P is for Peirce

Q uarrying stone. Building mills that ground wheat and corn for area farmers. Growing grain, hay, potatoes and peas. Planting and harvesting orchards of fruit trees. Raising pigs, sheep and dairy cows. Making brandy. Felling trees for lumber. Marketing plants of all kinds. These are some of the commercial activities the Peirce family pursued on their property on the banks of Rock Creek.

The story involves three families who left Quaker settlements in Pennsylvania. Skilled millwright Isaac Peirce arrived in the mid-1780s. He worked with his wife’s brothers, Amos and Abner Cloud, as the families purchased land in Maryland and Virginia. Another family, the Shoemakers, began moving to Washington in 1800.

The Peirce Plantation

Isaac Peirce amassed property along Rock Creek, starting with the purchase in 1794 of 160 acres that included a house, barn, mill, slave quarters and hundreds of fruit trees. Small boats would carry plaster up the creek to be ground at his mill. Isaac added a saw mill around 1800. Using stone quarried along Broad or Piney Branch, he then constructed a spring house, carriage house, distillery and — by 1829 — a new mill based on recent revolutionary designs.

Historians believe Isaac had earlier built the nearly identical Argyle mill just up the creek on land he was unable to secure for himself. Beginning in 1853, when the Blagdens purchased that mill and an adjoining 300-acre estate, their farming and milling business was second in the valley only to the Peirces’. Meanwhile, Abner Cloud and Jonathan Shoemaker also owned mills, one near present-day Fletcher’s Boathouse, the other downstream from the Peirce farmstead. Neither was profitable. However, Jonathan’s nephew David did succeed in marrying Isaac Peirce’s daughter Abigail in 1815.

As Isaac Peirce became one of Washington’s primary landowners, he began leasing out Peirce Mill to concentrate on the family’s other economic pursuits: real estate, farming, raising animals and making cider and brandy. Upon his death, the mill and most of his property went to elder son Abner, who himself died ten years later. Running the family business fell to David and Abigail’s son, Pierce Shoemaker. The mill remained a money-maker. But, like his father-in-law, Shoemaker sought a bigger return from other pursuits, increasing the amount of cultivated land by 50 percent to 120 acres, expanding the timber business to supply a growing city and dealing in real estate.
Isaac Peirce’s younger son, Joshua, had taken an interest in his father’s orchards. In 1823, Isaac gave Joshua 82 acres, which he renamed Linnaean Hill — after Carl Linnaeus, who invented the system of classifying living things by genus and species. Joshua then went into the nursery business, publishing catalogs of trees, plants and flowers and marketing over a number of states. He helped introduce Americans to exotic imports, especially camellias. He created a landscaped “pleasure garden” to lure customers to his business in what was still fairly remote countryside — but also opened a city branch off 14th Street. And he constructed a hilltop mansion made of that same Rock Creek stone.

Despite their Quaker roots, the families relied on slave labor for some five decades. Slaves owned by the Peirces and Shoemakers worked as house servants, farm laborers, coachmen and salesmen. One of them, William H. Becket, was foreman of Joshua Peirce’s nursery business.

When emancipation was declared in DC in 1862, Pierce Shoemaker applied for compensation for 20 slaves. Joshua Peirce’s petition listed 11, include Becket. After the Civil War, Joshua brought Becket back as an employee, and the former slave was at his side when he died in 1869. Even without slave labor, the Peirce and Shoemakers continued to prosper, and Pierce Shoemaker built a handsome home called Cloverdale up the hill from the old family cottage.

**Business Grinds to a Halt**

Shoemaker’s nephew, Joshua Peirce Klingle, inherited Linnaean Hill — which explains why the home Joshua Peirce constructed came to be known as Klingle Mansion. More interested in real estate and politics, Klingle closed down the nursery business. By the 1880s, commerce was also winding down on the Peirce plantation. Milling had become unprofitable, as the number of farms plummeted and newer methods produced flour more cheaply. Peirce Mill became more famous as a picnic destination.

The decline of commerce helped turn attention to the Peirce land as a recreation destination and eventually to the establishment of Rock Creek Park. Pierce Shoemaker’s son, Louis, did lead an energetic resistance when the park law was signed in 1890 — challenging the right of the government to take his land and the amount of money received in return. But, after losing these battles, he became a supporter of preservation within the park and a civic leader in the Brightwood neighborhood.

Many of the Peirce family buildings remain today: Peirce Mill, Klingle Mansion, Cloverdale, the spring house, the carriage house and the distillery (now part of a private home). The newly restored mill resumed grinding grain in 2011 — and offers a regular schedule of milling demonstrations. Friends of Peirce Mill and Casey Trees (two non-profit groups that support the National Park Service) have planted a small orchard as a reminder of the brisk economic activity beyond milling that took place along Rock Creek during the 1800s and further added to the authenticity of Peirce Mill.