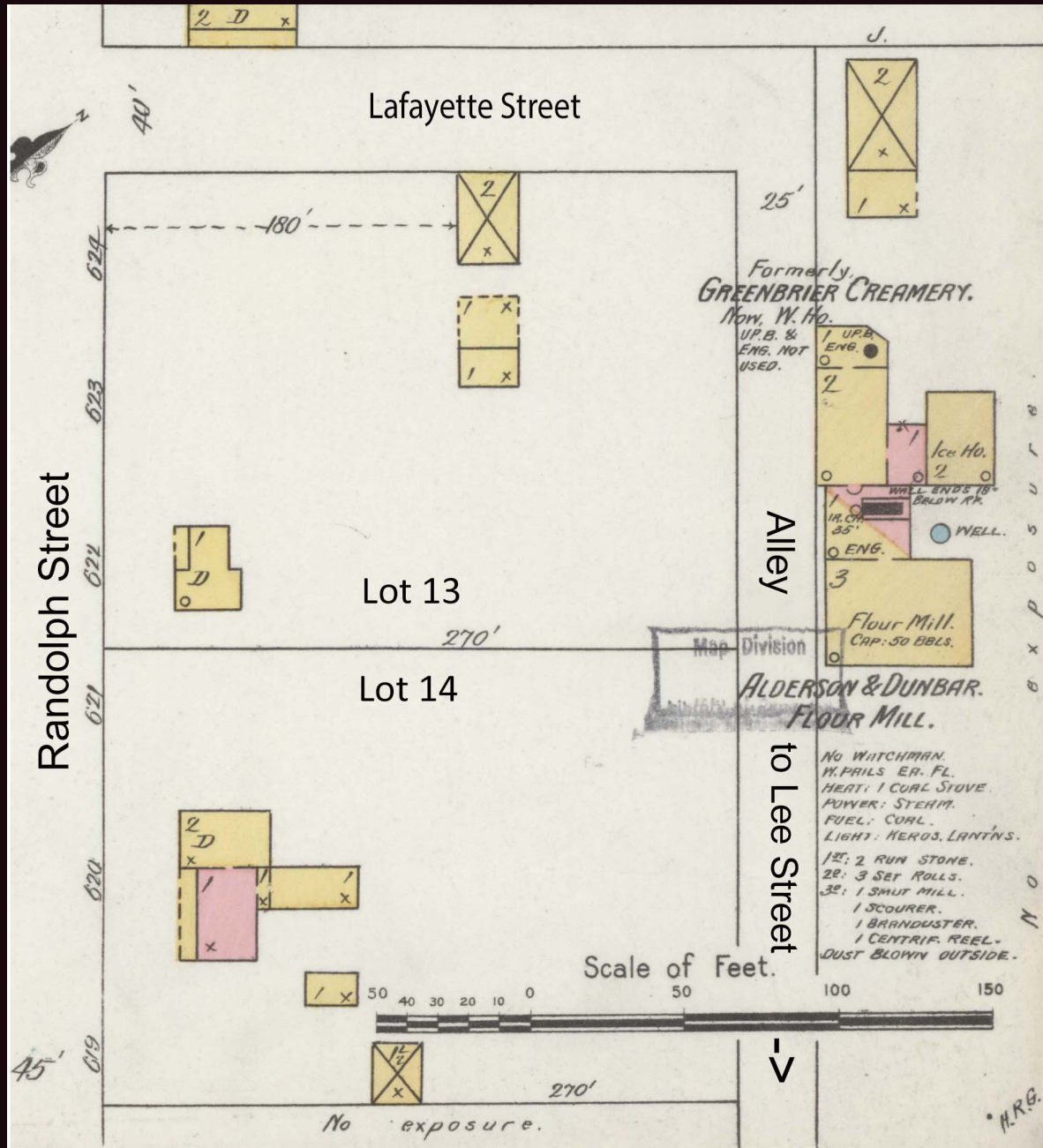


## Early Flour Mills at Montwell Commons

1885 - 1906



## 1898 Sanborn Fire Map

Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division, Sanborn Maps Collection

Prior to the Civil War, there were many grain mills with stone grindstones powered by water wheels along the creeks of the Greenbrier Valley. After the Civil War, two developments dramatically changed the production of wheat flour and other grains: Roller mills were developed that pulverized wheat kernels between steel or porcelain rollers rather than being ground between stone wheels; small steam engines became commercially available to power the roller mills. As a result, mills could be established wherever grain was grown and not just along creeks.

