears and peaches to make a living.

By a decade later, the wool market changed, and the Cass Woolen mill shut down sometime before 1900 when the photos of its remains shown here were taken. The windows and doors were probably reused in local homes. In the 1900 census, both Edward Cass and William Roe Cass were listed as farmers; the woolen mill was history. In 1909, John Miller reported that "the Cass woolen mill has been many years in disuse" (p. 488). The hand loom was apparently taken out by the Casses and eventually found its way into Susan Helm's hands as she reported in the *Journal of Erie Studies* in the fall of 1994 (Vol. 23, #2, p. 40).

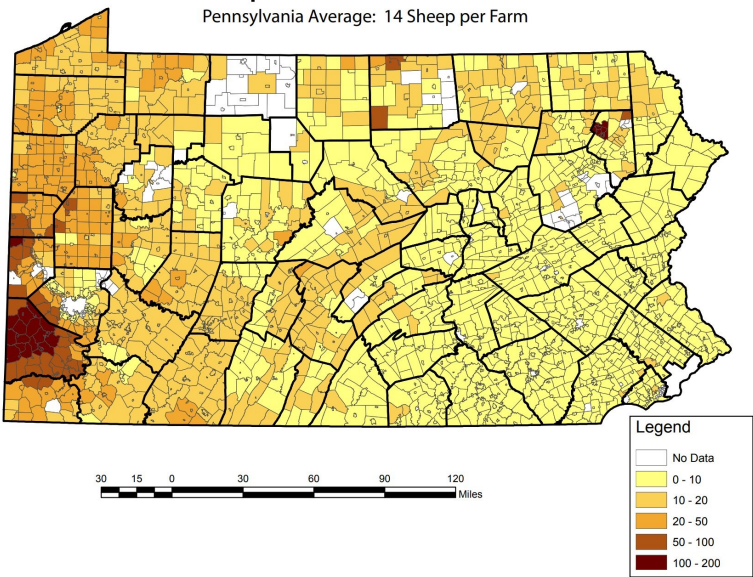
It only recently occurred to Beth that in order to run a woolen mill, to process wool, you need sheep! So the area around the mill, particularly in Harbor Creek, must have looked like a little England, with sheep on almost every piece of property (and heavy Yorkshire accents in every house!). The 1850 agricultural census shows there were over 5,000 sheep in Harbor Creek township! Production of wool was over 14,000 pounds! The lengthy attached list records the farmers and the number of sheep they owned as reported by the 1850 agricultural census. It and the maps clearly show that wool was a major local product. The state agricultural map from 1850 shows that the average farm in Harbor Creek and surrounding townships housed 20-50 sheep. The township map shows approximately how many sheep were reported on each farm. In 1850, the sheep competed with 555 horses, 208 oxen, 1,004 milk cows plus 989 beef cattle and pigs for pasture.

How did the sheep impact the land? Sheep nibble close to the soil, so the flocks have to be moved regularly from one pasture to another. How do you move sheep? With hard working diligent English shepherd dogs! This explains Kenneth Evans' (Beth's father) penchant for shepherd and collie dogs; they are bred to herd sheep. Beth asked her father once why he only wanted shepherd dogs—and he answered, "Because they don't kill sheep." There were sheep on the Willats farm north of the Evans farm, both located in tract 213, originally called "Launceton," apparently after an ancient town, Launceston, in Cornwall, England. The 1880 census actually counted how many sheep had been killed by dogs! So Kenneth had a valid concern! According to his daughter, Pam Willats Whitmore, Dale Willats sent his sheep's wool to the Frankenmuth Woolen Mill in Michigan for processing during the 20th century. That mill opened in 1894, is still operating.

This research revealed a history of Harbor Creek (and probably Greene and Greenfield) townships that hasn't been told before, Including the original tract names, that reveals more of our ancestral ties to "little England"!

