

"Shoomac Park" (Robeson House)
Ridge Avenue and Wissahickon Drive, northeast corner
Philadelphia
Philadelphia County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-1067

HABS
PA
51 PHILA
259-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
Reduced Copies of Measured Drawings

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Eastern Office, Division of Design and Construction
143 South Third Street
Philadelphia 6, Pennsylvania

ADDENDUM
FOLLOWS...

"SHOOMAC PARK" (ROBESON HOUSE)

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Address: Northeast corner of Ridge Avenue and Wissahickon Drive, Philadelphia, Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania.

Present Owner: Fairmount Park Commission

Present Occupant: Vacant

Present Use: To be demolished May 1961

Brief Statement of Significance: This house is associated with one of the earliest grist mills in Pennsylvania. It was located on nearby Wissahickon Creek. The mill site also enters into General Washington's plan of attack on Germantown.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Original and subsequent owners: The house appears to have been built during the ownership of Rudiman Robeson, who sold it to John Vanderen in 1762. The property had been in the Robeson family since 1690. Vanderen owned the house and mill throughout the Revolutionary War.
2. Date of erection: Probably 1759.
3. Builder, suppliers: John Renshaw may have furnished the stone. On 19 November 1759, John Roberts wrote, "At the request of Rudiman Robeson and John Renshaw junr, I measured the Quantity of stones which sd Renshaw procured in Building sd Robeson's House and find the same to Contain one Hundred and fourty three perches." Logan Papers, vol. 14, p. 36, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
4. Notes on alterations and additions: There are no documented alterations, but the physical evidence indicates that the house was originally only 22'-9" wide, and was increased to 38'-3" at some unknown time. (apparently c. roughly 1840).
5. Important old views: See India ink drawing (c. 1834), reproduced as the frontispiece in Susan Stroud, Historical and Genealogical Account of Andrew Robeson...and His Descendants (Philadelphia: 1916)

6. Sources of information: "Shoomac Park," a research report by Dr. Margaret Bailey Tinkcom, 28 February 1957, typewritten ms., Philadelphia Historical Commission. This report cites other public records and general published works which mention this house. See Supplemental Material.
- B. Historical Events Connected with the Structure: The Vanderen Mill on the Wissahickon Creek was one of several ordered to be disabled by General Washington in 1778. This was done to reduce the food supply to the British troops then occupying Philadelphia. The road up the Wissahickon Valley was strategically important as an access to Philadelphia, and it was also intended to play a role in the Battle of Germantown.
- C. Supplemental Material: The following is a copy of a typewritten report by Dr. Margaret Bailey Tinkcom, Research Historian, Philadelphia Historical Commission, 28 February 1957:

SHOOMAC PARK

William Penn's Patent No. 26, recorded in Pennsylvania in 1684, granted to Robert Turner "five hundred acres of land above Skoolkill falls called Shoomac Park" in return for "One English silver sixpence" to be paid in Philadelphia on the "first day of the first month of every year." (W Penn to R. Turner, 24th day, 4th mo., 1684, in Penn Papers, Deed Box, HSP) Turner's grant is duly shown at the juncture of the Schuylkill and Wissahickon, on Thomas Holme's "Map of the Improved Part of the Province of Pensilvania" (1687. In APS).

No buildings are marked on Holme's map so that it is impossible to tell from it whether Turner himself "improved" and "seated" the property "according to Regulations" as his patent required him to do or whether he considered that he had fulfilled his obligation to the Proprietor in this regard when he leased to Joshua Tittery in 1686. For these fifty and a half acres, Tittery agreed to pay the not inconsiderable rent of sixpence per acre semi-annually at Turner's house in Philadelphia (Robeson, Historical and Genealogical Account of Andrew Robeson... and his Descendants, P. 10) The agreement provided Turner with a nice profit and indicates the value of the mill site at Shoomac Park to the economy of seventeenth-century Philadelphia.

The property continued to appreciate in cash value and in 1690 Andrew Robeson, sen., purchased Shoomac Park and also bought "for £60 sterling, Penn's currency" from Joshua Tittery his lease right in the mill site and water power. Robeson probably made his home at Shoomac Park, and in partnership with Charles Saunders, operated a flour mill there. This is said to have been the second grist mill to be set up in Pennsylvania, incidentally. (Eberlein and Hubbard, Portrait of a Colonial City, P. 116. According to the Duc de la Rochefoucault, it was the first such mill. See Travels through the United States of

North America..., 1795, 1796 and 1797, I,7) Whether the mill was the first or the second of its kind was much less important to its owners than the fact that it was very profitable. There can be no doubt of this, for in 1693, just three years after Robeson and Saunders went into business, the mill property was valued at £350 for tax purposes. (William B. Rawle, ed., "First Tax List for Philadelphia County, 1693," PMHB 8:95)