Corn and wheat were major grain crops in Greenbrier County in 1909: 450,000 bushels of corn were produced on 12,000 acres, and 8,000 acres of wheat yielded 100,000 bushels(1). With this amount of grain being produced annually, a number of entrepreneurs saw opportunities to start a new business and become

millers. The farmer could either sell his wheat to the miller or exchange some for flour, and the miller would have flour to sell. A number of steam powered roller mills were established in the Greenbrier Valley including ones at Lewisburg, Spring Creek, and Alderson. The following paragraphs focus on the steam powered roller mills located on a lot that is now part of Montwell Commons.

In 1885, John Handley built a steam-powered roller flouring mill on the lot where the Simpkins tanyard and later, the Donnally glove factory, were located. The mill was located on an alley that extended from the end of Lafayette St. up the hill to Lee St.

The mill was sold to John Cox and H.R. Hodson two years later and they made major improvements the next year. They built a three story, 40'x60' mill building which was the largest building in town. The mill had the capacity to produce 50 barrels (about 5 tons) of flour a day. The 1898 Sanborn fire map shows this flour mill as a 3 story frame building with no watchman but water pails on each floor, a coal stove for heat, and kerosene lanterns for light. It was powered by a steam engine and coal-fired boiler with a 35' brick chimney. There were 2 stone grinders on the first floor, 3 sets of rollers on the second floor, and a smut mill, scourer, bran duster, and blower on the third floor.

A diagram showing the elevators and machines in a typical 3-story mill is shown in Figure 1, and the 1886 Cox mill might have had a similar configuration.

