

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, June 20, 2016

The Modern History of Yorklyn (*repeat of Nov. 9, 2009*): Local history was made in November 2009 with the announcement and then the front-page newspaper article on the disposition of the former NVF property in Yorklyn. When a long-prosperous mill town dies, what happens to the contaminated mill sites, the buildings falling down, and the desirable land gobbled up by over-zealous developers? As of 2009, we had our answers. Through an ambitious plan developed by concerned land owners, a responsible developer, and the Delaware Division of Parks and Recreation, the best possible solution seems to have been achieved. The Bankruptcy Court settling the NVF case awarded the mills and about 85 acres of surrounding hillsides to CCS Developers and the Delaware Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control (DNREC), the parent of the Division of Parks. It looks like a wonderful solution to what could have been a serious problem for the environment and the future of the community.

Most of the NVF mills have been razed and their sites cleaned up, with several significant buildings being saved. Only three additional building lots have been carved out of the 85 hillside acres surrounding the mills; on the remainder, the State of Delaware will buy conservation easements. These easements will permit the Division of Parks to build up to six miles of trails connecting the Auburn Heights Preserve with Oversee Farm, both owned by the state, suitable for steam cars, bicycles, joggers, hikers and horseback riders. Three of the buildings in the main fibre mill complex between Yorklyn Road and the Wilmington & Western Railroad will be saved. The buildings in the Auburn Mills Historic District adjoining Auburn Heights will be saved and upgraded. These include the Marshall Brothers paper mill, the mill office (1895), and five dwelling units in two historic houses, the oldest of which was built in 1760.

The first of several generations of Garretts arrived in what is now Yorklyn in 1726 and built a grist mill in 1730, where the paper mill now stands next to Auburn Heights. In 1782, this was converted to a snuff mill, and during the 19th century, the mill site had various uses before the Marshall Brothers bought the property in 1889, and it became a paper mill, eventually funneling its entire output to the National Vulcanized Fibre Company downstream, a practice that continued until production was permanently halted in 2008. About 1800, the Garretts relocated their snuff business to a location where they developed many brick buildings on the east side of Red Clay Creek, downstream from their original mill, and here snuff was made until 1954. These buildings have fallen into disrepair, and many have collapsed. The first fibre mill at the location of the main NVF complex was built along the railroad in 1904, and most of the large buildings were constructed in 1911–12. Israel Marshall patented the idea for the largest endless fibre machine in the world, but he died before it was completed and installed. The uses for vulcanized fibre were diverse: originally it was popular for suitcases and satchels, trunks, and waste baskets. During World War II, it was used widely in the aircraft industry. In more recent years, its main use was for all types of insulating products. The rapid growth of the plastics industry sealed the fate of vulcanized fibre, and today the only manufacturers are in China.