

Water-powered Gristmills of Union County

by Thomas P. Rich and David W. Del Testa

“In the Buffalo Valley of central Pennsylvania, simple water-powered gristmills began appearing in the 1770s.....They became centers of early communities, and remained vital components of the local agricultural economy, even until the present day.

“Union County is atypical of the normal history of water-powered gristmills as found elsewhere in the US. The Union County mills remained commercially viable for far longer than anywhere else in the US and when they did close, they did not become sites of quaint nostalgia. With the exception of one mill converted into a private residence and two that have served as potters' studios, no water-powered gristmill evolved into a static reflection of its former role. Union County has no cafes, flower shops, knick-knack stores or restaurants in former mills. When they closed, they might briefly have served as chicken coops or electrical power plants, but for the most part they simply were salvaged for building materials or fell into ruin.

“Why did Union County's gristmills survive and then mostly disappear? Union County has had a balanced, albeit limited, range of economic activities that faced no local challenge and did not suffer badly from economic volatility in the same way as, say, coal production or steel milling have. Agricultural production that farmers adapted to external markets provided the county's core activity. No large city existed nearby from which suburbs might have overtaken choice farmland. The county's rich soil and hard-working farmers remained productive.....That the mills in Mazeppa (Johnson's Mill), Cowan, and Buffalo Crossing (H&C Grove's Mill) operated simultaneously, even in the 1970's, speaks to how geographic isolation, productivity, conservatism, and lack of suburbanization preserved traditions.” [from the Introduction to “Water-powered Gristmills of Union County”]

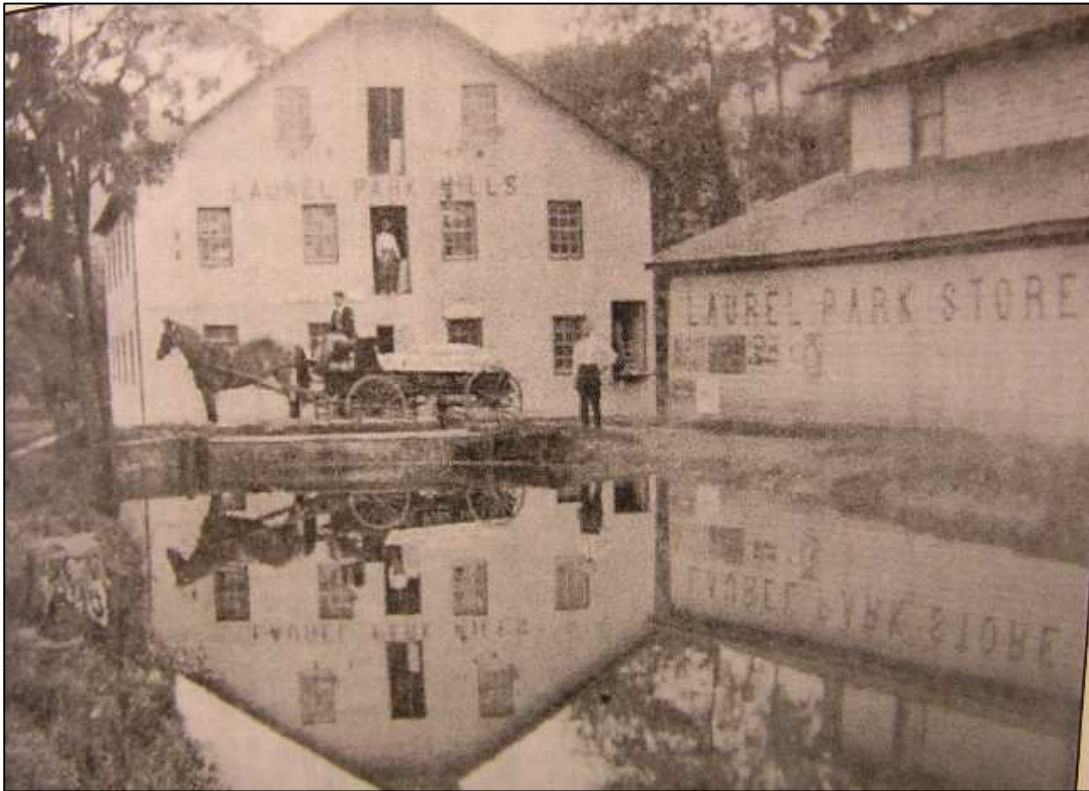
“The Amazing Race: Derr's Mill. Much has been written about Ludwig Derr and his founding of the town of Lewisburg (Derrstown) about 1785. A German immigrant, Ludwig lived in Berks County before settling in the Buffalo Valley in 1769. Perhaps the single act that defined the character of the man was the construction of his mill-race. It was reported that in about 1770, he dug almost single-handedly, and by hand, the head race for his mill from Buffalo Creek near the later Campbell's Mill clear across what would become Lewisburg to the site of his gristmill near the mouth of Spring Run (Limestone Run, Bull Run).”

“Fisher's Mill. The topography of the land at the mouth of Laurel Run where it empties into Penns Creek provided an excellent mill seat for Peter Fisher. Laurel Run falls steeply there as it rushes down to Penns Creek enabling Fisher to build a sawmill there in 1795, and in 1797, he built his gristmill with what has been reported to be two immense overshot water wheels.”

These and more than 40 other mills are described in detail, with photos, maps and genealogical information on the mills' owners in the Heritage book "Water-powered Gristmills of Union County, Pennsylvania" recently published by the Union County Historical Society. The book is free with 2014 membership in the society, or can be purchased for \$25. This definitive volume should be in the library of every local historian/genealogist and anyone interested in the development of mills, and commerce, engineering and innovation in central Pennsylvania. A must read!



Derr's Mill circa 1860



The Mil at Laurel Park



White Deer Mill