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THE DESERTED VILLAGE OF SYCAMORE MILLS – Ancient Bridge House is Over Grown with Wild Roses – Old Union Library Building Still Stands

Caroline B King writes the following interesting sketch about Sycamore Mills, an ancient and romantic village in the upper section of Delaware County:

“Sweet Auburn, loveliest village of the plain,
Where health and plenty cheered the laboring swain
Sunk are thy bowers, in shapeless ruin all,
And the long grass o’ertops the moldering wall.”

Nestling in the foot hills of Delaware County, almost within reach of the busy hum of the city, peacefully sleeping, with no sound to disturb its slumbers but the whispering of the winds in the tops of the tall buttonwood trees, and the swirl of the falling water of Ridley Creek, lies Sycamore Mills – just such a village as Goldsmith pictured in his immortal lines. Here are the deserted walks, the grass-grown roadways, the ruined mill and the moldering walls. Here, is the Hawthorne bush with “seats beneath the shade, for talking age and whispering lovers made,” and the never falling brook and forsaken flower garden with all the other faded beauties which Goldsmith describes.

A half hour’s journey on the Pennsylvania Railroad, followed by another half hour spent in driving over the picturesque roadways of Delaware County brings one to the long covered bridge, still in excellent repair, which leads to Sycamore Mills. As one crosses the bridge and enters the once prosperous hamlet, the sense of solitude and stillness is so intense as to fill one’s very being with a sensation of awe, and the dozen or more little houses which formed the community, together with the library and mill, stand like sleeping monuments of a forgotten past.

Occasionally a rabbit, bold, because he knows not the fear of man whom he seldom sees, scurries through the dead leaves or a red fox seeking a short cut to his lair, crosses the grassy roadway, the noises of their scuffling waking the drowsy birds and for a moment Sycamore Mills is filled with sound, then all is silent once more.

Over, above and into the half open windows of the little stone houses the roses climb and twine themselves about the remnants of furniture, which are still to be found in several of the once comfortable homes. Here and there a “window box, still containing vestiges of such old-fashioned flowers as muck or Canterbury bells, or mourning bride, strikes the eye. Now a worn pump which no longer even wheezes is discovered, or a pottery vase on a broken mantle shelf over a huge dusty fireplace where bats have dwelt for years. All tell their own sad little tales of desolation. In the background the forest of stately button woods and lowering black oaks screens the forsaken little village from the rude gaze of the passerby, and the comforting hills shield it from the prying eyes of the curious.

RUINS OF OLD MILL – Beside the limpid Ridley Creek still stands the ruin of the old mill, which once furnished occupation for the departed inhabitants of this almost forgotten village. Once the snug little houses teemed with life, romance held sway, tragedies were enacted, and the simple and blissfully ignorant inhabitants of the peaceful valley lived their lives and played their parts in the great scheme of things, while the great march of progress went on unheeded.

It was a prosperous little community, this Sycamore Mills or as it was at one time known, Bishop’s Mills, and earlier still Upper Providence. The houses, even those which

are in ruins, show evidences of this, and with their substantial stone work, blackened oak ceilings, and great fireplaces must have made comfortable homes.

Long ago, even as far back as the days of William Penn, does the history of Sycamore Mills, extend. For that great man himself "Did grant on the 24th of June 1680 to James Swaffer, 500 acres of land in Providence," and later said James Swaffer in turn deeded this land to Jeremiah Collet who transferred it to someone else, and then it passed through various hands until at last in 1717 John Edge, to whom the property had descended, formed a co-partnership with Jacob Edge and Henry Miller and erected the mill whose gray ruin yet stands beside the creek. From that date until 1901, when the original mill with its numerous additions was destroyed by fire, it changed hands a number of times and many are the good old Philadelphia names which are inscribed on the yellowed and worm-eaten old documents telling of the sales and transfers. The Yarnalls, the Biddes, the Coxes, the Caldwells and the Lewises, all at one time or another owned or leased Sycamore Mill. And furthermore, every farmer in the neighborhood, it appeared, might rent the mill from its owners for his personal use, and take his grain there and grind it to his own liking, without giving thanks or pay to anyone.

Thus the mill itself played a conspicuous part in the history of the village. On its walls hung the big iron key of the library for the use of farmers who might desire to spend their time in reading while their grist was being ground. The mill was the chief means of livelihood for many years to the villagers, although the farmers about the country lived exceedingly well on the proceeds of their lands.

STORY TO ITSELF – The library deserves a story to itself, as it still stands in fine repair, almost unchanged. The date of its building, 1812 still plainly visible on a plate adjacent to the old time wooden door. Here the weekly newspapers were kept for the good of the community, and quaint almanacs and other books of reference, with some pious tales for Sunday afternoon reading, and cook books and novels in three volumes for matrons and maidens sentimentally inclined. These old volumes remained on the shelves of the library for many years after the village was deserted, and only the bats and owls which finally found their way through broken windows, can tell of the treasures of book lore which crumbled and faded there.

