

THE BERKSHIRE FURNACE

Where the Berkshire Furnace once flourished, nothing remains. The site is identified by the sign, but the exact location of the buildings is uncertain. Three homes that once formed part of the operation still exist and are inhabited. The ruins of the furnace are now buried beneath a layer of soft earth and leaves.

The Berkshire Furnace was born when William Bird erected the first building in 1750 along Spring Creek. The creek has since been known as Mill Creek, Furnace Creek, and Manor Creek (it's present name). The exact date of founding is sometime between 1752 and 1755.

The location Bird chose was .5 miles south of present-day Wernersville. The land at that time was a part of Lancaster County since Berks County was not formed until 1752.

Bird successfully operated this furnace until his death in 1761. He died without a will, leaving an estate that consisted of many holdings of forges and land near Birdsboro plus this furnace complex which was quite small compared to others. Bird was survived by his wife Bridget and six children.

The oldest son, Mark, petitioned the court to divide the estate among the seven survivors. As a result of the petition an inquest was ordered and in May 1764 the estate was appraised at 12,939 pounds. The inquest allowed Mark to fully own and control the entire estate providing he gave security for the payment to the other heirs.

Bridget Bird remarried to John Patton and subsequently Mark sold this property to John and Bridget for 2,550 pounds. John was quite active and operated the furnace for 12 years until the outbreak of the Revolutionary War. John became involved with patriotic duties and managed to influence Peter Grubb III to move to this area and operate the Berkshire Furnace. Peter Grubb eventually purchased the furnace and then entered into a partnership with George Ege. They used ore from the Cornwall Mine as the principal source of iron ore for the Berkshire.

Peter Grubb III bought 331 acres of land and built a home there in 1785 at the intersection of Furnace and Hospital Roads. This home is privately owned and occupied. Three years later, Grubb was broke and unable to pay his debts. The acreage and home were sold to George Ege. In 1790 Bridget Bird Patton sold the furnace to Ege and thus Ege acquired the furnace he had been leasing for the last 14 years.

The furnace was unfortunately not a paying proposition. Operation was limited because the flow of water was not sufficient to power the bellows and other machinery. The charcoal needed to smelt the iron ore was becoming scarce in the immediate vicinity. Ege was using 3,000 cords of wood a year to run the furnace. He realized that he now lacked sufficient fuel and water to expand or even continue operations.

The furnace was originally called the Roxberry Furnace and was later known as the Berk Shire or Berkshire Furnace. George Ege changed the name to the Reading Furnace around the start of the Revolutionary War but this caused confusion as there was a forge with the same name in Chester County. Eventually it again became known as the Berkshire Furnace.

The Berkshire, when fully operational, employed as many as 35 to 45 men in all phases of its work. The key men had to live close by as this was a 24-hour operation.

Another of the remaining buildings is an occupied home on Preston Road, built of native stone and situated over a spring. This was the home of the manager of the furnace.

The third remaining building is the Samuel Harnish farmhouse. William Bird is believed to have built the stone section of the home and it is believed to have been used to house some of the workers and perhaps as a company store.

The Berkshire, when operated by George Ege, supplied the army and navy with cannonballs, shells and shot. Between 1777 and 1781 the furnace supplied 10,025 shot of three pounds and up, 300,000 grapeshot of eight ounces and under, and 4,672 shells for mortars. No cannons were cast at the Berkshire but these were made at the larger Cornwall and Hopewell furnaces.

Bird was casting iron stoves that were more efficient to heat cabins and for cooking. A stove designed by Benjamin Franklin in 1742 was later made at the Berkshire as were firebacks, pots, skillets, clock weights and other farm and household items. The clock weights were cast of iron to replace leaden ones that were melted down to cast bullets for the Continental Army.

After 43 years of operation, the Berkshire Furnace ceased production in 1793.

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