



## Kent Historical Society Newsletter

Volume 21, Number 2

Kent, Connecticut

June 2020

### John Mills: A Man of “Interest”

*by Marge Smith and Jeffrey Morgan, with help from Susan Shepard*

As we continue our mission to untangle the mixed-up reporting of early Kent’s property ownership, we are clearly becoming enamored of the various settlers themselves – their personalities, their relationships, their occupations and their beliefs. We’re getting a feel for what the little settlement might have been like, and it’s not unlike Kent today, with friendships, rivalries, disagreements and mutual understanding. One Proprietor-settler who seemed capable of all of these was John Mills, whose house still stands at 108 North Main Street. He also owned several lots in Flanders, and since there is confusion about one of them, we decided to take a look at the properties and the man himself.

108 North Main Street is the long-time shared home of the extensive Britton family. The current owners are all direct descendants of John and Jane (Lewis) Mills. Because there are so many of them, scattered far and wide, they manage the property through a carefully choreographed schedule. Though none of them are full time residents, they are deeply devoted to the town, and have a long tradition of holding their weddings at the First Congregational Church, celebrating holidays (especially Thanksgiving when they all try to gather), taking turns vacationing at the house, and burying their loved ones in the Britton section of the cemetery behind the church. Their tie to the town is among the longest standing that we know of.



