

YOUHADTOASK

By Chris Potter, Managing Editor of *Pittsburgh City Paper*
and writer of the weekly “You Had to Ask” column

Why is Rt. 51 South also known as Saw Mill Run Boulevard? I’ve spent many hours stuck in traffic, wondering about this.

— Mike Kalka, Beechview

You’ve probably figured out that the road is named after Saw Mill Run, which in turn was named after a saw mill, which in turn was named for the fact that, well, a lot of sawing went on there.

In recent years, Saw Mill Run’s principal contribution to the local economy has been to be polluted and smell bad – a vital part of our industrial heritage, to be sure. Near the intersection of routes 51 and 88, for example, the water has been known to run bright orange, the result of hundreds of gallons of mine water that flowed from an abandoned coal mine every minute. While Saw Mill Run is less noxious than it used to be, for many years it was hard to look at it without having a tear come to your eye; whether from the history or from some sort of airborne pollutant, it’s hard to say.

As it turns out, Saw Mill Run itself was the site of some of Pittsburgh’s earliest industries: water-powered saw mills, gristmills, and so on.

The original Saw Mill Run saw mill was probably built in the late summer of 1759 very near where the stream meets the Ohio River. In *Pittsburgh: The Story of a City*, historian Leland Baldwin wrote that when General John Stanwix came to take control of Pittsburgh in August 1759, he “lost no time in beginning the erection of a permanent stronghold at the Point.” The first order of business was to develop the quarries, brick kilns and other facilities needed to construct Fort Pitt. Among the first of these was a saw mill “erected on what has ever since been known as Sawmill Run on the south side of the Ohio.”

The location was ideal: it was a manageable water source located just downstream of the Point. Other mills soon followed even after the first one fell into disrepair. In 1781, Judge Hugh Henry Brackenridge wrote in his journal of a “Saw-Mill Run” upon which “at a small distance from its mouth is a sawmill, [slightly] below the [location] of an old mill built by the British, the remains of which are still yet seen.”



***Pittsburgh from Saw Mill Run* by Russell Smith, 1843. This view from the south bank of the Ohio River looks toward the Point. In the foreground are salt mine buildings; riverboats are on the Monongahela Wharf.**

Saw Mill Run also may have been the birthplace of another vital Pittsburgh industry: extortion and racketeering. In a 1957 article in *The Pittsburgh Press*, William White recounted that in the mid-1810s, “panic was widespread among owners of saw mills on the run” – by which White meant their businesses were located on the creek, not that their owners were trying to flee, just in case you’re confused. “[L]etters were received demanding money” or else the mills would be burned down. When business owners didn’t pay up, several wells were poisoned and a handful of grist and saw mills were set afire, as were dozens of haystacks. One of those mills belonged to the namesake of the neighborhood of Elliott, a mill owner by the name of West Elliott. (Oddly, the name of the place sounds more like the name of a

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person, and the name of the person sounds more like the name of a place.) But Elliott not only caught the fire before it could do much damage to his mill; he also caught one of the arsonists while out hunting later. Elliott did what anyone would do: as White put it, he “swung his rifle and crushed the man’s skull, then reported what happened to Pittsburgh authorities” – a nice gesture, if somewhat belated. Either way, the attacks stopped.

Despite Saw Mill Run’s rich history, there was talk of changing the boulevard’s name in 1930. County officials suggested it should be changed to Liberty Boulevard – ironic, given the amount of time you and thousands of other drivers sit shackled in traffic every day – because the road connected with the recently-completed Liberty Tunnel. But various historical societies opposed the measure; the old name, critics pointed out, dated back to the time of George Washington. As the *Sun-Telegraph* observed in an editorial, the name “is a landmark that definitely locates a section of the city. The name has been familiar to many generations of Pittsburghers.” In today’s Pittsburgh, of course, those are reasons to get rid of something.

Either way, now you have something else to ponder the next time you’re in traffic ... besides the importance of a good mass-transit system.



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