

"There is nothing  
so powerful as truth"  
DANIEL WEBSTER

NEW HAMPSHIRE

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# UNION LEADER

UnionLeader.com

Monday, January 31, 2011

Vol. 148, No. 262 • 48 Pages • 50 Cents

## New Hampshire Old Mills Preservation Leadership Award



Newest member of Damon Mills-Farm next to Leisa Damon is "Daisy" (3 week old Jersey) and Brian with historic ice saw.



NEWS > LOCAL

## FARM, MILL HONORED

*Fitzwilliam family wins preservation award*

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Published:

Sunday, January 30, 2011 8:25 AM EST

FITZWILLIAM — Brian Damon got his first tractor when he was 6 years old.

It was a gift from his father, a brand-new Ford with his name emblazoned on the front, and to drive it he had to sit on the transmission casing to reach the clutch.

"My mom wasn't real thrilled I was driving the tractor," he said. "Other kids were maybe riding bikes; I was on a tractor bailing hay."

Damon owns and operates a farm and lumber mill in Fitzwilliam that have been in his family for five generations.

"It's a remarkable family mill farm. There are very few left in the United States like this," said Gerry B. DeMuro, chairman of the board of directors of the Acworth-based organization Northern Heritage Mills, and president of the Northern United States chapter of the Society for the Preservation of Old Mills.

The Damon family was recently awarded the 2010 New Hampshire Old Mills Preservation Leadership Award, presented by DeMuro's two organizations.

When the first sawmill was built on his property in 1830, Damon said, the farm was needed to support the mill. It provided the horses and oxen needed for the logging operation and to transport raw materials, and food to feed the family and workers at the mill.

When Damon was young, there was still a water wheel in the saw mill, he said, and he remembers that during the summer, the water power would run out around mid-day. By his time there was a diesel engine that

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Lisa and Brian Damon show off their dairy herd at their Fitzwilliam farm, including one of Lisa's prized Jerseys, Lily.



picked up the slack, but he imagined that the mill workers of the 1800s would have moved on to the labor-intensive work of cutting hay with scythes.

These days, the combination of the lumber and farming operations constitute a smart business portfolio, which has been particularly beneficial in the economic downturn.

"Lumber has been sluggish for the last two years at least ... not that there's a vast amount to be made farming, but it does diversify the operation," Damon said.

Damon Lumber does a wholesale business but also cuts custom timber for post and beam construction that it ships to clients across the country. Rebuilding after two fires, Damon said, the family took the opportunity to expand the capacity of the mill each time, and can now cut beams up to 40 feet long.

On the farm side, the primary business is raising heifers for Smith's Country Cheese, a dairy in Massachusetts that milks 200 cows.

But Damon's wife, Lisa, also keeps her own herd of 15 Jerseys that she milks by hand in the farm's 180-year-old barn.

Many of Lisa's cows are descended from the dairy herd that Brian Damon's father, Clayton Damon, kept until he was badly injured when he was run over by a tractor in the 1970s.

Doctors told him he would never walk again, and though he eventually proved them wrong and worked until he was 84, Brian Damon said, the dairy herd was sold.

Brian Damon always enjoyed the farm, he said, and never really considered any other career. But it's hard work doing two demanding professions, he said.

"It's a busy life," he said. "What time the farm doesn't take up the saw mill can."

In addition to the saw mill, still in operation, there was also a turning mill that burned down in 1967.

"It was almost like a working museum," Brian Damon said, with a steam engine that was installed in 1850 to supplement the water power that had run the operation from its first days.

The Damons keeps a collection of items from the old turning mill on the mantel in their house, including wooden handles of various sizes and two pieces of wood that fit together to form a water faucet. Next to the fireplace there is an ice cream maker made by White Mountain in Winchendon, Mass., each of which contained wooden paddles from Damon Mills.

"From the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s, wooden products were a very much needed everyday



item," he said. "There was no plastic and there was no cardboard."

Between the two of them, Brian and Lisa have three daughters, all in their 20s. None of them seems likely to take over the family business, but "things could change with any one of them at any time," their parents said, almost in unison.

