

# Compton's Mill:

## *Built and Preserved by a Remarkable Family*



Written by: **Mary Reisinger**

PHOTO BY MARY REISINGER

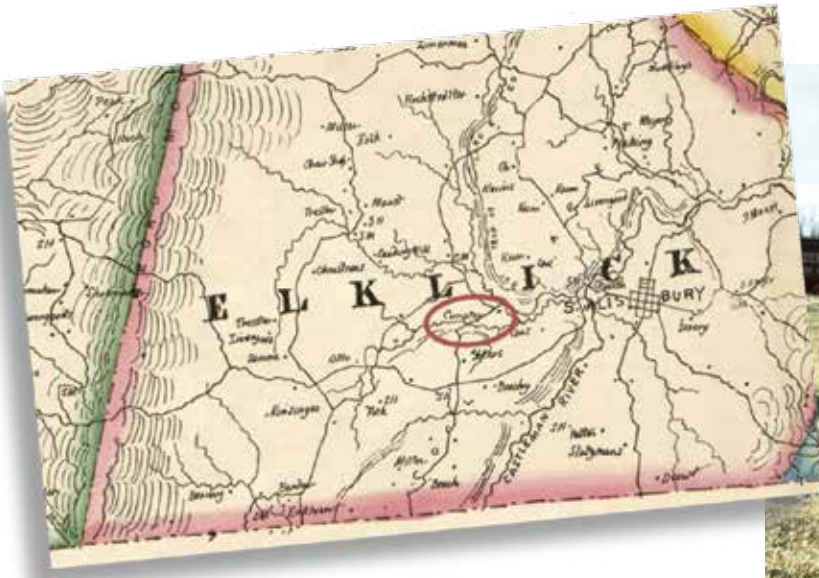
In the late 1700s, brothers John and Ebenezer Griffith acquired land near Salisbury, Pennsylvania. They constructed two log buildings: a home and a grist mill to process local corn and wheat. At the end of 1823, this property was purchased by Abraham Morrison for \$2000. Morrison, in turn, sold the mill to Jonathan Hostetler in 1836 for \$2500. Hostetler operated the mill until 1868, at which time Samuel Compton entered the picture.

Samuel's branch of the Compton family in America originated with Elycum (or Eliacum) Compton, who had immigrated from France and settled in New Jersey. Elycum and his wife Sarah had a son, Robert. Elycum died before the Revolutionary War, but General George Washington often had meals at the boarding house of the Widow Compton and was impressed by her young son. At Washington's

request, eight-year-old Robert joined the general's staff as aide and messenger. Robert was once stopped by soldiers and searched, but the papers he was carrying were never found because they were in the lining of his boots. Though too young to be on any military rolls, he was among the soldiers that made the famous crossing of the Delaware River in 1776.

Robert Compton was apprenticed to a tailor in his teens, and continued this trade as an adult. He and his wife Lydia had twelve children. The family moved to Berlin and then Salisbury, Pennsylvania. After his wife's death, he lived with a grandson in Grantsville, Maryland, where he died in 1856, just before his 88th birthday, and was buried in the Grantsville Cemetery. A Revolutionary War Star has been placed at his grave.





Robert and Lydia's second child, Phineas, was a gunsmith and tinner in Salisbury for most of his life. He is credited with inventing the first modern meat-cutting machine and manufacturing it for several years. Just two years before his death he and his son Samuel bought property in the New Germany area of Western Maryland. The Compton School, a log structure where the Comptons lived for a time in New Germany, is thought to have been built in the late 1700s. As a very early building and the only remaining log cabin school in the area, it was moved to Spruce Forest Artisan Village in 1989; it can still be visited there today.

Phineas and Adaline's (or Adeline's) son Samuel began learning gunsmithing from his father at age thirteen; he also acquired expertise as a tinner, cobbler, and tailor. As a young man, Samuel bought two adjoining pieces of land on Elk Lick Creek; one of these properties was the site of the Hostetler mill. Samuel ran the older, simpler grist mill for a short time, but then built a more efficient mill to better meet local demand. The new mill stood about fifty feet from the old mill. Much of the stone and lumber for the new mill was brought by sled from remote parts of the family's property.

Israel Schrock, builder of the mill, has gone down in history as "a highly temperamental but exceptionally skilled craftsman." He insisted that the stone for the mill foundations and walls must be taken from the tops of ridges where it would be stronger, he felt, due to being subjected to wind and weather.