Sheep Per Farm in 1850

Pennsylvania Average: 14 Sheep per Farm



Adams	Jeremiah	20	Cowden	Thomas	20	McClane	John	16	Taggart	Wareham	22
Ames	Horatio	8	Crosby	Patrick	25	McGill	Dudley	67	Tate	William	6
Atwood	Than	33	Crouse	Andrew	46	McLean	John	65	Throop	Benjamin	16
Atwood	Oses	20	Culbertson	Thomas	15	Miles	Arnum	30	Throop	Benjamin, Jr.	8
Austin	Nathaniel	21	Davis	Henry	12	Miller	Deabod	30	Tracy	Lucius	20
Backus	Ezra	40	Doing	Benjamin	6	Miller	William	25	Turner	Jesse	20
Backus	Ebenezer	15	Elliott	Thomas	106	Mills	John	30	Tuttle	John	40
Backus	John	10	Elliott	Mary	21	Miner	William	44	Twitchell	Aaron	27
Backus	Timothy	16	Elliott	Gilbert	25	Miner	Henry	50	Videto	Ira	25
Baird	Thomas, Jr.	23	Ferguson	Robert	38	Moore	Alanson	15	Videto	Hiram	280
Baker	John	11	Field	Otis	6	Moorhead	George	50	Wadsworth	Truman	20
Bell	Levi	7	Flowers	Sally	30	Moorhead	John	30	Wadsworth	Henry	6
Besley	William	60	Foster	Chapin	24	Moorhead	Joseph	49	Walker	Silas	30
Bliley	Charles	12	Gates	Asa	16	Moorhead	James	10	West	Spencer	46
Bowen	Edwin	10	Gifford	Gorsham	32	Moorhead	Thomas	10	Williams	Lewis	60
Boggs	John	12	Goodwin	Daniel	25	Moorhead	Joseph M.	32	Wood	Albert	18
Bonnell	George	27	Graves	Chauncey	26	Moorhead	Joseph Y.	100			
Bonnell	Thomas	22	Gray	Thomas	6	Moorhead	Robert	26			
Bonnell	John	40	Greenwood	Joseph	27	Nelson	George	17			
Bort	Christian	22	Greenwood	Walter	20	O'Brien	Patrick	20			
Brawley	James	38	Greenwood	Charles	7	Ohlweiler	Frederick	40			
Brown	Daniel	56	Griffin	Norman	4	Osborn	Richard	17			
Bryant	Philip	44	Hawes	Eleazer	22	Owen	Elijach	3			
Burch	Reuben	60	Henry	Robert	10	Peck	Seymour	10			
Burgess	Lyman	37	Hielman	Michael	26	Peck	Orin	17			
Calhoon	Russell	15	Hiles	Isaac	40	Peck	Zalmon	10			
Camp	Eder	17	Hinton	William	54	Peck	Joseph	73			
Camp	William	39	Hinton	Thomas	26	Pierce	Jonathan	12			
Campbell	Elias	42	Hinton	Charles	20	Pinney	Roswell	27			
Campbell	Hugh	23	Hoyer	Jacob	15	Proudfit	Robert	12			
Canty	Jeremiah	40	Hunt	Henry	17	Riblett	David	8			
Carr	Joseph	16	Jordan	Arnold	14	Rice	John	11			
Chambers	David	52	Kirkpatrick	John	50	Rich	Dexter	26			
Chambers	David S.	12	Kirkpatrick	Archibald	25	Rudd	Thomas	36			
Chambers	Samuel	26	Kirkpatrick	John	22	Russell	Charles	3			
Chambers	James	50	Lawrence	Zalmon	46	Sacks	John	21			
Chambers	Stewart	12	Lee	Lawrence	9	Saltsman	Jesse	26			
Chambers	Benjamin	53	Leet	Calvin	110	Sample	Robert	7			
Charles	Jacob	23	Leet	Alfred	98	Scott	William	20			
Chellis	Stewart	13	Lewis	Marcus	40	Sewell	Sydney	65			
Clark	Lemuel	50	Lewis	Auriel	14	Sewell	North	25			
Clark	William	18	Lord	William	6	Shaw	Augustus	9			
Clark	Chauncey	30	Lowry	Nathaniel	90	Slade	John	42			
Clark	David	14	Luce	Byram	36	Smith	William	13			
Clark	James	43	Mahony	Michael	4	Smith	James	12			
Clark	John	26	Martin	John	25	Steele	Adna	15			
Cooper	William	30	Martin	Alexander	9	Stevens	Samuel	400			
			May	William	21	Stillman	S	8			
			McCain	Elihu	18	Stinson	Mary	50			

