

History of Leonard's Mill Pond

The original mill construction date of Leonard's Mill and millpond is unknown. The owner of the mill at the time of the Revolutionary War was George Parker, Sr. He received by original patent "a tract of land called 'Parker's Security' in 1770". Whether Mr. Parker built the homestead, barn, saw and grist mills, and pond after obtaining the patent is unknown, but we do know that during the American Revolution in 1777 his land was called Parker's Mill.

On February 6, 1777 the Council of Safety of the Maryland Congress received word from Samuel Chase of Tory (Loyalist) build-up on the Eastern Shore at Parker's Mill. He wrote, " ... the Tories in Sussex, Somerset and Worcester Counties have been assembling for some days. They have 250 men collected at Parker's Mill, about nine miles from the Roebuck with some men, with intention to seise (sic) the Magazine and destroy the property of the Whigs." Three regiments were sent to quell the insurrection.

When General Smallwood, later governor of Maryland, finally arrived from Wilmington with his regiment on February 19th, it is reported in the Archives of Maryland that he "found people generally quiet and peaceable". An additional report states, "upon arrival here General Smallwood found the community had recruited a military body, and though inadequately armed; had with daring and courage captured a large number of Tories without bloodshed". Even though the insurrection was pinpointed at Parker's Mill, and George Parker probably allowed the Tories to assemble at his place, there is no record with which side he sympathized.

A year later, following the first visit of Rev. Freeborn Garrettson, the Methodist Society began meeting at George Parker's Homestead. Salisburians who had no horse often walked four and a half miles to attend one of the services. For many years they met in Mr. Parker's parlor in the winter and in his bam in the summer. Conveniently, the pond was used for baptisms. In addition to Rev. Garrettson, Bishop Francis Asbury also held services at the homestead when he traveled down the "Stage Coach Road," the main route from Salisbury to Wilmington. Both Asbury Methodist Church of Salisbury and Union Church, located north of the pond, trace their beginnings from these early meetings at Parker's Mill Pond.

By 1816 George Parker had obtained more than six hundred acres. He then was granted a patent for "Parker's Conclusion", which involved a resurvey that tied together all of the various tracts of land he had purchased, including any vacancies. Mr. Parker, "weak in body but sound of mind", wrote his will in 1832. Possibly the teachings of the Methodist Society had an effect on him, for in the will he freed "the girl slaves at age twenty-five and the men slaves at age twenty-eight". Parker's Conclusion was deeded to his grandchildren rather than to his own children. When the will was probated in 1833, Sarah, George I, Edwin and Margeritt – the four children of his son Daniel – received "three quarters of the mills", and the two boys of his other son, Elisha Parker, received "one quarter of the mills".

Sarah Parker married Theodore Brewington and, in 1851, they bought the mill rights of her brothers. The mill then became known as Brewington Mill. When Mr. Brewington died, he left his wife with the problem of disputed mill rights, since she owned "one quarter, one half, and one eighth of parts of the mills". It was taken to court as a "friendly suit" in 1871, where Samuel A. Graham, a prominent local attorney, was appointed trustee to sell the mill property. Colonel William J. Leonard was interested and bought the property, renaming it Leonard's Mill. Even though Mrs. Brewington had sold the mill property, she lived in the old homestead until she died in 1876. George Leonard, Col. Leonard's cousin, then moved to the farm to run the mills.

Colonel Leonard was a well-known figure in the community because, during the Civil War, he had "commanded Purnell's Legion of the Federal Army", was captured and "held in the infamous Libby's Prison in Richmond before he was exchanged", and "upon his release, served as the Provost Marshall of the Eastern Shore". In the fight for a new county, he was a leader, giving "one thousand dollars to help pay for a courthouse".

George must have been quite a colorful character, for his grandsons, Emory and Irving Leonard, described him as being a big man with a long beard, bald head, and a peg leg. According to Emory, his grandfather lost his leg in a wagon accident. While hauling lumber, he was accidentally thrown beneath the wagon, and one leg was crushed by a wheel. The injury was so severe that his leg had to be removed. He was tied to a bed, there being no anesthetics at the time, given some of his homemade brandy, and the leg was then amputated.

