

COLVIN RUN MILL

(From a pamphlet once handed out at the Mill)

Situated near the Difficult Run on the Leesburg Turnpike, the Colvin Run Mill stands on what was once a major artery from the rich farming valley of the Shenandoah to the busy maritime port of Alexandria. It was a merchant mill engaged in buying and selling grain and flour as well as an important facility serving the local neighborhood and grinding to the customer's order. Merchant mills became important to America's and northern Virginia's—economy throughout the eighteenth century. In some communities a single mill operating but one day each week could supply the entire neighborhood. That day came to be known as "milling day." In many communities the gristmills became sizeable and profitable commercial enterprises during the last years of the colonial period. They continued to provide the area's major means of earning credits in the markets of other regions until the centers of wheat production and flour milling shifted westward during the 1830's.



Local tradition holds that the Colvin Run Mill was built in 1794, and this date had been painted on the mill's east wall. This view conflicts with the opinions of architectural historians who have examined the existing physical evidence — building style, materials, hardware — and concluded that the mill probably was built sometime around 1810.

The mill is closely modeled upon the principles invented by Oliver Evans (1755-1819), whose book, *The Young Millwright and Millers Guide*, revolutionized milling. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries hand labor performed practically all the tasks of milling except turning the millstones. In Evans' revolutionary design, each floor served a specific function, and the grain was transformed into food in a continuous, smooth-running process.

Entering the mill on the second floor, where it was weighed by the miller, the grain was carried by an elevator made up of a long canvas belt with buckets attached every six inches—the whole of which was powered by the waterwheel—to a smutter where it was cleaned. (The smutter gets its name from a black fungus called smut which grows on grains. By tumbling and blowing the smutter cleans away this fungus and other impurities.) From here the cleaned grain moved through a chute to the garner (storage bins) located on the third floor above each millstone area on the floor below. Grain was released from the garner into the hopper above the millstones where it automatically fell into the center of the stones for

grinding. From there the flour was taken by another elevator to the fourth floor where it was dumped into the hopper boy for cooling and drying.

The dried flour then fell through a chute down to the bolting chest on the third floor. The bolting chest was a giant "sifter" that produced much finer flour than unbolted whole wheat flour. From here, the flour fell through one last chute to the second floor for either packaging or storage.

In the entire process, the miller had only to weigh the grain, check the mill equipment and millstones, and start the waterwheel!

Evans' designs found their way into mills in many parts of the country. After building his own "Red Clay" Mill near Camden, New Jersey, in the late 1780's, he traveled south to Maryland where he helped the prosperous Ellicott family erect a huge complex of grist mills near Baltimore, in what is now Ellicott City. George Washington and Thomas Jefferson were among Evans' Virginia customers, having their own mills based upon the inventor's plans. And Andrew Ellicott himself operated a number of mills designed by Evans in northern Virginia.

Because of the proximity of those other mills to the Great Falls area, the mill at Colvin Run may have originally been built to Evans' specifications. The specifications may have been known to William Shepard, who is believed to have settled on the Colvin Run Mill site and built a mill there. Unfortunately, there is no conclusive proof one way or the other, but when the derelict ruins of Colvin Run Mill were examined in the early 1960's they revealed a number of similarities to the floor plans and cross sections printed in Evans' book.

The mill's most prosperous period occurred during the years 1883-1934 during the ownership of Addison Millard of Frederick County, Maryland. During Millard's ownership, the mill pond and mill race were rebuilt and the mill machinery was modernized. The greatest change was the actual grinding process. A new machine, called a "roller mill," proved more efficient (but not necessarily better in quality) than the "old fashioned" revolving mill stones. By 1930 it was estimated that over one million bushels of grain had passed through Colvin Run Mill.

Throughout its history the mill at Colvin Run was the center of a small cluster of neighborhood services reflecting the daily life of rural northern Virginia. There are numerous references to blacksmith shops and country stores. Gazetteers and business directories trace the growth of a thriving rural community at Colvin Run.

In 1965 the Fairfax County Park Authority acquired the mill, and in an effort to recapture an unhurried era undertook a full-scale restoration. Because the building and its machines had undergone so many changes over more than a century it was decided that the plans of Oliver Evans would serve as the basis of the restoration. Detailed inspection of the ruined mill in the early 1960's supported that decision, because the decayed structure and the layout of the surviving portions of the original mill suggested many similarities to the Evans' scheme.

As the visitor passes through the mill today he sees the results of many skilled craftsmen who have quite literally recreated the past. Using traditional tools and skills these craftsmen have built the structure, made the bricks, and assembled the machines. Everything in the

mill, with the exception of a few steel parts included for modern safety and convenience, is handmade from wood. Timber was hand-hewn to precise specifications. Bricks and glass have been made to specification. As in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the mill operates solely by water power. Water from the Colvin Run is diverted into a lagoon and millrace, and flows over the handmade overshot waterwheel (so-called because the water flows over the top of the wheel). The restoration was recognized in 1973 when the Metropolitan Chapter of the American Institute for Architects awarded the mill its first prize for excellence in historic architecture (and was subsequently recognized by the American Society of Mechanical Engineers).

Today Colvin Run Mill grinds again, providing flour and corn meal not for the ports of the world or for the neighborhood households, but for visitors from both. Sitting as a reminder of the beginnings of America's technological might, the Colvin Run Mill today is a modern masterpiece of craftsmanship. The skill that recreated it reminds the visitor of the Yankee ingenuity which first characterized American technology.

Colvin Run Park is today the center of an active crafts program, which is a part of the historic preservation program of the Fairfax County Park Authority. The visitor to the Park may visit The Miller's House where the best in the fine arts are exhibited for viewing and for purchase. On the grounds as well as in The Miller's House are working artisans and craftsmen who each weekend demonstrate such skills as print-making, painting, silversmithing, pewtering, coppering, blacksmithing, weaving, dye making, spinning, and a variety of other crafts.

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