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**HISTORY OF THE
THIENSVILLE DAM
THIENSVILLE, WISCONSIN**

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THE THIENSVILLE DAM

On July 20, 1842 John (Joachim) Henry Thien bought a plot of land from John Weston at a bend in the Milwaukee River, where the Village of Thiensville eventually developed. He had come about two years before from Oldenburg, located in the State of Hanover, in Germany. He was a man of some means and decided that a flour mill, which was needed in the area, could be built at that spot. It became the biggest undertaking in the area and caused the development of a marketplace-like village at that bend in the river.

John Weston an early resident of the town of Mequon and a surveyor, had bought the land (about 148 acres) at the bend in the Milwaukee River on march 13, 1839 for \$800.00. Prior to the purchase of this site in 1842 by John Henry Thien from John Weston the Council and House of Representatives of the Territory of Wisconsin passed an act on January 13, 1840 approving construction of the dam and the mill facilities. Now construction of the dam could proceed. This information was obtained from the History of Thiensville Bicentennial Edition and the abstract of title of the transactions between John Weston, the United States Government and Henry Thien.

Trying to reconstruct how the Thiensville Mill Dam came about is an interesting task. One has to remember that there was nothing there at that spot on the river. So how to go about building that mill. This is probably how:

The first thing he had to do is to get a land surveyor that can determine how many feet of drop is available in the river at that point. Then he can determine the proper size of the water wheels for the mill, which in turn allowed the sizing of the grinding wheels. The next step was to find a source of proper stone that will be needed for the mill building and also a source of suitable wood for the timbers, beams and boards needed for the dam and the mill building. He, or someone knowledgeable in architecture and construction of dams probably drew up a plan for the mill building and dam so they could calculate the quantities of the various timber sections and stone needed for the project. To collect enough stone, timber and other materials for the dam and the mill building was in itself, an enormous project that took much planning, effort and money. It is interesting to note that there probably was only one copy of the plan for the mill layout, this being long before there were blueprint machines. In 1843, a small sawmill was constructed on the mill race dike by Henry Hayssen, the son-in-law of John Henry Thien and Peter Turck, a surveyor. This sawmill, an up and down framesaw powered by a water wheel provided lumber needed for the mill building, as well as for other building construction in the area.

It is also interesting to realize that John Henry Thien probably had only been in America on a short time and, while probably learning the language as quickly as possible, had to depend on others to talk with the people he had to deal with for building his mill and the dam.

While no original plans for the dam or the mill building are known to exist, we know that the dam had a length of over 130 feet, with an undammed section (fish slide) over 60 feet in length on the south portion of the river. The mill race from the sluice gate to the mill building was about 700 feet long. The dam produced a “head” of water of about 5 feet, which created enough power to turn the water wheels that then turn the mill stones in the mill, probably grinding all day.

The plans having been made and a supply of the required materials assured, they then broke ground for the mill building first. This is because before the mill race could be excavated, they had to have the foundation for the water wheels and the mill building completed. Only then, when the building foundation was above the water level could the mill race to the building and the tail race, the short discharge channel from the mill building into the river, be connected. Probably, at the beginning of summer, when the water level in the Milwaukee River began to recede to its summer low, the construction of the dam was started. Simultaneously, the mill pond excavation probably also commenced. John Henry Thien was able to enlist the help of enough people, including some native Indians from the Sauk Tribe, to proceed with construction. The soil, excavated from the mill race leading from the head gate at the river to the mill building, was used to build a dike of sufficient height to separate the mill race from the river.

Some of the soil probably was also used, together with scrap trees and branches to build an earthen causeway out into the river just above the future dam, so the workers could start to install the timber posts, beams and anchor piles for the dam. Aided by low water, construction probably went quite well. The dam structure had to be quite stable and well anchored in order to resist the water pressure, especially during high water. Of course, if beavers can do it, so should humans. But it took quite a few men and horses back in 1842 to get it all done in time during the construction season. They probably worked 10 to 12 hour days. They also had to build the head gate at the entrance to the mill race, which is an important structure to regulate the amount of water that will flow down the mill race to turn the water wheel, which will turn the grinding wheels of the flour mill.

The construction of the mill building probably proceeded simultaneously, so the whole system could be placed in operation soon after the dam and tail race were completed, hopefully in time to start grinding the grain after the harvest in fall. The sign above the entrance to the mill building read THIENVILLE MILLS. The original three story mill building suffered a devastating fire in 1874 and was rebuilt by 1876 on a much larger scale, becoming an imposing five story building.

