NOTES AND QUERIES

"Darby Mill Race," by Rev. Charles S. Jones

The mill-race in Darby from 12th street to the old white mill at the foot of Mill street (demolished May 20–June 15, 1929), is one of the oldest in Pennsylvania.

The first race, if indeed there were a race, was that which supplied the Swede's mill built by Gov. John Printz in 1643 on what is now called Cobb's creek. The next was the race to the mill which stood on the site of the Jump Wrecking Co. property, Woodland Ave. at 43rd street, where prior to 1700 flowed Hans Moenson's creek. The next was the race which fed the first mill erected by the followers of William Penn in 1683. William Penn was a partner in this enterprise. The mill was located on Chester creek.

Fourth came the race for the mill in Darby which was owned jointly by Samuel Carpenter of Philadelphia and John Bethel of Darby; Bethel building and operating the mill.

In 1682 John Blunston bought of William Penn 1500 acres of land in Darby township. About 1685 he sold a part of his purchase to Joseph Wood. June 7, 1695, for 15 pounds Joseph Wood sold 9 acres along Darby creek to John Bethel reserving a quit rent of 6 pence to Wood. Bethel erected the mill,—a grist mill and a fulling mill later, and dug the race to supply the water-power. In a deed of Dec. 8, 1696, he secured the title to the narrow strip of land (about 15 feet wide) from the 9 acre plot to the beginning of the race up stream. The deed gave the right to repair the race by throwing out stone and dirt and the right to dig earth from the north side of the race for repairs. In lieu of which concessions John Blunston reserved to himself and heirs the "rent of 20 shillings to be paid on January 1 yearly forever in lieu of all damages and services due or hereafter accruing for or by reason of sd trench or mill cats aforesd." The deed states,—"All that mill cats race or trench already digged in and through the sd John Blunston's land and meadow from a certain creek there called Darby creek down towards the mill that is erected by sd Carpenter and Bethel."

The above deed covered the race from the dam to "Blunston's Oak," the remains of which are still to be seen near the trolley trestle. In a deed of 1722 it is called a "Spanish Oak by the ford over Darby creek in Kings road from Phila. to Chester." For at that time the road from Phila. to Chester crossed the creek at the head of tide at a ford near this tree. A ford existed there within the memory of our older residents. The road from Haverford to Darby (laid out 1687) came to "the landing" or this ford on Darby creek.

Several early deeds provided for "free ingress, egress and regress along said ditch, with a path along the bank thereof; and liberty to repair the ditch." A deed of 1722 granted liberty to repair and get dirt from "the Hill near the dam."

In 1696 the race supplied "three water corn or grist mills (probably all in one building) and a fulling mill lately erected." The fulling mill was operated by James Cooper until 1703 when it was conveyed to Job Harvey, son-in-law of John Bethel, for 75 pounds. The agreement was confirmed in 1798 after the death of Bethel, Sr. The deed specified the amount of water to be taken from the race and that a light gate be kept at the fulling mill branch of the race when sd mill was not in use. Also that Job Harvey and heirs were to pay ½ damages or repairs to race.
A deed of 1730 provided a private road be left open from King's road over the s. e. end of Obediah Bonsall's meadow ground (adjacent to the lot of Joseph Bonsall on s. w. side of mill race. And another deed in 1739 provided this road be left open to all persons with or without cattle, horses, carriages, etc. On the s. e. side of the trolley trestle, from Springfield road to the race there is still this right of way left open.

When Chester Ave. was widened in 1904 by the purchase of 10 feet along the eastern side from Griswold Mill Co., it became necessary to extend the culvert over the race which ran under the road. Walter Welsh is authority for the fact that in the old arch were found 4 stones each bearing a figure, -1-7-7-5. The arch was therefore made in that year. And it would seem that the King's road that year was changed from the old course to the present.

5/1/1868, Simeon Lord, who had built a cotton mill on the old mill property, sold to Samuel Cattell, and the deed gave “right to take certain amount of water from the race for use of the boilers of the mill.” In recent years the race was used not for power purposes but to supply water to the mills. The filter plant with three steel tanks was erected and 400,000 gallons of water per day could be pumped from the race, thus giving a very cheap water supply.

The mill property was sold Oct., 1928, and the old race was abandoned with the demolition of the mills. Very soon there will be no appearance of this historic feature of Darby's industrial life which for 234 years contributed to the growth and wealth of Darby. For those old mills created the town of Darby, and the mills were made possible by the race. And so we pay our tribute of honor to the old race as we say adieu.

Book Notice


The postgraduate writer of a thesis on some phase of American history is fortunate in his ignorance. If he knew the overwhelming vastness of material he would be paralyzed before he began. Here is a calendar of, not all, but the chief sources of American history in New York City, for the period before 1800 alone. The list is especially rich in manuscript sources, over three-fourths of the work being given to that class. In general it follows the Osgood survey of 1900, and refers for fuller details to that of Paltsits in the Stokes Iconography, sixth volume. The work undoubtedly grows out of Columbia's stimulation of monographs in this field among widely scattered postgraduates, in which she has produced distinguished results. An Introduction gives the scope and purposes of the work excellently and an Index of twenty-five pages is well done. The manuscript classification of general material is by chronological subject periods, while special topics, like Law, Land, Business, Ecclesiastics, Culture, Education, Fine Arts and Music, Languages, Literature and Drama, and the like fill the rest of the volume. With the large number of postgraduates being sent into the Philadelphia field, their advisers often wish there was a similar volume on the Quaker City's riches.

Burton Alva Konkle.