Andrew Robeson, sen., was not a simple miller, nor were his interests limited to his property at Shoomac Park. He had come to the New World from Ireland and settled with his family in Gloucester County, New Jersey, about 1676. There he acquired a considerable amount of land (see Robeson, Hist. & Gen. Account... pp 7-9 for a list of his holdings) and as a Proprietor of the Province of West Jersey and a member of the "First Council of Proprietors" (1687), he took an active part in the affairs of the Colony. (New Jersey Archives, 21:405) And when Robeson moved to Philadelphia, he busied himself with public matters in Pennsylvania -- he was appointed to Governor Benjamin Fletcher's council in 1693 -- as formerly he had done with those of West Jersey. (Robeson, Hist. & Gen. Account, p 6) When he died in November 1694, the Robesons were well established among the first families of Pennsylvania.

In 1702, Shoomac Park was purchased by Andrew Robeson, Jr., the nephew of the first Andrew Robeson. Andrew Jr., was about as conspicuous in the public affairs of West Jersey and of Pennsylvania as his uncle had been, serving for a time as Chief Justice of Pennsylvania. (Lawrence Lewis, Jr., "Courts of Pennsylvania in the 17th Century" PMHB 5:165) He settled at Shoomac Park in 1702 and by 1714, he had added some fifteen hundred acres to the Robeson property there. The Robeson house and mill are marked on the early maps, but in all probability the house did not attain its present proportions until much later. (Thomas Shoemaker dates the main part of the house from about 1760. See note on the back of a photograph of "High Bridge Mansion" in the Shoemaker Collection, portfolio 3-b, HSP. An item in the Logan papers, Hsp, 14:36, might be cited in support of this statement: "At the request of Rudeman Robeson and John Renshaw junr, I measured the Quantity of stones which sd Renshaw procured in Building sd Robeson's House and find the same to Contain one Hundred and fourty three perches." John Roberts. November 19th, 1759")

Andrew Robeson, Jr., continued to run the flour mill and in addition he operated a ferry from just above the mill across the Schuylkill to the Lower Merion shore. Then as now, Shoomac Park, standing at the head of the Wissahickon Valley, commanded an important crossroads. Travelers and waggoners going northwest from Philadelphia moved up the Ridge Road (called Wissahickon Road on the Scull & Heap "Map of Philadelphia" 1750) by the Robeson house and mill, and waggons and horsemen going southwest from Germantown came to Robeson's ferry to cross the Schuylkill on their way to the Conestoga Road. Conversely, travelers from the back country, went past Robeson's on their way to Philadelphia and those living west of the Schuylkill, used his ferry to cross to the east side. (Charles R. Barker, "The Stony part of

the Schuylkill", PMHB, 50:363. By mid-century the ferry was kept by Peter Righter and known as Righter's ferry. See also: "Plan of a Road to the Wissahickon from Eighth Street of Philadelphia," c 1720, in HDP) Situated as it was, the Shoomac Park mill could not fail to prosper. It provided flour for the Philadelphia market and for export, and ground the grain (sic) for the local farmers, including some whose farms were as far away as East Vincent Township in Chester County" (PMHB, 34:199)

The Robesons had sold their mill and Shoomac Park before the Revolution disrupted Philadelphia's quiet ways. In 1750, Henry Shellenberger, "the miller who lives in Germantown" advertised in Sower's Pennsylvanische Berichte (March 16, 1750) that he would operate the late Andrew Robeson's mill. A dozen years later, both the mill and the house were in the hands of John Vandeeren (See Deeds, HDP, specifically, deed between Rudiman Robeson and John Vanderen, May 22, 1762; between Edward Robeson and John Vandeering, June 1, 1768; and between Edward Robeson's estate and John Vanderen, March 23, 1771) The mill property and the house were owned in the 1770's and '80's by John Vandeerin and the mill figures in Washington's orders on at least two occasions. On October 3, 1777, the General Orders outlining the plan of attack on Germantown, directed General Armstrong "to pass down the ridge road pass by Leverings Tavern and take guides to cross the Wissahickon creek up the head of John Vandeering's mill-dam..." Armstrong was ordered to capture the pickets stationed on the left of Vandeerin's mill. (Fitzpatrick, ed., Writings of George Washington, 9:307-308) Armstrong met with little opposition on his way to Germantown but he did not press his attack aggressively and his failure in this regard contributed to the loss of the battle.

