

Pierce Mill
Rock Creek Park
Washington, D. C.

HABS No. DC-111

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PHOTOGRAPHS
Written Historical and Descriptive Data
District No. DC

Historic American Buildings Survey
By HABS Headquarters
for
Delos H. Smith, District Officer
1707 Eye Street, N. W., Wash., D. C.

PIERCE MILL
Washington, D. C.
Rock Crsek Park

Owner: U. S. Governmsnt.

Date of Erection: 1829.

Architect: Not known.

Builder: Isaac Pierce.

Present Condition: Good, restored 1935.

Number of Stories: Built on Hill, 2 in front, 3 in back.

Materials of Construction: Stone, excspt North gable of wood.

Other Existing Records: As noted in tsxt.

Additional Data: (See following pages)

PIERCE MILL
Washington, D. C.

Pierce Mill in Rock Creek Park is situated on a tract of land* which included portions of three early English land patents. One of these, known as "Re-Survey on New Seat" was patented to George Rsd in 1747. Another, known as "The Gift", patented to Samuel Beall in 1762, passed to William Deakins, a prominent Revolutionary patriot, who conveyed it by deed to Isaac Piercs in 1794.** The third patent included in the immediate parcel of land surrounding the Pierce Mill was one patented to James White on March 18, 1772, and known as "Mill Seat". The southern extremity of this tract was included in the land deeded by William Deakins to Isaac Piercs in 1794.

Isaac Piercs (the name was originally spelled "Pearce" and later "Piercs") was the pioneer of that family in the District of Columbia.*** He was descended from George Pearce of Somers County, England, who, with his wife, Ann Gains, settled in Chester County, Pennsylvania, in 1684. George Pearce was of Quaker Stock, his name first appearing at the Chicester Friends Meeting in 1686. He was a considerable land-owner and a substantial member of the community, representing Chester County in the Provincial Assembly of 1706.

His second son, Joshua Feirce, was born in England in 1684. He married (first) Ann Mercer of Westtown, Pennsylvania, and (second) Rachel Gilpin, of Birmingham, of that State. The latter was descended from Richard de Gylpin, who came into possession of the Manor of Kentmore in 1206, during the reign of King John.

Isaac Feirce was born in Chester County, Pennsylvania, on April 9, 1756. He was a son of Joshua and Rachel Feirce, and although the date of his arrival in the region about Georgetown is not definitely known, it must have been prior to 1790, as his name figures in the census for Maryland at that time. Mr. Francis D. Shoemaker, his great-grandson, believes that he came to the District in 1785.

* Parcel No. 75 on the map prepared by the Commission for the selection of land in Rock Creek Park, filed in the Chief Surveyor's Office of the District Building, Washington, D. C.

** Recorded January 7, 1795, in Liber B2, folio 156, of land records of the District of Columbia.

*** For genealogy of the Pierce and Shoemaker families, see: Spencer, R. H., Genealogical and Memorial Encyclopedia of the State of Maryland, American Historical Society, 1919, Shoemaker, B. H., Genealogy of Shoemaker Family, J. B. Lippincott Co., Philadelphia, 1903

When Isaac Pierce first settled in what is now Rock Creek Park, he found a two-story frame mill very near the site of the present stone construction. This mill had an undershot waterwheel, and contained two "runner" wheels.

Newspaper clippings from the files of the Public Library in Washington, D. C., show that Georgetown and the vicinity around Washington was formerly quite active as a milling center. From a newspaper clipping dated September 19, 1871, seven mills are listed in Georgetown. They ranged from two burrs to eleven burrs, with a daily output ranging from 120 barrels to 800 barrels.

Formerly there was a string of old mills along Rock Creek, which must have been somewhat more important as a watercourse than it is now. Mrs. William Thornton intimates the former magnitude of the Creek in the following entry in her diary for August 9, 1800: "Four horses drowned in Rock Creek."*

Among the most important of the eight or more mills along the creek during the early part of the 19th century was the Patterson Paper Mill. The Lyon's Flour Mill, farther up, was advertised for sale in December, 1873, as a "large merchant mill in good order... with the whole water power of Rock Creek." The John Quincy Adams Mill was situated within the present confines of the Zoo. A description of it appeared in the National Intelligencer for August 5, 1867: "The mill is driven by an overshot wheel of twelve feet in diameter, the water being conducted over the wheel by a canal from the dam up the creek. The mill, with three runs of stones, when in full work, makes two hundred barrels of flour daily. It has been this season turning out daily some hundred and fifty barrels." The Blagden and Pierce Mills were farther up stream.

