

Pennypack Creek Grist Mill Walk

This walk is conducted periodically by the Association, however the information is included here for those doing research on the area.

Water Powered Milling

There were many forms of water wheels used to harness the water power of the Pennypack Creek. The most common use of this energy was the driving of grinding and sifting machinery of the grist, corn and flour mills. The wheels were generally named by the way the water entered them.

Tub Wheels: This wheel had a vertical axle inside a closed tub. The water came in at one side of the tub, pushed its way against the paddles of the wheel until it found an escape port on the other side of the tub.

Undershot Wheels: Usually the most primitive and lowest power yield of all the horizontal axle wheels. Usually found in areas of rapid water. The water goes under the wheel.

Breast Height Wheel: The water is introduced halfway up the back of the wheel, turning the wheel counter clockwise. The often wider wheel was slower, but could supply greater power.

Overshot Wheels: The water came in high at the top of the wheel. Which way it turned depended on which side of the vertical of the wheel the water supply was placed. This kind of wheel delivered the most power, but needed a high head of water at the dam.

This walk will take us in a southerly direction from the Pennypack E.R. Trust property down Huntingdon Road to Creek Road to an area called Shelmire Mills. From there we will continue on to Papermill Road, cross the bridge and follow the railroad tracks to Feters Mill. The walk will terminate at the Alnwick Train Station.

Distance: Under 2 Miles

Terrain: Mostly level, some downhill

Time: Approximately 2 Hours

People, Places, Events Covered on the Tour

- The Importance of Milling in the 1700's
- The Types of Water Wheels Used in Milling
- Henry Wynkoop (1737 – 1816)
- Shelmire Mills (George Shelmire, Miller)
- Creek Road
- The Great Newtown R.R. Train Wreck
- Brewer's Distilleries
- Brown's Grist Mill
- Hallowell-Langstroth-McDowell Paper Mills
- Bryn Athyn Cathedral Quarry
- Harmon Yerkes
- Addis-Fetter Mill

The Importance of Milling in the 1700's

Preparing grain for bread to feed the people and for feed for domestic animals was one of the most indispensable wants of a newly-settled people.

Prepared timber was also one of the most important factors in early industry. The saw-mill was attached to nearly every grist mill, but was often seen by itself on small streams that only furnished power in spring or wet weather.

There were also numerous oil and bark mills, and mills for preparing plaster and carding wool for home spinning and weaving.

English rulers were glad to receive from America cargoes of flour; hence grinding and preparing flour for export was a leading and extensive business in the early days of the country.

In 1785 in Moreland Township, there were ten grist mills, three saw-mills, one oil mill, two tanneries and a distillery.

Henry Wynkoop (1737 – 1816)

Not all of the valley's early settlers came directly from Europe. The Dutch had settled in Northampton Township much earlier. The Wynkoop family was one of these.

Henry Wynkoop was involved in politics by the age of 23 as a member of the Provincial Assembly of Pennsylvania. He was appointed Justice of the Peace in 1764 and later as Associate County Judge. He was a friend of Washington, Hamilton and Adams and was elected to the first Congress of the United State in 1789. Gerrit (or Gerardus) Wynkoop was listed as having taken up residence in the Morelands in 1717 and was an elder in the Church of North and Southampton.

The Wynkoops continued to be involved in politics, John as a Constable in 1774 and Phillip as a Supervisor in 1767. Maps indicate that the property was owned by William Wynkoop in 1871.

Shelmire Mills

The area around the junction of Huntingdon and Creek Roads was once called Shelmire Mills, after George Shelmire, who bought the land with a grist mill from Silas Yerkes in 1787. Shelmire improved the property and passed it on to his sons who further developed the property into a thriving mill village. The roads were lined with tenement houses and at least three operating mills. The second grist mill being added in 1825 and a plaster mill in 1838. Plaster was used for fertilizing worn soil.

The mills were owned by Jacob Shelmire in 1825 and by Menden Ludwig in 1869.

The Civil War, the advent of the railroad through the valley in 1872, which obliterated several mills, and the drop of water in the creeks wiped out the mills and the villages. Shelmireville fell into ruins.

A Mr. Pearson, a wealthy artist was a passenger on the Newtown train when he spotted the ruins. After a days exploration of the site, Mr. Pearson bought the entire property and rebuilt the village, modifying it to his plans.

Creek Road

A 150-rod strip of land inside the present bucks County line between Davisville Road and the Horsham boundary was first sold to Joseph Jones of the city of Southampton, England, who assigned his equity to Peter Chamberlin and his wife Lucy, residents of the neighboring village

of Bustleton. The Chamberlins emigrated not later than the year 1693, at which time they established themselves near the present junction of Pioneer and County Line Roads.

On August 8, 1693, the Provincial Council ordered that the road from the city to Bethayers “extend up into the Countrey to Peter Chamber-lains.” (Colonial Record of Penna., 1387) The road was known for a century as Chamberlin Road. It later came to be called Pioneer Road and finally Creek Road.

