



In 1768, Samuel Lewis, a miller from Franklin Corners in Basking Ridge, built a water-powered grist mill and a barn on the Passaic River on land originally acquired from William Penn. His grandson, Richard Southard, bought the property in 1777 and soon found that the convenient location along a major thoroughfare between New York and Philadelphia, so practical for commerce, placed him smack in the middle of the Revolutionary War. His small wooden mill supplied desperately needed flour, meal, and feed to the Continental Army encampment at Jockey Hollow, Morristown, during the bitter winter of 1779-80. Since the barn was used to store the army's grain, it is known today as "The Grain House."

As the war moved south, quiet once again settled over the mill. Samuel Woodward, another family member, owned it into the early 19th century. His daughter, Phebe, married a Peapack miller, Ferdinand Van Dorn, who later bought the property. His business prospered, and the little mill, by now a bit long in the tooth, couldn't keep up with demand. In 1842, he erected a larger stone mill with an inside waterwheel system. It still stands on Route 202 opposite this restaurant.

The property passed through several hands in the ensuing years and gradually fell into disrepair, but in 1929 it received a surprising new lease on life. Famous restaurateur William Childs saw intriguing possibilities in the barn standing near the old mill and bought the entire property outright. He moved the barn to the other side of Route 202 the following year and began converting it to an inn. Rather than gut the inside, however, Childs chose to preserve the classic old structure's unique spirit through a painstaking restoration. Not a beam was touched in the barn's solid frame and it remains to this day as it was more than two centuries ago. Only the functions of the subdivisions have changed. What was the wagon and machinery room is now the William Childs Dining Room. The grain storage area that fed Washington's army is now The Grain Room. The horse stable is the Coppertop Pub, and the bents in the second floor's great haymow are now individual dining rooms.

William Childs' Olde Mill Inn was an immediate success and cemented his family's already sterling reputation in the restaurant business. William started the first Childs' restaurant with his brother Samuel (later a NJ State Senator) in 1889 on New York City's Cortland Street. These country boys from the Somerset Hills envisioned a grand, cross-country chain, and the Childs' name eventually graced 107 establishments in North America. They ran one of the largest chains of any kind in the world and served over 50,000,000 meals a year. The Childs' restaurants were renowned for their large glass fronts and sparkling white walls and tables, and the brothers proved to be not only astute businessmen but progressive employers as well. They were the first in the United States to hire women to wait tables.

In William's words, the Childs' outstanding success was based on "food as close as possible to that served in the best homes... family recipes and absolute cleanliness." Their concept of moderately priced meals, freshly prepared in a pristine atmosphere in convenient locations, sounds simple enough today - but in the late 19th century, it truly revolutionized the industry.

Today The Bocina Group continues The Olde Mill Inn's long tradition of affordable elegance. Today's Grain House, its setting steeped in a gracious era long past, continues to be a local favorite. It is ideal for small to medium size parties, as each room of the historic building is devoted to an individual theme and is fashioned to meet a wide array of needs. For an intimate gathering in a private room or an extravaganza for one hundred, replete with dance floor and sumptuous buffet, look no further. The Grain House, so deeply rooted in our nation's past, so lovingly preserved by William Childs, offers a unique atmosphere of charm, history, and fellowship not duplicated anywhere else in New Jersey.

Written with sincere appreciation to the Somerset Hills Historical Society.

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