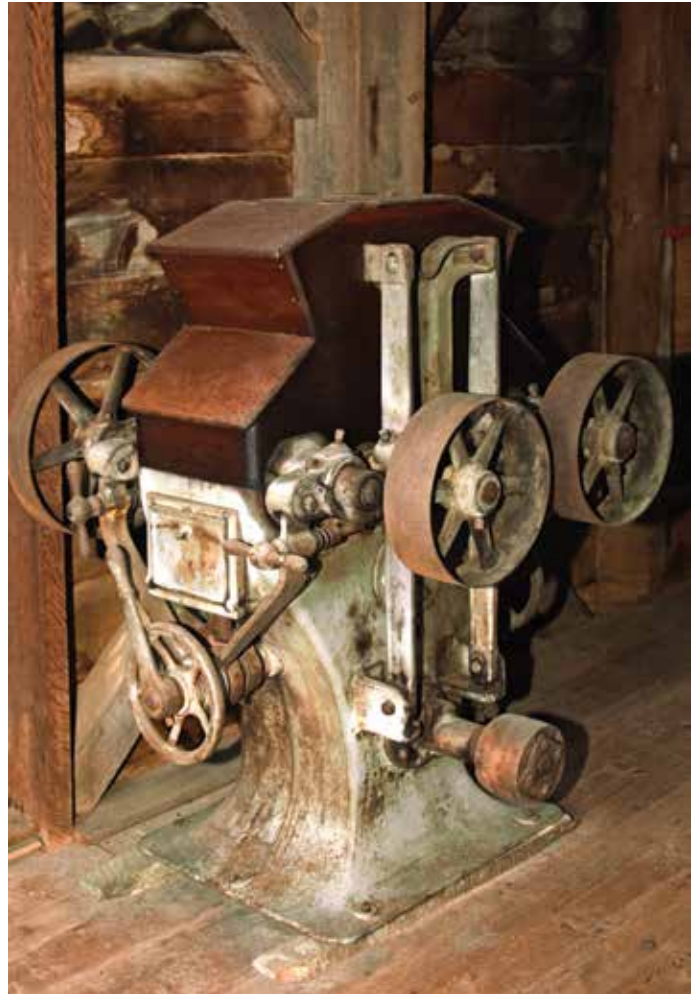
**Map:** Late 1800s Somerset County, PA, map of landowners shows Elk Lick Township boundaries. The name Compton is highlighted.

**Top Right:** Robert Compton's grave marker in Grantsville, MD, cemetery. *PHOTO BY MARY REISINGER*

**Right:** Innovations added by Demetrius Compton include this long strand processing system using different rollers for processing oats, buckwheat flour, cornmeal, and pastry flour. *PHOTO BY SAM HOUSLEY*







The interior of the mill and its equipment remain much as they were when in operation due to Jay Compton's preservation efforts. The wooden chutes pictured on the left circulated raw and partially processed grain, which went up via small cups in vertical chutes and down in angled chutes by gravity.

PHOTOS BY SAM HOUSLEY

Likewise, he chose white oak trees from exposed areas for their strength. Beams, head-posts, and roof trussing were fastened with six-sided white oak pins. The six-sided pin in a round hole is a traditional shipbuilding technique. Care was taken not to use wood with knotholes as these areas might contaminate the flour with sap.

On the exterior wall, a stone dressed and faced by Samuel Compton displays his name and the year 1871, but the lettering on the building shows 1872 as the year the new gristmill was complete, and it was 1873 before it began operation. The former mill had run on the flow of the creek with an undershot wheel, but the new mill had a larger, heavier overshot wheel, and dams were built to regulate the flow of the water. The old millrace was repurposed to power a sawmill. The new mill



Original paper sacks used nearly 100 years ago for flours and meals produced at Compton's Mill.

PHOTOS BY SAM HOUSLEY

**On January 6, 1930, Demetrius Compton reflected on his eighty years while sitting in his office at the mill during a snowstorm:**

**My Birthday January 6, 1930**

As I sit in my old mill room,  
With the snowflakes flying thick and fast,  
And the wind goes by in howling, mournful blast,  
My mind goes back to the days of yore  
Some three-score years or more  
To the lads and lassies gay,  
Who were my comrades of that day;  
But where, O where are they?  
Old Father Time has garnered them all,  
And sent them to the Great Beyond,  
Where the shores are green  
And the suns are bright  
And flowers bloom  
And blessings flow forevermore  
And I am left a lone solitaire  
To view the passing throng  
But with optimistic faith,  
As to my fate  
I too, must pass along,  
With footsteps headed west  
Toward the land of the setting sun,  
And eternal rest;  
A fate decreed to every one—  
And then the question comes  
Will we, or will we not,  
Be numbered with the blest?



was equipped with “buhr” stones and was known to produce excellent flour and meal. In fact, the letters IXL on the building refer to the slogan “I excel.”