By 1794 Isaac and Betsy Pierce were established in what was then Prince George's County and later Montgomery County, Maryland. By 1800 he had acquired from 1,600 to 2,000 acres of land stretching from Chevy Chase to the Zoo, broken only by about forty-nine acres of land belonging to the Blagden Mill property.

In 1801 he built a spring house which is still standing today. Here the milk and butter were kept cool. An old stone jutting out from the side of this spring house often served as a seat, so Mr. Francis Shoemaker states. The spring is a good one, but the Government has put in drains connecting it with the sewage system and when heavy rains occur there is a back flow from the sewer into the spring, so I have been told. If this still maintains, it could be corrected by opening the pipes and supplying them with air vents.

* Duhamel, James F., "Tiber Creek", Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Vol. 28, p. 204.

Southwest of the springhouse is a modern dwelling which occupied the former site of Isaac Pierce's home. This was an old house of hewn oak, with wrought iron nails and wooden pegs, which Isaac had found at the time of his arrival in this section and improved in 1810. This was torn down by Pierce Shoemaker who erected on the site a stone house in 1876. In 1910 Mr. E. S. Newman remodeled this dwelling, so that there is now nothing left of the original old picturesque home of the Pierce family. The history of these changes can be read on the western gable of the house, where a plaque contains these initials and dates:

B	P.S.	E.S.N.
1 P	1876	1910
1810		

Behind the family dwelling was a house in which the slaves were quartered, according to Mr. Francis Shoemaker. The house now owned by Dr. H. H. Kerr (diagonally across from the mill, on Tilden Street) was built in 1811 and was intended for a distillery. Fine peach brandy is reported to have been made there and it was commonly known as the "Still House". Cider was also stored there. In 1878, however, after one of the principal barns on the estate had burned down, this building was used as a barn. On the north gable of this house is to be found the following inscription: "B I P 1811."

MILL

Mr. Francis Shoemaker and various writers maintain that the present mill was built in 1820. However, there is to be found on the south gable of the mill's plaque bearing this inscription: "B I P 1829". It is possible that this date was added to the gable at a later time, when some change was made in the mill. What strengthens this theory is the fact that the south gable is constructed of stone whereas the north gable is made of wood. "B I P" is thought by members of the Pierce-Shoemaker families to mean "Betsy and Isaac Pierce" (Isaac having married Elizabeth Cloud), but some writers think it stands for "Built by Isaac Pierce."

The mill is a well-preserved, well proportioned structure of blue granite. This stone was taken from a quarry on the Broad Branch Road, according to Mr. Francis Shoemaker. This quarry, he says, was on the left side of Broad Branch Road not far from the stream of that same name, which is the first stream above Pierce Mill.

In 1840 the original undershot water wheel was supplanted by an overshot one. This in turn was changed in 1876 to a "forty-inch Loeffler turbine" wheel which, as Mr. Shoemaker states, "Sucked in the water and carried it into the mill."

There are two mill stones at Pierce Mill today. One of these was bought in 1880 by Mr. Francie D. Shoemaker from a firm in Georgetown for \$75.00. This was an imported stone intended for grinding wheat and flour. The other stone used in the mill at the time that Mr. Shoemaker purchased the aforementioned one was of flint, intended for grinding corn, and had been there for some time.

The original dam, so Mr. Shoemaker says, was above the site of the present concrete one, at a point near where the bend of the Creek now is. This dam crossed the creek at an angle. It was washed away during a period of high water in 1876, and since that time there have been three or four dams built between the site of the original and the present one. As late as 1904 there was a wooden dam over Rock Creek near this point. At that time the annual report of the committee on Parks and Reservations of the Washington Board of Trade gave this statement: "The old wooden dam at Pierce Mill having been washed out, a new dam of concrete has been built. It produces a waterfall about seven feet high".

