THE MILLS OF CRUM CREEK AND WHISKY RUN

Springfield Township

1766 – 1900

Forming the western boundary of Springfield Township, Crum Creek remains a wooded creek valley much as it was at the beginning of Penn’s Colony. The Lenni Lenape called it Ockanickon, to the Swedes who founded the colony of New Sweden in 1636, it was Kroke-eller or Cromkill, the crooked creek.

The Swedes engaged in farming and carried on a fur trade with the local Indians but failed to establish any significant industry along the numerous streams leading into the Delaware River. In the report of the Swedish Governor Johan Rising to the directors of New Sweden in 1655, he complained of a lack of capital investment in manufacturing industry in the new colony. He stated: “We sit here already as though we had hands and feet tied…and our good intentions of erecting useful manufactories in the country, namely saw-mills, powder mills, timbering and logging, brick making, etc., have not been carried out.” Rising’s appeal for action was not heeded, New Sweden never really prospered, Penn’s Colony took its place in less than thirty years.

The founding of Pennsylvania in 1681 and of Springfield a few years later by Quaker farmers of Chester County, England, was followed by years of land clearing and the establishment of agricultural “plantations” in the township. There is little evidence of industrial development in this area through the early years of the eighteenth century. The first records of manufacturing along the Crum Creek are in 1766 when William Fell, son-in-law of Bartholomew Coppock, a first settler, was assessed as half owner of a saw mill. The other half interest was owned by William Paist. This mill was located approximately where Beatty Road now crosses Crum Creek, the present location of the Philadelphia Suburban Water Company plant. Also in the year 1766, Job Dicks owned a saw mill and Elishia Jones a grist mill. The location of the Dicks mill is uncertain, but the Jones mill still stands along Paper Mill Road, having been converted to a private residence. By 1799, the Fell saw mill was owned by Edward Fell, a nephew of William, and there was also in operation at the site a pottery with William Marshall as the potter.

Where the Baltimore Pike crosses Crum Creek, the brick chimney of the Victoria Plush Mill can be seen. It was on this site in 1779 that John Lewis built a grist mill, in 1788 he added a saw mill and remained the owner of these two mills until 1817. In 1811 the tax lists show John Lewis, Jr. as the owner of a paper mill, he was joined in this business by his brother George in 1817.

By 1826 the Lewis brothers were on record as owners of a woolen factory and a paper mill. The typical paper manufacturing operation of the time was to have vats filled with a macerated mas of rags and common waste into which was dipped a wire mesh frame. The excess liquid was drained and the frame turned over to drop out a sheet which was pressed between felt blankets to squeeze out the remaining moisture. The paper was hung up to dry and was sometimes treated with sizing made from hides or animal bones. The Lewis paper mill had an output of more than sixty reams of paper a week which included printing paper and wall paper. There were twenty two employees in 1826, most of whom lived in a seven family tenement near the mill, also owned by the Lewis brothers. There were two mansion houses associated with the mill in which the mill owners probably lived.

The woolen factory was rented to the firm of Wetherill & Glover and employed sixteen hands operating four carding machines and a variety of equipment for woolen manufacture. On May 23, 1826, Wetherill & Glover advertised in *The Upland Union* to inform those who had wool to either card into “rools” or manufacture into cloth, that this firm was now prepared to accept orders for work. They stated: “They have got new machinery of a superior quality, and will attend to the concern themselves, and feel confident they will give general satisfaction to all those who may favor them with their custom.” Customers were to leave raw materials at two locations to be picked up and delivered at two week intervals. One drop point was the Black Horse Tavern in Middletown, the other was an inn in Chester known as the sign of the Swan.