SHEEP FARMERS IN HARBOR CREEK TOWNSHIP 1850

Total # of sheep = 5321

Production of wool =

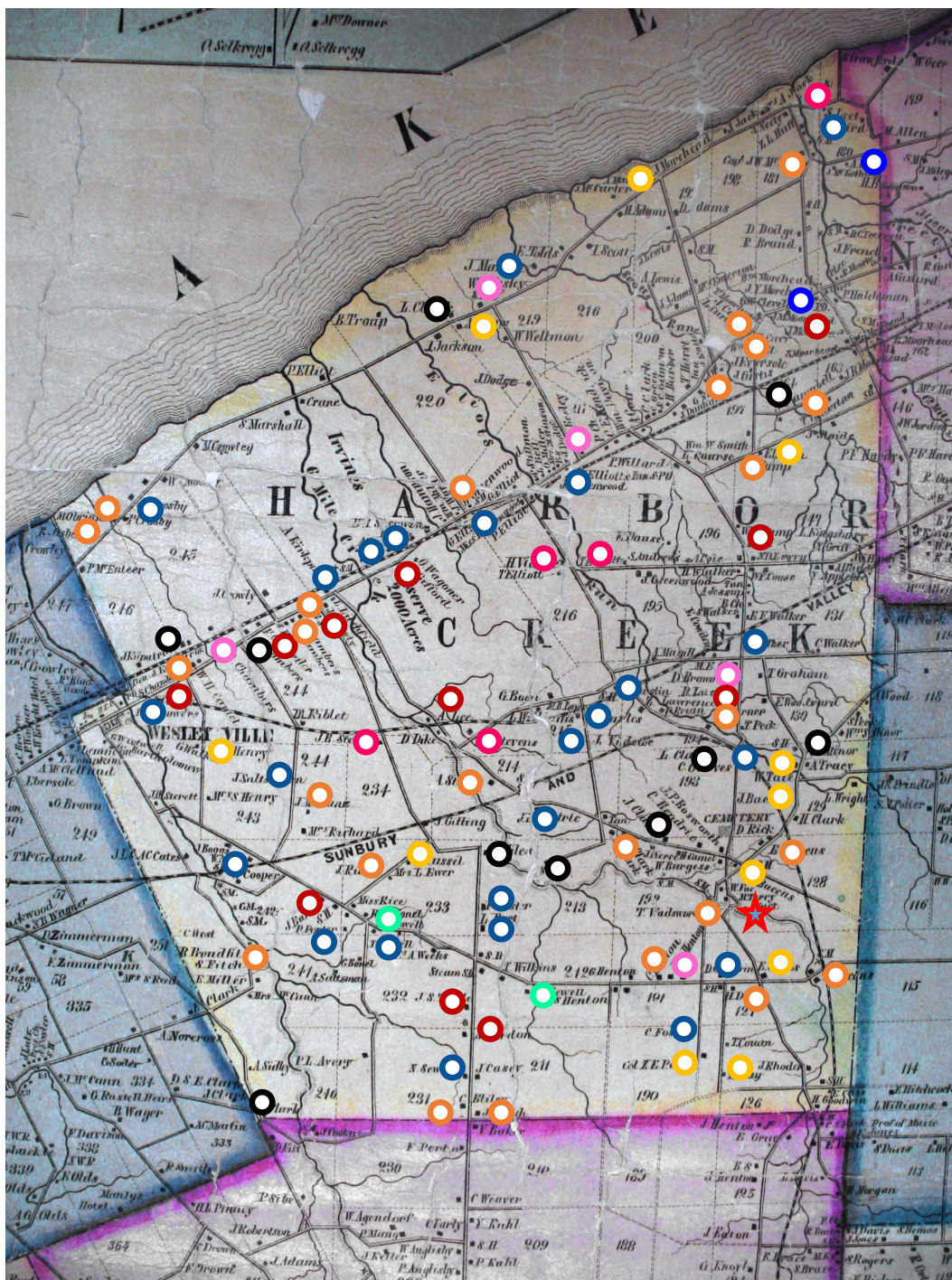
14,413 pounds



Every farm would have had
at least one pair of sheep
shears!



- <10
- 11-20
- 21-30
- 31-40
- 41-50
- 51-60
- 61-70
- 71-80
- 81-90
- 91-100
- >100



Plot of sheep farms and numbers of sheep in Harbor Creek township from the 1850 census overlaid on map from 1855.

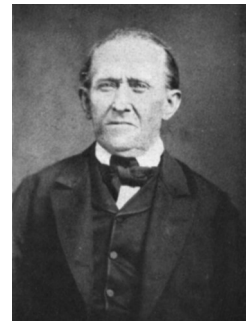
Note that J. Rhodes (southeasternmost farm), part owner of the woolen mill, did not own any sheep!



The Cass Woolen Mill

Photos taken in 1900.

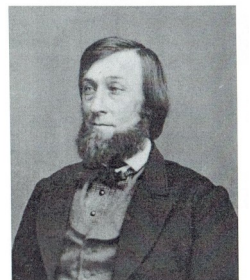
Color enhanced by Dennis Cass in 2023.



