

Phoenix Mill

3640 Wheeler Avenue, Alexandria, Virginia



Modern view of Phoenix Mill building (Siena Corporation)

Located along Wheeler Avenue in Alexandria is a tall, unassuming brick building with a high-peaked roof. The building's unique many-paned windows hint that the building may be more than it looks. Built in 1801, the building is the last standing grist mill in the City of Alexandria. The four-story brick structure replaced an earlier mill that had burned to the ground in exactly the same spot just months before.

The original mill structure had been built sometime between 1770 and 1789 by William Hartshorne and his partner, George Gilpin (Fairfax Deeds Book R-1:353; Wigglesworth 1976/1977:49). Hartshorne was the sole owner of the mill when fire devastated it in 1801. Hartshorne rebuilt the mill structure, naming it Phoenix Mill. Phoenix Mill was a four-story tall merchant mill that operated four pairs of millstones. The building measured 40 feet wide by 55 feet long and reportedly produced not only flour and feed, but also ground lime for plaster (Wong 2015). The Mutual Assurance Company (1803) valued the mill at \$12,000.

Hartshorne used his mill as collateral for an \$11,400 loan from Pennsylvanian Mordecai Lewis. When Hartshorne defaulted on the loan in 1812, the property was sold at public auction to repay the debt (Fairfax Deeds M-2:141-143).

Thomas Wilson was the successful bidder for the mill property in 1813. He subdivided the

property for the benefit of his heirs in 1823, leaving the mill lot (Lot #2) to David and Hannah Wilson and William and Martha Brown (Fairfax Deeds Book U-2:407, 410A). Neither couple apparently had an interest in operating the mill, for the mill was rented to local millers for the next 30 years.

By 1854, the mill was again for sale at public auction. Now called the Brick Water Mill, the mill was advertised as being able to grind 100 barrels of flour per day. It had four “burrs” or millstones and sat just “yards” from the railroad and turnpike (*Alexandria Gazette*, January 4, 1854).

The Watkins’ family purchased the mill at auction in 1854. They later purchased an adjoining 27-acre parcel to increase the size of the mill property to 83 acres. Like the previous owners of the mill, the Watkins’ rented the mill to local millers.

Renamed Dominion Mill, the mill is shown on a 1865 map showing the Civil War of Washington (below). It sits between the

Orange & Alexandria Railroad and the turnpike, just south of Fort Williams and north of Cameron Run. When the Union occupied the Alexandria area during the Civil War, Union General Winfield Scott ordered the removal of all trees “within 10 miles of the railroad” to deny the element of surprise to would-be Confederate raiders (Lancaster and Lancaster 1992:89). This barren landscape is captured in a period photograph (right). During the Civil War, the Orange & Alexandria Railroad was the only cargo and passenger line that connected Orange County, Virginia, with ports in Alexandria.

The mid-nineteenth century saw changes in both the mill property and the mill building. In

NOTICE OF SALE

"That Valuable new Mill and Farm now occupied by William Hartshorne, known by the name of Strawberry Hill, situated on Holmes's Run and the Little River Turnpike Road in the County of Fairfax about three miles from Alexandria; the tract contains 236 acres, of which 30 are in young thriving timber, 70 in good meadow, the greater part of which may be watered from the Creek and Mill Race - and the residue is well improved arable Land. There are on the premises, one peach and two apple orchards, a productive garden of two acres handsomely laid off - A framed dwelling House two stories high, 30 feet by 20 with two wings, a large Kitchen, a pump of good water at the door; Stables, Stone Spring House, &c. Also a large well-finished new Brick Mill 55 feet by 45, four stories high with three pair of large Burr and one pair of country Mill Stones, capable of manufacturing ten thousand barrels of flour annually. The stream is large and constant, and affords a fall sufficient for water wheels 19 feet in diameter.

-*Alexandria Gazette*, July 7, 1812

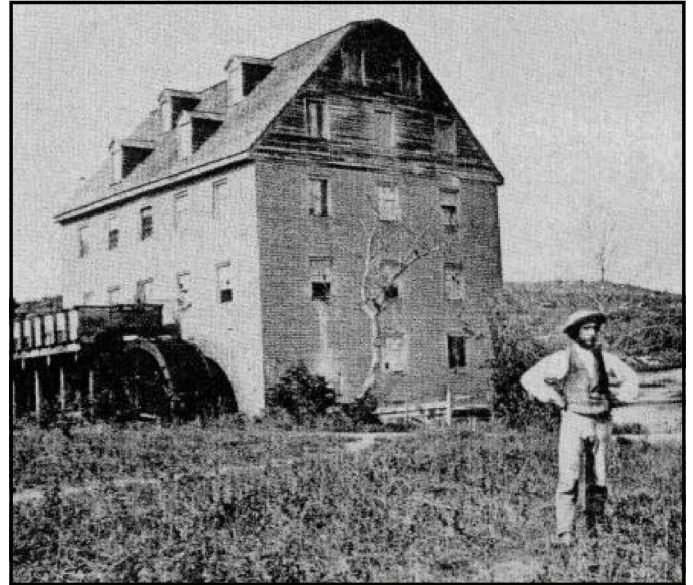


Detail from US War Department (1865) *Military Map of NE Virginia, showing Forts and Roads* (Library of Congress)