Shoomac Park not only served Washington as a convenient guide post (sic) by means of which he could locate for his officers the line of British pickets, south of Germantown, but the mill itself played a part later on in his plans for dislodging the British from Philadelphia. On February 1, 1778, he wrote to Major John Jameson: "Sir: The quantity of provision, Flour especially, that is carried into Philadelphia, is by all accounts so great that the British Army is well supplied with almost every article....I know of no other way to prevent the supply of Flour, but disabling the Mills as we have not Guards sufficient to stop all the Roads. You are, therefore, in concert with General Lacey to fix upon a certain time and attempt to disable all the Mills upon Pennepack, Frankfort and Wissahickon Creeks beginning with Morris's at Frankfort, Vanderen's on Wissahickon and Lewis's at Pennepack... As it will be impossible for you to remove the stones, I am advised to take off the spindles and saw off the spikes of the water wheels... You must be fully sensible of the necessity of secrecy, and therefore none should be intrusted but the Officers who are to execute the business, and those should be such who have no connections in the part of the Country where the Mills are..." (Fitzpatrick, Writings, 10:413) It is interesting that, after the British left Philadelphia, Vandeerin made no claim for damages to his property inflicted by the occupying troops. This suggests that the British found his mill as useful as Washington thought it to be and, in consequence, took care to keep it in working order. (La Rochefoucault mentioned passing the British earthworks

as he traveled along the Ridge Road in 1795, he also noted the "ruins of many half burnt and half demolished houses, so many exxpressive (sic) monuments of that inveterate animosity, with which the war was carried on." See Travels, I, 4)

In 1782 Vandeerin put his mill up for sale. His advertisement lists: "A grist mill, with two pair of stones, two boulting chests and hoisting gears complete, which go by water, suitable for either merchant or country work, situate on Wissahickon Creek, a never failing stream...six miles from the city. About 38 acres of land, four acres of which is watered meadow, and...about 25 acres thereof is woodland, well timbered. There are on the premises, a stone dwelling-house, pleasantly situated, a spring house contiguous thereto, and a young thriving orchard... N. B. If the said mill and premises are not sold before the 25th day of March next, they will then be leased." (Advertisement quoted in PMHB, 39:501) Vandeerin evidently found no purchaser, for in December 1789, Peter and Jonathan Robeson, the great-grandsons of Andrew Robeson, jr., bought Shoomac Park, the mill and 263 acres of land from the Vandeerin estate for \$15,400. (Robeson, Hist & Gen. Account.. p 11)

The Robesons carried on the flour milling business successfully at their Wissahickon mill for about fifty years. They ground "from forty-five to about fifty thousand bushels" of wheat annually, procuring their grain from Virginia, New York and the upper parts of Pennsylvania. According to La Rouchefoucault, the grain came from Philadelphia "from which it is brought to the mill which is large enough to contain about ten thousand bushels. Six horses are constantly employed in carrying the meal to Philadelphia, and bring back corn /wheat/ in return. This journey is often performed twice a day. Mr. Robertson /Robeson/ employs about his mill five men, three of whom he pays... The rest are apprentices." (Travels I, 8)

Peter Robeson and his family lived at Shoomac Park, at this period often called Roxborough, until his death in 1838. An india ink drawing, made about 1834, showing Shoomac Park as it was then, is reproduced as the frontispiece in the Historical and Genealogical Account of Andrew Robeson... and His Descendants. Another very similar picture of the house is published in The Portrait of a Colonial City p.117, by Messrs Eberlein and Hubbard. At this time, a flower garden went down from the house to the Creek and an arbor and a summer house provided pleasant places to sit in the summertime. The old house had "quaint, old-style doors in two parts, upper and lower; a wide hall in the middle of the house, running through to the back; low but broad windows with small panes, decorated mantels with large fireplaces and brass scrolls on either side to hold the fire-irons." (Robeson, Hist & Gen. Account.. p. 12) It must indeed have been a "sightly abode."

In 1864 the entire Robeson estate was offered for sale. A plan of the property in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (Mss Division) shows Shoomac Park with mill and a saw mill, this latter mill was south of Ridge Road and west of the Creek. All this part of the es-

tate is marked "D" or "Dobson" and the price \$30,000 has been noted. John and Joseph Dobson, the purchasers, were carpet manufacturers and they carried on their business in the old mill until it was burned in 1866. A new mill was built on the site of the old one and according to Thomas Shoemaker: "This proved a very valuable property, yielding--- six hundred thousand dollars in profits before its purchase by the Park Commission..." (See india ink sketch of John Dobson's mill in Thomas Shoemaker Collection, portfolio 3-b HSP) Incidentally the change of the Shoomac Park mill from a flour to a carpet mill parallels the shift of business interests in Philadelphia. The city was no longer a commercial metropolis, exporting flour and similar commodities to Europe and the West Indies, it had become a manufacturing center and carpets and other textiles were among the more important products of its factories.

