

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, October 17, 2016

When the Greenbank Mill Burned Down: In 1964, two years before the Wilmington & Western Railroad started operation, Historic Red Clay Valley, Inc. (HRCV) bought from Wilmington attorney Saul Cohen the historic Greenbank Grist Mill, built by Robert Philips about 1790. Part of the vast Darlington Flinn property around Greenbank and Price's Corner, Cohen had acquired it, along with a lot more, in the course of settling Flinn's estate. John K. Walters, who lived in the Philips Farmhouse adjacent, was the agent in the deal. The price was \$10,000 including 1.7 acres, which was later augmented by about 7 acres more upstream without additional charge. HRCV insured the mill for \$10,000 immediately.

The longtime miller, J. Roy Magargal, who had operated the mill for previous owners John MacDonald and Darlington Flinn, was invited to stay on rent-free to continue his diminishing trade. He kept the mill race functional by patching the dams in Red Clay Creek and maintained the penstock and water turbines that turned the grinding burrs and the line shafts. He taught several HRCV volunteers something about the miller's trade. In 1967, a foot bridge was built across Red Clay Creek, connecting the parking lot for the Wilmington & Western with the mill, and the latter was open for tours on days when the trains were running.

About 5:00 a.m. on a humid August morning in 1969, the phone rang at Auburn Heights. It was Mrs. Walters advising me that the mill was ablaze, and the fire companies were on their way. When I arrived at the scene in early morning, the frame portion was leveled, it was very damp everywhere, and heavy white smoke was still rising from the ruins. The stone-walled Madison factory, attached to the frame mill, was standing but without a roof. Within days, it was determined to be arson, and the young delinquents responsible had been identified. HRCV volunteers, with help from Roy Magargal and the community, started the long process of cleaning up the debris. The HRCV Board of Directors was unanimous in wanting to rebuild the mill.

An Amish contractor, Aaron Lapp, was engaged to rebuild the frame structure, and he and his crew did an outstanding job for \$10,000, the amount of HRCV's insurance proceeds. Aaron lived near Gap, Pennsylvania, but he did not drive motorized vehicles, so someone from the Mill Committee of HRCV had to transport him and his assistants twice a day. Most of these trips were made by Don Cook, then secretary of HRCV and active with the mill before the fire. At the conclusion of Lapp's work, a new roof was in place, and the interior frame section was rebuilt and secured. Nothing was done with the stone walls of the Madison factory; they were later believed to be unsafe, and about 1973 they were torn down. Roy Magargal set up shop again in the rebuilt section, and he was a good caretaker, but the grinding burrs never turned again in his lifetime. He sold grain and other products purchased elsewhere. His favorite watchdog was in charge during the night.

The arsonists, mostly between the ages of 17 and 20 and led by a ring leader, were brought to trial. The trial illustrated the justice system at its worst. I watched the accused intimidate the jury in the courtroom. The ring leader sat in the courtroom, his eyes on the jury box, and he continued to sketch likenesses of the jury members. I went to lunch at the cafeteria in the basement of the Hotel DuPont, and the defendants were there, too. They joked and were having a grand time. They had no thought of being convicted, and indeed they were not.

Despite the progress made in rebuilding, after the fire the Mill Committee of HRCV never regained their prior enthusiasm. Roy Magargal died early in 1972, and the building lay vacant much of the time. Soon it was vandalized inside and out. The politicians decided to rebuild Greenbank Road, removing the foot bridge between the parking lot and the mill in order to make room for the new highway bridge. Finally Senator Margaret R. "Meg" Manning, a neighbor who was on the HRCV Board, took the "bull by the horns" and determined to do something to preserve the historic building. With her political connections, she got a small amount of state money and a lot of local enthusiasm, and improvements were soon evident. In the early 1980s, as HRCV was engaged in purchasing the former Landenberg Branch of the B & O Railroad, the Greenbank Mill Associates was formed, and title to the mill was transferred to the new organization. It was a great step forward for both organizations.