Contrary to popular opinion, Mr. Isaac Pierce never "ran" the mill. He was a millwright, not a miller. Nor did his heirs ever run it: Mr. Abner Pierce was a stone mason, and Mr. Pierce Shoemaker was a jeweller. Mr. Isaac Pierce had a considerable number of slaves to work on his estate and millers were hired to do the actual running of the mill.

The miller occupied a small frame house across the road from Pierce Mill below the property now belonging to Dr. Kerr. The various millers who occupied it were, to quote Mr. Shoemaker: "Donald, Tennyson, Gaskins, Flecker, Donald again, Gaskine again, and the White Brothers. The latter were at the Mill as late as 1917, under Government administration, but they didn't pay the Government". There is an old desk in the mill today which has stood in the mill for many years, and whose legs have been cut off "so as to make it modern". Upon this desk is carved the following inscription: White & Bro. 1876 96 '7". Mr. A. P. White gave the following account of the last time Pierce Mill functioned as a mill. This was in 1897.

"I was grinding a load of rye for a neighbor when the main shaft of the mill broke. I was about half through with the work, and the neighbor had to haul his unground rye away, and I guess he never got it ground. That was the last time the mill was operated. I have been told that I might make some arrangements with the park authorities to fix up and run the mill again, but after putting it to work again the Government might want to change things around, and I would be taking too big a chance. A water mill grinding wheat and corn in the capitol of the United States would be a strange sight to most of the city bred people of Washington."

Adjoining and in connection with the flour mill was a saw mill. This was situated below Fiercs Mill Road where the stream from Linnean Hill joins Rock Creek. The rscce for this saw mill came down in front of the door of Fierce Mill. Both Isaac Fierce and Fierce Shoemaker had saw mills, but in nsither case were they found to be profitable.

Business at Fierce Mill flourished particularly between 1860 and 1870. This was considered the "boom" period in the history of ths mill. Large quantities of corn, whest and rye were hauled by teams from all the surrounding towns and villages - from Georgstown, Rockville, Bladsnsburg, and Falls Church. Saturdays presented a scsne of great activity in the vicinity of the old mill. The horses and teams were so many around the mill door that it was difficult to gst by. The mill did much business on ordinary days, too, it being a dsily occurrence to ses from ten to twslve teams and a number of boys on horsebsck from the surrounding country with grist.

OWNERSHIP OF FIERCE MILL

1. Isaac Fierce held the mill from the time of his arrival in Rock Creek Psrk to the time of his death in 1841.

2. Isaac Fierce died in 1841, leaving his estats to his son Abner C. Fierce.*

3. Abner Fierce died in 1851 and he devised the mill property to his wife's nephew, Fierce Shoemaker.**

4. Fierce Shoemaker held the Fierce Mill property until it was purchased by the United States Government in 1892, through condemnation proceedings. At that time the Government condemned 450 acres of land in Rock Crsek Park for inclusion at a price of \$450,000. Psrcl 75, upon which Fierce Mill stands (15.612 acres in all), was bought by the Government for only \$16,306.00. Today it is worth probably nine or tsn times that much.

Prepared by: Ruth E. Butler,
Historical Assistant.

Reviewed 1936, H.C.F.

1. Last will and testament dated Nov. 14, 1835, probated Jan. 7, 1842, rscrded in Liber 5 of Wills, Folio 239, in the office of the Rsgister of Wills for the District of Columbia.
2. Last will and testament dated Jan. 19, 1848, probated July 5, 1851, in Liber 6 of Wills, Folio 395, in the office of the Register of Wills for the District of Columbia.

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~ Pierce Mill ~
Rock Creek Park



NATIONAL CAPITAL PARKS
WASHINGTON

UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
NATIONAL CAPITAL PARKS

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The original dam is said to have been above the site of the present concrete one, at a point near where the bend of the Creek now is. This dam crossed the creek at an angle. It was washed away during a period of high water in 1876, and since that time there have been three or four dams built between the site of the original and the present one. As late as 1904, there was a wooden dam over Rock Creek near this point. At that time the annual report of the committee on Parks and Reservations of the Washington Board of Trade gave this statement: "The old wooden dam at Pierce Mill having been washed out, a new dam of concrete has been built. It produces a waterfall about seven feet high."

