

## George Washington Visits Colvin Run-November 7, 1799

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From Washington's diary, we know he spent the night of November 7, 1799 at Wiley's Tavern above Difficult Run, on the Middle Turnpike (Route 7), where Colvin Run enters the larger stream. We know from Washington's letters that he came to Wiley's Tavern to investigate the meets and bounds of his 300 acre property that today is the location of the Colvin Run Mill. Washington bought this property from his friend Brian Fairfax in 1763 since it contained the Bridge Branch (Colvin Run) that fell from its source around the current Lake Fairfax about 100' to its join with Difficult Run at the Middle Turnpike. Such a property was referred to as a "mill seat" in its legal description at the time. Since water was the major source of power in early America, mill seats had important economic potential. Washington had been a land surveyor since the age of 15 and did his work in the western areas being explored and opened to settlement by Europeans. He was aware of the good buys. After completing his presidency in 1797, Washington devoted his attention to his lands and the preparation of his will and a business plan for the operation of his plantation properties. His will lists over \$500,000.00 worth of real property in addition to his five farms at Mount Vernon and his many slaves. Washington decided to sell his 300 acre Colvin Run property and have greater cash for his heirs. His visit to Colvin Run on November 7 & 8, 1799 was to take care of matters related to the sale. It is a measure of the man and life in early America that the former President and General, two months before his death, would spend two days walking the boundary of this remote property to prepare for its sale.

The property would not finally change hands until August 22, 1811, when it was deeded to the first miller, Philip Carper by William Sheppard. Sheppard was with Washington on that November 7<sup>th</sup> day in 1799. Sheppard, Thomas Gunnell, and William Wiley were neighbors of the 300 acre property area and walked the property boundary with the former President on that day. Within two months, on December 14, 1799, Washington would die at Mount Vernon. The story we tell here begins on November 7, 1799 and ends with the sale of the mill and 90 acres of the property by William Sheppard to Philip Carper on August 22, 1811.

Another character in our story is Washington's nephew Lawrence Lewis. By Washington's will, Lawrence Lewis and his bride Eleanore Parke Custis would receive the 1000 acre estate we now know as Woodlawn. Eleanore Custis was the granddaughter of Martha Washington. Lawrence Lewis would become the chief executor of Washington's estate and responsible for the sale of the Colvin Run tract after Washington's sudden death. Lewis would work with William Sheppard to arrange for the sale.

This is ironic since Washington distrusted Sheppard and suspected him of trying in a devious way to seize part of the Colvin Run property. In a letter to the Virginia Land Office of November 8, 1799 written from Wiley's Tavern, Washington states: "I have discovered that a Mr. William Sheppard who was with me on the survey, and who has acted a very disingenuous part upon the occasion ....". In a letter of November 20, 1799

on the survey, Washington states “ and the only person with me (William Sheppard) who had it in his power to give correct information had views quite incompatible therewith; and to mislead and deceive, were the sole objects of his attendance;”. At the end of this letter, Washington says flat out: “I dislike very much the disingenuous conduct and concealment of Mr. Sheppard in this business”.

A few years later in January 2003, the same William Sheppard would agree with Lawrence Lewis to purchase the Colvin Run property from the Washington Estate. Sheppard failed to make the required payments and the Estate foreclosed the intended purchase. However, the foreclosure was after Sheppard and the Estate completed construction of the mill. And so the man, William Sheppard, who Washington disliked and distrusted was able to work with Washington’s heir and nephew Lawrence Lewis, to build the mill, sell it to Philip Carper, and pay his debts to the Estate for the land while retaining perhaps over 200 acres for himself. This man so disliked by Washington was able to convince the much younger and inexperienced Lawrence Lewis to make the deal. We wonder if George would be happy with the Sheppard deal or feel that the devious Sheppard got the better his young heir and nephew.

The leading figures, in this twelve year story are Washington, Sheppard, Lewis, and Philip Carper. Washington was the person with the vision of a mill and the owner of the site; Sheppard and Lewis developed and sold the property for profit, and Philip Carper, miller, entrepreneur and business man, bought the mill and established the first national manufacturing factory in our community.

Much more detail on this history can be found in Washington’s papers at <http://gwpapers.virginia.edu> or in unpublished manuscripts at the Colvin Run Mill Historic Site by Sam Swartz and Debbie Rob