



North East Winnipeg Historical Society

Matheson Millstones

One of the first tasks that Miles Macdonell, Lord Selkirk's first Governor of the Red River Settlement, undertook was the building of a flour mill in the area. To grind their wheat into flour, some of the first farmers brought their querns, or primitive hand mills, with them from Scotland. Late in 1814, Macdonell reported that lumber for the mill was being procured, and the next spring he noted in his journal "part of the mill erected today."



The Matheson Millstones in 2018. *Photo source Eric De Schepper*



Millstone Dressing Tools. *Photo source: Theodore R. Hazen*

The early mills of the Red River Settlement were powered by wind or water and turned out flour which varied tremendously in quality and in brand content. Two pairs of circular stones lay atop and close to each other, then ground seed kernels into flour between them. The interior surfaces, chiseled with specific designs called "dresses", moved the resulting flour to its exit at the stone's periphery

The stones were cut out of granite rock quarried at Granite Point on the west shore of Lake Winnipeg and transported to the settlement using Hudson Bay Company York boats. The stones were so hard they did not wear down significantly, although the chiseled designs did need "redressing" or re-chiseling by the miller.

The finished product depended, as it does today, upon the condition of the wheat kernels and their freedom from contaminants, including frost damage, as well as the skills of the miller and the refinement of his equipment. Although the locally milled flour was a trade item shipped to company posts in the Northwest, the Hudson's Bay Company imported flour for its own employees on a prescribed scale. The Chief Factor and traders received 336 pounds for the lowliest yearly servants of the company.



A close-up of the dressing on the millstone. *Photo source: Donna Cudmore*



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The Matheson Grist Mill

Alexander Matheson was born in Scotland around 1773. He may have been born in Rosshire, a county in the Scottish highlands, however, as an adult he was listed as being a resident of Kildonan, Scotland, a village on the south coast of the Isle of Arran in the Firth of Clyde.

He married Ann Matheson (born circa 1795) and they had five children: John (born 1797) Ann (born 1799), James (born 1802), William (born 1807) and George (born 1808). Each of the births were recorded in the Kildonan parish registers, however, there is no mention of William in later records, so it is probable he died in Scotland while still quite young.

It is believed that Ann Matheson must have died shortly after the birth of her last child, as Alexander married Jean Matheson in Scotland on September 21st, 1810. They had at least three children: Hugh (born 1811), Angus (born 1813) and Ann (born 1815).



Angus Matheson's Family. Photo source: Mary Liggett Collection



Built in 1871, the Matheson Barn at 1842 Henderson Highway. Photo source?

Alexander's eldest son, John, had immigrated to Red River in 1815. John urged his father to come to the settlement with his family and he would guarantee their passage. Alexander wrote to Andrew Colville of the Hudson's Bay Company in 1823 to advise that he and his family, along with his sister-in-law, Janet Sutherland (widow of Robert Sutherland) and her son, John Sutherland would be sailing on the *Prince of Wales*.

The Matheson party arrived safely at Red River in 1823. An 1824 list of settlers and lot numbers shows Alexander and his son James established their home on Lot 776 on the east bank of the Red River. The census of 1827 shows James on his own lot, #251, on the west bank of the river, while the 1828 census shows Janet and John Sutherland on Lot 775.

Matheson's mill on McLeod's Creek in East Kildonan (previously known as Water Mill Creek) was built sometime after Alexander Matheson and his family arrived at the Red River Settlement in 1823.

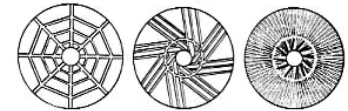


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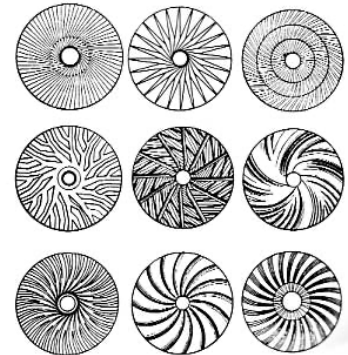
Located at the site of what is now known as 1025 Henderson Highway, north of the Curtis Hotel, Matheson's was the only mill on the east side of the Red River, and one of the rare water-powered mills operated in Manitoba during the 19th century. The Grist Mill and paddlewheel had been built at the east end of the dam on land that was a little higher than that surrounding it (now Maxwell Place at Brazier Street).

