

Photo: Archives of Friends of Peirce Mill.

The waterwheel at Peirce Mill today is motionless and decaying, which gets on our nerves as Friends. Not so long ago, that same waterwheel was bright and busy as seen in this photo. The overshot wheel was installed in the late 1960s and powered by a combination of pumped creek water and city water. The water flowed over the top and turned the wheel counterclockwise. The flume is well above the elevation of the creek upstream, so this design is somewhat misleading. It also dumped chlorinated water into the creek, which is no longer an acceptable practice. ☒



4305 38th Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20016



# Milling About

News from the Friends of Peirce Mill Summer/Fall 2001



## We plan an event with the National Trust for Historic Preservation

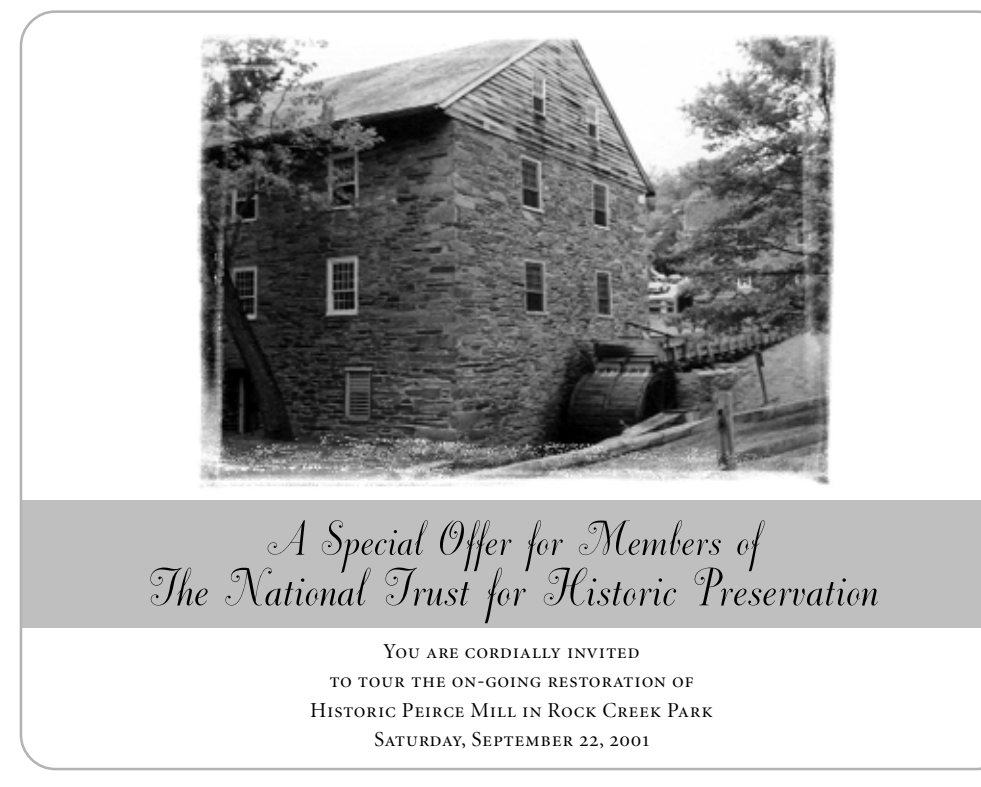
The National Trust has been supportive of our efforts to restore Peirce Mill ever since November 1998, when we received a \$5000 matching grant from the Trust for the services of a fund-raising consultant. Now we have been offered the one-time use of their mailing list of members in the Washington area to issue invitations for a special event to be held at the mill on September 22, 2001. A committee organized by Sheila Ploger performed heroically to apply mailing labels and stamps to 2,500 post card RSVP invitations, all in one day! The invitation, reproduced below, was done by our graphic designer, **Kevin Palmer**. Responses received to date indicate that we will have about 50 National Trust visitors to the mill for this special event. We plan to schedule tours of groups of five to ten people every hour beginning at 9:30 AM. Knowledgeable people would be stationed at points in the building to explain both the workings of the mill and the restoration plan. We have lined up

members to act as tour leaders, and others to greet visitors and hand out information packets. The following members devoted their Saturday to work with Sheila getting out the invitations: **Kate Maynor**, **Charlotte Jacobsen** (a new member—welcome!), and **David Lyman**. Other members who were standing by to help later, but were not needed, were **Carol Houseman**, **Sue Gerson** and **Idelle Barnhart**. Thanks to all for your willingness to help out in this special but important job!