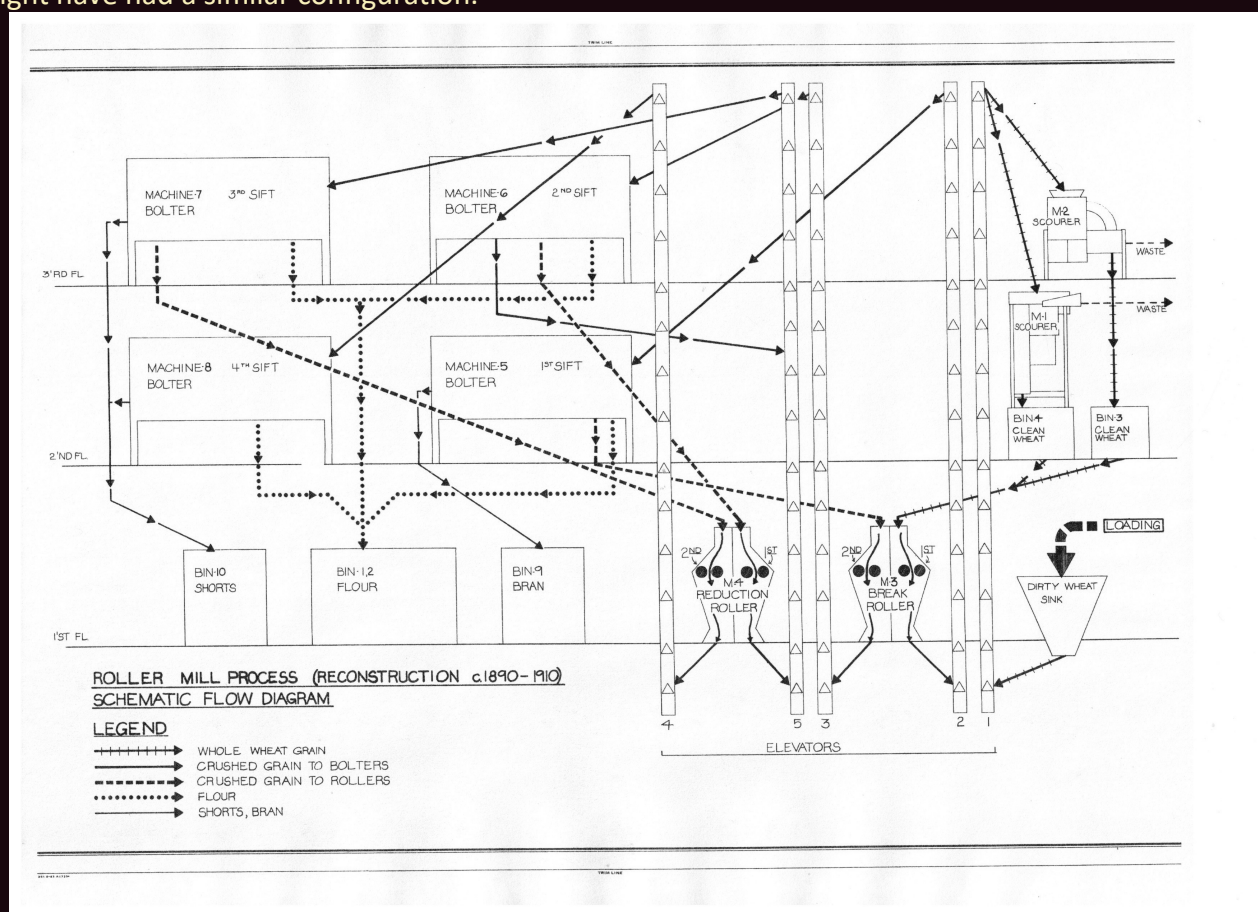


Figure 1 Schematic flow diagram of the Boxley roller mill

In 1897, the mill was sold to G.S. Alderson and F.C Dunbar but it burned down two years later. The fire map shows that the Greenbrier Creamery was adjacent to the mill and it was also destroyed.

Deeds from the Greenbrier County Courthouse, clippings from the Greenbrier Independent newspaper archives at the North House Museum and other regional newspapers, and several books provide information about the flour mills that operated on the east side of Montwell Commons from 1885 until the mill burned in 1899. The importance of the mill is indicated by the fact that the following year, a new flour mill was built on the west side of Montwell Commons using the 1825 foundation of the Withrow Tannery. It's history is documented in the Lewisburg Milling and Electric Light Co. page on the [montwellcommons.org](http://montwellcommons.org) website.

## 1885 – 1886: Lutz & Handley

### January 28, 1885

J. Bell and the firm of Price & Hardie convey the “Simpkins Tanyard” and house to John Handley by *Deed 36-148*: “. . . sell and convey . . . that certain house and lot of land . . . known as the “Simpkins Tanyard” (which is described in *deed 27-143*, in which James Withrow conveys the “Simpkins Tanyard” to H.W. Donnally, 'as . . . a certain house . . . situated near what is known as 'Beirne Spring' originally erected by John Simpkins for a tannery. . . ') subject to the restriction to the use of water in the Withrow to Donnally *deed 27-143*” ( . . . all the water privileges to which they may have been entitled in the said lot except that the said Donnally, nor any other person claiming under him, shall not have the privilege of conveying onto under or through the said lot for the purpose of tanning leather such as is now manufactured by the said Withrow in his Tanyard until after the expiration of twenty five years from the date of this deed . . . [which would be in 1897])

### February 5, 1885

**A New Enterprise in Lewisburg** Messrs. C.H. Lutz and John O. Handley have purchased the building and lot near Beirne's Spring, in Lewisburg, known as the Glove Factory property, upon which they propose to establish a Steam Mill for the purpose of engaging in a general milling business. With this object in view they have also purchased of Mr. A.E. White one of Frick's large and improved Engines of sufficient power to run their machinery. Mr. Lutz left Lewisburg this week for Cincinnati to secure the necessary machinery for manufacturing wheat into flour, grinding corn, &c. The old brick building on the lot will at once be reconstructed for mill purposes, and the firm hopes to have their establishment in full operation at the end of about six weeks. *Greenbrier Independent* vol 19 no. 35

### June 10, 1886

**Dissolution of Partnership** The co-partnership which existed between Charles H. Lutz and John O. Handley, who under the firm name of Lutz & Handley, conducted a steam flouring and grist mill at Lewisburg, W. Va. Has been dissolved, they having sold out to John G. Cox and H.R. Hodson. All debts of Lutz & Handley will be paid by Messrs. Cox & Hodson, under agreement between the members of the two firms. Chas. H. Lutz, John O. Handley Jun. 3-4w. *Greenbrier Independent* vol 20 no. 1

## 1886 – 1897: Cox & Hodson

### March 25, 1886

The interest owned by Mr. C.H. Lutz in the Lewisburg Steam Flouring Mill has been purchased by Mr. John G. Cox. The new addition to the mill - a frame building 40 x60 feet and three stories high – has just been completed and the machinery transferred and set to running. As the changes were progressing, in the building, several important arrangements for the better running of the machinery were made. An additional bolting machine was introduced. Also an appliance for the elevation of the grain to the upper floors by steam power and not by muscle as heretofore, The public henceforth has a right to expect from the establishment as fine flours as can be gotten anywhere in the country. . Mr. Lutz is stepping out of a good thing, but thinks (or hopes) he is stepping into a better by removing to and accepting a proposition in Florida in another line of business.