John Henry Thien succeeded in building a very important facility, which greatly helped in establishing farming in this area, including those in Ozaukee County and portions of Washington County. It also resulted in considerable growth at that little market place on the Milwaukee River that was incorporated as the Village of Thiensville in the year 1910.

The dam has outlived the mill, which was shut down in the late 1930's. The mill building was finally torn down in 1956 and a new commercial building was constructed on the original foundations. The dam has needed much repair to fulfill its purpose over the life of the mill. The dam has become a landmark for Thiensville. It has become an historic attraction that compliments Thiensville Park, which is a popular place for gatherings, festivals and sports events.

APPENDIX A

The following is a brief description of some of the documents about the dam on file at the Thiensville Village Hall.

1. Abstract of Title of the property John Henry Thien bought in 1842 showing the various real estate transactions over the years from 1839 to 1966.
2. September 6, 1916 – The Thiensville Milling Company gave right of access to Mrs. George (Clementine) Kallenbach to the mill race for fishing, boating and to draw water.
3. March 28, 1939 - The Thiensville Milling Company owns and operates the Grist Mill on the Milwaukee River. It was incorporated in 1912 and the Thiensville Milling Company rebuilt and maintained the dam and spillway. The company is now insolvent and the dam is not being maintained. Spring thaws have washed out the middle section of the dam.
4. October 23, 1939 – The Mequon Township Advancement Association was founded.
5. September 10, 1941 – Transfer of ownership of the Thiensville Dam from the Thiensville Milling Company to the Mequon Township Advancement Association, Inc.
6. October 8, 1941 – The Public Service Commission of Wisconsin (PSCW) approved the sale of the dam.

7. October 24, 1957 – The name of the Mequon Township Advancement Association was changed to Mequon – Thiensville Advancement Association. Due to lack of funding for dam maintenance and repair, members voted to transfer title of the dam to the Village of Thiensville and the Town of Mequon.

8. December 13, 1962 – Joint ownership of the Mequon – Thiensville dam was transferred from the Mequon - Thiensville Advancement Association to the Village of Thiensville and the City of Mequon, including maintenance of the mill race.

9. April 24, 1963 - A hearing was held at the Public Service Commission of Wisconsin (PSCW) to turn ownership of the dam over from the Mequon - Thiensville Advancement Association to the Village of Thiensville and the City of Mequon. It was noted that the control gate for the Millrace is a wooden structure which can be raised and lowered to control the water level in the Millrace. In 1960 the north quarter section of the dam was rebuilt with steel piling and filled with concrete from the middle section onto the north retaining wall.

10. June 13, 1963, PSCW Findings – The application by Mequon – Thiensville Advancement Association to transfer ownership of dam over to the Village of Thiensville and the City of Mequon was approved. It was noted that construction of the dam was authorized by the Territorial Legislature of 1843.

11. Newspaper Article – Ownership of dam was turned over to Mequon and Thiensville on February 20, 1963, with Mequon owning 75% and Thiensville owning 25%.

12. March 20, 1976 – A determination was made that the mill race is part of the dam, i.e. City of Mequon is partially responsible for its maintenance.
13. October 5, 1976 – Contract for repair of Thiensville Dam by Gunitite Corporation to include complete restoration and repair of Thiensville Dam.
14. July 1980 – Milwaukee River Thiensville Dam, Ozaukee County Inventory No. 539, National Dam Safety Program Inspection Report, prepared by St. Paul District, Corps of Engineers.
15. July 23, 1985 – Letter from WI DNR to Village President Robert Warber, regarding method of payment.
16. April 26, 19 - Letter to DNR regarding FEMA Flood Plain Mapping.
17. April 20, 2000 – Letter from M-T Milwaukee River Advisory Committee to Village President Don Molyneux recommending a structural inspection of the dam.
18. September 12, 2000 – Giles Engineering Associates submitted report on Mill Race Distress Evaluation, Milwaukee River, Thiensville, Wisconsin. The report found that the soil embankment between river and spillway is leaky. Sheetpiling cutoff wall should be extended 50 feet to west, place rip rap stone on embankment.
19. May 8, 2002 – Memorandum from Corps of Engineers, Detroit, Civil Design section covering inspection of dam and recommendation for repairs.
20. September 18, 2001 – Letter to Joseph Wanielista, P.E. regarding Corps of Engineers Investigation of Dam.
21. Memorandum thru: CH, Civil Design Sect., CH. Design BR. May 8, 2002 (U.S. Army Corps. Of Engineers)

22. June 2003 – Report: Mequon/Thiensville Dam, Conditional Survey, Milwaukee River, Mequon, Wisconsin with attached memorandum dated June 16, 2003 (U.S. Army Corps. Of Engineers)

23. December 2004 – Report titled Mequon/Thiensville Dam Condition Survey, Milwaukee River, Mequon, Wisconsin – prepared by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Detroit District for the City of Mequon, Wisconsin.