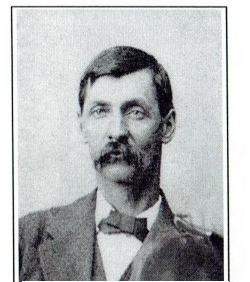
John Cass



Hannah Cass



Edward Cass



Ephraim Cass



Left: The remains of the mill dam, 2009, Dennis Cass

Right: The mill race about half way between the dam and the waterwheel pit, 2009, Dennis Cass



CASS CHRONICLES 2000

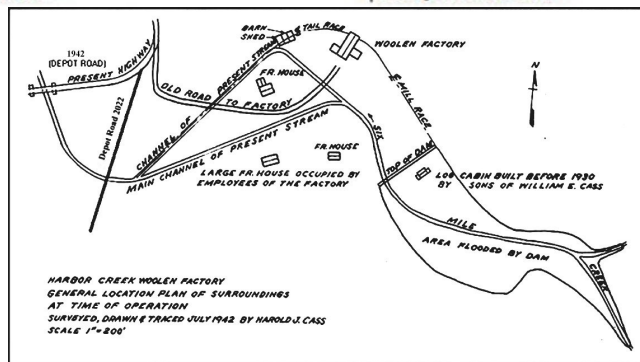
An updating of
"The Chronicles of the Descendants of John Cass"



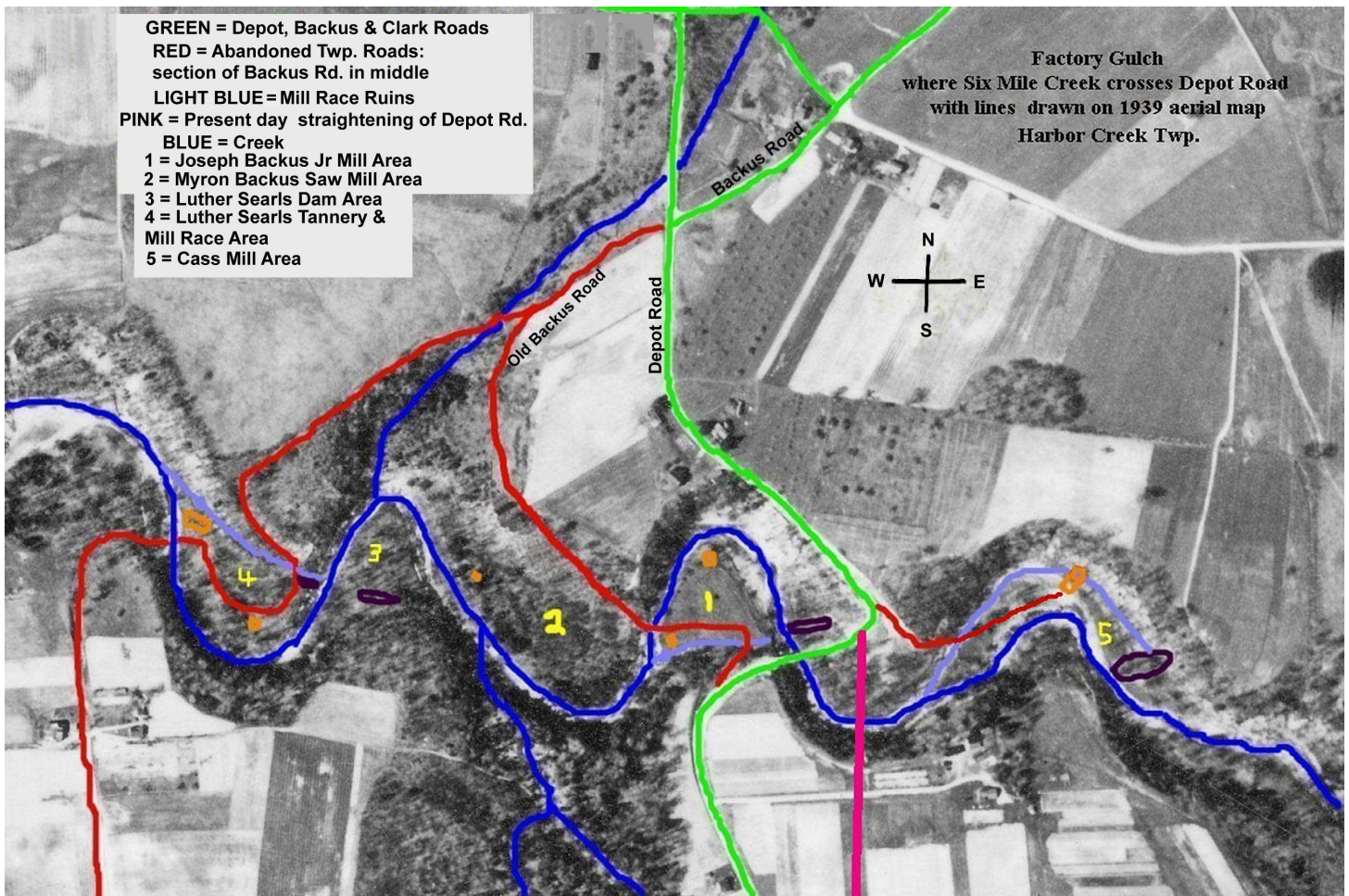
Harbor Creek Woolen Factory Ruins January 23, 1900

