



Early Mills of the Wissahickon Valley

By Russ Bellavance, President of the Wissahickon Valley Historical Society

All Photos by Jessica Yale Photography

In researching the history of our area, we learn a lot from reading and thinking about the names of streets. If you have ever been to the Ambler branch of the Wissahickon Valley Historical Society, you may have wondered why anyone would name a street "Race Street." Or you may have thought that Reiffs Mill Road was a strange name for a street. But a quick look at the economic history of the region shows us why these names exist. Mills! Mills, all different kinds of mills, were crucial to our economic growth, providing people with food, clothing and shelter. Until the late 19th century these mills were powered by the water flow of both the Wissahickon itself and its many tributaries. And Race Street? Any time you see a Race Street, you know that it parallels an old mill race, which was the watercourse that would carry the water (usually stored in a small reservoir) to the water wheel. The mill along Race Street in Ambler was the Lukens sawmill, and below that on Tannerie Run was the flour mill belonging to the Reiff family. There were seven other water-powered mills operating in Ambler in the 1700s and 1800s, including even a silk mill.

The first mill in the area was a grist mill built in the early 1700s, by William Harmer, and was at the intersection of what is now Butler Pike and Morris Road. At the time, Morris Road did not

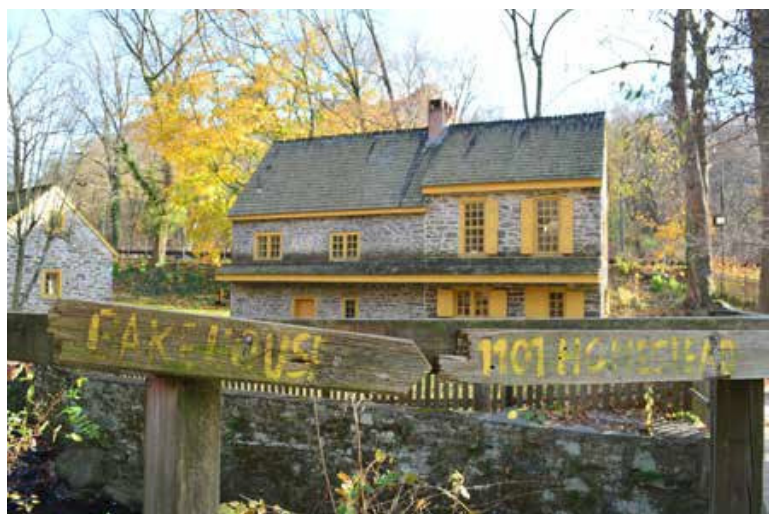
exist, and although the Wissahickon Creek was good for providing power and carrying waste downstream to the Schuylkill River, it was not very good for transportation. Harmer recognized the need for good roads, and he successfully petitioned for a road to be built from Samuel Morris' mill in Fort Washington to Clemens Mill in Lower Salford, which is how Morris Road came into existence. In his petition, Harmer said, "for want of roads we labor under great difficulties and hardships, for what is more necessary than a convenient road to places of worship and mills and market?" In 1728, Harmer also built a fulling mill where wool was made into cloth. He ultimately sold all of his property to Morris Morris, who "oddly" was completely unrelated to Samuel Morris, Anthony Morris or Joseph Morris, all of whom were important to the area.

The mills belonging to Harmer, Reiff, and Lukens, were all in Upper Dublin, including that portion of Upper Dublin which became Ambler Borough in 1888. They were very important to people living in Whitpain but what about mills in Whitpain? Well, there are actually two mills that compete for the honor of being the first mill in Whitpain. One was the sawmill built 1746 by the Yost Family where Stony Creek crosses Yost Road and the other was a grist mill built in 1746 by the Erb family, which

was also at Stony Creek, near where it crosses Township Line Road. The Erb family also built and operated an oil mill on Oil Mill Run, which is now called Prophecy Creek. What, you may ask, is an oil mill? It was used to create an important by-product of the acres of flax grown in the area to provide linen cloth. The flax seeds would be ground to produce linseed oil, which was tremendously useful to the preservation of the wood tools, furniture and equipment used in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Sadly, most of the old mills were completely destroyed in the late 19th century, leaving old ruins in some areas. But one mill remains, just across Township Line Road in Lower Gwynedd Township. This is the Evans-Mumbower Mill, owned and operated by the Wissahickon Valley Watershed Association. That will be the subject of our next article.

This is the 13th in a series of articles about local history brought to you by the Wissahickon Valley Historical Society. Look for more articles in coming months about the various mills that once populated the world-famous Wissahickon Creek. If there is a topic you would like to propose for a future article, please contact me at rcbellavance67@gmail.com. If you enjoy these articles, you may want to consider membership in the Society. Please see our website at wvalleyhs.org for more information.



One of the most famous of the early mills was the first paper mill in America, built by William Rittenhouse on Paper Mill Creek. Consider a visit to the historic Rittenhouse Homestead and Bakehouse - it's beautiful.