*Greenbrier Independent* vol 20, no. 42

### May 24 1886

John Cox and H.R. Hodson buy the mill from John Handley, *Deed 37-436*: “John Handley and his wife hereby sell, grant, and convey . . . the following real estate. The lot . . . on which the steam flouring and grist mill is situated and all the buildings, rights, and appurtenances thereto . . . “

**August 26, 1886**

The steam flouring mill of Cox & Hodson is one of the largest buildings in the town. It is a three story frame, and furnished out with the most improved machinery. And as frequent allusions have heretofore been made in our columns, it is only necessary to hint that they are driving a good business. Four hands are kept almost constantly employed. *Greenbrier Independent* vol 21 no. 12

**June 7, 1888**

The Lewisburg steam mill which has been thoroughly remodeled with new and larger bolters installed will renew operations again today. *Greenbrier Independent* vol 23 no. 1

**May 23, 1889**

**advertisement:** The Lewisburg Steam Mill is now in running order Flour, Meal, and Chop on hand and for sale at reasonable rates. We need all the money due us. So please pay up. Respectfully, Cox & Hodson, Proprietors *Greenbrier Independent* vol 23 no. 51

**June 20, 1889**

H.R. Hodson sells his interest in the flour mill and lot to John Cox for \$1500: “. . . to wit the lot with the steam flouring and grist mill thereon situated west of and near the Beirne Spring with all and singular appurtenances. . .” *Deed 41-105*

**April 2, 1891**

**A Laudable Enterprise** A move is on foot here looking to the organization of a joint stock company with a view of purchasing the Lewisburg Steam Grist Mill, putting in the patent rollers and other improved machinery and otherwise enlarging and improving the present plant so that flour may be manufactured here that can compete with that made at Staunton, Alderson, or any other place.

Several parties have already indicated their readiness to subscribe to the Stock and there is no reason why such a company may not be easily formed. This is an enterprise which commends itself to all, and we have often heard leading farmers in this community urge the establishment here of such a mill. A first-class patent roller mill at Lewisburg will stimulate the raising of wheat and other grain in the county, afford a ready and convenient market for the farmer, and be a constant source of revenue to the community. There is positively no reason why it may not be established. The new machinery, as we are informed, can be obtained on easy terms, and nothing but a little energy and public spirit is needed to secure the success of the enterprise. We believe it will pay the stockholders and be of inestimable benefit to the county. *Greenbrier Independent* vol 25 no. 44

**April 11, 1895**

A stroke of lightning on Monday evening last caused more excitement here than has been witnessed from a similar cause for years. It struck Mr. H.W. Donnally's house, shocked Mrs. Donnally, tore the doors off a safe, and caused three teams to run away. - Two of the teams were on Main Street and the other started from Mr. J.G. Cox's mill. The first one belonged to Mr. Thos. Lynch, and the wagon was completely wrecked and the horses were considerably cut and scarred. The other two teams were stopped before any damage was done. *Greenbrier Independent* vol 29 no. 46

**May 2, 1895**

John Arbuckle vs. John G. Cox et als. Decree in favor of plaintiff for \$482.60, in addition to \$1,315.19 heretofore decree, and in favor of the Richmond City Mill Works for \$2,457.86, and for a sale of the flour mills of the defendant to satisfy same. *Greenbrier Independent* vol 29 no. 49



### **December 3, 1896**

Dr. J.L. Nelson was thrown from his horse near Cox's Mill last Monday and was seriously hurt, but is now improving. *Greenbrier Independent* vol 31 no. 28

### **October 7, 1897**

**Commissioner's Sale** In pursuance of the authority vested in me as Trustee and Special Commissioner of the Circuit Court of Greenbrier county, appointed in the chancery cause [*Justice is administered according to fairness as contrasted with the strictly formulated rules of common law*] of J.W. Arbuckle, plaintiff, against John G. Cox and others, defendants, pronounced on the ninth day of August, 1893, I will sell at public auction, to the highest bidder, in front of the lot known as Stratton's Hotel, in the town of Lewisburg, as directed in said decree, on Monday, the 1<sup>st</sup> day of November, 1897, that valuable Mill Property in the town of Lewisburg, owned and conducted by the defendant John G. Cox as a Flour and Grist Mill.