Artistic Representation — Harbor Creek Woolen Mill Ruins Prior to 1900
Digitally enhanced by Dennis Cass

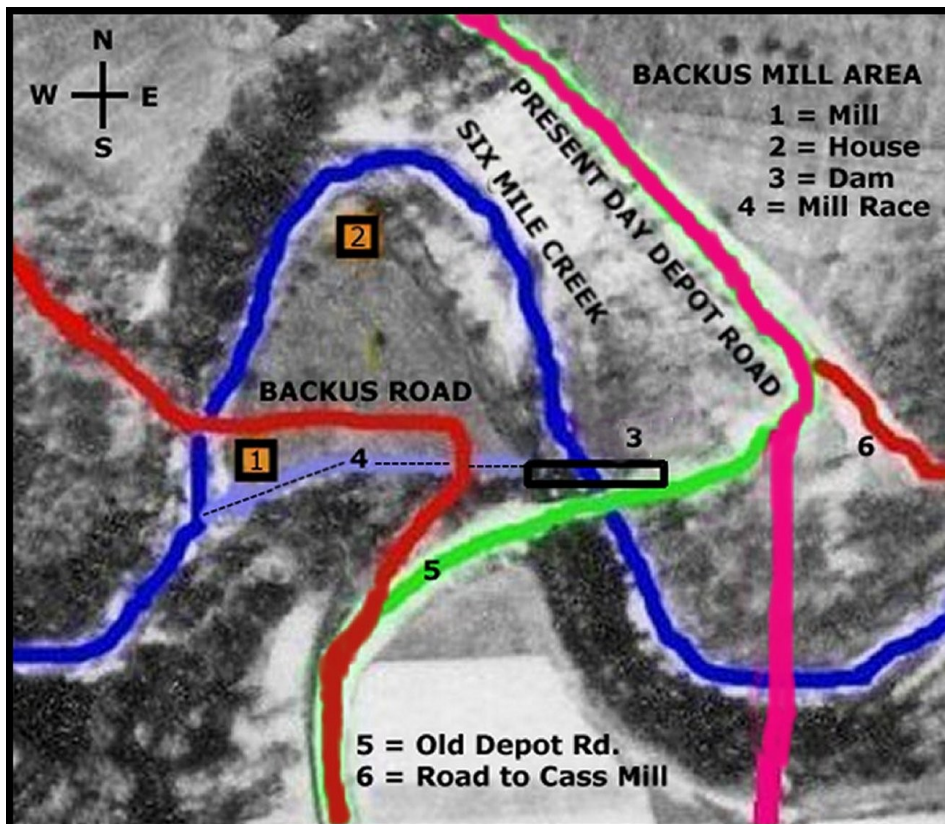
Author of the original Chronicles	Harold J. Cass
Author of the Chronicles Extension	Hugh H. Hays
Authors of the present 2000 Edition	Various
Compilers of 2000 Edition	Dennis Cass & Perry M. Smith
Editor of 2000 Edition	Perry M. Smith