1866, the Alexandria Water Company rerouted its intake canal to cross the lower part of the mill property. Phoenix Mill's tailrace now emptied into the Water Company canal rather



Locomotive on the Orange & Alexandria Railroad, Virginia (1862) (Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Congress)



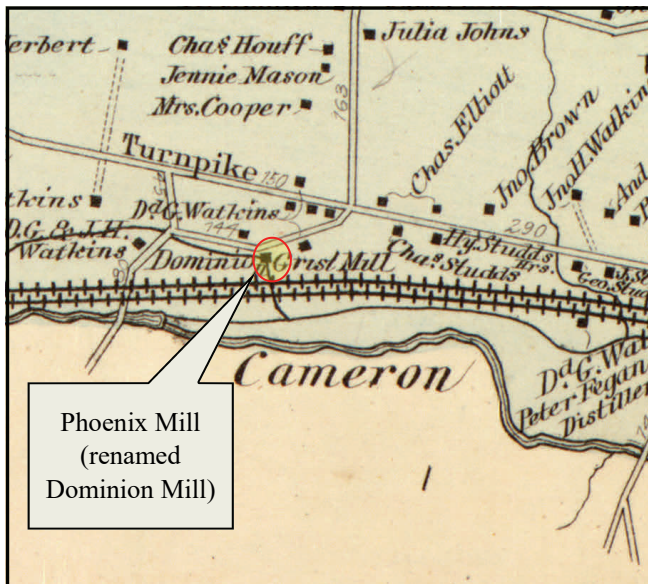
Undated Civil War-era photograph showing cleared land around Phoenix Mill (Image from Davis 1985)

than into Cameron Run. By 1871, the Alexandria & Fredericksburg Railroad (formerly the Orange & Alexandria Railroad) had condemned part of the mill property for their new right-of-way. This again altered the tailrace for the mill.

Sometime after 1870, a second overshot wheel was added to the mill. Reportedly made by the Jamieson and Collins foundry in Alexandria (Wong 2015), the new metal wheel increased the mill's output from 35 hp to 80 hp. The land's value also increased from \$1,500 in 1870 to \$5,000 in 1878 (Land Tax 1870, 1878).

The Watkins family sold the mill in 1888 to pay estate debts. John Brown purchased the 83 acres that included the mill, then known as Old Dominion Mill, for \$6,500 (Fairfax Deeds Book H-5:50). Brown defaulted on the deed and the mill was again sold. Frank Hill purchased the mill in 1896 (Chataigne 1888). Like those before him, Hill leased the mill to local millers who oversaw mill operations.

When Hill sold the mill and its land six years later, he appears to have sold the mill building separately. Charles Cockrell purchased



Detail from Hopkins (1878) *Atlas of fifteen miles around Washington* showing the mill as Dominion Grist Mill

the land around the mill and farmed the property (Fairfax Deeds Book L-6:659) Newton Carr, who boarded with Cockrell, operated the mill and may have overseen the replacement of the mill's original wooden wheel in 1909 with a Fitz 1-X-L metal wheel (Census, Population Schedule, Falls Church District 1910:209; Wong 2015).

By 1930 the mill had ceased operation and most of the land Cockrell purchased had been subdivided and sold. The photo (below right) shows the mill and surrounding lands as they appeared in 1927.

Samuel Bell, who at some point had acquired the mill building, purchased two parcels from Cockrell in 1954. He then sold the combined properties to the Industrial Maintenance Corporation in 1958 (Alexandria Deeds 466:492-493). The Corporation made many changes to the property, including adding a large wing onto the mill building. It may have been around this time that the mill's head and tail races, still visible in the 1927 photograph (right) were filled and the property paved.

Siena Corporation recently purchased the Phoenix Mill building. They plan to adaptively reuse the mill building, removing the non-historic additions and adding landscape elements that will echo the building's historic past as a grist mill. The mill will again be a reminder of the milling industry that flourished along the banks of Cameron Run less than a century ago.



Above: Undated mid-nineteenth century photograph of Phoenix Mill building, mistakenly labeled as Cloud's Mill (Source: William Smith Collection, Alexandria Public Library)

Below: Aerial Photograph taken in 1927 showing the Phoenix Mill and mill races (Source: Alexandria Archeology 2016)