In 1835 the Lewis grist mill was converted into a cotton factory and rented to James Ogden. Ogden was succeeded by two sons of George Lewis, Mordecai and John Reese Lewis, who continued the conversion process, changing the old paper mill into a cotton mill. In 1854 John Reese Lewis died as a result of injuries sustained while attempting the rescue of two small children who had fallen through the ice near the mill dam in 1851. His brother Mordecai continued the business until his death in 1870 when the operation was carried on by his three sons, Isaac, Albert, and Reese Lewis. The property was purchased from the Lewis family by John J. Turner for the Victoria Plus Mills. The old till building was rated and a new factory erected in 1898. The factory manufactured plus for theatre seats and drapes, imitation fur for toys and linings for coffins.

Just north of the Springfield Mall is Whisky Run, a tributary of Crum Creek, large enough to have had located along its banks several mills powered by its flow. The first was the Elishia Jones grist mill. Further upstream a blade mill to manufacture small cutlery was owned and operated by George Lownes in 1779. By 1799 Curtis Lownes was owner of the cutlery mill along with a tilt-mill. The blade mill was discontinued sometime before 1807 and the tilt mill changed to a carding mill.

Carding is the process whereby the fiber of wool or cotton and combed, straightened and aligned before they undergo spinning into yarn. The carding machines were a series of rollers of different sizes. The rollers covered with leather stuck full of fine wire teeth.

At some small carding mills, local residents could bring in loose wool or cotton, send it through the machines and go home with yards of soft carded “lap” ready for home spinning into yarn. The Lownes mill produced finished yarn which was sold to local weaving mills. George Bolton Lownes operated this carding mill until 1827, when it was rented to Samuel Riddle.

The mill was a structure seventeen ty twenty-six feet, three stories high. Under the operation of Riddle the mill was managed by his son-in-law, Archibald McDowell. McDowell was san Irish immigrant in his early twenties, and apparently well experienced in textile operations. The Riddles moved in 1831 to the Parkmount Mill on Chester Creek, leaving Dowell to manage the Springfield mill. In 1833 the Riddles purchased machinery from G. B. Lownes for their Parkmount Mill and about this time the operation of the carding mill returned to George B. Lownes and continued until his death a few years late.

The heirs of Mr. Lownes sold the machinery at public sale on May 5th, 1835 an event advertised in the Upland Union.

“To be sold at Public Vendue, on the third day, the 5th of 5th Mo. (May)

in the Township of Springfield at the cotton factory of George B. Lownes,

deceased, situate about one quarter of a mile north of Gibbon’s Tavern,

on the road leading to Springfield Meetinghouse the FOLLOWING

VALUABLE MACHINERY VIZ:

One picker with belt and sundries; 2 carding engines, one lap card, one

drawing frame, one Eclipse speeder with straps, 700 speeder bobbins,

two mules of 228 spindles each, turning lathe and tools oil cistern,

balance beam, weights and tackle, one stove and pipe, one vice and a

quantity of tools, six lamps, &c. 86 tin cans, scales and weights, banding

machine, bundling machine and sundries. Sale to commence at 1 o’clock

on said day, when attendance will be given and conditions made known.

Joseph Lownes, Joel Evans, William P. Lawrence EX’RS.

N.B. The cotton factory and dwelling houses will also be for rent.”

After the public sale, the first tenants of the mill building are not known, but by 1844 the building was occupied by the Philadelphia coach maker, Edward Lane & Co. The Lane company placed an advertisement in the Delaware county Republican, published in Chester, stating their intentions of operating a Wheel-Wrighting and Coach Making plant at their “establishment in Springfield, between Joseph Gibbons’ and Springfield Friends’ Meeting House”, explaining that they have gone to “considerable expense in fitting up machinery” to produce Dearborn wagons. A later ad in the Republican on February 21, 1845 stated:

“WAGONS – THE SUBSCRIBERS HAVE ON HAND AT THEIR MANUFACTORY, READY-MADE DEARBORN WAGONS FOR ONE OR TWO HORSES, OF THE BEST SEASONED MATERIALS AND MADE BY EXPERIENCED WORKMEN, WHICH THEY WILL DISPOSE OF VERY LOW. PERSONS IN WANT OF GOOD WAGONS WILL DO WELL BY MAKING APPLICATION TO EDWARD LANE & CO. SPRINGFIELD”

Later the mill was a weaving operation, the operator identified as Pilkerton.