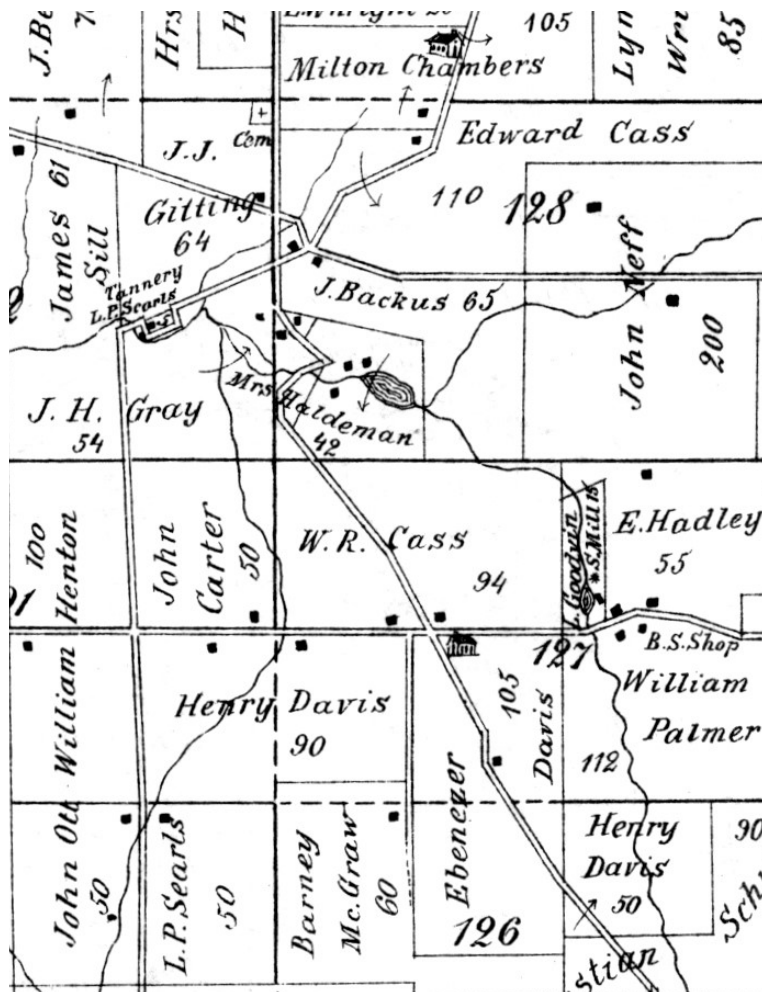


Left: There was a mill race that ran down from the dam along the hill. At the lower end are the remains of what is left of the water wheel pit in the foreground of the picture taken by Dennis Cass. The remains of the mill race can be seen behind the standing man. Center: Sketch map made by Harold Cass based on information from his ancestors. Right: close up of water wheel pit taken by Dennis Cass in 2009.



These maps created by Dennis Cass show the many mills and roads and changes in the roads during time. Note the purple oval on the right is the dam for the Cass woolen mill pond, the one north of the old Depot Road was the dam for the Backus Mill, the one on the left, just south of the number 3 was the dam for the Luther Searles Tannery at #4. The orange circles were the mills, with the lavender lines the mill races that brought the water from the ponds to the water wheels that ran the mills.





1876 map of Factory Gulch Environs
 Mrs. Haldeman, Joseph Backus' daughter, had purchased the Harbor Creek Woolen Mill after John Cass died. This map shows the mill pond which furnished the water to operate the water wheel of the factory. Another mill pond further upstream furnished water for the Goodwin sawmill near Station Road in tract 127. This map shows the one-room school at "Owens Corners", a building which has had numerous additions and served as a neighborhood store for many years, and is still standing and occupied.

B.S. Shop = blacksmith shop

S. Mill = Sawmill

Property ownership in 1808-1809

Tract number 195= Gresford, original investor Dewalt Smith, Warrant April 13, 1792; Survey June 15, 1794; Patent August 16, 1799

Tract number 131= Fishkill, original investor Jacob Wright, Warrant April 13, 1792; Survey June 14, 1794; Patent July 30, 1799

Tract number 194= Bridport, original investor John (Grues) Greus Warrant April 13, 1792; Survey June 15, 1794; Patent August 7, 1799

Tract number 130= Preston, original investor William Williams, Warrant April 13, 1792; Survey June 14, 1794; Patent August 16, 1799

Tract number 193= Steyning, original investor Oliver Wolcott, Warrant April 13, 1792; survey June 15, 1794; patent August 3, 1799

