

Old Schwamb Mill · Works in Progress · Fall 2021

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Grant Funding Continues to Keep Mill Buildings Safe and Sound

When Arlington voters made the Community Preservation Act a reality, the Old Schwamb Mill applied for a modest grant: \$20,000 for a new roof for the Mill's Barn. Using period-appropriate ½ inch wooden shingles from a firm in Maine, the Mill completed the project on budget, and – thanks to generous donor support – reshingled the neighboring Dry House as well. A subsequent CPA grant, coupled with donor support, allowed the Mill to preserve and reglaze the 80-plus windows in the main building and restore siding and trim elements. The repainted Mill exterior now fully protects the underlying structure and keeps winter heating bills within reason.



For FY2021 the Mill applied for and received a CPA grant for two projects. First, the Mill hired the engineering firm Simpson Gumpertz & Heger Inc. to do a structural assessment of all three buildings, something the firm last did in 1975. Inspection and measurements were done this year. The funding allows for remediation of any structural concerns, should they be identified in the full report, due soon.



A second part of the FY2021 CPA grant was funding for restoring the Barn's windows – using the same careful processes used on the Mill's windows – and re-siding a portion of the Barn. This was last done in the late 1980s when the Barn and Dry House were deeded to the Mill by Watermill Place. The tight market in wood and labor in 2021 delayed this work, but the Mill has now purchased the siding from a firm in Vermont. The siding will be delivered to the Mill soon – cut, primed and painted.



Mill director **Robert Tanner** visited Ward Clapboard Mill, Moretown, Vermont, where the siding is being prepared. A mill site in operation since 1868, **Ward Clapboard Mill** turns whole logs on a lathe, then uses an indexing and sawing mechanism to cut clapboards

Photos from Ward Clapboard Mill, Moretown, Vermont. (top) logs ready for turning, (middle) workman planing, squaring, and grading clapboards, (bottom) finished goods ready for shipment.

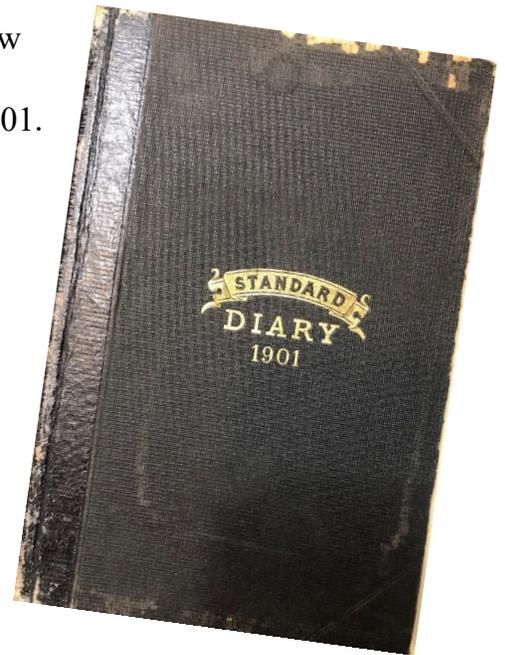
directly from the logs. Clapboards are then planed, squared and graded by a person operating a separate machine. These clapboards – primed, painted, and of high quality – will arrive at the Mill ready to install and at a total price better than we could find from conventional suppliers.

Delving into the Archives

When **Patricia Fitzmaurice** saved the Mill in 1969, she saved more than a building. She and her generous supporters preserved the machinery, the frame-making craft, and the business records dating to the nineteenth century. With a Research in Inventory Grant from Mass Humanities, these records were organized up to 1924 as the Clinton W. Schwamb Company Collection. A finding aid was prepared and early documents conserved in archival folders and boxes.

Since early 2020, director **Dermot Whittaker** and archives volunteer **Margie Hilton** have built on this work, further organizing records and doing some basic research. A reliable Tuesday volunteer, Margie has accomplished the following:

