

# *The Mill Creek Hundred History Blog*

Celebrating The History and Historical Sites of Mill Creek Hundred, in the Heart Of New Castle County, Delaware

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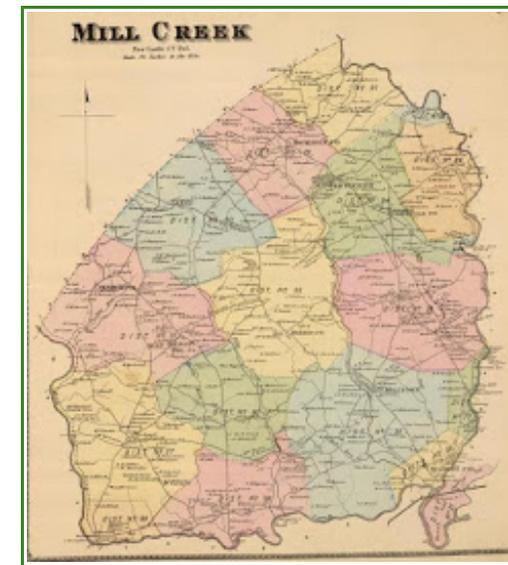
Wednesday, February 20, 2013

## The Greenbank Mill and the Philips House -- Part 1

The power of the many streams and creeks of Mill Creek Hundred has been harnessed for almost 340 years now, as the water flows from the Piedmont down to the sea. There have been literally dozens of sites throughout the hundred where waterwheels once turned, but today only one remains. Nestled on the west bank of Red Clay Creek, the Greenbank Mill stands as a living testament to the nearly three and a half century tradition of water-powered milling in MCH. The millseat at Greenbank is special to the story of MCH for several reasons -- it was one of the first harnessed here, it's the longest-serving, and it's the only one still in operable condition. The fact that it now serves as a teaching tool



Greenbank Mill in the 1960's, before the fire



Mill Creek Hundred 1868

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only makes it more special, at least in my eyes.

The early history of the millseat at Greenbank is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside....Ok, it's not quite that bad, but the actual facts are far from clear. The precise details (such as they can be determined) probably need to be tracked down in another post, but the short version of the accepted facts is that the land on which the mill stands was patented in 1677 to a Swede named John Anderson (Stalcop). Part of Anderson's tract was later acquired by Thomas Bird (who was the son-in-law of Cornelius Empson, part-owner of the [Stanton Mill](#)), upon whose death the property was left to his son, Empson Bird. It was from Empson Bird that the property was purchased in 1773 by Robert Philips.

As far as the mill is concerned, the only thing we know for sure is that there was a mill present at the site when Philips bought the property in 1773. It was said to have been old at that time, and made of logs. Exactly when it was built, and by whom (Anderson or one of the Birds), is not clear, but could possibly be narrowed down a bit by further research. It would eventually be replaced, but probably stood for over a hundred years.



Robert Philips' 1790 mill, in 1958

Robert Philips (1746-1828), the new owner of the mill, was the son of

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William and Mary Philips of Hockessin (who in 1766 had purchased the house that may have been the village's namesake -- [Ocasson, or the Cox-Mitchell House](#)). The Philips' were an industrious family, and Robert was no exception. He purchased the old log mill, known as the "Swedes Mill", and operated it for 17 years. By 1790 the Swedes Mill was apparently insufficient, for in that year Philips erected a new, larger mill next to the old one. (It should also be noted that Philips' father died in 1790, so perhaps the new mill was partially funded by his inheritance.) The new mill was 50' x 39' and stood two and a half stories high. Not long after erecting his new mill, Philips installed the latest in milling technology -- Oliver Evans' automated milling system. According to the [mill's website](#), the system was installed in 1793, making this one of the first to take advantage of the Newport-born inventor's time and effort saving mechanism. There are legends stating that Evans used Philips' mill to demonstrate the system to prospective buyers, but A) this myth, to the best of my knowledge, is unsubstantiated, and B) Evans had his own mill just upstream at Faulkland that he used for this purpose. That being said, it's a good story, and there's really no reason why it couldn't be true.

Very likely just a few years after building his new mill, Robert Philips erected another new structure on his property -- a house. Since first moving to the site in 1773, the family probably lived in an older home dating from the Bird family's tenure. In 1794, Robert built for his family a new stone house, two and a half stories high, overlooking his mill. [The National Register of Historic Places form for the house and mill states that there is a datestone reading "1783". The mill's website gives the date of 1794. I'll try to reconcile this data.] The house currently has a five-bay configuration with two doors, but it appears that the left three bays may be the original block. The two bays and door on the right side may have been added later, although possibly shortly after the initial construction.



