

# CAMERON MILLS (44AX112)

Report Summary by Shirley Scalley



1879 Hopkins Map of Project Area

## INTRODUCTION

In 1979, the Alexandria Regional Preservation Office (ARPO) conducted a survey of the Cameron Run Valley in southwest Alexandria and identified Cameron Mills as the stone foundations of two late eighteenth century mills. In March 1989, the ARPO registered the site with the Virginia Division of Historic Landmarks.

In April 1990, Engineering Science, Inc., on behalf of Hoffman Management, conducted a Phase I cultural resource assessment survey on the site of the historic mills. They coordinated the project with Alexandria Archaeology in accordance with the Archaeology Protection Code of the City of

Alexandria and followed the Archaeology Preservation Guidelines for the City of Alexandria (Alexandria Archaeology 1988). Carried out in three stages, the survey included: (1) archival study of historic use of the site; (2) on-site mapping and subsurface testing; and (3) analysis of stratigraphy, artifacts, and features.

## HISTORY

### *The Tobacco Plantation System*

Captain John Smith's report of his 1608 exploratory trip into the Chesapeake Bay and up the Potomac River encouraged traders and settlers to follow him into the new territory. The project area was a part of the Northern Neck Proprietary granted to seven

Englishmen by the exiled King Charles II in 1649. This proprietary included all the land between the Rappahannock and Potomac Rivers. By 1719, these seven shares had been consolidated by sale and inheritance, and Thomas, Sixth Lord Fairfax, controlled the entire proprietary and had the right to issue patents, i.e., to grant *fee simple* titles to the land.

From 1650 to 1720, many tracts of land in the proprietary were granted, the majority along the western shore of the Potomac River. Descendants of southern tidewater gentry, eager to expand the tobacco plantation system their forebears had developed, settled most of the riverfront. The Potomac River soon became a major transportation route for the tobacco trade.

This expansion of the tobacco plantation system was the basis of the economic, social, and political development of the eastern region of Fairfax County. Warehouses and wharves were built along the river, and "rolling roads," the earliest inland farm roads down which tobacco hogsheads were rolled, served as connections with the trade centers. Two major port towns, Alexandria and Georgetown, developed as key tobacco inspection stations.

### ***Transition to the Flour Trade***

At the end of the eighteenth century, the value of tobacco declined, and Virginia, particularly the eastern region, entered a period of economic depression. The plantation methods of cropping until the soil was unproductive and then clearing new land had seriously depleted the soil. Wheat and corn supplanted tobacco and became more profitable crops. Alexandria had developed into an important center for maritime trade and was fortunate to be able to participate in

the flour trade with Europe and the Caribbean as early as the 1770s.

In June of 1790, William Bird leased, from Thomas West, 8 acres of land in the project area to improve an existing mill seat, possibly the one thought to have been established at Cameron around 1752 by either John Colville or John Carlyle. Research indicates that a mill belonging to John Carlyle did exist in 1760 on the western side of Colchester Road. [Note to reader: For a differing interpretation of historical information, see the 2003 Cameron Mills report by Christopher Goodwin Associates.]

Bird purchased the 8 acres in September of 1790 and obtained permission to cut a race from Cameron Run through the lands of West, Alexander Smith, Peter Wise, and William Ward. In 1791, Bird sold half of his acreage to John Stump and John Ricketts, who also intended to build a mill. Stump and Ricketts had already purchased 10 acres from Thomas Herbert on which they planned to build a dam. They then sold Bird 5 of the 10 acres and the right to take enough water from the race to work two doubled geared, overshot water wheels to clean grain. By 1794, the three men had established two gristmills on adjoining properties, one on either side of the millrace. Later that year, Bird sold the 4 acres from the West purchase with his mill and machinery to John Mandeville. Gilpin's 1798 map of Alexandria shows "Cameron Mills" at the western edge of what is now the West End of Alexandria.

By 1825, at the end of a series of transactions, both mills were owned by the Stump and Ricketts heirs. By 1830, the Stump heirs owned the eastern half of the property, which contained both mills. In 1837, this property went to Richard

Windsor, part owner of the Accotink Mill, and in 1848, Windsor sold it to Reuben and Robert F. Roberts, two Quaker brothers from Medford, New Jersey.

### ***Quakers at Cameron Mills***

By 1798, many Quaker families had settled in Alexandria and had established a meetinghouse at Wolfe and St. Asaph Streets. Some of these families settled in the West End in an area known as Quaker Hill on the north side of Little River Turnpike west of Leesburg Road. The Roberts families were part of a new migration of Quakers and other Northerners into Virginia that began in the 1830s. These northern farmers were enticed by the availability of low-priced land. They introduced a social and economic system dominated by middle class values and based on small, independent farms that did not rely on slave labor. Virginia's economy improved considerably during the 1840s as a result of their farming methods, which included crop diversification and rotation, fertilization, and deep plowing.

