

Levy's Mills

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One of the delights of genealogical or historical research is that a search often leads off in an unexpected and surprising direction. Such was the case recently when I was asked to investigate the early settlement history of the area of Kocher Park near Lightstreet. I came across an early land record's reference to "Levy's Mills," and pinning down that reference led to the fascinating story of Aaron Levy. He was a hero of the Revolution, founder of a town in Centre County which bears his name, and a pioneer in religious tolerance on the Pennsylvania frontier.

The document in question was a 1794 survey for Aaron Levy of a 221-acre plot of land on Fishing Creek said to be "about 1/2 a mile above s^d Levy's Mills" in then-Northumberland County. The tract referred to is the site of the mill building at Lightstreet which still stands beside PA Route 487 just north of the village (no longer a mill, the structure now houses a gift shop).

Heister White's pamphlet *Grist Mills of Columbia County* records an old tradition that "two Jews erected a grist Mill on Fishing Creek below the mouth of Stony Brook." One of those men was presumably Benjamin Seidel, who sold the property in 1823 to General Matthew McDowell. (This Benjamin was probably the brother of Philip Seidel, who laid out the first streets of Williamsburg, now Lightstreet, in 1817.)

The land records, however, show that Aaron Levy owned the land when the mill was first built. In 1784 he patented the property by the name of "Draketown" (for its warrantee, John Drake). At the time Levy lived in the town of Northumberland, while the Seidels lived in the local village, so it appears that Levy owned the mill and employed Benjamin Seidel to manage it. These pioneers seem to be remembered in the naming of local roads: Levi Avenue and Seidle Street in Lightstreet and nearby Draketown Road.

Levy's grist mill was rebuilt several times, notably in 1868, when the present three-story frame structure was erected. Through the years the mill was known by the name of its various proprietors, such as: Peter Ent (to 1881), Harry Heacock (1904-1932), and Mac Johnson (1940 to its closing in the 1970s).



Heacock's Mill circa 1900

The earliest proprietor, Aaron Levy, was a well-known personage in Pennsylvania during and after the Revolution. He was born in Europe at Amsterdam in 1742 into an orthodox Jewish family. He came to America at about age eighteen and became a shopkeeper and merchant. Before the Revolution he migrated to

the frontier town of Northumberland, founded in 1772 at “the Point” where the North and West Branches of the Susquehanna River merge.



Aaron Levy

There he built up a prosperous trading business, supplying farmers with supplies and selling their products to coastal cities. During the Revolution, Levy was a crucial supplier of rations and clothing to the Continental Army and the Pennsylvania militia. After the Wyoming Massacre in 1778, he and his wife fled from the Forks of the Susquehanna down to the safer city of Lancaster. Levy lived and traded there until the end of the war, when the couple returned to their home in Northumberland. Aaron served several stints in the colony’s militia during the war in both Northumberland and Lancaster Counties.

Northumberland County was part of the New Purchase of 1768, when the Penn heirs bought from the Iroquois nations the rights to millions of acres of land within the chartered bounds of the royal colony. This land was available for claiming by anyone at the affordable price of just £5 per hundred acres. While the intent was to limit each person to one tract, speculators soon found ways to buy up rights to hundreds and even thousands of tracts.

Among these land-grabbers Aaron Levy was not the biggest, but one of the important dealers in real estate. At various times he held title to more than a half-million acres in Pennsylvania, and many more in Ohio and Indiana. Often he worked in tandem with famed Philadelphia banker Robert Morris, “the financier of the Revolution.” Like Morris, Levy loaned large sums to the Congress and took payment in Continental dollars which after the War became worthless. (Morris went bankrupt and died in debtors’ jail in Philadelphia; Levy escaped that fate and died a wealthy man.)

Levy bought up over 1200 contiguous acres in Penns Valley, now about fifteen miles east of State College. There in 1786 he laid out a town of over 600 home lots and named it Aaronsburg. Levy named the town’s very wide east-west boulevard “Aaron’s Square” and the central north-south street “Rachel’s Way” after his wife. Levy was hopeful that his town would be selected as a new county seat, but that honor went to Selinsgrove. Since his village was nearly at the geographic center of Pennsylvania, he dreamed that it might in future become the state capital, but that hope also was unfulfilled.

Most of the settlers of Aaronsburg were German immigrants. Levy presented them with a large lot for a Lutheran /Reformed church and cemetery. He also gave that church a pewter communion set, each vessel inscribed in German “Given to the German Congregation in Aaronsburg by Aaron Levy”; the set is displayed in



Aaronsburg still. This gift by an Orthodox Jew of equipment for the central Christian rite became an emblem of Aaronsburg's founding in tolerance.

After World War II, an aide in the governor's office suggested that Aaronsburg should celebrate its early history of inter-religious and interracial harmony. The little village of just over 300 persons took up the suggestion in a big way, and on October 23, 1949 held a day-long festival. It featured choral groups, various speakers, and a pageant about "The Aaronsburg Story" with a cast of more than a thousand! The nationally-known speakers included a Catholic (war-time OSS director "Wild Bill" Donovan), a Protestant (famed preacher Daniel A. Piliing), a Jew (Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter) and an African-American (United Nations diplomat Ralph Bunche, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize the next year), as well as Pennsylvania governor James Duff. An audience of well over 30,000 persons was in attendance.

To return to Aaron Levy, in about 1790 he retired to Philadelphia, where he lived on Fourth Street, just a block from Independence Hall. He was an important early member of Mikveh Israel, now the oldest continuous synagogue in America. When he died childless in 1815 he bequeathed all his properties to his adopted son, Jewish merchant Simon Gratz. Aaron Levy is mentioned by name on two blue Pennsylvania historical markers, one at the Mikveh Israel cemetery in Philadelphia and the other along PA 45 in Aaronsburg.



Levy's story has taken us far afield from his grist mill at Lightstreet, but the journey reminds us that on the Pennsylvania frontier rampant land speculation could be mixed with remarkable religious and ethnic toleration—a pattern first set by William Penn.