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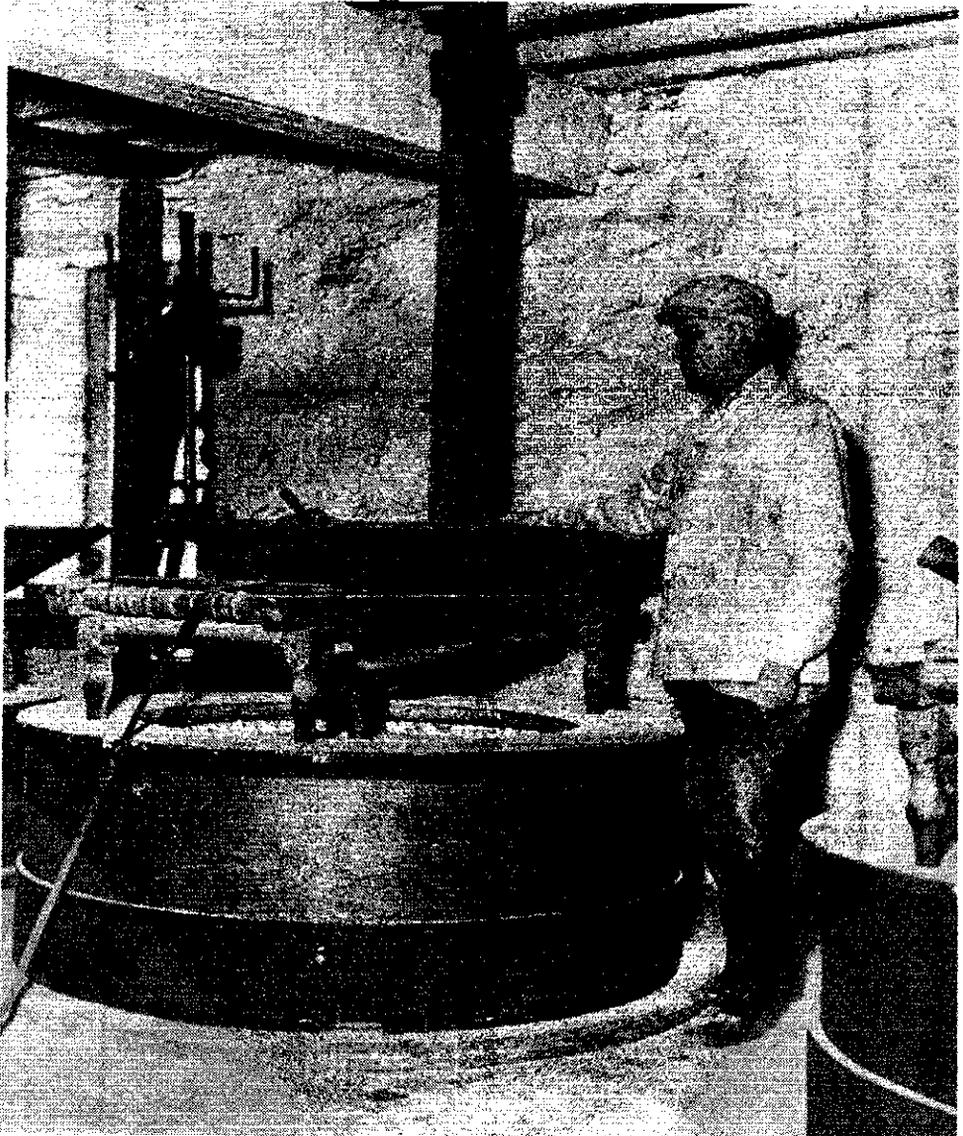
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RESTORATION

The restoration of Pierce Mill was accomplished as a Public Works Administration project authorized by Harold L. Ickes, Public Works Administrator, on July 15, 1934. Funds were made available on October 8, 1934, and construction work commenced on December 1, 1934. Work was completed on October 1, 1936, and the mill placed in operation on December 1, 1936.

The mill was restored and is being operated as an educational and historical project. The meal produced may be used in the cafeterias in the government buildings, or sold to retail purchasers at the mill. The operators may also grind grain for farmers from nearby communities on a commission basis.

The restored mill was first opened to the public on January 10, 1937.