Valuable information about the Roberts families and Cameron Mills comes from family papers on file in the Local History/Special Collections room of the Alexandria Library. An incomplete copy of a letter written in 1848 by Robert F. Roberts indicates that his primary reason for moving his family to Alexandria was to improve their standard of living. Although the price of the farm was over \$21,000, he thought it was a good investment.

*The stream of water, and the water power is good, more than sufficient to arm both mills the greater part of the year and the location is certainly favorable for the milling business, as in addition to the*

*manufacture of flour, the grist grinding of the town is a good business and this mill being the nearest must do if the people are accomodated.*

He continued by explaining that the 150 acres of land making up the farm could be used to graze cattle and that "Alexandria [was] poorly supplied with milk and a good business [could] be done with a dairy." Finally, he mentioned plans for using one of the mills to power the town's water supply.

Later that same year, Roberts wrote a letter to Elisha Hunt, an uncle in New Jersey, in which he discussed the state of his mill and farm. Although prices were good, he could not sell enough flour to make a profit and believed that he would have to increase the variety of items he sold.

In 1851, the Alexandria Water Company purchased the east mill, described as a "country or grist mill," and converted it into a station to pump water to their reservoir north on Shuter's Hill. Benjamin Hallowell, President of the Alexandria Water Company, returned the mill equipment to the Robertses for \$1. The Roberts brothers retained the west mill.

During the early 1860s, the Robertses took on a partner, Edmund Hunt, who appears to have been a relative of Elisha Hunt. They continued to operate the mill throughout the Civil War even though, as one contemporary observed, Union soldiers occupied the Cameron Mills and kept their weapons and ammunition at one side of the millrace.

Robert F. Roberts was killed by a train in 1884, at the age of 78, while crossing the Alexandria and Fredricksburg tracks just

north of his home. His son James was killed by a train at the same crossing 30 years later. James was then 67 years old, President of the Fairfax Mutual Fire Insurance Co., and a Director of both the Alexandria Water Company and the Citizen's National Bank.

Fire insurance maps published by the Sanborn Map Company provide information about the mills and associated structures during the twentieth century. The 1902 map indicates that Walter Roberts was the proprietor of Cameron Mills and that water and steam powered the mill. A 50-horsepower engine is shown in a one-story addition at the southeast corner of the mill. Other machinery noted includes: (1) in the basement, a packer and shafting, i.e., shafts that transfer power from the waterwheel to the gears; (2) on the first floor, three sets of millstones capable of 125 revolutions per minute; (3) on the second floor, a smutter for cleaning the grain before it is ground and a suction fan to aid in winnowing chaff; and (4) in the attic, several rolling screens and bolters, cylindrical sieves used in sifting the ground flour to separate the various grades.

A series of one- to two-story structures listed as a dwelling (possibly the Roberts house) and a small stable are located north of the mills on the east side of the millrace. Two water lines, 8 and 12 inches in diameter, are shown north of the pumping station, between the headrace and the outbuildings, presumably connecting the pumping station with the reservoir.

The 1912 Sanborn map provides the same structural information, but the mill was described as a "corn meal mill" powered by water only. The two water mains between the mill and the reservoir appear to have been rerouted -- both run around the eastern

side of the larger outbuilding rather than to the west. By 1921, Cameron Mills was no longer in operation, and in 1928, the Alexandria Water Company razed it.

The 1941 and 1958 maps show various changes made to the pumping station. By 1941, the outbuildings were gone, and a complex of 8- to 20-inch water lines surrounded the pumping station. The pumping station was demolished and filled over shortly before this survey. A recently published article indicates that the Roberts farmhouse was razed in the 1950s, which brings into question whether the outbuildings shown on earlier maps were, in fact, the Roberts dwelling. By 1958, the east mill had been incorporated into a larger brick structure. Additions to the original stone building could be seen on the east and south sides.

## ARCHAEOLOGY

### *Artifacts*

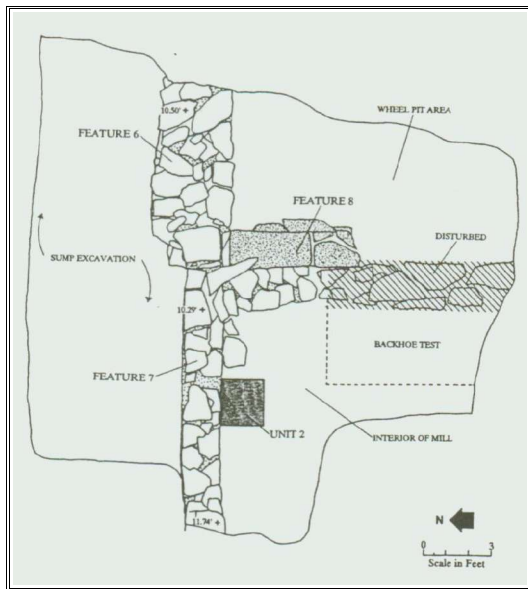
Artifacts were largely recovered from machine excavated backdirt that was trowel sorted. Almost all of the contexts from which the materials were taken were recognizably disturbed. There was no evidence, however, that the deposits derived from other locations.