This property is in good condition, with new and approved machinery, and located in the midst of a grain raising county.

TERMS OF SALE: Enough will be required cash in hand on day of sale to pay the costs of suit and expenses of sale, and the residue upon a credit of six, twelve, and eighteen months, the purchaser to give bonds with approved security, bearing interest from day of sale. James C. McPherson Trustee and Special Commissioner

I hereby certify that the above named Special Commissioner has given bond as required by law. Jonathan Mays, Clerk Oct. 7-4w. *Greenbrier Independent* vol 32 no. 20

### **November 11, 1897**

Mr. J.G. Cox has sold his steam mill in Lewisburg to Messrs. Frank Dunbar, Granville Alderson, and William Knapp for \$4,000. These young men will take charge to-day, and we bespeak for them unbounded success. *Greenbrier Independent* vol 32 no. 25

## **1897-1906: Alderson & Dunbar**

### **November 10, 1897**

The Cox mill and lot sold at auction by the Court Commissioner is conveyed to Alderson, Dunbar, and Knapp: ". . . that real estate, mill, machinery, and fixtures . . . known as the Lewisburg Roller Mill, together with all fixtures, appliances, and machinery therein, and also all the water rights and privileges. . . " *Deed 51-181*

### **December 23, 1897**

Lump coal for sale or exchange for grain, at Lewisburg Roller Mills.  
*Greenbrier Independent* Vol 32 no. 31

### **December 30, 1897**

The Lewisburg Steam Roller Mill is now running day and night in order to keep up with its heavy run of customers. They received a car-load of wheat from Summers County some days ago.  
*Greenbrier Independent* Vol 32 no. 32

### **February 8, 1898**

W.F. Knapp transfers to Alderson and Dunbar his 1/3 interest by *Deed 51-561*: ". . . in and to the Lewisburg Roller Mill, a steam mill property . . . near the Beirne Spring."

### **April 28, 1898**

The Lewisburg roller Mill is now compelled to run day and night, in order to supply the demand for flour. The proprietors shipped a car-load (100 barrels, 19600 lbs.) this morning to one firm in Fayette county.  
*Greenbrier Independent* vol 32 no. 49

### **November 10, 1898**

Flour and Buckwheat flour exchanged for corn or wheat. We have specially prepared Graham flour for bread and meals. It is not necessary to spoil your meat with the common compounds of lime, magnesium barium, &c. when for a few cents more per barrel we can furnish you the genuine Kanawha salt. And in a few days we will be able to supply our patrons with what brick they may want. Lewisburg Roller Mills. *Greenbrier Independent* vol 33 no. 25

(note: After finding this ad, the J.Q. Dickinson & Co. was contacted and they replied that theirs was the only saltworks operating in the Kanawha Valley in the 1890s and would have supplied salt to the Lewisburg Roller Mills. It is remarkable that 120 years later, Dickinson salt can still be purchased in Lewisburg.)

### **November 24, 1898**

Col. W.F. Butcher, of Oregon, wrote to Col. Ford of our own town, some time ago to ship a bushel of old Greenbrier corn meal and some buckwheat flour. The meal cost 50 cents here and the freight was \$1.90 - \$2.40 a bushel. It comes a little high, but "Fount" will enjoy it, for it "will remind him of his boyhood days" as it was raised in this his native county. *Greenbrier Independent* vol 33 no. 27

(This clipping is interesting because it shows the association of high quality flour with Greenbrier County. The source of the flour is not indicated, but there were steam powered roller mills at Spring Creek, Caldwell, Palestine, and Alderson in addition to Lewisburg.)

### **December 1898**

The Sanborn fire map of 1898 lists the following characteristics of the mill: No watchman, w. pails on each floor, heated by coal stove, kerosene lanterns, powered by coal/steam, dust blown outside.