The Fairmount Park Commission purchased the mill site and most of the original Robeson tract for the Park in 1872, but the Dobson Company kept the old house and some of the grounds around it. (According to Thomas Shoemaker it was John Dobson who turned Shoomac Park into a tavern.) In 1890, Shoomac Park was described by the Philadelphia Press (issue for August 11) thus: "This building, now known as 'The High Bridge Mansion' still retains somewhat of its old-time appearance, tho' the little front portico has been removed, and a wide porch built across the front and one side. The grading of the grounds necessitated the felling of the lofty plane and butternut trees, and also did away with the arbor and summer house, and the whitewashed stone wall which surrounded the garden;..." (See photo in Thomas Shoemaker Collection, portfolio 3-b; and a water color, c. 1883, reproduced opposite p. 94 in Robeson, Hist & Gen. Account.)

The alterations the Press noted were, unfortunately not the last or the most unsightly to be made at Shoomac Park, but although changes disfigured the old house, they did not materially affect its basic structure. Restored to its original appearance, Shoomac Park could again command the entrance to the Wissahickon Valley and serve as a reminder of the commercial and industrial growth of Philadelphia, and as a monument to a campaign in the Revolutionary War which, although a military failure, turned out to be an important diplomatic victory, contributing largely to the French decision to come to the aid of the American Colonies. (Alfred Hoyt Bill, Valley Forge....P 64).

(Signed) Margaret Bailey Tinkcom
Research Historian,
[Philadelphia Historic Commission]

February 28, 1957

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement

1. Architectural character: This building is typical of the late Colonial regional architecture, but generous in size, with fine stone masonry and a wide gambrel roof.
2. Condition of fabric: Very poor.

B. Technical Description of Exterior

1. Overall dimensions: 2-1/2 stories plus partial cellar, 38'-3" x 55'-4". The original house appears to have been more narrow, measuring 22'-9" by 55'-4".
2. Foundations: Stone masonry.
3. Wall construction: Stone masonry, presently plastered.
4. Porches, bulkheads: There is evidence of a full length porch along the north and west sides of the house, but its date of origin and removal are not known. The original cellar bulkhead survives on the south end, but the bulkhead doors are of recent origin.
5. Chimneys: Two chimneys each end, all are covered with plaster.
6. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: 7 exterior door openings on first floor. 3 exterior door openings on second floor (to former porch)
 - b. Windows and shutters: All windows are nineteenth century replacements. No shutters survive, and remaining shutter pintles are cast iron.
7. Roof:
 - a. Shape, covering: Gambrel roof (new roof structure but follows old shape), presently covered with tar paper, original covering unknown.
 - b. Cornice: The wooden cornice has been missing for many years, details not known.
 - c. Dormers: Three dormers in front, two in rear; are all of modern construction.

C. Technical Description of Interior

1. Floor plans: First floor: The original house appears to have been only one room deep and three rooms wide with a hall between the north and middle rooms. When the house was widened, the north room was extended to the full 38'-3" width of the house. The other two rooms were not changed. Widening of the original house allowed room for a new stairhall and the addition of several rooms at the rear of the house.
Second floor: The original house probably consisted of only three rooms (in line) on the second floor, without an interconnecting hall. Widening of the house allowed for a rear stairhall, a longitudinal hall and three additional rooms.
Third floor: Probably only a garret in the original house. The present third floor consists of six rooms, a stairhall and a short longitudinal hall, all of which seem to be of modern origin (apparently 20th century).
2. Stairways: The original house had only narrow winding stairways. The present house retains the old stairways, but also has a larger switchback stairs with intermediate landings located at the rear of the house.
3. Flooring: Random width pine flooring, overlaid with two layers of modern flooring.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Plaster.
5. Doorways and doors: A number of original doorways survive on the first and second floors; seven old doors survive.
6. Trim: Doorways are trimmed with double architraves, a few have single architraves. Window openings are trimmed with Greek Revival details throughout. Seven built-in cupboards are original, but much of their trim has been lost through vandalism.
7. Hardware: The only surviving hardware are the H-L hinges on several of the doors.
8. Lighting: Modern.
9. Heating: The original house had three fireplaces on each floor; present house has fourteen fireplaces, but all are closed off, and the house converted to central heating.

D. Site

1. Orientation: The main facade faces southwest.
2. Outbuildings: Several stone outbuildings (south of house) survived until recently, but they have been demolished, and their original use is not known.

Prepared by Lee H. Nelson, Architect
National Park Service
April 1961.

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REDUCED COPY OF MEASURED DRAWING

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