

## Dewar Furniture Makers

By Susan Parker

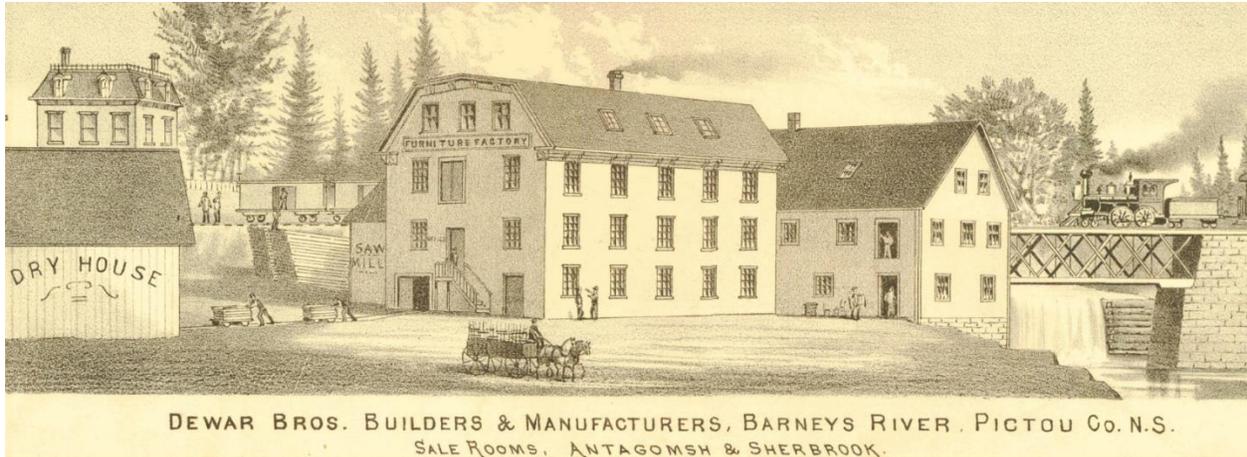
Born in Perthshire, Scotland, John Dewar came to Barney's River area in 1803 at 17 years old. His immigration represents an example of chain migration as family already in Merigomish enticed him to move to the area. Supposedly, John spent hours trying to cut down his first tree, taking an axe to all sides of the trunk. He became so frustrated that he declared his desire to return to Scotland. Despite the initial issues, he quickly learned the tricks and built a career in the milling industry.

The milling interest did not end with John, but lived on through several generations. John married Rebecca McDonald, the daughter of Loyalist Joseph McDonald. Similar to his father, their son Alexander became a millwright. In 1829, he married Eliza Brown, a dressmaker from Lochaber. The milling tradition passed onto four of their children, who all worked as millers. It is no surprise that the area in which John Dewar settled became known as Dewar's Mills, with a road still bearing the name to this day.

The Dewar family opened its first mill under John in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Although the exact date is unknown, it was well into operations by 1854 when a major flood along Barney's River temporarily caused it to shut down. A few years later, Robert, Alexander's son, built his own mill on Barney's River. The mill expanded into a furniture business, with its factory directly beside the mill. Robert brought in his cousins James Dewar and Murdoch Hattie to help the operation in its early days. By 1879, however, he partnered with his brother William to form Dewar Brothers. A drawing of their site was feature in the *Illustrated Historical Atlas of Pictou County*. At its height, the business employed about 150 men at the mill and in the woods.

Robert and William floated logs down Barney's River to their sawmill, with help from a flume, before they moved them into the dry house. Once dried, the logs returned to the mill to be planed and cut before turned into furniture. The factory made bureaus, dressers, sinks, beds, chairs, and tables, with most pieces made from Bird's eye maple. The Dewar Brothers operated showrooms in Antigonish and Sherbrooke and employed salesmen to travel with bedroom sets throughout Pictou, Antigonish, and Guysborough counties. Some of the first hardwood flooring in the province came from their mill and used in the military barracks in Halifax. Reportedly, a large Bird's eye maple table made by the Dewar Brothers was gifted to the Lieutenant Governor of Nova Scotia.

Although the Dewars sold the mill, the family remained in the Barney's River for generations. A picnic for the 1923 ship *Hector* celebrations, held in Dewar's Mills, showed a large portion of Dewars and mill workers stayed in the area. John Dewar's descendants stretch across Canada, however, and include a hockey player, teachers, nurses, lawyers, accountants, politicians, and Celtic musicians.



Dewar Bros.' Mill from the *Illustrated Atlas of Pictou County* (1879)