*Mills House still sits at 108 North Main Street*

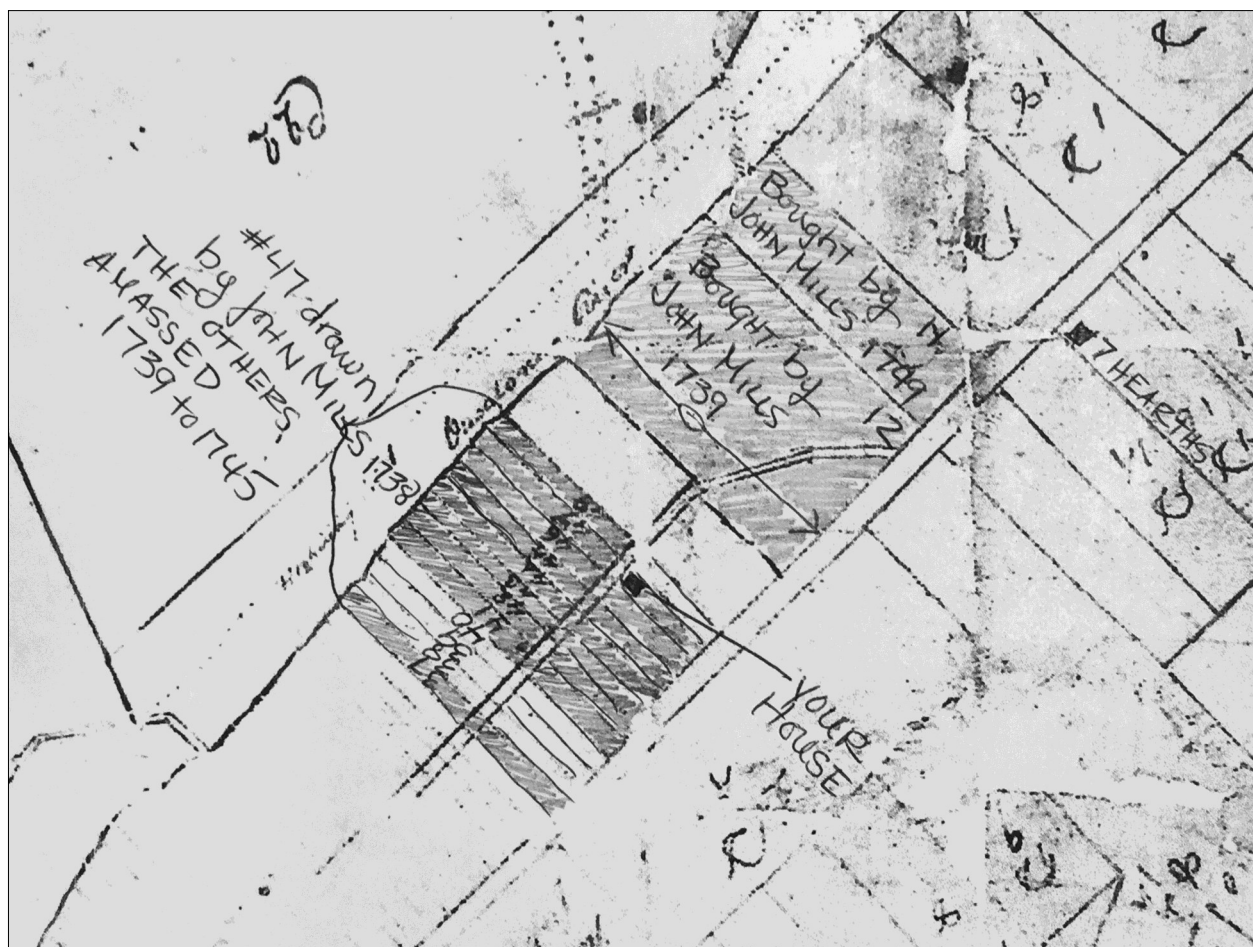
---

## John Mills: A Man of “Interest” (con’t)

John Mills was born in Windsor, CT, in 1707, the grandson of a Dutch immigrant, Pieter Vandermeulen, whose name meant “of the mills.” John came to Kent with the clear intent of making money, and in short order could have been described as the first example in town of what we now call “The Top 1%.” The size of his Home Lot was HUGE, extending from near 120 North Main (the former Blacketter house) all the way south to the railroad tracks! It has often been written that one part of the Britton house had been picked up and moved down to the site from Cobble Lane. Other accounts say that the present rear part of 60 Cobble Lane was the original John Mills home, but we now firmly believe that neither is true. Jeff has done extensive examination of the Britton house, and says that the section with the

four front rooms and maybe the lean-to is early enough to have been built right there by John Mills. Family tradition says that when John finally laid the floor in his new home in 1739, Jane “danced for joy.” It must have been a great relief to the young woman with three small children underfoot! John did own the land up on Cobble Lane, so perhaps he built the requisite “starter cabin” somewhere up there, before building the big house on North Main, just as Barnabus Hatch did in South Kent. Grandson John Mills III is likely the builder of 60 Cobble Road, so maybe the replication of the name is how the second legend got started.

John and Jane appear to have been an oddly matched couple. Though the Mills family in Windsor was closely entwined with the church,



*A map of the many Mills Properties. He bought the narrow shaded lots to make up his 80 acre home lot. “Your House” shows the location of the Britton house. He bought Lots 11 and 12 as additional investment*

John seems to have been more interested in amassing wealth, and also exercising some degree of political power. Jane, on the other hand as we will discuss shortly, was an empathetic, thoughtful, spiritual woman who must have chafed at some of her husband's money-lending practices. Mabel Seymour wrote about Mills in *A Lawyer of Kent: Barzillai Slosson & His Account Books 1794-1812* that "most of the business that came up in them [town meetings] seem to have been settled well in advance by Nathaniel Slosson and his political henchmen, Ebenezer Spooner and John Mills." Charles Grant, in *Democracy in the Connecticut Frontier Town of Kent* says that at the time of Mills' death in 1760 he was "operating one of Kent's largest farms, speculating heavily in land and lending money at interest to a majority of townsmen... He haled his debtors, Ebenezer and Jehiel Barnum, into court in 1752. The Barnums protested to the court that Mills' note was 'usurious and oppressive' and 'prayed the court to inquire into the case as a court of equity.' The court found 'the said note to be usurious whereupon it is considered that the plaintiff recover not his demanded £120 but the sum of £36 old tenor.' " Though Mills did not seek the political spotlight, he did serve as Lieutenant in the Militia,



was a selectman for one year and served on committees when requested, including one to help the neighboring towns of Sharon and Cornwall decide where to build their respective meeting houses. So, he was willing to do what he was asked to do by the town, but money was his focus. In examining the early democratic society being established in Kent, Grant ranks the settlers in terms of wealth, leadership, interest, activity and profit-taking. While Mills appears halfway down the list of town leaders, he ranks near the top in wealth and profit-taking, second only to the wily Joshua Lassell, who famously but unsuccessfully tried to swindle the CT General Assembly into giving him and his partner-in-crime Joseph Fuller *all* of the land on the west side of the Housatonic River!

John and Jane were admitted to full communion in the Congregational Church at the time of its establishment in 1741, and it is in this arena that we see their differences, especially in their dealings with the Schaghticoke Indians and the Moravian missionaries who had settled on the west bank of the river near the Indians. Like many of the townspeople, John Mills was an outright opponent of the Moravians. He also claimed that the "Indians was very lowsy." As an officer of the militia, he visited the Moravians in June of 1743, after which visit several of the missionaries were confronted by the Rev. Cyrus Marsh and other local citizens who viewed them as a real threat to the town and church. They were marched down to "Old Milford" to appear before a tribunal. They ultimately were not charged, but the unrest between the Moravians and the Marsh/Mills faction of Kent's population persisted for a long time, much to Jane's distress.