The 716 artifacts recovered consisted mainly of small personal items or domestic materials, such as glass and ceramics. An analysis of the dates assigned to the glass and ceramics suggested an intensive domestic use of the site during the late eighteenth and early to middle nineteenth centuries coinciding with milling and water pumping activities on the site. The comparative absence of container glass suggested a less intensive domestic use of

the site after the late nineteenth century when the manufacture of this type of glass began. There was also a distinct lack of modern glass and plastic debris. The presence of quartz flakes in the fill may indicate prehistoric activity in the area.

### **Features**

Portions of two mill buildings, constructed in the late eighteenth century on opposite sides of a central millrace, were located in the southern half of the property. They were not well preserved as a result of neglect, reuse, and demolition activities.



Stone Wall Segments, West Mill

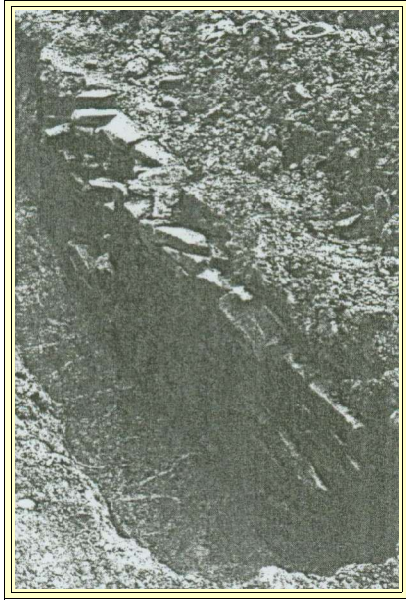
The west mill was observed in the form of short sections of stone wall foundation. One wall (*Feature 7*) was connected to the east mill by a stone wall across the north end of the wheel pit (*Feature 6*). A series of concrete platforms (*Feature 8*) abutted *Features 6* and *7*.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the east mill was incorporated into a concrete and brick structure (the pumping station). Portions of the east, west, and south walls were observed as little more than stone foundations cut level with the later concrete floor. Sections of the north wall had been protected from demolition and stood 3 to 7 feet above the interior floor. This wall abutted, to the east, the later pumping station wall.

The mills were built on a slope, and the natural fall of the land produced a drop of as much as 15 or 16 feet between the level of the millrace and the bottom of the mill wheel. The exact figure cannot be determined, however, because ground surfaces from the period cannot be positively identified. The depth of the wheel pit also cannot be identified, so it is not possible to establish the type or types of wheel used. Deed records, however, confirm the presence of a pair of overshot wheels at Bird's mill in the late eighteenth century. These wheels require a drop of 10 feet or more.

At a later period, water was channeled into the interior of the east mill by means of a small dam. The water passed into the "Pump House ... along a trough in the floor on the western wall, passing the steam engine first, then the water wheel." This suggests use of an undershot wheel or even a form of turbine. A diversion 34 to 40 feet north of the mills appears on Sanborn maps as early as 1902 and may represent the dam. The stone wall (*Feature 6*) connecting the mills may relate to the earlier attempt to divert water flow or may have supported the flume or penstock supplying water from the headrace to the wheels.

A portion of at least one outbuilding (*Feature 11*) was found at the north edge of the property. Artifactual evidence suggested a date of construction in the middle to late nineteenth century at the earliest. The Roberts family did maintain a dwelling or farmhouse near the mill, but there is no indication that *Feature 11* was related to that structure.



Segment of Outbuilding Wall

Grading was evident in all portions of the site sampled; no buried ground surfaces were observed. Extensive land alteration had apparently occurred in association with water company use of the property. Any structures existing in the north part of the site had been demolished, the debris removed, and the remaining material spread over the area. All traces of the headrace feeding the mills had been removed as a result. The outbuildings shown on early twentieth century maps also could not be positively identified. Modern fill had altered the ground level in all parts of the site, and

there were major utility disturbances north and northeast of the east mill.

## CONCLUSION

Through the years, the Cameron Mills site has been altered by each successive use of the property, and twentieth century activities have been particularly invasive. Nonetheless, this survey has revealed structural and artifactual remains associated with the use of the site beginning in at least the late eighteenth century. These resources have the potential of providing further information about the site: (1) when and how it was originally developed; (2) its subsequent development; (3) its role in the emerging urban center to the east; (4) industrial development in the area; (5) civil war activities on the site; and (6) information about the early mills as well as prehistoric uses of the site.

Development plans call for the lot to be used as a facility for the storage of fill dirt. While overfilling will effectively seal the site, adverse effects are possible from preparation activities, such as grading, as well as from the filling activity itself and the process of removing the fill later to access the archaeological resources.

Engineering Science recommended that under advisement by Alexandria Archaeology, monitoring of the initial stages of filling be undertaken to insure protection of known resources. This was a minimal recommendation for the immediate handling of the problem. Further mitigation procedures should be planned.

*This summary based on a 1990 report by  
Dennis A. Knepper and Madeline Pappas.*