

Inquirer Neighbors

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The mill was probably built in 1760 by the Rev. Michael Schlatter. This photo shows the remains of the mill along a tributary of the Wissahickon Creek.

Old mill hints at area's preindustrial past

The Springfield Twp. site lay undisturbed for about 200 years. A conservator is starting to research it.

By Kay Raftery
INQUIRER SUBURBAN STAFF

SPRINGFIELD — A half-buried water wheel, a couple of low stone walls, and a shallow stream are about all that remain of a once-thriving 18th-century paper mill recently rediscovered here.

For T. Scott Kreilick, an architectural conservator and metallurgist from Oreland, it is a tantalizing treasure.

"It's an amazing find," he said. The site, snuggled in a gully, is not visible from the nearby intersection of Stenton Avenue and Paper Mill Road — which, Kreilick said, took its name from the old mill.

A local property owner brought the mill to the attention of Cynthia Hamilton of the Springfield Township Historical Society in Montgomery County, which then contacted Kreilick.

With a grant of \$5,000 from the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Kreilick began his research. "We're proceeding with great caution, because it's on private property," he said.

The site has several structures, including an icehouse and a distillery. There also are the remains of a dam and a sluiceway.

Just finished is phase one, or documentation of the site's authenticity. The next step, when more grant money is available, will be to map the site and fix the location of the structures.

Kreilick estimated that the iron water wheel originally was about 14 feet in diameter and was powered by a tributary of the Wissahickon Creek called Carbel Run.

"Paper mills were good business in those days, because the tributaries of the Wissahickon and the Schuylkill were a great source of power," Kreilick said.

Information about the mill was included in a 1943 article found at the Springfield Historical Society, and a biography and other papers on an early owner, the Rev. Michael Schlatter, were at the Pennsylvania Historical Society, among other research depositories.

Mr. Schlatter, born in Switzerland in 1716, came to Pennsylvania in 1736 to organize new congregations for the German Reformed Church.

In 1755, however, he left the Reformed Church after a falling out over the establishment of charity schools. (He and Ben Franklin favored them.)

Although without a congregation, he continued to travel and preach and became known in the area as the "marrying preacher" for all the weddings he performed.

Mr. Schlatter also was a chaplain to His Majesty's Royal American



The Rev. Michael Schlatter was a Swiss immigrant. He moved to Springfield Township in 1759.

Regiment of Foot during the French and Indian Wars, and later served with the Second Pennsylvania Battalion.

In 1759, he settled in Springfield and purchased 135 acres near Stenton Avenue, built a home known as Sweetland, and in 1760 erected the mill.

Who worked there and what the mill produced are some of the mysteries Kreilick hopes to unravel.

What he knows from various sources is that Thomas Coombe, tax collector for the Port of Philadelphia, purchased the mill in 1776. Mr. Schlatter retained ownership of Sweetland.

During the American Revolution, Mr. Schlatter, still in the royal army, sided with the colonists and refused to serve for the British. On Dec. 5, 1777, he was arrested and thrown in prison, and Sweetland was plundered.

"They burned his papers and threw his silverware down the well," Kreilick said.

One story goes that Mr. Schlatter's portrait was rescued by his daughter Rachel, one of his nine children, who pulled the oil painting from the wall as a soldier was about to ram it with a bayonet.

"Schlatter was released from prison in the spring of 1778," Kreilick said. "We have on record that on April 27, 1778, he built a second home, also called Sweetland, where Chestnut Hill Hospital now stands."

In 1783, Coombe, the tax collector, dismantled the mill and split the materials — 24 joists and four window frames among them — with a Germantown carpenter, Adam Weaver.

Mr. Schlatter died in 1790. He is buried in Franklin Square near Independence Hall.

As Kreilick sees it, the old paper mill is an extraordinary relic of 18th-century technology that has remained pretty well undisturbed for more than 200 years.

"We'd like to keep it just as it is," he said.

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