APPENDIX B

The following is additional information from an unknown source on the history of the Thiensville Dam. This summary was prepared sometime after 1957.

HISTORY OF THE THIENSVILLE DAM

The Dam on the Milwaukee River at Thiensville was originally constructed in the early 1800's and was rebuilt and maintained from that date on by the Thiensville Milling Company or its predecessor companies at their own expense. The Dam affects approximately 225 properties in Mequon and 14 in the Village of Thiensville, having an assessed value of \$1,523,350 in Mequon and \$231,750 in the Village of Thiensville.

During the winter of 1938 and in the spring of 1939, the center section of the Dam was washed out, and because the owners were not financially able to repair the damage, the Dam remained in a damaged condition from that date on until 1941. In 1939, certain property owners got together and organized with the idea of finding a means of restoring the Dam and thereby raising the water level and improving their property.

The organization was incorporated under the laws of the State of Wisconsin on October 20, 1939, known as the Mequon-Thiensville Advancement Association. Its purpose was to construct and maintain a dam or dams on the Milwaukee River.

After conferences with the Thiensville Milling Company regarding the repairing of the Dam, on September 10, 1941, the Thiensville Milling Company donated the Dam Site and certain real estate to the Association by giving them a Quick Claim Deed to the Dam Site, the Head Gate Site, and abutting real estate. The Quick Claim Deed provides that the Thiensville Milling Company and its successors shall be entitled to any water power generated by the Dam. The deed also provides that in case the Dam is not maintained in a satisfactory manner, the property will revert back to the Thiensville Milling Company or its successors. The deed also provides that if there is a disagreement as to the necessity of repairs, the Public Service Commission of Wisconsin shall be the judge as to the necessity and extent of repairs.

The Association then undertook a Fund Raising Campaign to repair the Dam and engage an engineer to estimate the cost of restoring. Late in 1941, the Association entered into an Agreement with the Great Lakes Dredge and Engineering Company to make the necessary repairs. These repairs were started in 1941 and were completed in 1942. The cost of the initial repairs, all of which were paid for with subscriptions from property owners and other individuals in the community, amounted to \$9,757.51.

In 1943, sundry repairs were necessary to the Dam costing \$312.87, which funds were taken from the General Account of the Association. In 1946, additional work was necessary to the North Abutment of the Dam, and again subscriptions were asked for from property owners. The cost of repairs in 1946 amounted to \$2,030.00. In 1949, the South End of the Dam, or so-called Fish Run, was discovered to be in bad need of repairs and again a Fund Raising Campaign was undertaken.

At this time, the estimated cost of repairs was divided based on the assessed value of the property from about County Trunk Highway C to the Dam, and a resulting rate of 3 mills per thousand of assessment was established. This was entirely on a voluntary basis, in as much as the assessments could not be legally placed on the tax roll. The cost of the 1949-1950 repairs to the South End of the Dam amounted to \$4,482.55. Of the amount collected for the cost, \$775.00 was contributed by the Village of Thiensville and the balance came from property owners.

In 1956, the Association erected a fence at the North End of the Head Gate costing \$300.00 and in 1957, earth fill was placed on the Dam at a cost of \$265.07. The total cost of repairs and maintenance to the Dam from the time the Association acquired title in 1941 to the end of 1957 amounts to \$17,148.00.

At the Annual Meeting of the members of the Association in 1956, it was agreed that because of the problem in raising money by popular subscription without regard for property values and without authorization to make assessments based on property values, the members voted to transfer title to the Dam to Public Ownership to be vested in the Town of Mequon and the Village of Thiensville.

