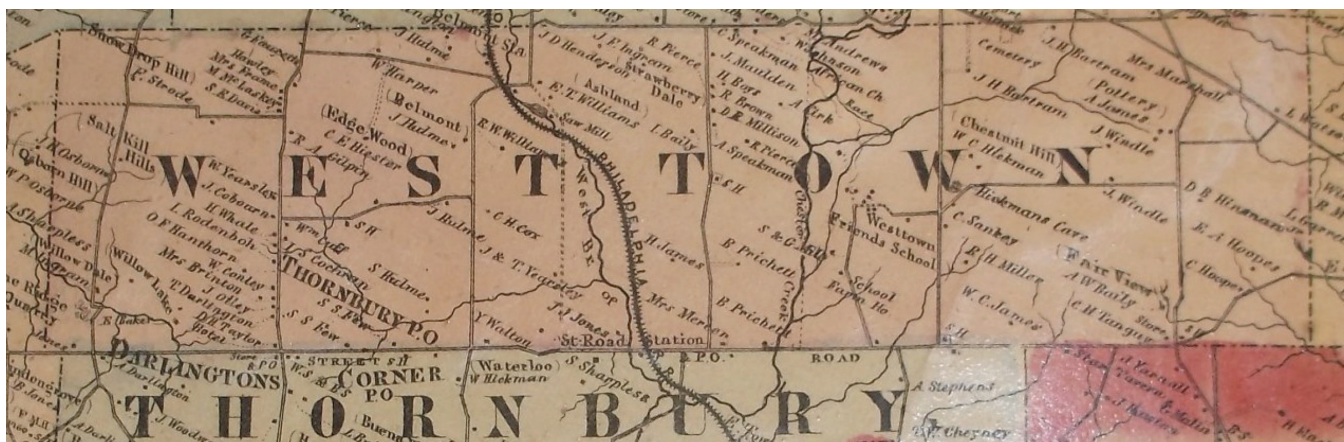


Mills of Westtown

by Daniel T. Campbell, AIA, Westtown Township Historical Commission



1860 Map showing many streams in Westtown Township, and Hawley-Williams sawmill, pond & millrace, just above the first T in Westtown.

The 20th-century Chester County historian Arthur James referred to Westtown Township as a “well-watered area” in his history of the township, first published in 1973. At the northwestern portion of the township, a tributary of Plum Run flows west to deposit into the Brandywine Creek near Lenape Park and Radley Run flows through the southeast corner of the township, into Birmingham and enters the Brandywine below Pocopson Bridge. But Westtown’s largest streams (in the center and east of the township) are the west and east branches of the Chester Creek, which join in Thornbury Township, about a quarter mile south of Street Road (Rt. 926). These have a few tributaries of their own. Hickman Run, in our township, now runs through Westtown Lake. Given this amount of water sources, it is remarkable that only a small number of mills existed in Westtown Township.

The location of a water-powered mill depends on the co-existence of the topography of the land and a source of plentiful water. A geographical area with higher changes in terrain, has more potential for this free power source, provided by gravity, than a flatter area does. Perhaps the gentler sloped land of the western end of the township could be the reason for the lack of mills on that side. There is greater change in terrain in the center of the township, between Oakbourne and the Westtown School area, where the Chester Creek tumbles down some rocky areas with adequate water to fill a mill pond, and then enough “fall” to drive a water wheel. This article is about the few sawmills and gristmills, which existed within the borders of Westtown Twp., but of which little physical evidence remains today.

Information gleaned from the 1850 Census Report, listed one sawmill and one combination gristmill / sawmill in business in the township, with 2 millers employed - along with 78 laborers, a few of which would likely to be employed at the mills. Products sold from the flour and sawmills from June 1, 1849 to June 1, 1850 produced \$17,500 in income. That seems a significant sum, when the average wage was \$10 monthly for men, and \$1 weekly for women (both including board).

