

SUNRISE MILL
Neiffler Road South of Swamp Creek
Frederick ~~Township~~ Vic.
Montgomery County
Pennsylvania

HABS NO. PA-6026

HABS
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46-FRED.V,
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 37127
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

SUNRISE MILL

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Location: Neiffer Road just north of Swamp Creek, Frederick Township, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania.

Significance: This mill was one of the earliest in upper Montgomery County, illustrating the area's industrialization in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Later it was the home and laboratory of Dr. Chevalier Jackson, one of the leading researchers in the field of esophagoscope.

Description: Sunrise Mill sits in a thickly forested glade on the north bank of the east-flowing Swamp Creek. The main buildings on the property are the mill/sawmill, a Swiss bank barn, and a farmhouse; there is also a mill dam, mill race, and a stone bridge. The approach to the mill has changed a number of times. Originally Neiffer Road came downhill from the north and passed to the west of the mill, with travellers fording Swamp Creek on top of the dam. In 1845 the county built a stone arch bridge to the east of the mill; Neiffer Road now travelled south down the hill, turned east so it passed along the north wall of the mill, and followed the creek to the north approach of the bridge. In 1968 the county built a concrete and steel bridge even farther east, and Neiffer Road now borders the northern and eastern edges of the property.

Michael Kraus and his son-in-law Yost Bitting built the original mill, a rectangular rubble stone structure 44'x 29' whose southern wall bordered the creek and whose main entrance faced east. A dateboard formerly on the north gable end, now in the possession of Montgomery County, dates the building from 1767, though the limited documentation uncovered so far makes it impossible to be certain. The building was three stories with a garret, though the surrounding grade has been raised over time, making the first floor appear to be a cellar. The south gable end and the southern end of the east facade were covered with board siding. The east elevation shows the border between the original building and an 1819 addition extending 17' to the north. (On the west side, recent repointing eliminated most traces of the boundary.) The masons building the addition also used local stone, though the pointing is different. The joist of the second floor extend through the exterior wall (perhaps for use as a nailing block for a porch or pent roof). A interior brick chimney was added to the north gable end; a bag hoist dormer on the east facade was built later in the 19th century. The building has an irregular fenestration--a result of changes and additions--and all lights now are boarded up.

The earliest arrangement of milling machinery remains unclear. It may be that a saw mill was built first, in order to provide capital and materials for the more complicated grist mill, and an

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opportunity to clear the land. For most of the property's history, the grist mill occupied the southern end of the mill building. The saw mill, constructed from wood with a king pole wooden truss, straddled the tail race immediately east of the stone building. When Montgomery County took over the property in the 1970s, the saw mill was in danger of collapse, so it was disassembled and the usable parts stored in the barn. The mill race and dam were reconstructed in 1981.

Much of the original interior is missing as a result of water damage and 20th century alterations. The water wheel and associated machinery occupied the lowest floor, while the grinding occurred at the southern end of the second floor. Installation of a turbine, probably in the 1880s, destroyed all evidence of the water wheel mechanism. It appears that until the construction of the farmhouse (described below) in the 1840s the owners of the mill lived in the southern end of the building. Though the kitchen was at the other end of the floor, the rest of the residential facilities were on the third floor. Remaining chair rails, plastering, and painting details suggest the northern end provided lodging for farmers waiting to have their grain milled. The painted dado below the chair rail and the opening for the five-plate stove in the living room illustrate the German heritage of the mill builders. In the 20th century Dr. Jackson used part of the mill as a shop and laboratory; he also ran the mill in order to generate electricity. At present the second story floorboards at the northern end of the building have been removed, and the third floor throughout is generally unstable.

The five-bay-by-two-bay, two-and-one-half-story farmhouse sits 50' north of the mill. The road from the 1845 bridge, now macadam, passes between the two structures; a stone retaining wall controls the bank immediately north of the road. Stone steps pass through an opening covered by a stone arch in the wall and lead towards the original main entrance. The stucco-covered house is 40' long by 24' wide, has a center-hall plan and is banked, creating a raised six-bay basement. The original main entrance was located to the center of the first-floor and included sidelights and a transom. A former entry porch has been removed, but a pent roof remains. The present main entrance faces north; to the west of the door is a two-story ell running north which also serves to connect the formerly separate two-bay-by-three-bay one-story summer kitchen to the rest of the house. All of these elements have gable roofs with wooden shingles, and there are brick chimneys on the west end of the main block, the north end of the ell, and the north end of the summer kitchen. Most of the windows are six-over-six-light sash. A wooden porch runs along the first floor of the north facade, and in the past several years the house has been painted and a new roof

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installed.