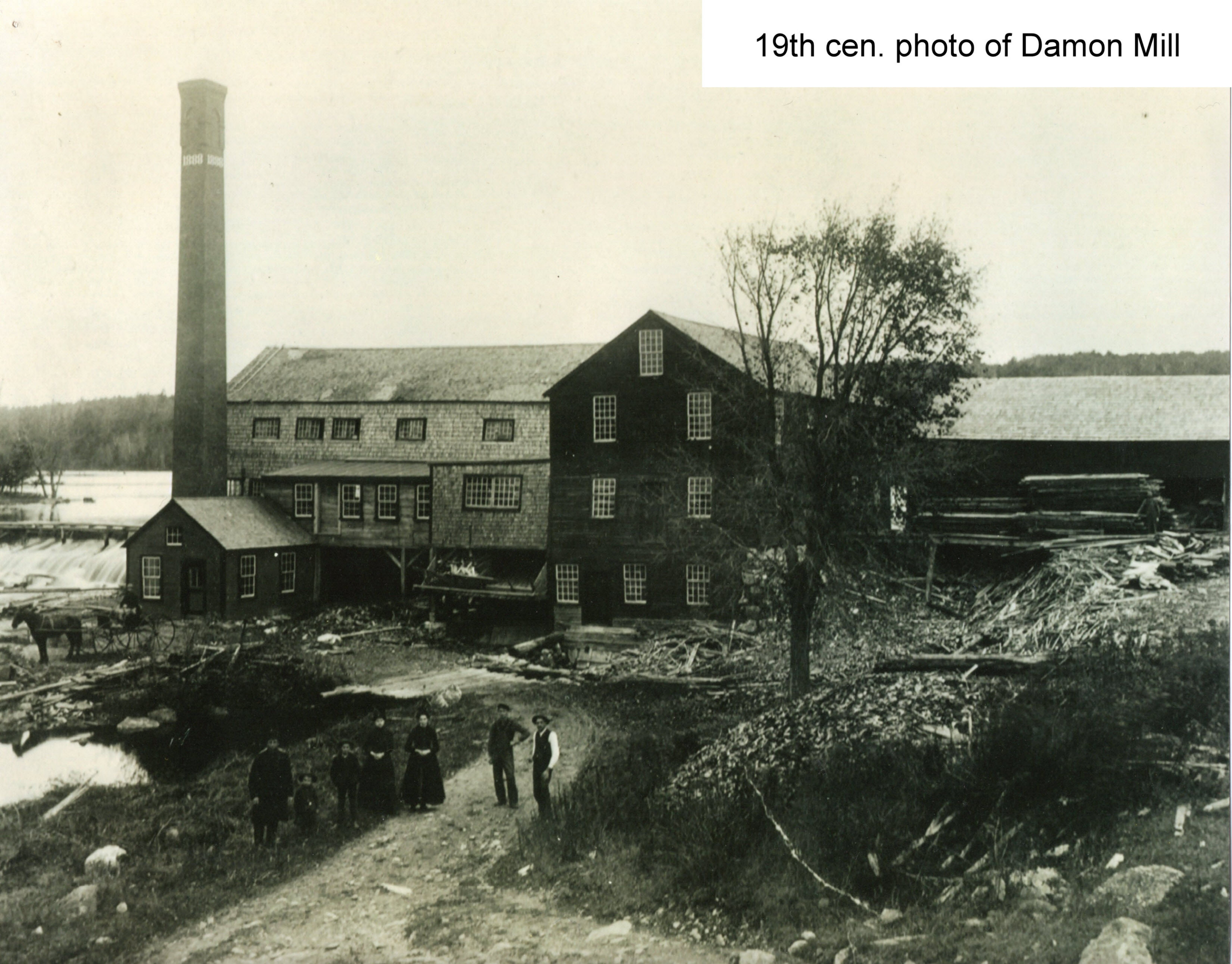
For now, however, the Damons say they are content, and surprised by the attention brought by their recent award, which included politicians touring their property. A 39-inch by 15-foot, 1.5-inch-thick wide board that was cut at the mill in 1900 will be displayed at the Farm and Forest expo in Manchester next weekend.

"We live a quiet life. We love what we do and we do it together," Lisa Damon said.

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19th cen. photo of Damon Mill







1865 Steam Sawmill, Damon Mills  
Photo taken 1936