## Work is suspended at the mill

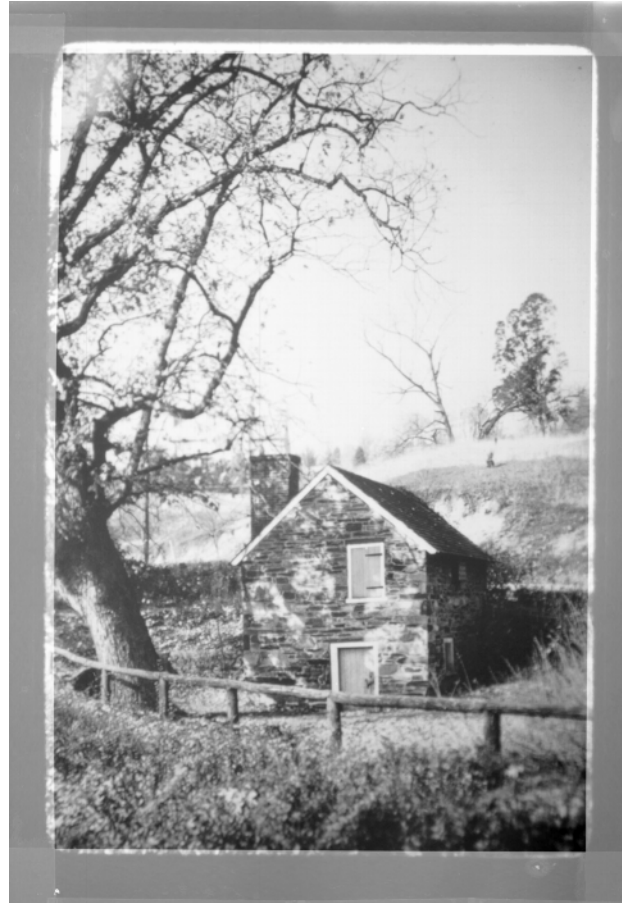
Members may have noticed that no work is underway currently at the mill. The Friends have not been able to reach agreement with Rock Creek Park officials as to whether the Park or the Friends will be responsible for contracting for the continuation of work on the floors, and all planned work in the future. This situation may lead to fundamental changes in the way the Friends work with Rock

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Postcard invitation recently sent out to members of the National Trust.

*Text on the back of the card:  
"Peirce Mill is the last remnant of a 19<sup>th</sup> c. complex of mills that once operated along Rock Creek in the District of Columbia. It is currently undergoing a three-year restoration which, when completed, will be a window onto the city's rural industrial past. On Saturday, September 22, 2001, Peirce Mill will offer special tours to members of the National Trust, led by experts in preservation and restoration technology, milling, and ecology. Peirce Mill is open to the general public from noon until 4 PM, and National Park Service Rangers will offer four public tours on the same day, including activities for children. Free tours for National Trust members will be offered each hour on the half-hour from 9:30 AM to 3:30 PM..."*



Creek Park. The annual meeting (see below) will be the occasion for members to express their views on this matter and decide on a course of action. As preparation for the meeting (on November 10), you will shortly receive a letter from the Board of Directors of the Friends which explains the issues and lays out alternatives for your consideration.

As you may know, the work carried out thus far by preservation contractor **Steve Ortado**, supported our structural engineers, Robert Silman Associates, exposed the damaged portions of the main beam and supporting column and made it possible to develop a detailed treatment plan. The next phase involves the actual repairs to those elements of the mill structure, followed by repairs to selected floor joists.

## More grant applications go in

Our fund-raising committee, led by **David Lyman**, has generated several more grant applications this summer. We now have applications pending with the following organizations: Marpat Foundation (second grant), Citigroup Foundation, Clark Charitable Foundation, American Express, and the George Preston Marshall Foundation. Preliminary proposals

also went in to the 3M Foundation, Sprint, and the Appleby Trust. So far we have heard only that Sprint did not accept our proposal. Thanks go to **Lisa Siegrist, Barry Nestor, Steve Dryden, and David Lyman** for their work on these applications.

## Planning underway for annual meeting and open house

This annual event for members and visitors will be held at the mill on Saturday, November 10. As usual, the day begins with an informal coffee hour, following which we will hold our membership meeting beginning at around 10 AM. The Open House will follow at around noon, with music, tours, and films. This year's meeting of the Friends is particularly important as issues will be discussed that affects the future of our organization (see above). Please mark your calendars and plan to be there for at least the meeting portion, if not for the open house.