Up until the 1960s a culvert ran beneath Henderson Highway where the creek flowed to the current site of Rossmere Shopping Centre, 1070 Henderson Highway and the Rowandale Baptist Church, 162 Rowandale Avenue.

The large dip in Rowandale Crescent reflects the creek's path as it continued north to Whellams Lane. Its entrance to the Red River is still visible as you look north from Chief Peguis Trail on the east bank to Kildonan Settlers Bridge. The creek was simply filled in at various places due to land development. From the 1870s to 1916 a chain ferry crossed the river where Whellams Lane is situated. The street was originally called Ferry Lane.



THE VERSATILE MILLSTONE
WORKHORSE OF MANY INDUSTRIES



Power to operate the mill was provided by the waters of the creek confined behind a mill dam, turning a large water wheel. This mill was one of the first to successfully harness the energy of flowing water (hydro power) in the Canadian Northwest.

Matheson's water mill used to be a two-run mill, which consisted of two sets of millstones for a total of four stones. Later operated by Alexander Matheson's son Angus, the mill was still functioning in 1868 or 1870, although a census report published in 1849 listing all mills in the Red River area does not include it.

Alexander Matheson died in 1845 and was buried in St. John's Anglican Cemetery at 135 Anderson Avenue.

The date that Matheson's mill was dismantled is not known, however, the millstones were conveyed to the Matheson homestead on Lot 60 (now the site of Edison, Kingsford, Grandview and Hawthorne Avenues), which was owned at the time by William (Willie) Matheson. Some years later, during a flood period, the stones were moved to the area of Grandview Street and Irving Place where they were used to weigh down a wooden bridge over McLeod's Creek. When the flood abated, they were removed from the bridge, and left lying by the roadside for more than twenty years.

Angus Matheson died in 1893.



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Searching for the Millstones

Mr. W.E. Hobbs, a prominent surveyor and longtime resident of North Kildonan, undertook a detailed study of McLeod's Creek west of Henderson Highway. He found no clues suggesting the site of the former mill, so he contacted Miss Frances McKay, Angus McKay's daughter. Until 1912, Angus McKay lived on the bank of McLeod's Creek, west of the highway, and Frances told Mr. Hobbs that she remembered as a little girl her father had taken her across the highway to show her a small lake created by a dam. Miss Margaret Matheson, a grandchild of Angus Matheson, remembered the millstones, but noted that as a child she took them for granted.



The Matheson Millstones with beautiful mosaic artwork applied by artist Ursula Neufeld. *Photo source: Donna Cudmore (2023)*



The Matheson Millstones *Photo source: Donna Cudmore (2024)*

Mr. Hobbs suggested to Harold Matheson, Angus' grandson, and Secretary-Treasurer of the Municipality of North Kildonan, that the stones were a valuable legacy from East Kildonan's past and should be preserved.

When Mr. Matheson had the stones returned to the family's Lot 60 homestead, a fair sized elm tree had its trunk growing through the centre of one of them. From there Frank DeGraff of Lot 68 North Kildonan, son of John DeGraff (one of the first group of immigrants to arrive in East Kildonan in 1893 from The Netherlands), recovered the Matheson millstones for posterity after finding them buried under several feet of fill. DeGraff used a bulldozer to uncover them. He verbally promised one of the millstones to the City of Winnipeg following his death, with the provision that it remain in East Kildonan, however, no written record exists to indicate this was ever done, so it is unaccounted for. Another one is used as a patio table on a property on Grandview Street.