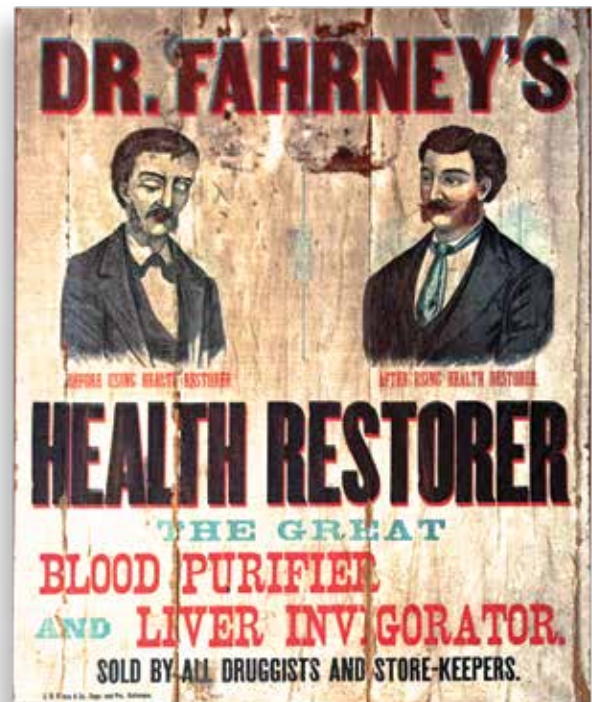
A neighbor of the Compton family, John C. Livengood, used a large wagon with three sets of wheels (changed to whichever size was needed) pulled by a team of six horses, to haul goods from Baltimore to Wheeling, West Virginia. The rig was famous for the melodious bells on the horses’ harness, and the teamster became known as Bella Hans. When Livengood died and his property was sold at auction, Samuel Compton bought the wagon; it was used for three generations at the Compton Mill, at the farm’s sugar camp, and to convey farm crops. After 140 years of service, the wagon was given by the Allen Compton family to the nearby Springs Museum.

Samuel’s sons divided the two properties. Phineas operated the farm where he was born, and Demetrius took over the operation of the mill. Demetrius, a gifted musician and teacher of instrumental music, appreciated modern improvements. In 1878, he had bought the first steam thresher in the area. He was equally innovative at the mill, instituting a roller mill process that greatly increased productivity.

During World War I, the mill ran all day and most of the night to produce the flour and feed needed by the country.

Demetrius’ son Ward followed his father in managing the mill; he added the bleaching process that made the flour whiter, which consumers considered a mark of quality. Appalachian wheat had long been considered among the most nutritious in the world; however, the bleaching process removed the hull and thus reduced the nutritional value of the flour by nearly a third. Nevertheless, this flour was very popular and, according to Ward’s wife, made excellent bread.

Family members tell a number of stories about the mill. In one anecdote, a neighbor insisted that the men drop his 200 pound sack of flour out of the upper



**This original poster on the wall of the mill features a once-popular Hagerstown, MD, elixir, Dr. Fahrney’s Health Restorer. PHOTO BY SAM HOUSLEY**



story door rather than lowering it by block and tackle. When the flour hit the wagon bed, the driver was thrown into the air and landed in the dirt road, muddied but unhurt. Another tale is about the moonshine produced behind the saw mill by workers, and bottled and sold as a “health restorer.”

The advent of huge commercial mills rendered small independent mills nearly obsolete. Because it was so difficult to continue making a profit, Ward Compton closed the mill in the late 1930s. Amazingly, it is still standing and in excellent condition, thanks to the determined effort and skill of Ward’s son Jay Compton, fourth generation descendant of Samuel Compton.

Though the mill closed a few years before Jay was born, he has done a great deal of restoration and is still, in his 78th year, looking after the property. The interior of the building remains much as it was when it was a functioning mill. Just inside the doorway is the cornerstone from the old Griffith log farm house, built in 1780. Other mill equipment—stones to grind buckwheat flour, pastry flour, whole wheat flour, and cornmeal; roller mills for products such as oatmeal; the machines used for bleaching; chutes; bagging machinery; the long lever that controlled the waterwheel—remains in place. A storage cupboard holds a supply of paper flour sacks used nearly 100 years ago. A pot-bellied stove stands in the corner of the office.



**Above:** This wheeled barrel was filled with sacks of a customer’s flour, rolled across the floor to the opening, and attached by chains to a pulley system to be lowered to the conveyance below.

**Left:** Artifacts such as this 1890 account book kept by Demetrius Compton are still in the mill office. *BOTH PHOTOS BY MARY REISINGER*

Outside, the large building with crisp white paint and red trim is beautifully maintained. Its first floor of two-foot-thick stone is followed by several wooden levels, rising to the height of 60 feet. Parts of the hand-dug millrace have been restored. Jay still entertains thoughts of rebuilding and reinstalling the waterwheel if time and health allow. The next generation to care for the mill will be Kristin Compton, Jay’s daughter, who is proud to be carrying on the family tradition.

Though the mill’s interior isn’t open for visitors, anyone can see this striking landmark building by turning on Oak Dale Road from Route 669. If driving from Grantsville, MD, toward Springs, PA, this will be a left turn soon after Mark’s Harness Shop which is on the right. The mill is on the left on Oak Dale, and across from the mill stands the original house built for the Compton family by Israel Schrock. It is a private home still occupied by the family.