- Transcribed the minutes of the Clinton W. Schwamb Company, Inc., 1909-1957. These minutes of the corporation’s annual meeting of officers (typically Clinton Schwamb, his wife Maude acting as clerk, brother Louis Schwamb, and later Clinton’s son Elmer Schwamb) provide the owners’ perspective on capital improvements like steam power and electrification, labor shortage challenges, the Depression and New Deal, and the pace of growth in business.
- Transcribed the travel diary of Clinton W. Schwamb, June-July 1901. In his twenties, Clinton Schwamb made a trip to Chicago and Denver to visit relatives in those cities. His first-hand account of the long railroad trip, Chicago businesses, and the sites around Colorado preserve the voice of a young man only a few years from taking charge of his own family’s business.
- Indexed and summarized correspondence of the Clinton W. Schwamb Company, Inc., 1920s. Margie’s detailed summary of these business letters – some of them heated! – to and from customers and vendors reveals the challenges of meeting customer expectations while standing by the business’s methods and billing.
- Analysis of time-and-motion records on frame and moulding orders, 1940s-1950s. The Schwambs and their workers often recorded who did each part of a complex order, and how long it took. Margie’s work added to the list of confirmed Schwamb workers which now stands at 162.
- Research into frames and wood types used, selected years. Using a spreadsheet, Margie and Dermot calculated how many frames were produced in a given year for each decade 1905-1965, and what woods were used. Margie is also researching ten of the Schwambs’ biggest customers.



Clinton W. Schwamb’s travel diary, describing his trip to Chicago and Denver. He includes a list of expenses during the trip.

Margie’s work has provided factual answers to many questions visitors have on the Schwambs’ business and production. It also makes clear the need for foldering and safely housing the unprocessed parts of the collection 1924-1969, including thousands of frame and moulding orders. We are grateful for resources for this archival organization, and for the patient work by archives volunteers like Margie.

Events and Visitation – Striking a Balance

Every public-facing institution has been challenged by the current pandemic, especially where events are concerned. The directors and managing personnel at the Old Schwamb Mill have tried to serve the public safely during the pandemic, while sustaining the Mill's role as a museum and local cultural resource.

In 2021, with Massachusetts vaccination rates among the highest in the nation, we reopened the Mill to normal visitation. This permitted two very popular art exhibits – *The Still Life Photography of Brian Maguire*, proceeds from which were generously donated by **Louise Maguire**, and *Three Views of a Secret*, a show which benefited the Mill through normal commissions. We also held events outdoors – craft projects for children, musical performances, and a meet-and-greet with children's author **Peggy Fenner** who donated her children's book *Becoming Best Friends with the Old Schwamb Mill* to the Mill for its benefit.

Director **Janet O'Riordan** kept the directors up to date on the Town of Arlington's recommendations concerning Covid-19. She also spent extra time helping to coordinate outdoor events that involved both the Mill and the Arlington Heights business community. These include the Arlington Commission for Arts and Culture's Neighborhood Haiku, with poems adorning windows of the Mill and the Heights businesses, and the related July 14 walk that brought residents and visitors out to the Heights on a warm evening. As she does every year, Janet helped with outdoor strolls in the Heights for Hallowe'en and the Holiday season. The Mill has welcomed increased use of the Town's Mill Pond Park by yoga students, picnickers, and, this fall, by visitors to an exhibition of outdoor sculpture.

On December 11, a new exhibit opens at the Mill: *Into The Woods: From Trees to Frames*. In this exhibit, prepared by a committee headed by directors **Doreen Stevens, Ann LeRoyer and Ellen Cohen**, we share what we have learned about frame-making at the Mill during the Schwambs' century of ownership. Designer **Jennifer White** has once again created beautiful panels.

We encourage safe enjoyment of this exhibit in the following ways:

- a “soft” opening date without a large reception – feel free to drop in any time during normal hours 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.
- measured admission – we may ask that visitors wait downstairs to prevent the upstairs from becoming crowded
- masks required inside – we have them available if you forgot to bring one
- ventilation – dress warmly as we will have some windows cracked to encourage air flow
- casual visitation – with the exhibit open well into spring, we encourage visitors to drop in any Tuesday or Saturday to enjoy the exhibit at their own pace
- online participation – we will advertise many related lectures at different times of day or evening, all offered virtually via Zoom. *Be sure we have your email!*

Schwamb Shares – Research into the Frame Business

In 1847, Charles Schwamb arrived in Boston from Germany. By 1864, he had his own frame factory in what is now the Old Schwamb Mill. In 1904, his grandchildren Clinton and Louis Schwamb took charge of the business which ran as The Clinton W. Schwamb Company, Inc., until Clinton's son Elmer Schwamb retired in 1969.