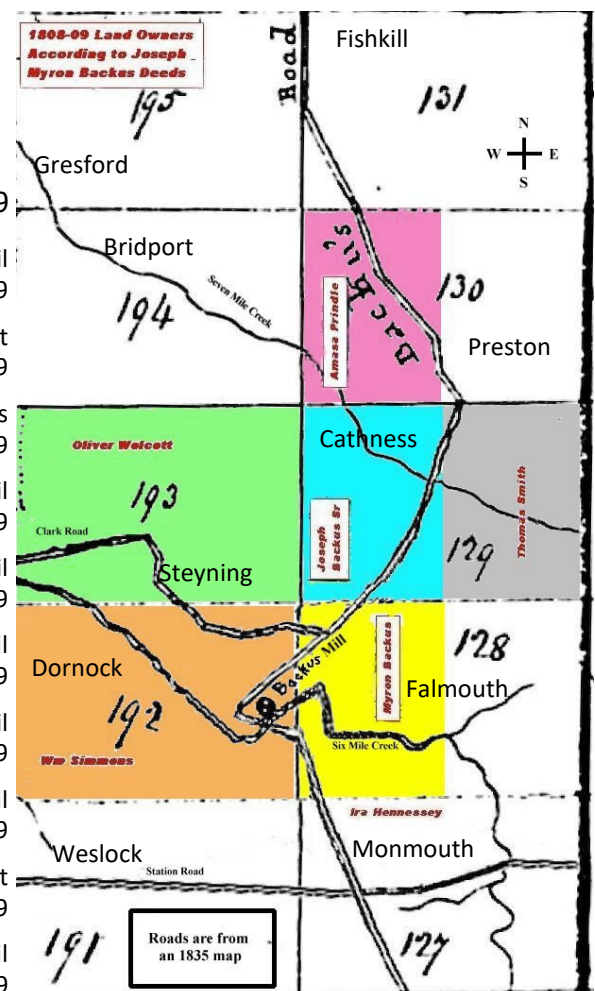
Tract number 129=Cathness, original investor Thomas Smith, Warrant April 13, 1792; Survey June 14, 1794; Patent August 1, 1799

Tract number 192=Dornock, original investor William Simmons, Warrant April 13, 1792; Survey June 15, 1794; Patent July 31, 1799

Tract number 128=Falmouth, original investor James Burnside, Warrant April 13, 1792; Survey June 14, 1794; Patent July 30, 1799

Tract number 191=Weslock, original investor Christopher Baker, Warrant April 13, 1792; survey June 15, 1794; Patent August 6, 1799

Tract number 127=Monmouth, original investor Steven Austin, Warrant April 13, 1792; Survey June 14, 1794; Patent August 6, 1799



1880		Page	Sheep	Lambs	Purchased	Sold Living	Slaughtered	Killed by dogs	Died of disease	Died of stress of weather	Clips, Fleeces #	Weight lbs.
*Adams	Delila	25	2	1					1		2	12
*Backus	John	16	5	4		1					4	20
*Bell	Hiram	7	25	32		32		2			25	125
*Biley	Charles	23		12		19	1	1				
*Bonnell	John	23	38	8	1		1				28	118
*Bonnell	Richard	22	49	15	1		2		2		29	130
*Campbell	Hugh	11				2						
*Cass	William R.	14	18	9		8					9	60
*Cass	E. William	20	27	17		4		1			15	62
*Chambers	Benjamin	14	43	31		30	2			1	24	100
*Chambers	Milton	17	40	22	188	180					19	76
*Clark	Chauncey	12			20	20						
Cole	Henry	27	90	16		17					50	300
*Cooper	William J.	15	42	21		15					23	138
*Crosby	James	10	3									
*Crowly	Michael	10	18	18		18	4				7	28
*Crowly	Thomas	10	12	12		10					5	35
Culbertson	Thomas	1	43	16						1	15	62
*Davis	Henry	20	77								36	160
*Dugan	John	10	56								28	112
*Firman	James	11	11	7		1			1		13	52
*Gittings	John	13	4								3	24
*Goodwin	Benjamin	16	2		2	1					2	12
*Goodwin	Eldridge	16	71	47	6	24	1			17	38	160
*Greenwood	Thomas	17	3								1	10
*H(e)inton	Pat William	20	11	4					1		7	35
Hitesman	Sebastian	22	1								1	6
*Kendrick	Charles	4	30	15		9	1			1	17	68
King	Rufus	24	8	15		12		1			8	48
*Lavery	Peter	21	37	15		13					15	70
*Leet	Alfred	26			47				1			
*McGill	William	6	8	7		7			2		3	15
*Mead	John (Jehu)	26	3		3						3	300
*Moorhead	John	1	200	80			50	2		2	150	600
*Moorhead	James R.	13	54	17	1	13			1		33	231
*Moorhead	William	27	12	7	8						9	67
*Neff	John	16	21	6		3			1		14	56
*Raymond	Charles	6	18	7		7					10	60
*Roberts	William	14	1	5	5	9	1				5	20
*Ross	Joshua	16	16	2							10	100
Runser	George	9	10	5		2					8	40
Runser	Peter	7	72	35		20			5		41	300
*Sewell	Sy(i)dney	21	45	15		20					34	120
*Shultz	Christian	16	5	9							2	10
*Shultz	Edward	16	68	40	2	22			2		34	128
*Slade	Alphonso (John)	10	41	38		36						
*Smith	Rebecca	20	4								3	12
Sopp	Frederick	21		5		13						
Sopp	Philip	18	14	16		4		1		9	7	30
Steucher	Benjamin	10	3									

* = appears on 1876 map Total sheep count = ~ 1700; Production of wool = ~3500 pounds



Shep, the Evans collie, c. 1962. He had one leg amputated because of cancer.

