



27 October 2023

Susan Hobart, President
Martha's Vineyard Garden Club
PO Box 5061
Vineyard Haven, MA 02568

Dear Susan,

Following up on our recent conversation, I wanted to set down, in more organized form, the argument I was making about the Island-wide impact of the Old Mill (aka Satinet Mill) in West Tisbury during the 19th century.

Wool had been the Island's principal cash crop since well before the Revolution. It was prized for its non-perishability, its steady economic value, and the relatively modest amount of labor needed to harvest it (a sheep is sheared once a year; a cow is milked daily). A sheep farmer could—depending on their skills, the resources available to them, and the composition of their households—sell it “raw” or at any subsequent stage of processing: cleaned, carded, spun into yarn, knitted into finished goods, or woven into cloth.

When David Look purchased the grist mill on the Old Mill River in 1809, he converted it into a wool-processing factory (so as not to compete with his existing grist mill, located less than a mile away on the Tiasquam River). Look's mill, in its finished form, contained machines for carding, spinning, and weaving wool. Farmers could bring their wool to be machine-carded for a price, or sell it, uncarded, to Look, who would process it further and sell the resulting yarn or cloth at a higher price.

Look's widow continued to operate the mill on this basis after his death. Captain Thomas Bradley, upon acquiring it in 1845, built a bigger and better mill (the current Garden Club building) on the site, enabling greater efficiency and higher volume. Henry Cleveland, who bought it from Bradley in 1859, carried on the business for fifteen more years.

The Old Mill was, from 1810 to roughly 1875, the *only* industrial wool-processing center on Martha's Vineyard. It served sheep farmers from *all* parts of the Island—Edgartown and Chilmark, as well as (West) Tisbury—who chose to outsource the processing of their wool, deriving a smaller but more immediate return from it than if they had chosen to undertake the time- and energy-consuming work of carding, spinning, and weaving themselves.

The famous satinet cloth that gave the Old Mill its informal name was also sold Island-wide. Indeed, the Island (along with Nantucket and nearby Cape towns such as Falmouth and Mashpee) was likely the *primary* market for West Tisbury satinet.



The mechanization of the southern New England textile industry was already well underway by the time David Look converted the mill from grinding grain to carding wool in 1810, and mature by the time Bradley rebuilt the mill in 1845. Mainland factories such as those in Tiverton, Fall River, New Bedford, and Taunton had economies of scale that Look, Bradley, and later Cleveland could never hope to compete with, and for the Old Mill to market its wares primarily on the mainland would have been a losing economic proposition. (Indeed, the growing availability of less-expensive mainland-made textiles on the Island drove the mill out of business in the 1870s).

It's reasonable to assume, therefore, that mill-owners as savvy as Look, Bradley, and Cleveland would have concentrated their marketing locally, taking advantage of Vineyarders' first-hand familiarity with the quality of their product. Given the legendary durability of West Tisbury satin, and the extent to which it was sought after for making sailors' coats, Edgartown (followed by Vineyard Haven and, more distantly, by Chilmark) would have been a key market for the mill.

The Old Mill may have been located in West Tisbury, but it was—if you'll excuse the impression—deeply woven into the fabric of agricultural, commercial, and maritime life across the Island. It's said that Takemmy (the Wampanoag name for what's now West Tisbury) translates as “the place where anyone goes to grind corn.” From 1810 to 1875, it could equally have been said that West Tisbury, specifically the Old Mill, was “the place where anyone went to process wool.”

I hope that this information is useful to the Garden Club in understanding the unique role of its home in Vineyard history.

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'A. Bowdoin Van Riper'.

A. Bowdoin Van Riper, PhD

MVM Research Librarian

Author, “150 Years of Island Industry,” *MV Museum Quarterly*, August 2021

Co-Instructor, “Martha’s Vineyard’s Woolly History” Class, February 2023