In June, 1965, the North Kildonan Parks Board decided to "provide an appropriate resting place" for the remaining two millstones, monuments of North Kildonan's early history.



The Matheson Millstones resting place is a park at Edison Avenue and Henderson Highway. *Photo source: Donna Cudmore (2024)*



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The Matheson Millstones were moved to the little park at the corner of Edison Avenue and Henderson Highway in 1966, and a plaque alongside the millstones bears this inscription:

IN MEMORY OF THE PIONEERS WHO FIRST SETTLED IN THE COMMUNITY, THESE MILLSTONES WERE ORIGINALLY USED IN THE MATHESON GRIST MILL BUILT AFTER 1825 ON McLEOD'S CREEK. FOR MANY YEARS THIS MILL SERVED THE RED RIVER SETTLERS AND THEIR DESCENDANTS. ERECTED BY THE NORTH KILDONAN PARKS BOARD ON NOVEMBER 1ST, 1965.

Matheson Millstones Park

The park housing the millstones at 1257 Henderson Highway remained unnamed for forty-eight years, until it was given the name of **Edison Park** in 2014. There is no historical significance to this designation; it was just taken from the street it was situated on.

In 2019, while the park was being upgraded, local Mosaic Artist Ursula Neufeld was commissioned by the City of Winnipeg to add mosaic work to the millstones. Working with Little Bluestem Landscape Architecture + Design, Neufeld created a pair of mosaics as homage to the history of the area and the natural history of the prairies.



Ursula Neufeld with the millstones and her mosaic artwork. *Photo source: Sheldon Birnie (2019)*

In an interview with Sheldon Birnie of the Free Press Community Review, Neufeld explained “The mirror swirls indicates how the millstones used to go around, so there are crocuses around the cap, and underneath are my versions of Manitoba wildflowers. At the bottom, because it was a millstone and wheat was really important, you’ll see swirls of water and the wheat.” Neufeld, an artist who often does community art projects, said she was drawn to the subject when considering the area’s history. “The rocks, obviously, are thousands of years old and prairie wildflowers would have grown around those rocks.”

Darcy Granove, landscape architect and owner of Little Bluestem, advised “we commissioned Ursula to encase the existing concrete pedestal and new base in tile mosaics in order to highlight the pattern of the millstone and its function to grind wheat. Her artwork, using the cooper mirror to indicate the movement of these once powerful tools, gives reflective glimpses of the pattern on the underside of the stones.”



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Ursula Neufeld spent thirty years in the field of Early Childhood Education and has incorporated her love of the arts and children to create wonderful mosaics in schools and communities. Information on her projects and a description of where and how she works can be found at <https://ursulaneufeld.mystrkingly.com/>



The new sign at Matheson Millstones Park. Photo source: Donna Cudmore (2024)

In 2020 Jim Smith, President of the North East Winnipeg Historical Society, applied to the East Kildonan-Transcona Community Committee to have the park renamed to honour the Matheson family. The members of the Committee were in agreement with his suggestion and forwarded the request to the next governing body. Shortly afterwards Covid-19 occurred and plans for the name change were delayed.

In March, 2024 a majority of Winnipeg City Council members voted to approve the application to have the park renamed **Matheson Millstones Park** and on August 15th, 2024 a small ceremony was held to announce the change. Local politicians, members of the North East Winnipeg Historical Society and a number of descendants of Angus Matheson were in attendance to celebrate this tribute to the area pioneer.

Sources:

Jim Smith, President, North East Winnipeg Historical Society
Margaret Kennedy, Winnipeg Free Press, September 30, 1972
Shirley Kowalchuk, Grist from the mills of history, August 11, 2016
Sheldon Birnie, Free Press Community Review, September 19, 2019

The North East Winnipeg Historical Society meets the 4th Wednesday of each month (except July, August and December) at the Bronx Park Community Centre, 720 Henderson Highway. Everyone is welcome to attend.

Website address

www.newpghs.com

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We respect the history of all and acknowledge the custodians and traditional keepers of this territory on which we reside.