

# Milling About

News from the Friends of Peirce Mill

Summer 2005



## Mill to Open Again on Weekends

**W**ith the completion of work on the hurst frame and a clean-up of the mill, Rock Creek Park officials have given the green light to guided tours of the mill on weekends for the next few months. Park Ranger **Anne O'Neill** and her staff, assisted by FOPM volunteers as needed, will conduct the tours. Members who attended the picnic at the mill on July 24 got to take the first tour that has been offered in many months. In the basement, you'll see an empty machinery pit but a beautifully repaired hurst frame. All the machinery on the second and third floors is untouched. While you're there, check out the exhibits at the Peirce Barn, including the newly-acquired Meadows Mill, a working miniature mill with real millstones. Peirce Barn is open noon - 4pm on weekends. To check on mill tour times, call the ranger at the barn (202-282-0927).

## Final Work on Mill Floor

**Gus Kiorpes** and **John O'Rourke** have finished repairs to the hurst frame and all the old machinery has been removed from the pit. The picture shows the current appearance of the pit, with the newly-installed stone bearer at the center. In addition to making the repairs, Gus and John worked with our NPS liaison, **Kari Grabinski**, and our other contractor, **Steve Ortado**, to identify and photograph each piece of the unserviceable machinery that had been removed. Some pieces will go into the collection of Peirce Mill artifacts, while others will serve as templates for replacement parts to be made by Gus and John.

Work at the mill for the rest of the year will be concentrated on repairs to selected floor joists, the final phase of work on the internal structure of the

building. Our engineers, **Robert Silman Associates**, have completed a report detailing necessary repairs to each of 25 joists beneath the main floor and the report has been submitted to Rock Creek Park for approval. Once we get the go-ahead, Steve Ortado will begin the repairs. The work will require removal of floor boards, one quadrant of the main floor at a time. It is hoped that the work can be done in such a way that visitors can still be accommodated on occasional tours (see below).



*View of empty machinery pit and new stone bearer beam.*

## Save The Date

September 24th is **Rock Creek Park Day** (the 115th anniversary of the park's founding), and we will celebrate with an Open House at the mill. FOPM also will have an information table at the Rock Creek Nature Center directing visitors to mill.

## Fund-raising Success

We have encouraging progress to report on the fund-raising front. The **Kiplinger Foundation**, our largest donor, came through again, this time with a \$50,000 matching grant! The grant is payable over two years as we receive other donations to be used as matches. Other grants received in the last quarter include \$5,000 from the **Higginson Foundation**, \$5,000 from the **Clark Winchcole Foundation**, and \$2,400 from a variety of other sources, all of which can be used for the Kiplinger match. This brings the total of grants and pledges received to date from all sources to just over \$400,000 (not including in-kind donations of about \$15,000 in services and materials). It looks like it will be September before we learn if we got the large grant we applied for from the Save America's Treasures program. If we do get all or part of the \$292,000 requested, then we have three years to match that amount. We just received advance notice of an upcoming \$50,000 grant in September (can't reveal the source until it's confirmed!) so we would have the first part of the required match. We're definitely making progress!



*Friends of the two mills enjoy a lunch together.*

## Picnic Time at the Mill

On Sunday, July 24, 15 members of FOPM gathered for a picnic with twelve folks from the **Friends of Colvin Run Mill**, our sister mill in Fairfax County. **Bob Lundegard**, a member of both groups, made the arrangements. We set up a canopy back of the mill near the creek and ate lunch there before visiting Peirce Barn for a background briefing by Ranger O'Neill and a look at the historic photos of the mill on display there. A tour of the mill followed,

starting with the refreshingly cool basement. The temperature got progressively higher as we moved up to a rather hot attic. Our visitors also explored the grounds of the mill, including the site of the original mill dam upstream from the mill, and were told about plans for a fish passage around the so-called Teahouse Dam, near the mill.



## Meet Your Board

**Sheila Ploger**, an integral part of the Peirce Mill restoration project since the first meeting held in the fall of 1996, has served on membership chair and secretary/treasurer. Originally from Ohio, she lived in Colorado and California before moving to the Washington DC area 20 years ago. Trained as a geologist, she has worked for the U.S. Geological Survey, has been active with a homeowner's association, and was part of a start-up company that provided networking computer hardware. For the past 20 years she has worked with children in the media center of a Montgomery County elementary school. Sheila's love of history, coupled with a desire to preserve Peirce Mill and provide an outstanding learning opportunity for the area's schoolchildren and other visitors, has been her motivation to serve.