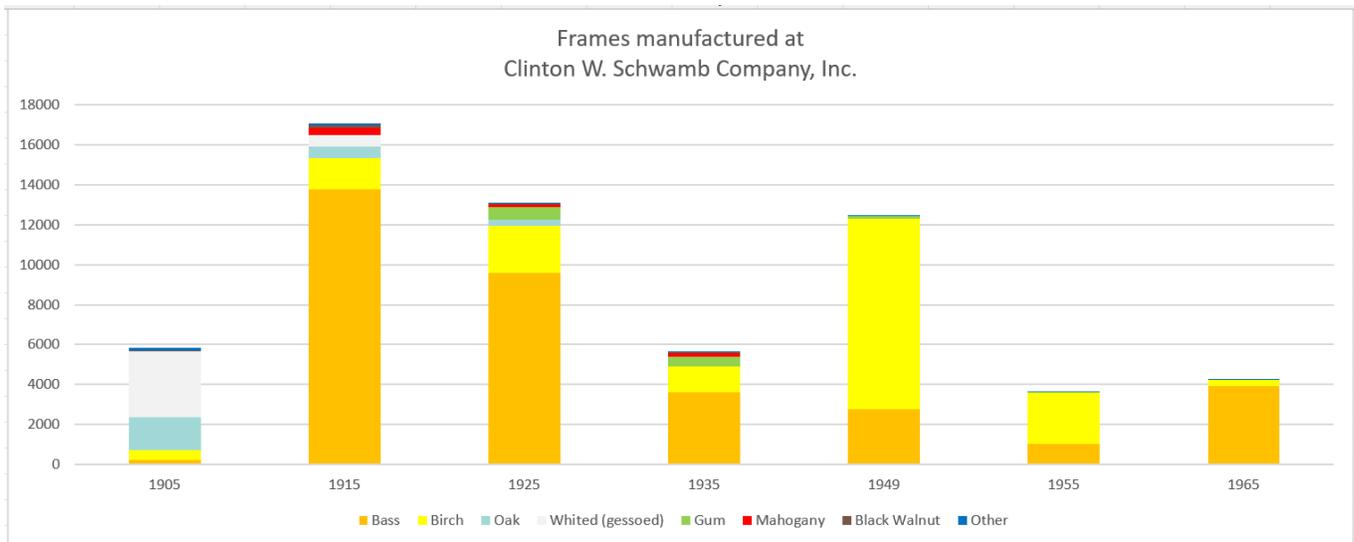
As part of the Mill's upcoming exhibit *Into The Woods: From Trees to Frames*, we looked into the business records of the Clinton W. Schwamb Company, Inc. With limited time and resources, we

counted frames manufactured in 1905, 1915, 1925, 1935, 1949, 1955, 1965. We noted the wood used, but not the size or complexity of the frames. What did we find?

Even with a limited workforce the factory regularly produced thousands of frames a year. We know that the high-speed shaper was used for ovals as well as the lathes, and that the use of fast-setting hide glue avoided bottlenecks in the glue room.

The Mill produced finished frames of every type – round, square, octagonal, fan-shaped, panels and spandrels – not simply ovals.

Lighter woods such as bass, birch and oak were the rule in the twentieth century, with woods like black walnut, mahogany, or cherry making up a small percentage of orders.



Gessoing frames appears to have been a regular service offered by the Mill until the 1910s. In Clinton and Louis’s first year of business in 1904-5, they ordered 13 barrels of “whiting” each barrel approximately 300 pounds. Combined with glue, this whiting created the plaster-like gesso that gave frames a smooth finish and provided a base for painting or gilding.

Work on frame orders was often divided among workers between construction, turning, and special features such as arch tops or Japanese corners. Frame orders frequently list the workers and time spent on each stage of construction in pencil on the back.

Frame making varied year to year based on factors other than the economy. For example, with a workforce of twelve in the 1920s, the Schwambs appear to have produced fewer frames than ten years previous. Why? We suspect that orders for linear moulding – probably more profitable – increased more than frame orders. A survey of moulding orders for these years will help us find the answer.

Elmer Schwamb’s side business Elwane assumed a large role in the Mill’s business after World War II. Elmer bought frames and finished them with stain, lacquer and gold leaf for distribution to hundreds of gift shops and galleries across the United States. The jump in frame production in 1949 reflects a customer base that grew substantially in 1948, thanks to a network of agents who worked on commission to place the frames in shops from Los Angeles to Dallas to New York City.

Non-frame manufacturing was substantial. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Schwambs made wooden products as stand-alone items or components in other products: frames for a children’s weaving kit, molded bases for clocks or mementoes, and simple wooden display cases.

We encourage you to learn more about frame making by visiting *Into the Woods: From Trees to Frames*, opening December 11 and continuing through winter and spring of 2022!