At the 1957 Annual Meeting, a report was submitted to the members disclosing the need of repairs that were considered necessary on an immediate basis, and the Directors of the Association embarked on a program of ascertaining the cost of making these repairs and agreed on a program of obtaining the funds for such repairs by securing a contribution from the Village of Thiensville and the City of Mequon equal to one-quarter of the total cost from each and the balance of one-half to be raised by popular subscription.

A contract with the Village Board of Thiensville was made late in 1957, and a check in the amount of \$500.00 was received from them. At the same time, a request was made to the City Council for a contribution, but this was never forthcoming. Because of the fact that the City was unwilling to contribute to the maintenance of the Dam, the Directors then agreed not to undertake a program of raising funds by popular subscription but concentrate their efforts on trying to have the City and the Village accept title to the Dam immediately and have them make the necessary repairs.

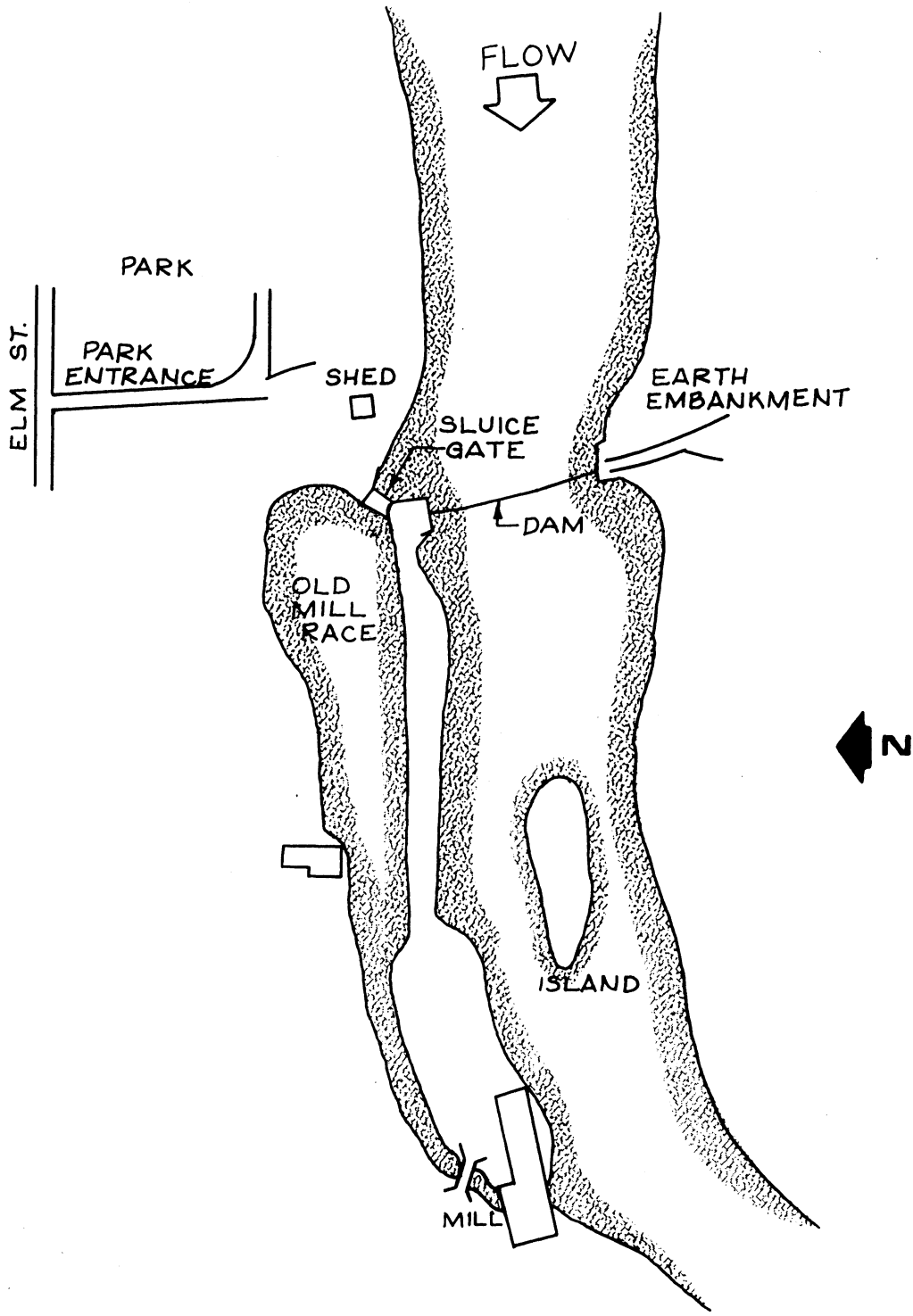


FIGURE I-1
SITE PLAN
THIENSVILLE DAM
DONOHUE & ASSOCIATES, INC.
1980

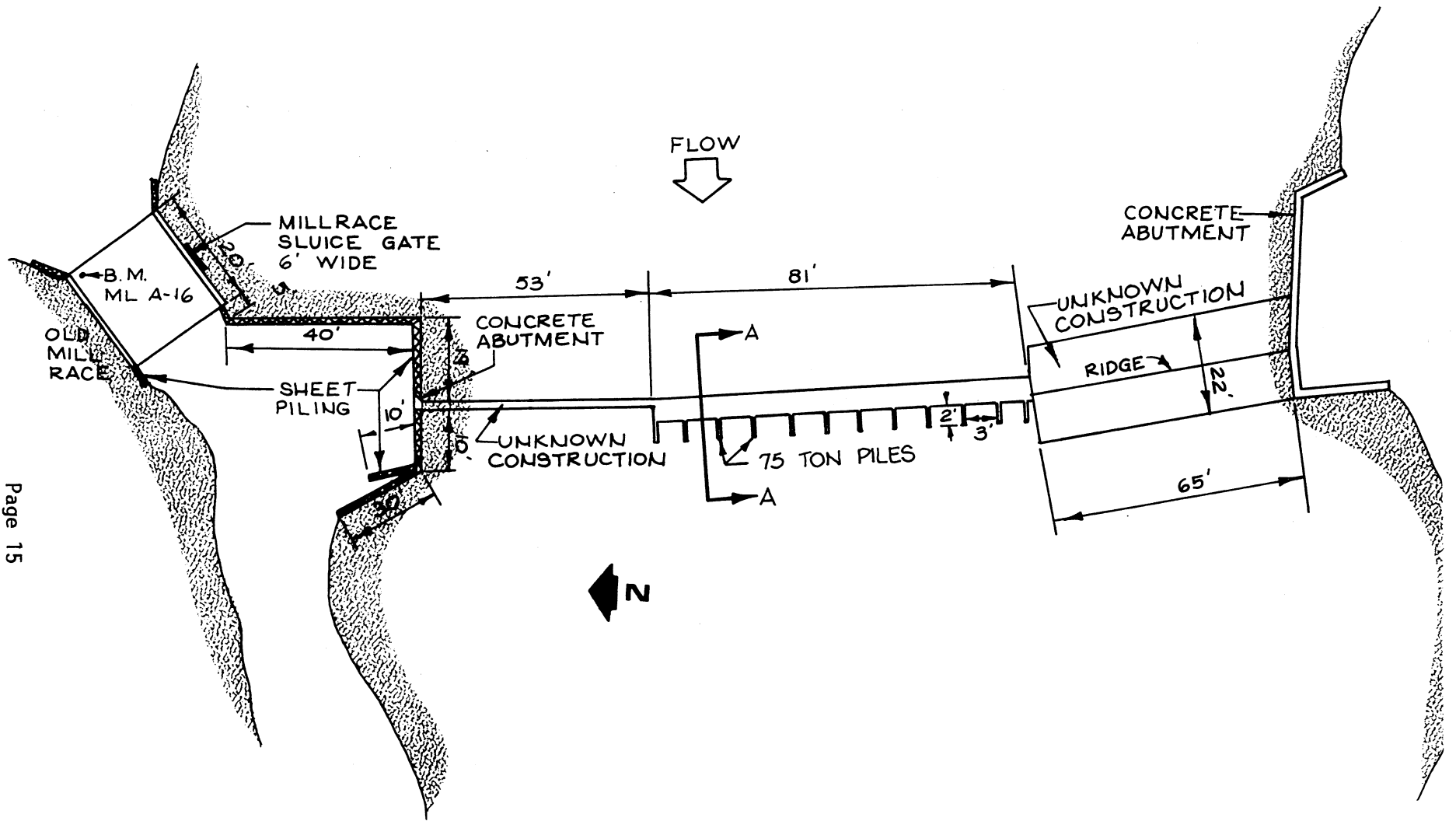
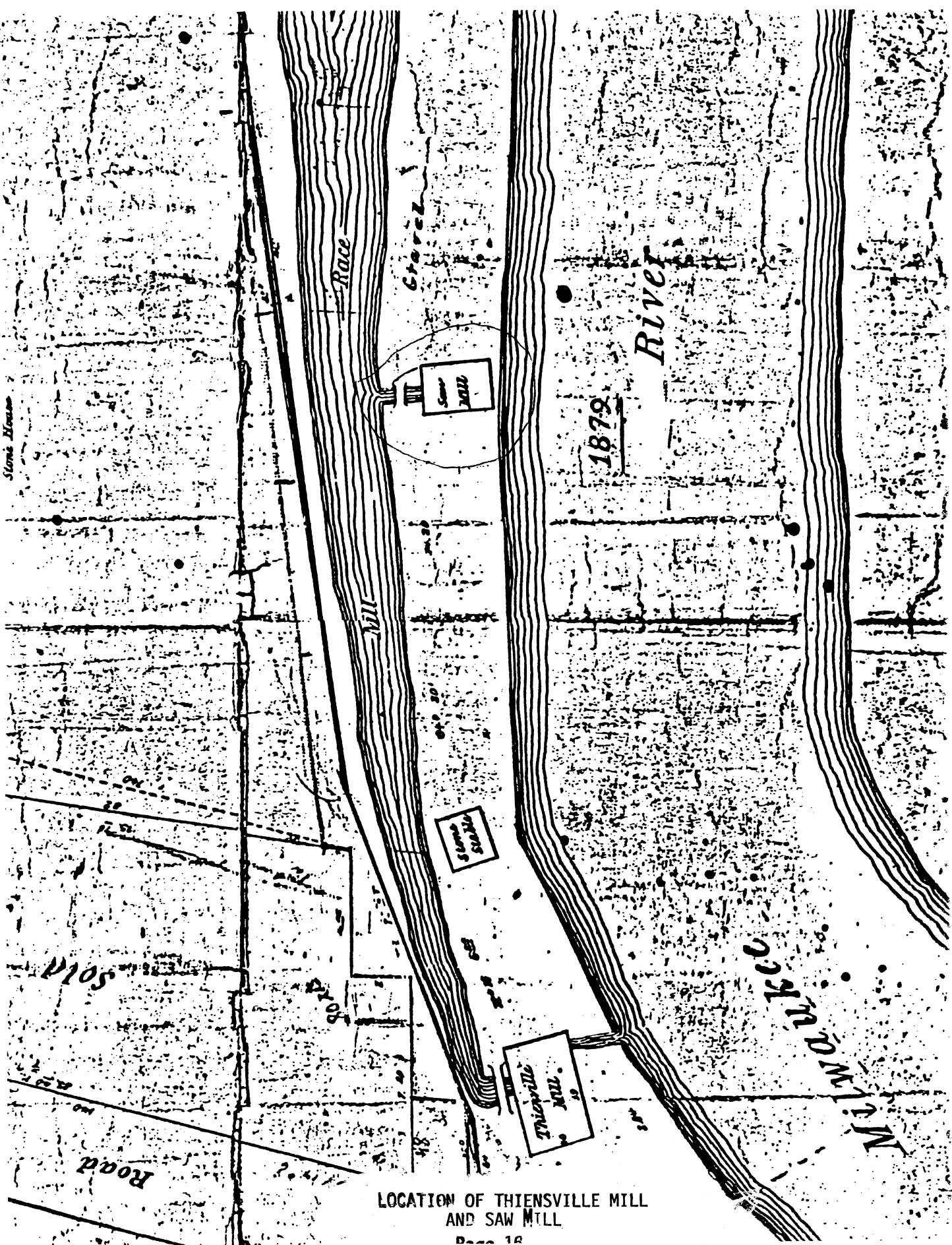


FIGURE I-2
 PLAN VIEW
 THIENSVILLE DAM
 DONOHUE & ASSOCIATES, INC.
 1980

Stone House



LOCATION OF THIENSVILLE MILL AND SAW MILL

The Thiensville Sawmill Site

This sawmill was built by Henry Hayssen for John Thien at Mequon River in 1843. This was a year after he had completed the gristmill.

Its waterwheel powered an up and down frame saw that undoubtedly furnished lumber for most of the early homes in the village.

Henry married John Thien's daughter, Anna on August 15th, 1844 and built a home on the west side of the plank road the same year.

The site is located on the strip of land between the millrace and the river, 140 yards west of the millrace gate.

*Submitted by
Dick Bayley
4/97*