A treasure trove of information about the Moravians and their life with the Schaghticoke is revealed in *Gideon's People, Being a Chronicle of an American Indian Community in Colonial Connecticut and the Moravian Missionaries Who Served There*. The two-volume book is a translation, by Corinna Daly-Starna and William A. Starna, of a set of German-language daily diaries

*This chest is certainly one of the several mentioned in the estate of John Mills. It is now in the collection of Britton descendant Cathy Schwanfelder and her husband Ken*

kept by several of the Moravian Brothers in Kent for nearly a decade. Because there was regular interaction between the Indians, the Moravians and the white settlers, all carefully documented in the diaries, we can learn much about the daily doings of our town founding families. John and Jane appear frequently, and Jane's struggle in her heart about her faith is spelled out in detail. In 1752, she befriended Brother Joachim Sensemann's wife, whom she often visited. Jane lamented that she had become involved in worldly matters and asked for help in "giving her heart to her Saviour." She then apparently put pressure on John to open his mind to the Moravians, because Sensemann recorded that John and Jane repeatedly invited him to visit their home. He and his wife finally agreed, and he noted after the visit that Mrs. Mills was "an awakened woman." Mrs. Sensemann in turn took Jane and one of her daughters to visit the "Indian sisters." Jane's efforts to get the Moravians to socialize with her family eventually did bear fruit, for there were other visits to the Mills home on North Main Street, and a certain level of trust developed among them. John took to hiring the Indians to work on his farm, with the approval of the Moravians, except for the fact that he chose to pay them with food and rum, the abundance of which did cause occasional trouble. But all in all, John and Jane got along well with their neighbors across the river.

Sadly, John met a tragic end in 1760. As selectman, he was supervising the building of a bridge over the river at Bulls Falls in South Kent, and was drowned when the boat he was in capsized. Mills family tradition says that he had ferried a woman across, but never completed the return trip. In 1762, the widowed Jane took two of her daughters to visit Anna, the wife of Brother Johann Mack, who noted in his diary that "the widow expressed special love for the brethren and sisters, and still bewailed the bad treatment the brethren had suffered in the beginning...she repeats it every time, perhaps because her husband was a constable back then and had to arrest the brethren."

When her children had all grown and started families of their own, Jane moved to Branford, CT, where she married the Rev. Philomen Robbins on October 21, 1778. After his death a few years later, she returned to Kent to be with several of her

children. She is buried next to John in Good Hill cemetery, where her stone reads "Jane Robbins, Relict of Rev. Philomen" but she clearly is there as Jane, beloved wife of John.

That final testament to John by Jane is revealing. Jane clearly struggled with the worldly temptations that John placed in front of her. John had been dazzled by wealth and made mistakes in its pursuit. He was also swayed by the narrow-minded thoughts of many of the "Old Light" leaders of Kent during the Great Awakening. But he was not a bad man. In the Kent Land Records, Vol II, page 262, there is an interesting deed. It says simply, "I John Mills, for the consideration of the difficulty and hardships undergone by Stephen Paine in his first settling in said Kent and benefit it was for the proprietors to have a family settled here, have given 20 acres." Stephen Paine was the first person to build a home in Kent, on the shore of Lake Waramaug in what is now Warren. Paine was not a member of the church community, but was a valuable citizen of the fledgling town and respected by all. He literally was THE first settler, and must have faced almost impossible challenges when he and his family started their lives here.



*John Mills Gravestone at Good Hill Cemetery*

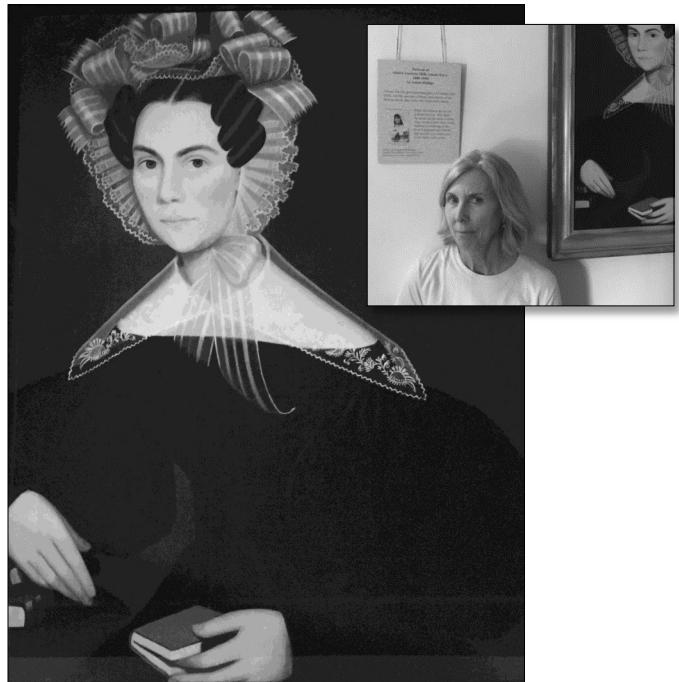


John recognized this, and obviously having plenty of land to spare, personally rewarded Paine for his service to the town.