After Shep died, Prince, an English shepherd, was the farm dog at Evan-Acres. 1964.



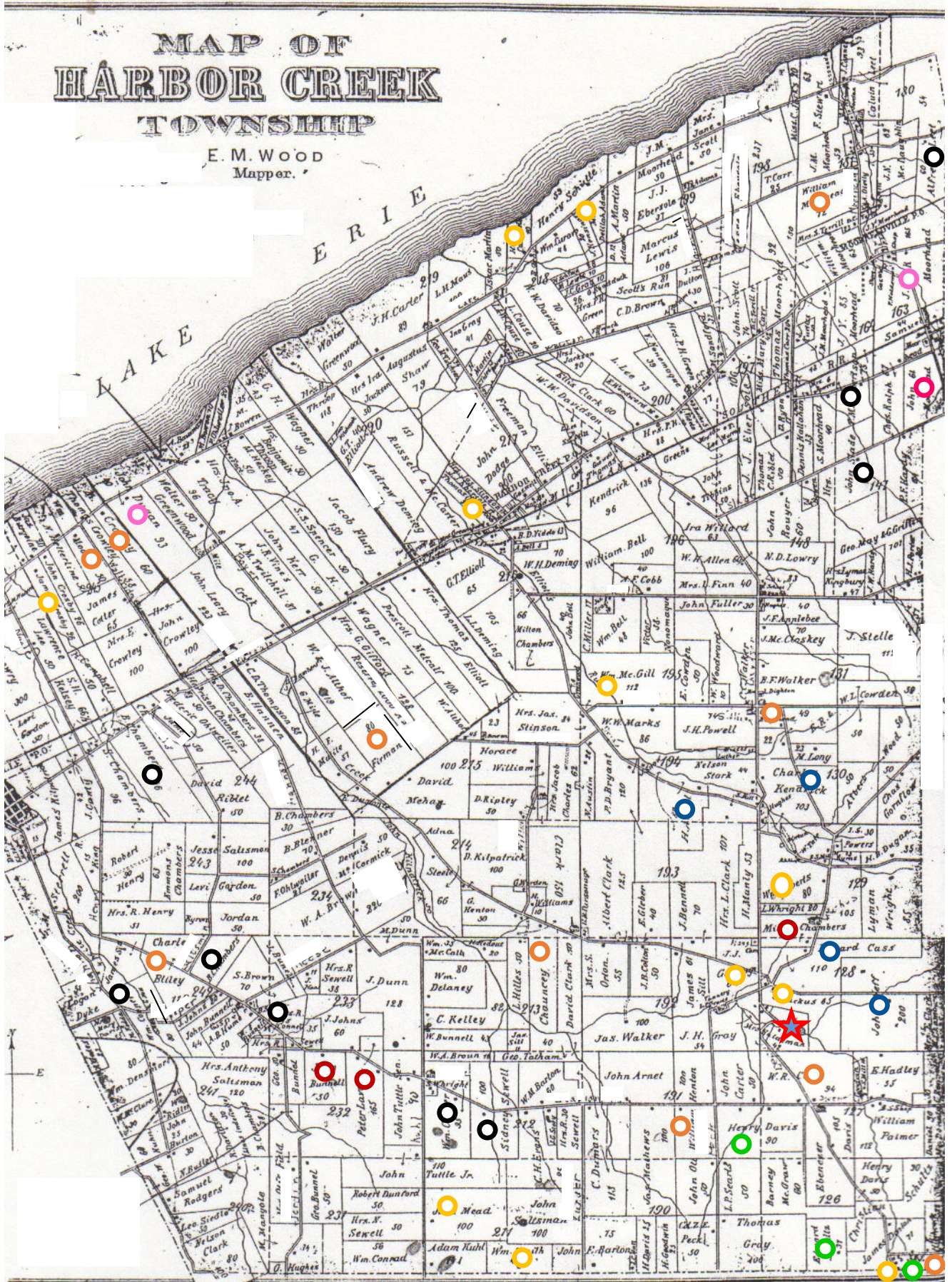
MAP OF HARBOR CREEK TOWNSHIP

E. M. WOOD
Mapper.



Cass
Woolen
Mill

- <10
- 11-20
- 21-30
- 31-40
- 41-50
- 51-60
- 61-70
- 71-80
- 81-90
- 91-100
- >100



Sheep farms in Harbor Creek, 1880, overlaid on 1876 map