*you stop arriving by and looking at it and because you need to make money is not a...*

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The Philips House

Although the house has looked down on the mill for over two hundred years, the mill site it stands above has undergone several major changes in usage over the years. The first (or second, if you include the 1790 upgrade) came about around 1811, and was the result of circumstances originating far beyond Mill Creek Hundred. Prior to the War of 1812, anti-British sentiments and trade restrictions began to cut the flow of woolen products from Europe, opening the door for increased domestic production. Merino Mania (named for the type of sheep best suited for woolen production) gripped the country, and many entrepreneurs rushed to acquire these Spanish sheep. Among these was Robert Philips, who by February 1811 was advertising for someone to oversee his new flock.

It was about this time that Philips decided that he needed a new facility dedicated to his new undertaking. It seems likely that he tore down the old Swedes Mill, and in its place erected a new stone mill for use as a woolen factory. He named it the "Madison Factory", after President James Madison, a proponent of US manufacturing. The Madison Factory was 45' x 25', three stories high, and in line with the building trend of the time, made of field stone. It would stand for over 150 years, although only for a few of those would it be used for its initial purpose.



Gathering -- Location Reveal...

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MCH History Event -- Location Obtained!!!

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#### Historical Resources

- [Historic Aerial Photographs](#)
- [PDF Full Version of Greenbank and Marshallton Mills Origin Paper](#)
- [1849 Rea & Price Map](#)
- [Scharf's "History of Delaware"](#)
- [Archiplanet](#)
- [National Register of Historic Places](#)
- [CHRIS -- Delaware History Resource](#)
- [DELDOT Archaeology Reports](#)

#### Local Historical Groups and Websites

- [Friends of Brandywine Springs Facebook Page](#)



Original Madison Factory and Mill, 1967

**TO WEAVERS.**—Wanted immediately, several woollen weavers, either for broad or narrow looms, to whom the most liberal wages will be paid for weaving common country cloths,—also, apprentices to the various branches of the Woollen Manufacturing.

ROBERT & J. R. PHILLIPS.  
Madison Factory, Aug. 17, 1813. 421—tf  
N. B. Yarn will be given out to country weavers, by applying as above.

One of Philips' attempts to staff the Madison Factory, 1813

Even though he got a beautiful stone mill out of it, in the end I've a feeling that Robert Philips probably regretted building the Madison factory. From the beginning he seemed to have trouble with his workforce, a function of a few skilled workers suddenly being in high demand. And unfortunately for Philips, the cycle of boom and bust is not a new phenomenon, especially when it's dependant on world affairs. By early 1815 news of the peace treaty with Britain and the normalization of trade reached America, and the brief advantages enjoyed by domestic wool producers quickly disappeared. As the ad above shows, Robert had been joined in the wool venture by his son, John R. Philips. After the end of the war, in the space of a few years, John R. seems to have tried to sell off the wool business and threatened to leave the state (it's unclear whether or not he briefly did), attempted to revive his and his father's woolen venture, and then actually gave up and moved away.

By the 1820's, the aging Robert Philips was left with his gristmill and failed woolen business. It had failed so "well", in fact, that in 1819 two of his neighbors had entered claims against him for nearly \$7000 in debts. Philips' property was seized by the sheriff and put up for public sale. It would remain unsold, however, until 1830, two years after Robert's death. In that year the mill and property were purchased by Robert's nephew, John

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C. Philips\*. This is where we'll pick up the story in [Part 2](#).

\* -- It actually took me a little while to realize that John R. and John C. were different people. Genealogical information about the Philips family is a bit hard to come by, but eventually I figured out that John C. was Robert's nephew. He was the son of James Philips, Robert's brother. At first I thought the Johns may have both been sons of Robert from different mothers. Robert's first wife, Catherine Dixon, died in 1768. He then remarried to Catherine's second cousin, Ann Dixon.

Posted by Scott Palmer



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## 1 comment:

▪ **Anonymous** [July 2, 2013 at 7:31 PM](#)

Great article! I have done some genealogy, I'm related through John R, Phillips. His son Parmenio, was born in 1813 at Greenbank, moving to Virginia, IL. where he became a doctor.

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