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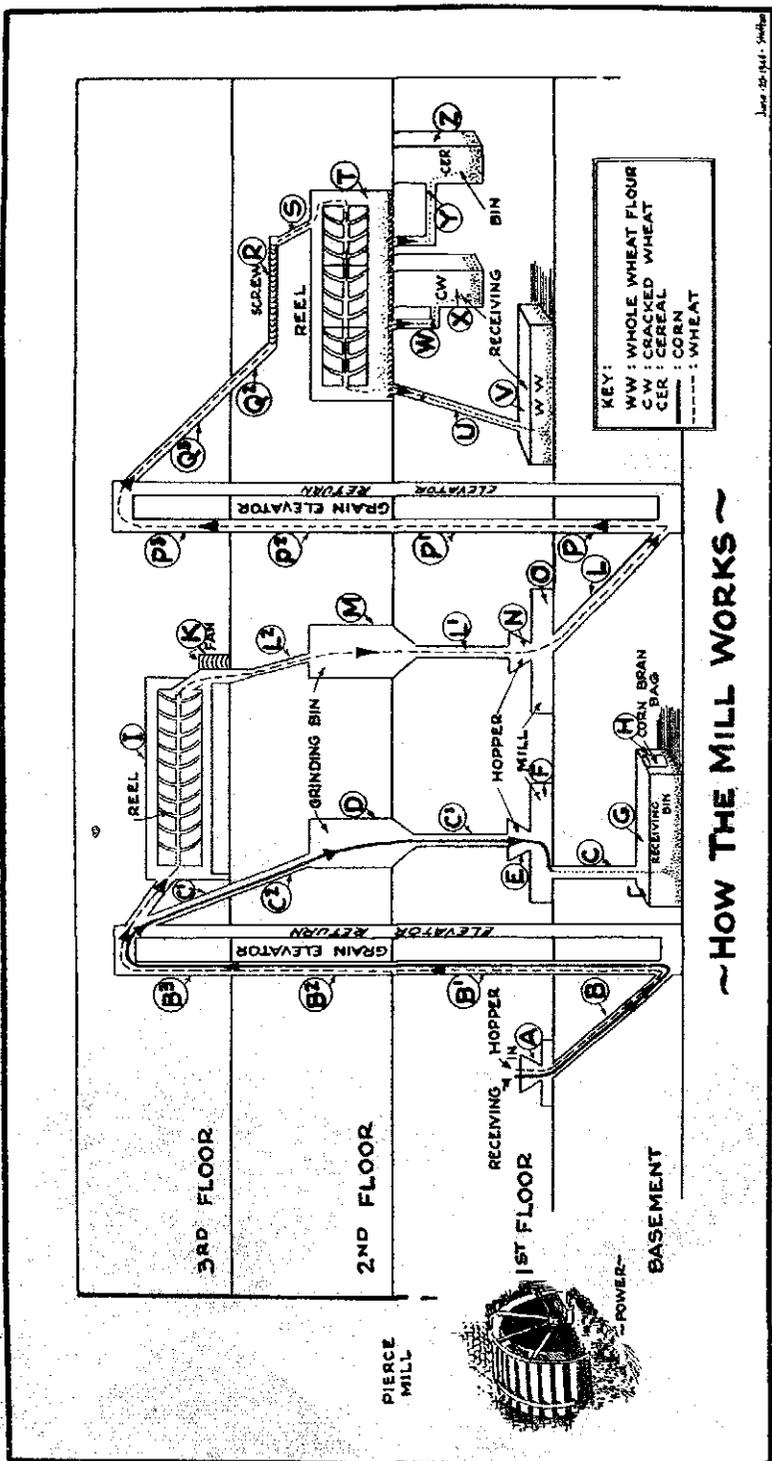
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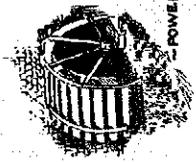
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June 25-1914 - 5447

~ HOW THE MILL WORKS ~

PIERCE MILL



KEY:
 WW : WHOLE WHEAT FLOUR
 CW : CRACKED WHEAT
 CER : CEREAL
 C : CORN
 W : WHEAT

Addendum To:
Pierce Mill
Tilden Street & Beach Drive, NW
Washington
District of Columbia

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MEASURED DRAWINGS

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

ADDENDUM TO:
PIERCE MILL
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Tilden Street & Beach Drive Northwest
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PHOTOGRAPHS

PAPER COPIES OF COLOR TRANSPARENCIES

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National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001