After being destroyed by fire sometime before 1853 the property was conveyed to Thomas and Oliver Holt, who erected a large stone woolen mill, three stories high which employed fifty persons. This firm continued in operation until May 18, 1882 when it was again destroyed by fire.

A few hundred feet downstream from Sproul Road the course of Whisky Run bends around the ruins of a cotton mill built by Joseph Gibbons on his farm in 1832. A structure forty-five by sixty feet, three stories high, the mill was leased to several different textile manufacturers over a number of years. In 1833 Gibbons went into partnership with Archibald McDowell, possibly to have McDowell set up his new enterprise.

The plant was first leased to Simeon Lord and William Faulkner, a partnership which continued until 1847 when Lord moved to Avondale. Thomas and Oliver Holt rented the site in 1847 and were in business there for a short time before expanding to their large woolen mill up stream about 1853. In December of 1865 the Gibbons Mill was destroyed by fire, at that time being operated by George Wood and Joseph Baker. It was never re-built.

At the point where Crum Creek enters Springfield there was located in 1826, on the west bank, two snuff mills and a two vat paper mill operating from one mill race. On the Springfield side of the creek was a mill which performed a variety of tasks including sawing stone, grinding oyster shells, threshing grain and making cider. This unit was described as having a head and fall of fourteen feet. The measure of the water head and fall was a common method of describing the power potential of a mill. This complex was the original Edward Fell mill then owned by Samuel Pancoast. Pancoast had bought the sawmill from Fell in 1805 and sometime about 1815 had erected the grist mill which performed the grain, cider and oyster shell grinding operations. The oyster shells were a source of lime needed badly in this part of the country for farmers to overcome the acid soil conditions common to Delaware County. Later accounts refer to a plaster mill, also a heavy lime user.

In 1828 the grist and saw mills were purchased from Samuel Pancoast by William Beatty. Beatty was born in Delaware County in 1791, the son of Thomas Beatty, an immigrant from Ireland and a ruling Elder of the Presbyterian Church. William Beatty worked on his father’s farm and at an early age indentured to Andrew Linsay of Haverford to learn blacksmithing. He served with distinction in the army during the War of 1812 and after leaving the service started his own business. He became the first manufacturer of edge tools from cast steel in the United States. In partnership with his father, Mr. Beatty rented a tilt mill from Edward Lewis which was located in Middletown. The quality of their products soon became famous. At that time the ship builders of New England had to purchase edge tools from Europe as the quality of tools made in this country were not comparable. Ship builders were said to personally travel to Beatty with orders for adzes and axes and wait for the products to be made. In 1828 the Beatty Edge Tool Company moved to Springfield and set up shop at the mills on Crum Creek. Beatty had already received a Silver Medal from the Franklin Institute at their Second Annual Exhibition held in October 1825. Again in 1842 at the Franklin Institute’s 16th Annual Exhibition, a First Premium award was presented for: “Chisels, hatchets and other edge tools by John C. Beatty, Delaware County…..These goods rank among the very best of their description…”

John C. Beatty was the son of William and had studied mechanical drawing in Philadelphia, he became a partner in the business in 1840. In 1850 William P. Beatty and Samuel Ogden were owners of the plant and in 1860 John C. Beatty purchased the interest of Ogden. The Beatty ax factory continued in Springfield until October 1871 when new and larger facilities were opened in Chester.

William Beatty sold the Springfield site to the Ogden brothers who sold the property to J. Howard Lewis who owned it in 1884. At that time there was in operation at the site a grist mill and a bobbin turning shop at what was then known as “Beatty’s Hollow.”