## FOPM Officers and Key Individuals

President .....	Richard Abbott
Vice President .....	Steve Dryden
Secretary/Treasurer .....	Sheila Ploger
Business Manager .....	David Lyman
Archivist .....	Philip Gaudette
Legal/Tax Affairs .....	Gene Hines
Chair, Proctors Committee .....	Mrs. Randall H. Hagner, Jr.
Assistant Chair, Proctors Committee ....	Mrs. I. Townsend Burden
Special Events Coordinator .....	Robert Day
Board Member .....	Arthur Fort
Board Member .....	Tom Blackburn

# The Mills of Capital Country

**Love of the past, and beauty, are helping to keep the big wheels churning**

Jones Mill Road. Hunter Mill Road. Powder Mill Road. If you take a walk down one of those ubiquitous roads in the Washington area that has the word "mill" in its name, chances are you won't find a mill. You'll be lucky to find even a stone foundation, or a hint of the long and narrow depression in the ground, the millrace, that brought water from the nearby creek to drive the mill wheel.

As the road names indicate, mills once were a common feature of the local landscape. But, starting in the late 19th century, the mills throughout the eastern United States were abandoned as new power sources were created and grain production shifted westward. Many mills were torn down and their stones scavenged for new buildings. The massive grinding wheels often made of French quartz were dragged away for garden ornaments. Wooden mills rotted and collapsed into the creeks that once moved water wheels.

"I have a photograph of my grandfather, who died before I was born, making the wide belts that are used to transfer power in old mills," says Philip Gaudette, a volunteer at the Peirce Mill restoration project in Rock Creek Park. "For me, the mill is a connection to a time before Pepco, when the local economy depended on the technology of water power."

The pre-Pepco time stretches back over more than two centuries of Colonial and early American history, a period when the mill was the center of the community. Mills did almost every kind of work that required a steady power source. Gristmills were essential because they converted wheat into flour for bread. Sawmills cut the wood necessary for homes and wagons. Specialty mills processed woolen cloth, or ground up sumac berries and stems for leather tanning. Animal bones were crushed between millstones to make fertilizer.

Painters and poets memorialized the miller's world, with portraits of skaters on ice-covered mill ponds and sentimental verse. A popular 19th-century school song instructed:

Leave no tender word unsaid,  
Love while life shall last.  
The mill will never turn again,  
With water that is past.

A few area mills have survived the ages, though, and are maintained as educational exhibits. In recent years, efforts to keep these mills running and to revive others have expanded. More than a dozen mills are either in use or being restored inside and outside the Capital Beltway. Ellen PercyMiller heads the campaign to preserve Chapman's Mill, also known as Beverley Mill, near Haymarket. It was severely damaged by vandals in a 1998 fire, further complicating the effort.

"After the mill burned," PercyMiller recalls, "hundreds of people showed up at our office. Some cried. Some donated money, even people who just pass the mill on the road and don't live around here. It's an incredibly primal response."

Standing inside the machine, as one does in a functioning mill, is to experience a creative, handmade marvel. Once Rock Creek's Peirce Mill is restored, visitors will see a fully automated system that remained state of the art for much of the 19th century. At Chapman's Mill, it's the size that overwhelms. With seven stories made entirely of locally quarried rock, Chapman's is one of the tallest stone buildings in the United States. A 29-foot-diameter metal disk, resembling a mini-Ferris wheel, captured the water from Broad Run.

Most mills in this area, however, were small and supported modest businesses. William Farrer, who owned northern Montgomery County's Hyattstown Mill in the 1850s, had one employee, and his annual output of meal and lumber was valued at \$4,125. The boxy, red-roofed building in Hyattstown was reopened in 1999 with an unpretentious mission: support the regional arts community with space for exhibits, performances and meetings. To find it, just follow Hyattstown Mill Road.

Steve Dryden, vice president of the Friends of Peirce Mill, writes about historic preservation and the environment in the Washington area.

By Steve Dryden  
*The Washington Post*  
Sunday, May 29, 2005

# d o w n s t r e a m



4305 38th Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20016