Most of the lumber from the early sawmills was used locally. Sawmills were wooden structures, open on the sides and ends, for the logs to be rolled in, and the sawn lumber to be pushed out, when completed. Prior to 1850, the saw blade was straight up and down, mounted in a wooden “sash”, like a window, which slid up and down, as the log advanced along a track. The blade was toothed to cut on both the upward and downward strokes, similar to a jigsaw blade today, and the log was advanced in increments of about ¼ inch, by a large gear wheel. After 1850, saw blades became circular, and were powered by a heavy flywheel in a similar building, while the log was pushed through the blade, in one continuous motion. These two methods produced distinctive parallel saw marks from the sash saw, and circular saw-marks from the circular blade, thus indicating the approximate period of time, that a board was produced by each method.

Westtown School Sawmill - 1795: After the school was established in 1794, a sawmill was set-up to produce lumber for the school buildings. This was located along Chester Creek near the northern border of the property; the creek was dammed and a “race” (ditch) in

the ground carried water to the sawmill site for power. Nothing remains today, except foundation stones and the depression of the race. However, the miller's house remains in the wooded area near the Westtown Lake. Using trees from the property, this sawmill supplied most of the lumber used in the first school building which opened in 1799; after which this sawmill lost its usefulness and the dam was removed, when the road to Milltown (Westtown Way) was built.

Westtown School Gristmill and Sawmill, 1801 to 1914:

A stone gristmill was built in 1801, a major purpose being to supply flour for the school, from wheat grown on the property. In 1839, a sawmill was added to it. The mill incorporators (who were also school committee members) were permitted to use timber and stone from the School property in building the mill and a house for the miller. The Westtown gristmill ceased operation in 1914, was converted to a community center in 1924, the was demolished in the early 1970's. The millers house still serves as a residence (recently renovated), at the sharp bend in Westtown Road, across from the farmhouse and growing fields.



Westtown Gristmill and Miller's House, circa 1900. The mill is gone, but the house still exists on Westtown Rd.

Chester Creek was dammed just upstream from where Westtown Road crosses the creek today, and the millrace took a circuitous route to the mill site; many remnants of which can be seen today. Westtown Historical Commission members were given a tour of these sites in the spring of this year, graciously guided by Kevin Gallagher, from the Westtown School Archives.



Westtown School Mill Dam, circa 1902, with two women, likely students.

So how did a grist mill work? Water-powered gristmills of the period used two circular stones having opposite directional grooves to grind corn kernels into meal, and wheat grain into flour. A lower stone was stationary on the floor (bed stone), while an upper stone rotated above it (runner stone); then the corn or wheat was fed into a whole at the center of the runner stone, and the food product was sliced and crushed in the space of approximately 1/32 of an inch between them, while being pushed outward to the edges of the stones.

Hawley-Williams Mills near Oakbourne: Local maps, as early as 1816 indicate "S.M." for "saw mill" on the west branch of the Chester Creek southeast of the later Oakbourne Station site, and Media Rail bridge, none of which existed then. A small pond was created, so only a short millrace was needed to carry water to the sawmill site and back into the creek, at the rear of the Oakbourne Equestrian Center (today). The property had been in the Hawley family since 1783 and an 1847 map lists "Hawley's S.M." at that location. That same year Abraham Williams purchased the former Hawley property and moved there. The 1850 Census reported that Williams had sawed 50,000 feet of lumber at his sawmill during the previous year. A newspaper item in 1853 reported that the mill had burned, but the wheel was spared by keeping it turning, so it was continuously wetted.

Abraham William's son Enoch (1814-1870) seems to have been a versatile person, since Witmer's 1874 "Atlas of Chester County" listed the property as "E.T. Williams, B.S.S, Saw & Feed Mill", meaning that a Blacksmith Shop was in operation, and a gristmill had been added, grinding at least corn meal for animal feed. Enoch's son Abram S. Williams (1849-1919) seems to have expanded the grist milling to include wheat flour for area neighbors. Research into the operation of Camp Elder, a Civil War camp across Oakbourne Road, indicates that local farm wives used Williams' ground products, to bake for and feed the soldiers, impounded there.

Although Westtown Township had only these few sawmills and gristmills, the structures and their millers provided significant contributions of lumber for building, and food products for nourishment to the expanding population, of the late 18th, the 19th and the early 20th century Westtown Township community

Historic Resource Materials from: James, Arthur. A History of Westtown Township, 1973. Chester County Historical Society.

Map: Stone & Pomeroy, Philadelphia & Vicinity, 1860.

Photos: Courtesy of Westtown School.