

THE MILL AS AN ARTIFACT OF THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE IN THE BUILDING OF AMERICA

Cathy Quering,
Introduction to Curation
Historic Preservation Certificate Program
NOVA at the Loudon Campus

From the forward of Artifacts and the American Past by Thomas J Schlereth:

“Artifacts and useful objects are a part of all recorded history. They are devised, invented and made as adjuncts to the human being’s ability to accomplish work or enjoy pleasure. A close examination of any object...can reflect...the natural materials at hand, the structure of commerce, and the extent of man’s scientific and emotional sophistication.” – R. Latham, “The Artifact as Cultural Cipher” in Who Designs America.

The role of mills in the New World was paramount to the success of the early settlers. To build homes they needed the lumber from the mills and to eat and feed their livestock, they needed the gristmills for the processed grain and flour and there were woolen mills for clothes and linens. They also ground gypsum to use as fertilizer. The mills usually had on site a blacksmith and coopersmith and someone had to make the bricks. In addition to blacksmiths, coopersmiths and tanners setting up shop by the mills, the communities grew there. In the new communities, people needed to rely on one another. The Blacksmith needed wooden handles from the woodworker and the woodworker needed tools made by the Blacksmith. People bartered for goods and services. Roads were built to the mills and from the mills to the market. The mill was the place where the people in the community congregated to get local and distant news. They were also frequently the post office, bank and general store and some even had distilleries. The mill owner wore many hats and was so vital to the community that from 1705-1766 all millers were exempt from military service in the local militia.

When tobacco got too expensive to grow and harvest and had depleted the soil’s nutrients, the farmers started growing wheat and the flour industry grew. By 1853, in Loudoun County, there were 6 saw mills, 9 grist mills, 17 grist and saw mills, 21 merchant mills, and 17 merchant and saw mills combined. Milling became the major industry. In the 1850’s and 1860’s, Virginia was the fourth largest wheat-producing state and Loudoun one of the state’s most prolific counties due to new farming methods and tools. Aldie Mill was the largest in Loudoun County and is still one of the few operating mills today. It was also among the mills in the 19th century to incorporate the new technology of Oliver Evans’ labor saving machinery.

Some of the mills only took care of the local community’s needs but many transported their product to the Alexandria markets and overseas. Over the years the flour went by river ferry, roads and trains. Since the Potomac was the most direct route from the Ohio Valley to the tidewater and had many navigational obstacles, George Washington, himself a mill owner, introduced a bill to build canals around them and helped create the Potomac Canal Company, the rights of which were transferred to the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal Co. The Little River Turnpike was a main thoroughfare used, but many early local roads were built to and from the mills. There are still roads named after the mills they serviced.

SPOOM (Society for the Preservation of Old Mills) is one organization today preserving mills and educating the public about the historical contributions of Mills. Aldie Mill and Colvin Run Mill still grind flour and have events like Living History Re-enactors and tours. Visitors can also rent out the space for special events.