On August 5th, 1843 Delaware County was struck by a severe rain storm and flooding which caused great damage to mills and bridges throughout the county. John C. Beatty observed the storm at his residence near his mill in the northwest corner of Springfield. The rains began there between two and three o’clock in the afternoon and continued until five o’clock. While he stated that the winds were not violent at his mills, there was apparently tornado activity on the hills nearby as threes were broken off and some torn up by the roots. At about five o’clock Mr. Beatty observed: “The creek began to rise, when several of the workmen, with myself, went to the shop to secure some timber which was afloat and likely to be washed away; but we had not time to make anything safe, before we were obliged to make our escape, which, if we had not done at the time we did, we must have been washed with the mills down the creek. The water in the space of ten minutes rose I think, seven or eight feet. The bridge was the first that went – it seemed to fall over as if there was no strength in it – then my wood house, with about ten cords of wood and a lot of chestnut rails – next the head gates were bursted out, when the edge tool factory went down with a tremendous crash, and in an instant there was nothing to be seen but water in the place where it stood. The sawmill was the next to yield to the violence of the flood, and all of the logs, plank, boards, &c., near it were carried away. The walls of the plaster mill and finishing mill were undermined, and those in front fell out, leaving the back and end walls in such a wrecked condition that they fell in a few days after. About half the race bank, and eight yards of the breast of the dam, was completely swept out. All the hammers, anvils, unfinished tools, coal, &c., were swept away, or covered with stones and dirt below.” The water level at this place rose to a height of about fourteen feet above its usual level.

The next mill downstream was the paper mill of John Lewis. A part of his dam was destroyed and the head gates pushed in by the force of water. Considerable damage was done to his paper making machinery. Baltimore Pike was spanned by a wooden covered bridge, described as a “roofed lattice bridge” with a span of ninety feet. This bridge was above the dam of the mill of George Lewis, the Wallingford woolen mill. The wood work of the bridge was carried off and the dam destroyed. A large stone bui8lding used by Lewis as a dye house, collapsed and was carried away. The mill race was partly filled up and the machinery in the main mill building was badly damaged. At this point the water was about twenty feet above normal levels.

The Beatty mills were rebuilt quickly and were in operation the following year. In fact most of the severe damage was repaired in short order, in the Delaware County Treasurer’s Report of 1844, it was stated that all but three of the damaged bridges in the county were rebuilt at an expense of a little over twenty thousand dollars.

The enterprises that operated along Crum Creek and Whisky Run from 1766 till 1900 included the following: at least two grist mills, a saw mill, a pottery, a cutlery mill and tilt mill, a mill for sawing stone, the grinding of oyster shells, a plaster factory, a cider press, a paper mill, two woolen factories, a carding mill, a cotton mill, a carriage factory, a bobbin turning shop, and of course, the Beatty Edge Tool company and the Victoria Plush Mills.

During the nineteenth century the expanded use of steam power reduced the dependence of water powered mills, industrial sites located along streams were no longer necessary. An example of this trend is indicated in this advertisement which appeared in *The Delaware County Republican,* August 15, 1851:

“SHINGLES – The subscriber has on hand and for sale at his

STEAM MILL in Springfield, a large quantity of Prime and

Culling Chestnut Shingles, which he will sell from $4.50 to $9.00

per 1000. Also, shingles manufactured for persons finding the

wood, from $5.00 to $3.50. SKETCHLEY MORTON…Springfield

The railroad reached Springfield in 1854 with the construction of a rail bridge across Crum creek, by mid October 1854 the line was complete to Media. Travel to the city was no longer at lengthy horse and wagon trip over rough dirt roads. Almost immediately travel in the area was revolutionized, a timetable of November 29, 1880 shows that a train leaving Morton station at 8:04 A. M. arrived in Philadelphia (32nd Street) by 8:30. It was now advantageous for industry to locate near rail sidings as the age of steam displaced the age of water power.

Springfield Historical Society

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