John built and furnished quite a comfortable home for his own family on the Great Plain, the contents of which are listed in detail in his probate inventory. They had lots of good beds and bedding (think four-posters with curtains); a taste for flowered fabric such as calico; many mirrors, one of which was valued at £4 (a lot of money when you consider that his horse was valued at £7); a “druget”, which was a woven floor covering, not common in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (but we know Jane loved her hardwood floors); and many books, including Locke’s *On Human Understanding*, Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Young’s *Night Thoughts* and Pope’s *Essay on Man*. Ironically, or maybe fittingly, John left his “Money Trunk” to Jane. One item listed that is still in the family’s possession is this lovely blanket chest. (Pictured on page 3)

Eight of the ten Mills children survived to adulthood and most married into good local families - Fuller, Swift, Marsh and Bordwell. According to Grant, the sons became farmers, store keepers and a tavern keeper. Two of the daughters, Jane and Sarah, married ministers, and son Peter married the Rev. Cyrus Marsh’s daughter Rebekah. The family had many clergy among their plentiful descendants. Where do the Brittons fit in? John and Jane’s son Lewis had a granddaughter named Almira Leucetia Mills, who lived in the family home on North Main Street, where Ammi Phillips painted her portrait. Her daughter, Mary Ann Adams, married William Audley Britton of New York City, and the line has continued down to today’s large extended family. Almira’s great-great-granddaughter Caroline (pictured inset right), the daughter of Audley Britton, visited Seven

Hearths a few years ago, and we were struck by the strong family resemblance as she stood next to Almira’s portrait. Did Almira look as much like John and Jane as Caroline does Almira? Fun to think about! Long time KHS President, Miss Emily Hopson, was a proud descendant of John and Jane Mills, as were all of her many Hopson cousins, including Myra, whose house and farm on Fuller Mountain are now the Pond Mountain Trust. Another Mills cousin, Herb Tully of Ross, CA, now owns Emily’s house in Macedonia. His children and grandchildren are enjoying learning about their Kent ancestors when they come for their annual visits. We’d love to hear from anyone else who can claim descent from John and Jane Mills, or any other of our Founding Families for that matter!



*Almira as painted by Ami Phillips*



## Membership Renewal



If you haven’t already, please renew either by mail OR you can renew online  
[www.kenthistoricalsociety.org](http://www.kenthistoricalsociety.org)

We hope you can continue to support us! You sustain us. You enhance us.

*Thank You!*



## Kent Historical Society

PO Box 651  
Kent, CT 06757

\* \* \*

**Become a member!**  
[kenthistoricalsociety.org/memberships/](http://kenthistoricalsociety.org/memberships/)

\* \* \*

**Please remember the Kent Historical Society  
in your will or estate plan.  
We are incredibly grateful for the visionary  
donors who have remembered us.**



---

### **Our Mission:**

We are a donor-supported nonprofit organization.  
Our mission is to collect, preserve, interpret and present  
the rich history of Kent as well as to provide educational  
and research material to enrich the public understanding  
of Kent's artistic and cultural heritage.

### **Kent Historical Society**

10 Studio Hill Road, PO Box 651, Kent, Connecticut 06757  
860-927-4587  
[info@kenthistoricalsociety.org](mailto:info@kenthistoricalsociety.org)  
[www.kenthistoricalsociety.org](http://www.kenthistoricalsociety.org)

### **Officers**

Jeffrey Morgan, Acting President  
Sharon Cipolla, Treasurer  
Catherine Sweet, Secretary

### **Trustees**

Deborah Chabrian, Kent Freeman, Roger Gonzales,  
Melanie Marks, Chris Naples, Guy Peterson, Allan Priaulx

Director ~ Patrice Galterio  
Curator/Archivist ~ Marge Smith

Hours at Tallman House at 10 Studio Hill Road  
Tuesdays 9am - noon, Fridays 1 - 4pm  
or by appointment