## Reaching out to the community

The Friends participated in two events in May which publicized our organization and the Peirce Mill restoration effort. On May 5, we held our first Community Day at the mill. The event was publicized in the *Northwest Current* and announcements were posted in apartment houses along Connecticut Avenue. Additionally, **Kate Maynor** assisted on much of the job of publicizing the event. Our members, in collaboration with Rock Creek Park Rangers, presented a day-long program for some 150 visitors. The program included tours of the mill, films, a description of the restoration plan, and a number of programs for children. Outside the mill, Chief Ranger **Laura Illige** gave a talk on plans for a fish ladder in Rock Creek adjacent to the mill. Old-time string band music was provided by our friends, Carolee Rand, Bob McCluskey, and Ann Porcella.

*Two weeks later, Steve Dryden and Philip Gaudette manned a table at a street fair in Mt. Pleasant, publicizing the Friends and Peirce Mill. Some 30 people signed up to request information on membership in the Friends.*

## Agribusiness in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Washington

In the decades before and after the Civil War, Peirce Mill did a booming business. The miller ground 3,300 bushels of corn one year. But the mill business was a small part of the enterprise along Rock Creek

that was developed and operated by Isaac Peirce in the early 1800's, by his son Abner in the 1850's, and by his nephew Peirce Shoemaker until 1891. They raised livestock—horses, mules, cattle, sheep, and pigs—as well as produce—wheat, rye, corn, oats, peas, beans, potatoes, butter, honey, and apples—not to mention a distillery.

The landscape around the Peirce estate was “chiefly distinguished for its simple and quiet beauty.” An hour's ride from the Capitol, it was far out in the country and seldom mentioned in the Washington newspapers. “You might walk for miles without meeting a human being.” The city barely reached Boundary Street (now Florida Ave.) [Quotes are from McCormick 1967]

What comes to mind when you think of that part of Rock Creek and Connecticut Avenue? A residential area, perhaps, or Howard Law School, or apartment buildings, or Calvert-Woodley. But look at the Boschke map published in 1861. The only roads with names are Peirce's Mill Road (now roughly Tilden),

Broad Branch Road, and as part of the war effort the “New Military Road”. Peirce Shoemaker and Joshua Peirce occupy most of the cultivated area along the creek from what is now the zoo up to Military Road. Further west along Peirce's Mill Road live Dr. Keasby, H. H. Dent, and J. O. Harry, who live near Rockville Pike and Tennallytown.

The contrast between the land that Isaac Peirce knew and the modern stretch of Connecticut Avenue is at least equaled by the contrast between the agricultural economy in the countryside north of the new federal city of that day, and today's mix of government, services, technology, and real estate. As part of the educational mission of the Friends of Peirce Mill, we plan to research the social and economic conditions in 19<sup>th</sup> century Washington. Peirce Mill, the center of a substantial agribusiness of the time, is a fine place to start.

—*Philip Gaudette*

### THE RANGER'S CORNER

## Peirce Mill Dam Gets a Ladder—for Fish!

Peirce Mill Dam—rest your elbows on the split rail fence near the creek, and you can rest your eyes on the soothing waterfall created nearly 100 years ago. For many visitors, Peirce Mill and the adjacent dam represent the respite and peace preserved in Rock Creek Park. However, imagine an exhausted alewife swimming upstream to spawn. She leaps over rocks and small barriers, pushes over raised fords, only to reach an insurmountable obstacle. The eight foot wall of stone towering above her means frustration and defeat. She will never reach her destined spawning grounds.

In a strange way, traffic needs of workers commuting over newly rebuilt Wilson Bridge will change the picture for the alewife, at the same time leaving the cultural resource of the dam intact for us to enjoy. Since building the bridge involves unavoidable taking of habitat and environmental destruction, the project helps other areas in the watershed improve conditions for native fish. The Wilson Bridge project will restore anadromous fish

to the entire length of Rock Creek. Anadromous fish begin their lives in fresh water, mature in salt water, and return to the stream of their birth to spawn.

Shad and alewives can only jump a few feet, so a raised sewer line or ford crossing the creek can represent a stopping point in their reproductive journey. At the dam, a fish ladder will provide water “steps” for the fish to go around the dam. We will be installing a “fish cam” with a video connection inside the mill, so visitors can watch the migration action without perching perilously close to the steep banks near the ladder. Work may begin as soon as March of 2002, temporarily closing picnic grove 2 (across the creek from the mill) so the heavy equipment can work without endangering visitors. We're hoping that by May 2003, once again the traditional spring fish run will be coursing up Rock Creek.

—*Laura Illige, Chief Resource Management and Visitor Services Rock Creek Park*