The Great Newtown R.R. Train Wreck

Slightly upstream of Shelmireville there is a sharp bend in both the creek and the railroad tracks. It was here that the great train wreck of December 5, 1921 occurred due to an inaccurate signal system and the inability of the engineers to see the other train coming around the bend. The two trains met head-on, the steam locomotive of one train rose vertically and fell atop the wooden passenger cars of the other train, setting them on fire. The wooden cars were immediately engulfed in flames killing twenty seven people and injuring seventy others. One result of the accident was the abolition of all wooden passenger cars in the state of Pennsylvania.

Brewer’s Mills

Directly across the Pennypack Creek from the Shelmire-ville Worker’s House, sticking out from under the traprock below the water level are groups of square stone foundations. Several brewers had mills and distilleries across and upstream from Shelmire Mills. The flow of excellent spring water from the cliffs behind the site made the distilling process quite feasible.

The railroad was built over the breweries and cut off the spring water from the main creek, creating today’s swamp.

Brown’s Grist Mill

A short distance north of Paper Mill Road on the east side of Pennypack Creek stood George Brown’s Grist Mill circa 1794. The original Brown dam and mill were buried under the embankment of the Newtown Railroad in 1872.

Hallowell-Langstroth-McDowell Paper Mill

The paper mill, located at the junction of Creek and Papermill Roads was owned by Israel Hallowell in 1760, passed to John and Thomas Langstroth in 1800 and was owned and operated by Joseph McDowell from 1836 until 1858.

The Hallowell Mill was located on 600 acres of land purchased from Thomas Holme. It is reported that a man by the name of Canby built the original mill.

The Langstroth family came to this immediate area in 1790 from the Falls of the Schuylkill. The paper mill then used the water rights and dam purchased from the George Brown Mill across the creek.

Thomas Langstroth left his mill to two of his sons. When the mill burned on March 19, 1809, popular subscription raised the money to rebuild the mill. John Langstroth refused the money, while Thomas, Jr., accepted the money and rebuilt the mill. It was listed as the most advanced in the county. The Langstroth family history is tied the Ephrata Cloisters through Thomas Langstroth’s wife. Thomas would ride out to the Cloisters to help set up and run its famous printing presses.

The mill was sold to Joseph McDowell who enlarged and improved the mill greatly. It too burned to the ground on July 1, 1858. The loss was \$30,000. Eighty people were out of work and the death of the village resulted from the loss.

Bryn Athyn Cathedral Quarry

Proceeding south along the Newtown R.R. tracks and beyond a cut in the cliffs, the land recedes to the left to reveal the remains of a quarry and a railroad spur. A great deal of the stone for the Bryn Athyn Cathedral was mined at this site.

Raymond Pitcairn, oldest son of John Pitcairn, Jr., who endowed the building of the cathedral, devoted his life and talents to the project. Since the sandstone and limestone of the European cathedrals were showing signs of wear after four or five centuries, he decided that better stone could be found in this country. It turned out that a bed of metamorphosed granite lay under the woods along the Pennypack only a quarter of a mile from the cathedral site and the quarry was opened.

The quarry itself has long since been filled. The railroad spur was used for coal cars supplying fuel to heat the Bryn Athyn church and school complex.

Harmon Yerkes

The Yerkes name figures prominently throughout the area in the early history of Moreland Township. High on the bluff above Fetter's Mill is a large farmhouse (1790), which is contemporary with the immigration of the Yerkes Family from Germany to the valley. The 30-Years War in Europe shattered the economy for the middle classes. The farmer, Harmon Yerkes, was part of the flood of immigrants from Germany at that time. There are ties between Germantown, where the wealthier merchant class settled, Frankford, where the working middle class settled, and the Yerkes as farmers in the Pennypack Area.

The date 1790 was found on one of the large 'upside down' masonry pillars in the original barn. There were three other large Yerkes farmhouses on similar promontories along the creek. This particular house has been known as 'Cinqfoil' for the tiny five-petaled yellow flowers that cover the steep banks to the floodplain.

Addis-Fetters Mill

The mill site was purchased from the Yerkes Family in 1835 by Amos Addis, who built the mill and installed a horizontal wheel. It was owned by a Mr. Morrison in 1851. Casper Fetters bought the mill in 1860.

The history of Fetter's Mill can well be traced through the Fetters genealogy. Casper Fetters was born in Illesheim, Germany in 1726. Prior to 1760, he and two brothers emigrated to New York. Casper later moved to Bucks County. His son, Casper, Jr., lived in Bucks County and raised thirteen children. Casper Jr.'s fourth child, Casper C. married a Southampton lady and they raised twelve children in the area. Their oldest son, Casper C., acquired several farms in Montgomery County and a mill on the Pennypack Creek. Here they had five children, but only one lived to adulthood.

Although principally a farmer, he taught school and ran the mill from April 1867 to 1871. He then returned to farming and settled on Second Street Pike below Southampton before moving to Philadelphia.

