

Significance

The Lightfoot Mill property is significant for several reasons:

1. The early date and largely original condition of its 18th century mill is its prime importance. The present exterior appearance is almost identical to that when it was built in 1747, and the interior has retained most of the original hand-hewn beams and wide oak floor boards. Not significantly modernized, the Lightfoot Mill today includes most of its early grist and lumber milling machinery, fully in tact, replacements being of the same type installed about 1820. It is, therefore, a complete visual document of the local mill which was such an integral part of every early settlement. The Lightfoot Mill is an excellent example of the mid-eighteenth century mill, essential to a region's agricultural and commercial growth. Its commercial importance continued through the 19th century up to 1940, as the Store and Warehouse fed local commerce and carried the flow of trade as an adjunct to the Mill. They eventually stood apart as two separate entities.

2. Its importance is strengthened by the prominent role which the Lightfoot family played - and later the Oberholtzers - in the religious, political and literary life of the area. As the Lightfoot home, it was the abode of a very active and respected 18th century surveyor of southeastern Pennsylvania. Samuel Lightfoot was a strong Quaker influence for good in the community as were the Shenemans during the pre-civil war years when the property is reported to have had an underground tunnel from the barn to the house. Still later, during the Civil War and after, it was the warm and sunny home of Sara Vickers Oberholtzer, a poetess of recognition beyond Chester County and originator of the School Savings Bank System in America.

3. Architecturally, the miller's house (c.1832-'33) is an unusual example of the return to classical style as interpreted in the farmhouses of northern Chester County. We have no indication of the first miller's house - the Lightfoot house - and can only surmise that it was not unusual. It was, however, taxed up to 1824 as a stone house. The second one begins to show the miller's position of leadership in the community. It was designed a cut above the normal domicile in use of new features rather than in size. The gable entrance, the generous size windows, the important treatment of doorways, and the stairway rising to a sunny second floor set it a step apart. Georgian and Federal balance were set aside. The literary atmosphere of poetess, Sara Oberholtzer, is evident in the pleasant dining room with entrance of its own, in the narrow but well lit study in which she may have done her writing, and in the inviting second floor window-walled sitting room. It was an airy house - pleasant. Even the yard evidenced the awareness of a planted lawn with specimen trees, red cut-leaf maple and six or seven weeping cherries, giving it an ambient charm.

This property is no longer destined to support an agrarian economy. It is being surrounded with urban development. It has outlived its original purposes. However, what is left can be a source of pride and interest as well as joy to the community and to all historians. The mill is of tremendous value as a living museum of the milling trade, and for that reason alone, the property should be recognized. The store and warehouse must find a new adaptive use. The houses need only restoration. Two hundred and thirty-four years of history are caught at this bend in the road.

* * * * *

In 1747, there were fifty taxable farm properties in Pikeland Township and no convenient grist mill to serve them. Consequently, Samuel Lightfoot built his combination grist and lumber mill on Pickering Creek in that year.

Lightfoot was one of Pikeland Township's earliest settlers, having come in 1725, and, as the mill prospered, he became one of its wealthiest. By 1751, he was the township's largest taxpayer. For a number of years, his assessment was often more than double that of the second highest. In 1765, Lightfoot was also listed as the township's largest landholder, with over four hundred acres in his name.

In addition to his prominent role in Pikeland Township's commercial life, Samuel Lightfoot was also a leader in area political and religious affairs. In 1734, he signed a petition sent by the Concord Friends Meeting (Delaware County) to King George II, asking the king to intervene on their behalf in a boundary dispute between the Penn and Baltimore proprietaries. In 1736, he was chosen a commissioner of Chester County, and in 1751, he was appointed a Justice of the Peace for the county.

Along with his sense of public service, Samuel Lightfoot evidently possessed the strong religious and humanitarian convictions appropriate to the son of a Quaker minister. In a 1764 letter sent to his son Samuel in Ireland, he expressed indignation at the brutal treatment of Indians by some white residents of the area after the conclusion of the French & Indian War. "But not yet satisfied with Blood, they assembled about the beginning of last week, and came down to destroy about 140 Indians who had taken refuge in the Barracks at Philadelphia..." He found their behavior "scarcely consistent with the laws of humanity."

As far as I know

this is unsubstantiated!

3.

Lightfoot worked as a surveyor in addition to operating the mill and participating in religious and political affairs. (He kept the field records for Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon as they worked from 1763 to 1767 to establish the boundary between Pennsylvania and Maryland.)