In 1881 George Leonard purchased the mill and mill rights from Col. Leonard. George soon became a trustee of a nearby school, which was named after him. One of the students, Mrs. Lewis Brown of Salisbury, remembered him "coming in one day and stomping his wooden leg and frightening the children."

George Leonard became prominent not only in the educational development of the community, but also in economic development. Much of the money he made was from the apple brandy he made with his distillery. He was only one of the few men in the county who was able to obtain a liquor license. In 1896 the cost of a retail liquor license was twenty-five dollars per year.

The distillery was located on the south side of the pond where it drew water to cool the grindstones, hot from friction. In the time of George Leonard, these stones were turned by three horses. The apples used to make the brandy were ground first and the juice from these drained and distilled. This product was similar to cider and called low wine. It was distilled a second time to produce the brandy, using thirteen barrels of low wine to make one barrel of brandy. In 1880 the going price per half pint of brandy was a quarter. According to Irving Leonard, his grandfather always said that if, when shaken, the bubbles on top of the brandy quickly disappear, the brandy was good.

Periodically, Internal Revenue inspectors would test for the alcohol content by using dyfrometers to find the specific gravity. After the inspectors, called gaugers, tested for alcohol content, they would, of course, taste it. Fred A. Grier tells this tale about the gaugers:

After two gaugers had tasted the brandy, one said that it tasted like leather, while the other argued that it tasted like iron. To settle the argument, they finally decided to empty the kettle. When the vat was empty, the men found a small piece of leather with an iron tack in it!

So much for the ability of government gaugers.

Mr. Grier tells of an episode in his own family in relation to George Leonard's brandy:

Alison A. Gillis, Mr. Grier's father-in-law, crossed the mill bridge many times to see his girl, Laura Williams. When he married her in 1880, George Leonard gave them a demijohn of brandy, saying not to open it until there was a son in the family. He and his wife had two daughters. One of these had no children, while the other, who married Fred Grier, had one daughter. She had two daughters and one of these had a daughter. The demijohn has not yet been opened, and it still is in the family!

Across from the distillery on the south end of the dam was the sawmill. Water flowed under the mill, turning a wheel that moved the long saw blade vertically. Irving Leonard related this story about his father's work in the sawmill:

Each morning, Harry Leonard went to the sawmill and put a large log onto the saw. He would set the amount of water turning the water wheel to the speed he wished the saw to move, and then return to the house for breakfast. By the time he went back to the mill, the log was almost completely sawed through lengthwise.

Irving did not remember seeing the sawmill. He only recalled hearing his father speak about it. Therefore, it must have been demolished in the late 1800's. From a map that was found, we know that it was in existence as late as 1877.

A short distance north of the sawmill stood the old gristmill. One of the Leonard boys, determined that he would make money running the mill, ran it almost twenty-four hours a day. "In one year he ground 1800 bushels of corn, receiving one-sixth of each bushel as payment". Corn made up the major part of what was ground, but buckwheat also was ground. Besides corn meal, hominy, too, was produced at the mill.

Both the sawmill and gristmill were undershot, meaning that, unlike many mills, the water was not channeled in from above on to an upright wheel, but flowed under the mill. The water wheels at the millpond were placed on their sides, with the water striking the side of them.

In addition to the mills and other buildings, there also was a family cemetery. In his will, George Leonard stated that before it could be probated, his sons must move the graves in the family plots to lots in Parsons Cemetery. This was located at the site of the present Merritt Upholstery and Pine Knoll Branch of the Bank of Delmar. In 1907, George died at the age of eighty-six, from stomach cancer, and the task of moving the graves was carried out.

George willed to his son William J. Leonard, the mill and mills rights, and to Joe Leonard, a part of the property including the homestead, and to Harry Leonard, another piece of property. Joe rented the homestead to Bill Cannon. Between 1907 and 1911, it caught fire and burned down. In trying to stagger payments of fire insurance on three houses that he owned, Joe dropped the insurance on the old homestead. It was during that time that it turned, and he received no compensation.

