

Early “Yorklyn” Garretts and the Founding of the Snuff Business in 1782: What made Yorklyn a mill town? It almost started out that way when the original settler, John Garrett, joined with some of his farmer-neighbors to build a grist mill harnessing the waters of Red Clay Creek about 1730. We believe this mill was along what is now Benge Road behind Auburn Heights, where the paper mill buildings of the Marshall Brothers Division of NVF Company have recently operated. Old Public Road from the productive farm areas around present-day Hockessin, as well as the Creek Road toward Kennett Square were the links to the outside world. John Garrett Jr., who inherited the property from his father, built the first section of the “farmhouse” next to the mill in 1760; this house was greatly enlarged in the 19th century, and it is now a part of the Auburn Heights Preserve. John Jr. also experimented with the manufacture of snuff, perhaps in the grist mill or another structure very close by as early as 1782. With his newfound success in making snuff and having at least three sons interested in the business, he acquired more land ½ mile downstream and built a new and larger snuff mill just before 1800, while still maintaining the original one. Well up in years, John Jr. also built a home on the hill overlooking this new mill where he lived a few years before his death. This house was greatly enlarged by his grandson, William E. Garrett, in 1850 and has been referred to since as the Garrett Mansion.

Although one of John's sons, Horatio, continued to live in the area (then called Auburn) for several years and built himself a nice home halfway up the Benge Road hill about 1806, his brother, John III, pulled out for Ohio, and another brother, Levi, moved to Philadelphia and operated the growing snuff empire from there. The Garrett Snuff business was a major player in the economy of the village throughout the 19th century, but no Garretts made their year-round home here after about 1810. The summer mansion built by Levi's son William in 1850 was used only to escape Philadelphia's heat during the warm-weather months.

In 1845, the mills were expanded again with the construction of the “Lower Snuff Mill,” ½ mile downstream from the main plant. When William's sons, Walter and William E. Jr., died in the late 1890s, the snuff business passed out of the Garrett family. However, snuff was not finished in Yorklyn. The huge American Tobacco Company, through its subsidiary, the American Snuff Company, had bought up most snuff mills in the country, creating a monopoly, but implementation of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act broke up this monopoly about 1910. Before this, however, the snuff mills reached their maximum size and importance with the large #5 Mill being the newest addition (1902). After 1910, the Yorklyn mills were sharply downsized and came under the ownership of the George W. Helme Company of Helmetta, New Jersey. Snuff was manufactured here with 40 employees until the mills were closed down by Helme in 1954.