In the late eighteenth century, all property owners in Pike-nd Township were threatened with loss of their land, because in 1773, Samuel Hoare, a London merchant, had sold all of the township to Andrew and Sarah Allen and held a mortgage for the entire sale price. The Allens sold 115 parcels of the land and collected payments, but applied none of this money to the mortgage Hoare held. At Hoare's insistence, the sheriff foreclosed on the Allens and on the Pikeland landowners. Many fled, fearing confiscation of all of their property. Samuel Lightfoot and his son, William, were among those who stayed and cleared title to their lands. At Samuel's death in 1777, William inherited the mill and operated it until he died in 1797.

He left the property to his son Samuel. In the 1798 glass or Direct Tax, Samuel is listed as owner of "one stone grist mill.... 33'x28'.....and one stone barn, 40'x20'....".

The Lightfoots sold the property in 1812 to Lewis Reese and James Benson of Reading who, in turn, sold to Rees Sheneman in 1820. The Sheneman family held the property 39 years and probably had the most single effect on the appearance of the miller's house. By studying tax records, it appears that Rees Sheneman bought a farm with an active mill which he continued to operate. The house taxed on those early records was a stone house. Its valuation of \$275.00 was for buildings apart from \$700 for the mill per year. In 1824, the buildings were taxed at \$450.00 while the mill remained at \$700, indicating that the house had been changed considerably. (The average stone house was taxed on \$200 to \$300 valuation.) Its valuation remained steady until 1833 at which time it jumped to \$1000.00. While this valuation seems out-of-line, it nevertheless indicates that a change of considerable importance occurred. From these records, we can safely date the house in its present appearance at 1832 or 1833.

The Sheneman family was a well respected name in the Pikeland area and later produced a cabinetmaker of importance, Joseph Sheneman. Joseph died in 1875 from a farm not far away and may have been living with his parents in this house in the 1830s. If so, the elaborate treatment of the two doorways could be attributed to him. The fact that he became a cabinetmaker would make credible the builder's awareness of style books and new designs. Rees Sheneman passed the farm and mill on to Benjamin Sheneman in 1849 and he to Jones Sheneman in 1856. Jones Sheneman sold to Elias Oberholtzer in 1859.

The grist mill and saw mill had dominated the property in the 18th century. The 19th century saw other mills of importance appearing, one being just northwest on the creek. It was known in the first part of the 19th century as Beidlar's (Beydlar's) Mill and was a large saw mill operation. Elias Oberholtzer purchased Beidlar's in 1853 and promptly built a new grist mill powered by steam and the newest machinery. Four years later, he purchased the old Lightfoot grist and saw mill (this registration) which was about a mile downstream. These two grist and saw mills operated simultaneously, Elias operating the upper mill and John, his son, the Lightfoot or lower mill. Some years later, a spark from the fire making steam burned Elias' frame mill to the ground. This put the Lightfoot Mill on a 24 hour a day grinding schedule.

In 1871, John Oberholtzer had a serious accident at the mill while freeing the big wheel of ice which strengthened his decision to sell off the grist mill and six acres with the new night miller's house. Elias deeded the Lightfoot Mill to John in 1873 although John had been taxed for it for 10 years. After several abortive Agreements of Sale, John finally sold it to Allen Simmers in 1886. Simmers remained until 1919 when he sold it to O. Ernest Collins. the present owner.

John Oberholtzer had realized the potential of the store site as a pivotal center for farm produce and changing farming methods. Many new products which grist mills could not supply were being offered the farmer. John stocked them all. "Cope's Pure Dissolved Bone and Ammoniated Super-Phosphates", Peysson's Poudrette - an excellent manure for Corn, Potatoes, and Vegetables". Oberholtzer even did a mail order business advertising in nearby boroughs and promising prompt filling of orders for Buckwheat flour and Potatoes. In 1872, the store traded under the name of Oberholtzer and Hartman, "Dealer in Grains, Coal, Lumber, Feed, etc. Cash paid for hides and Old Iron..." (See attached advertisements). Good as the store site was, John could see the added advantage to merchandising if it were on a railroad line. He joined with his father and other farmers to bring in a spur line of the Pickering Valley Railroad which initially was to run from Kimberton (Phoenixville) to St. Peters. The Chester Springs, Anselma and Byers group succeeded in getting a branch through their valley in 1872 with John's store and mill site a major station. Three and four trains a day made the round trip from Phoenixville to Byers, sometimes using two engines.

Always alert to new and useful items, John Oberholtzer installed in 1878 one of the early telephones in the county. It went from his store to his house, about 100 feet apart, and, while a delightful curiosity to the neighborhood, it was a practical aide to John and one in which he saw a future. (See attached news items.)

Until about 1871-72, the store was simply located as "...on Conestoga Turnpike in West Pikeland..." After that date, it was called "Cambria" and when the Pickering Valley Railroad laid its track along the south side of the store, it was called Cambria Station. The station was in the store at first. Still later, as a school and a few houses clustered nearby, it was called Anselma as it is today. A post office serving the residents of Anselma was also located on the property. The Supple-Wills-Jones Milk Company leased a small piece of ground near the tracks for a milk loading station for which they paid \$30.00/year on ten year terms. Four hundred cans of milk a day were often shipped from this station in steam powered refrigerator cars.