The mill and mill rights were sold in 1921 to J. William Fran. In 1913, Furnam Howard purchased the mill, and a year later, Leonard Wailes bought it. By this time the old mill was becoming dilapidated, in part because the Stage Coach Road was quite narrow for the traffic it was then receiving. In 1914, the County Roads Department erected new gates and a concrete bridge at the dam. The original mill was replaced by a new, three-story mill.

The mill and pond were again sold in 1925 to Charles Robinson. In 1928 it was sold to Lewis T. Cannon, to John L. Beauchamp in 1929, and in 1931, they were willed to Clarence Beauchamp.

The year 1933 spelled disaster. On Sunday, August 20, 1933, with undiminished force, the storm raged through Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, clearing finally on Thursday, August 24th. It rivaled, and probably exceeded the great storm of 1897. There were six inches of rain, with winds of fifty to sixty miles per hour. All telephone and telegraph wires were down, and all bridges were washed out. Salisbury was completely cut off from the outside.

To prevent further such incidents of isolation, the State Roads Commission relocated the road in 1939, constructing a modern bridge across the pond, slightly east of the dam. This relocation was intended to alleviate the possibility of future road washouts.

Cecil Cline bought the mill and pond in 1943. He made fairly good money grinding corn and buckwheat. While Mr. Cline ground the grain, customers often waited in Mrs. Cline's tavern. Lulu Cline remembered that the area was beautiful at that time, and people swam just below the dam where it was sandy. On Saturdays and Sundays, the Clines would sell homemade ice cream at the mill.

In 1946 J. Russell Hopkins bought the mill and pond from Cecil Cline, and sold it to Carlton James in 1948. Under James, the mill was last operated by Frank Thornton. The mill and pond were sold in 1955 to Leonard Hull.

Disaster struck again in 1962. With a heavy rainfall, the waters of the pond began to rise. Mr. Hull tried to raise the gates to let the excess water out, but the gates were rusty. Only the middle one of the three gates worked, and it raised only partially. Flood waters washed away the original road beside and north of the mill, and eroded under the mill and concrete culvert. The north wingwall to the gates cracked and fell away from the culvert. The whole pond was reduced to a normal stream flow.

Because he felt that he could not afford to rebuild the dam with new gates, Leonard Hull planned to install a pipe at the stream's level, thus eliminating the pond. Since a sizeable residential area had developed around the pond, these owners requested that Wicomico

County buy the pond and mill to restore it. These property owners collected two thousand dollars, and the balance of the cost, nine thousand dollars, was paid by the County.

Stumps were removed from Leonard's Mill Pond. The gates were repaired, and new bulk heading and wingwalls were built. With the job finished, the gates were closed. But when the pond had almost filled, the pressure of the water pushed under the gates and up through the old wooden floor of the mill, draining the pond once again.

Steel sheeting was then placed in front of the gates at the floor level to keep the water from pushing underneath. The gates were closed, and again water pushed up through the floor, this time around the ends of the sheeting. After trying to restore the pond and dam without disturbing the old mill structure, the country finally realized that the flooring under the mill would have to be removed and sealed with concrete. This necessitated the removal of the mill, which was purchased for two thousand three hundred dollars, and removed by contract for four hundred fifty dollars. Repairs were completed, and the dam held. The total cost of repairs, equipment and labor amounted to over thirty thousand dollars.

It should be noted that the washouts of the earlier years were north of the mill through the earthen dam only. To restore the pond then, it only required filling with dirt.

Although Leonard's Mill is gone, the millpond remains. The mill's necessity has also been removed, but the pond fills some of the same, and some new, needs today. The County owns and maintains Leonard's Mill Pond, making it available to the public for fishing, boating, swimming and skating. As in the past, the pond has economic, ecological, recreational, and even scenic value as it continues to meet those needs in a changing community.