### **February 23, 1899**

**Disastrous Fire** Last Friday morning, the 17<sup>th</sup>, about 6 o'clock, the Lewisburg Roller Mill belonging to Dunbar & Alderson was discovered to be on fire. The alarm was soon given but the fire had already made such headway that all efforts to save the property proved utterly futile. Unfortunately, the water had been let out of the tanks to prevent freezing during the excessive cold weather and thus no aid could be gotten from the works. The building with all its costly machinery and contents, including about 1,500 bushels of grain, together with the Creamery building, immediately adjoining, was soon a mass of ruins, bringing to the owners of the mill a loss of between four and five thousand dollars, and to the owners of the Creamery building, Messrs. William and Ernest Echols – a loss of about \$400. They succeeded in saving all the Creamery machinery except the churn. The mill was insured for \$1,500 which will enable the owners to pay off the balance due on their purchase. They also lost their books, which, for the first time since they owned the property, had, for some reason, been left at the mill. Mr. Dunbar informs us that he had many valuable accounts on those books, but, as nearly all had been recently rendered, he anticipates but little difficulty in securing settlements.

The origin of the fire is wholly unknown, some having one theory and some another. The young men owning and operating the mill enjoyed so fully the good opinion, regard, and confidence of the people it is hard to believe that any one would deliberately do them such an injury. The mill was very valuable property and, under the capable and energetic management of Messrs. Dunbar and Alderson, was doing a large, growing, and profitable business. The destruction of it was a severe blow not only to the owners, but to the entire community.

Though smitten so severely by this disaster, these young men are not grieving over spilt milk, but, as we understand, have already announced their determination to rebuild. In this they will have the good will and best wishes of every person in the town and community.

*Greenbrier Independent* Vol 33 no. 33

### **March 8, 1899**

Lewisburg is again the victim of another disastrous fire, this time resulting in the destruction of the roller process flouring mill of Messrs. Dunbar, Alderson & Co., and the Lewisburg Creamery Company's plant. There were about 1,500 bushels of wheat in the mill at the time. Insurance, \$1,500. The fire occurred at five o'clock in the morning and is known to be the work of an incendiary. *The Weekly Register* Point Pleasant

### **March 17, 1899**

**Fire Record:** Lewisburg Roller Mills of Dunbar & Alderson, Lewisburg, W. Va. Loss \$5,000, ; insurance \$3,000. Incendiarism suspected. Will probably rebuild. *The Roller Mill* vol 17 p499

### **August 23, 1900**

Ed Alderson of Asbury, this county, has moved his planer, matcher, and edger from Alderson to Lewisburg and it is now located on the site of the old Lewisburg Roller Mill. He will be prepared to in a few days to furnish flooring, ceiling, molding, &c There will also be located on the same grounds several well equipped shops. (60 years later, this was also the vision of the Old Red Mill.) When the big Steam Roller Mill and Electric Light Plant (the most of the machinery for which has arrived,) in addition to the the above enterprises, gets in operation, the hum of business will make the old hollow lively. *Greenbrier Independent* vol 35 no. 11

### **August 30, 1900**

Six months after the fire, G.S. Alderson conveys his half interest in the Mill Lot to Ed. M. Alderson. *Deed* 56-577.

### **April 20, 1901**

Ed. M. Alderson then conveys his half interest in the Mill Lot to M.L. Dunbar who now owns the entire lot. *Deed* 56-578,

### **December 14, 1906**

The Dunbars sell the 3/16 acre Mill Lot to E.H. Sydenstricker: “. . . all of that lot of land known as the Mill Lot near the Beirne Spring bounded as follows: beginning at street at corner of Echols Creamery Lot . . . together with all water rights and other rights apportioned to said lot of land and all buildings thereon. . . “ *Deed* 72-394

### **References:**

Figure 1: Library of Congress, Boxley Mill Diagram <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/ar0051.sheet.00019a/>

(1) WVU Agriculture Experiment Station Bulletin #144, 1914 WVU # 3 0802 100896117 3

The *Greenbrier Independent* newspaper was researched at the Greenbrier County Historical Society archives at the North House Museum, Lewisburg, WV, where a digitized version is available.

Deeds are identified by 'book no.–page no.' and are on file in the County Clerk's office at the Greenbrier County Courthouse.