Although John and his wife, Sara Louisa Vickers, sold the store property to Oliver and Horace Moses in 1884, they remained at Cambria Station until the mill property was sold to Allen Simmers in 1885. They moved to Norristown in 1886 from where John became a successful grain merchant in Philadelphia. His knowledge of milling and agriculture was invaluable in guiding him to new and better ways of transporting and handling grain.

The twenty-four years that the Oberholtzers lived at Cambria Station were formative years for both John and Sara, but particularly for Sara. It was from this house that she polished her writing skills while raising two sons. Sara had formed an acquaintance and writing friendship with John Greenleaf Whittier when she was 15 or 16 years old. Whittier had been active in the pre-civil war abolitionist movement in southeastern Pennsylvania, and Sara sent him some of her early poetry asking him to criticize it. Whittier remained an encouraging influence on her skills throughout his life and is quoted as saying "much of it seems to sing itself". From this house, as a young happily married woman, Sara wrote most of her poetry, which was published by J. B. Lippincott & Co., Phila., under the following titles and dates:

Violet Lee - 1873, Under the Flowers - 1879, Come for Arbutus, (and other wild blooms) - 1882, Shoemakers' Dialogues - 1885, and her one novel, Hope's Heart Bells - 1883 - a story of Quakers in Northern Chester County dedicated to her husband, John. "Daisies of Verse" - 1886 = was probably written here as well. Later she published "Souvenirs of Occasions" - 1892, and "Here and There" - 1927, a reminiscence of her much travelled later life.

Sara wrote and spoke the Burial Ode for Bayard Taylor's funeral service in 1879 (Taylor was a distant relative) and from that time forward, she became a favorite Chester County reader and speaker. She was in demand.

- 1882 - Poet at the Bi-centennial of William Penn, Chester, Pa.
- 1887 - Poet at the Valley Forge Celebration.
- 1887 - Poet at the dedication of the Monument at Antietam Bridge for the 51st Regiment, Pennsylvania Volunteers.
- 1891 - Read her own poem for memorial service for the late J. P. Wickersham, principal at Millersville who became superintendent of schools in Philadelphia.

- 1892 - Speaker before the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences. Subject: "A Plea for Economic Teaching", later published by the Academy.
- 1893 - Speaker at the Congress of Representative Women at Chicago World's Columbian Exposition, Women's Branch. Subject: "A Successful Scheme for Inculcating Economy".

Later in 1893, the Oberholtzers, with their sons, sailed for the college town of Goettingen, Germany. A group of Chester Countians had gathered there to study and travel. Their letters home are full of incites into different customs. They stayed for a little more than a year.

It was through Sara's activity in the Women's Christian Temperance Union that her most absorbing activity came alive. As a newspaper Reporter, she attended a meeting of the American Economics Association at the University of Pennsylvania in 1888, from which she became imbued with an ardent desire to teach children "to be thrifty and not waste their pennies on candy, cigarettes and drink". With her usual intense thoroughness, she connected with a John Thiry of Belgium on the idea of a School Saving-Bank System whereby children made small weekly deposits, thereby learning a habit of thrift. The idea was right for the time, and Sara spread it nationally and internationally by speaking wherever asked. From 1890 through the 1920s, Mrs. Oberholtzer headed the organization tying it in to the World Union and other international organizations. After John Oberholtzer died in 1910, she moved to Germantown where she and her son, Ellis, lived many years. Ellis was becoming an historian and writer also, well known in Philadelphia circles.

The farm at Anselma, Chester County, never again saw as vibrant a leadership as was given by Sara and John Oberholtzer. It continued as an active and successful business location, however, under Moses ownership. Oliver Moses added merchandise items to make it a general store. In 1915, Moses sold it to W. Warren and Homer Latshaw. They discontinued the coal, feed and lumber business but continued the general store line of goods. Still later under the ownership of Charles Bergner, 1925, groceries and produce were added. The last person to operate the store was Charles Caldwell. Caldwell had purchased 29 acres described "...messuage, farm, store, warehouse and depot..." in 1928 - a bad year to go into business. In 1934, The Farmers & Mechanics National Bank of Phoenixville took ownership and sold the property in 1940 to George Dilworth and his son, Paul E. Dilworth. Paul Dilworth lived on the property but did not attempt to reopen the store. Instead, he turned it into a chicken barn. The store has not been open since and the farm, with acreage sold away, has lain all but idle for 40 years.

Eggs from these chickens were sold to Wyeth Laboratories for use in the making of vaccines.