The Swiss bank barn to the east of the house was built in 1795, a date which is carved above the north doors. The original structure was a 33' by 26' rectangle featuring a rubble-stone foundation, original oak vertical siding, and wood shingles. A cantilevered forebay extended 7' from the south wall. Supporting the roof are hand-hewn rafters, tie beams, and Germanic liegender Stuhl trusses, techniques further illustrating the German influence in this portion of the county. Both ends later received additions whose construction dates have not been determined. The one on the west was 14' wide and continued the forebay; the 16' eastern addition lacks that feature.

History: European immigrants began in the early 1700s to settle this section of Montgomery County. By the middle of the century German immigrants dominated the area, as illustrated by township names such as Frederick and New Hanover. As early as 1730 wheat became the primary crop for farmers throughout southeastern Pennsylvania, an emphasis which increased as foreign demand for American wheat grew.¹

Meeting this demand required the construction of more mills. Swamp Creek was an excellent site for such a building: the stream provided power for grinding and a route to Perkiomen Creek, which led to the Schuylkill River and Philadelphia markets. Many mills in the region, the number of which grew rapidly after 1759, were built in a manner similar to Sunrise Mill. Since the first known builder's guide was not published until 1795, construction of colonial mills was based on oral tradition. Other typical features which appear at Sunrise Mill include its rectangular shape, stone construction, and an interior mill race located at one end of the building. The destruction of the water wheels and related machinery prevents further comparisons, however.²

Limited records make tracing the early history of Sunrise Mill difficult. It appears to have been sold frequently before 1795, when Jacob Shoemaker purchased it. He owned the property for

¹ Stephen G. Del Sordo, "Eighteenth-Century Grist Mills: Some Chester County, Pennsylvania Examples," in Camille Wells, ed., Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture, I (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1987).

² "Sunrise Mill," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, June 1976; Del Sordo, "Eighteenth-Century Grist Mills," 75.

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nearly forty years, during which he built the barn (1795) and the mill's northern addition (1819). He may also have built the farmhouse, though its precise date has not been determined. Subsequent owners included members of the Sailor family and then of the Reed family; it was probably during Aaron Reed's ownership in the 1880s that a turbine replaced the water wheel.³

Dr. Jackson bought the property in 1918 and continued to operate the mill. He moved into the house, and created laboratories there and in the mill for his research into diseases of and instruments for studying the throat. He is most noted for inventing the bronchoscope, used for looking down the throat. His heirs sold Sunrise Mill to Montgomery County in 1971. Since that time most work has been in an attempt to stabilize the mill, though there have been occasional renovations. The most notable was the 1981 rebuilding of the mill dam and millrace.⁴

Sources:

Del Sordo, Stephen G. "Eighteenth-Century Grist Mills: Some Chester County, Pennsylvania Examples," in Camille Wells, ed., Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture, I. Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1987.

Milner, John, Associates, "Machinery Restoration Feasibility Study of the Sunrise Mill," West Chester, Pennsylvania, 1983. Prepared for Montgomery County Commissioners.

National Heritage Corporation, "Sunrise Mill Park: Preliminary Master Plan," West Chester, Pennsylvania, 1975. Prepared for Montgomery County Commissioners.

"Sunrise Mill," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, June 1976.

Historian: William Wright, Summer 1994

³ John Milner Associates, "Machinery Restoration Feasibility Study of the Sunrise Mill," (West Chester, PA, 1983) Prepared for Montgomery County Commissioners. National Heritage Corporation, "Sunrise Mill Park: Preliminary Master Plan," (West Chester, PA, 1975) Prepared for Montgomery County Commissioners, esp. 50-53, 74, 77. "Sunrise Mill," National Register Nomination.

⁴ Pennsylvania Register, "Sunrise Mill," 3.