The year 1813 must have been a notable one for the little community, for then a nail factory was erected (bringing in additional sources of revenue to the villagers), and was soon followed by a blacksmith shop.

Who can say just why the lovely spot was forsaken? There are various conjectures advanced among the oldest inhabitants of Media. Some say that it was due to the fact that in 1845 the heretofore peace-abiding little creek rose and swelled and went roaring through the place, leaving a trail of death and devastation behind it, causing so much sorrow and terror that this year has always been remembered in Delaware County as the season of the great flood. It was in this flood that Mrs. Rachel Green, the teacher, or, as she was termed then, the preceptors of the little village school, largely escaped with her life, while many of the villagers were drowned and their property destroyed. Others attribute the desertion of Sycamore Mills to the fact that sometime early in the nineteenth century a saw mill was erected in close proximity to the grist mill, and that when this occurred the first feeling of entity and strife arose in the hamlet. "You see," they say, "there was not always the water necessary to run two mills. Sometimes the creek went nearly dry, and as there was an arrangement between the owners of the two mills that when the grist mill was short of

water the saw mill was to stand idle, it was to be expected that considerable ill-feeling would be aroused at times.” And so, whether it was because of the freshet or the quarrels arising from the installation of a second mill, no one knows, but the fact remains that the village was abandoned and so fell into a state of somnolence and decay.

DAMAGED BY FLOOD – Years passed by the houses and other buildings crumbled, and the roadways became overgrown with weeds and grass. Vines and shrubbery choked the entrance to the dwellings. The old bridge built in 1763, was almost entirely washed away in the flood of 1843, leaving only the span remaining in place, supported by the tottering walls. Only the birds and the squirrels now inhabit it. Occasionally a cow, straying from the herd, wandered into the green surrounding woodland, and once year the collector of the county taxes passed through to assure himself that no bold squatter had settled there without paying due tribute to the ownership. Other villages sprang into existence in Delaware County and the little hamlet almost passed from memory.

RECONSTRUCTION PERIOD – And then one day, in the hottest part of an extremely hot summer, a number of men, wearied with turmoil of the city and longing for simple, primitive things, discovered this little, deserted recondite village in the hills, and decided to make of it a settlement not unlike that founded by Elbert Hubbard at East Aurora. This was in 1907, 190 years after the building of the mill.

The prime mover in the enterprise was H.H. Battle of Newtown Township, who was aided by E.S. Lewis of Philadelphia. These men, enthusiastic in their admiration for the beautiful spot, so full of historic and poetic associations, earnestly went to work to found an arts and crafts community. Elbert Hubbard, who is a close friend of Mr. Battle's, visited the spot and suggested several improvements. The snug little stone houses were restored, roads rebuilt, the dam mended and a new bridge erected. The Union Library was opened and the collection of books, among which were discovered a number of valuable works, together with some unique stuffed birds, foxes, squirrels and other animals, was removed to the Institute of Science in Media and the library transformed into a laboratory for the carrying on of the work of the new community.

The old blacksmith shop was remodeled and there the workers in the now settlement developed their ideas in basketry and pottery. A piece of meadowland was planted in basket willows and the making of craftsman baskets for holding plants and flowers became a successful enterprises. Artists and literary men from all parts of the state, hearing of the quiet, peaceful little nook, were attracted there, and soon the little stone houses flourished once more; the window boxes were filled, the fallen rose trellises raised and the drooping blossoms trained to cover the old gray walls. Begonias, adjoining the quaint little structures, were built, vases and urns of pottery added beauty to the landscape and for a time Sycamore Mills seemed once more to have recognition as a home of men.

But only for a brief space, however, for within a few years the homes were again deserted, the trellises had fallen and the roses trailed unnoticed over the gateways and fences. The laboratory was abandoned, the shops closed, and Sycamore Mills was once more left to the mercy of the red foxes, the owls, the bats and an occasional band of wandering gypsies.

NO MASTER TO COMMAND – What brought about this second desertion no one quite knows. One promoter of the new Sycamore Mills said recently while describing the beauties of the spot:

“If we had a man like Elbert Hubbard to act as a leader the place would have flourished, but we had no one to whom the dwellers in Sycamore Mills could look and so the plan failed.”

Therefore, picturesque as the place is, with its historic associations, its forests of stately button woods and black oaks, protecting hills and rippling stream, it is beauty to the mercy of the wondering gypsy, the foxes and the birds and squirrels. Here it peacefully sleeps during the long summer days and in the frozen loneliness of the winter, waiting for the coming of the fairy prince who shall wake it from its second slumber, while no sound but the whispering of the breezes in the tops of the tall buttonwood trees and the rush of the falling torrent disturbs its peaceful dreams.

“And no the sounds of population fail;
No cheerful murmurs fluctuate in the gale;
No busy steps the grass-grown footway tread,
For all the bloomy flush of life is fled.”

KEITH LOCKHART COLLECTION