

# White's Mill then



# Murdocksville now

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by  
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In the earliest days of the settlement of our country, sites were designated by their location on known waterways. Since Raccoon Creek is the largest stream draining northern Washington County, tracts of land were located on the Waters of the Raccoon. We are dealing here with the history of the land on the Waters of the Raccoon in Robinson Township, northern Washington County, Pennsylvania; specifically the Murdocksville area. The original village that grew there was called White's Mill. John White had taken up a 400 acre tract in 1772. It lay partly in what is now Allegheny, Beaver, and Washington Counties.

The road leading into Murdocksville from the south, along Raccoon Creek is known as Bigger Road. In earlier generations it was simply the "Creek Road". Before the white settlers came it was the " Hunters' Path ". It was along the Hunters' Path that Thomas Armor and Matthew Dillow came to make their first claim on the western land. That was in 1774 or before and they chose the western side of the Raccoon Creek. Soon the Thomas Biggers came to settle on the eastern bank of the same stream.

Thomas Armor of Scotch-Irish descent was probably one of the first settlers this far north in what is now Washington County. He received a grant of 388+ acres by Virginia Certificate, giving him "a tract of land situate [sic] on the Waters of the Raccoon, to include improvement made in the year 1776." At the same time he acquired 401 acres more for a brother. This indicated the Armor property to extend from Dillow's Run on the south to Winkfield's Run on the north; from the Old Homestead on the present Clinton Frankfort Road on the west to the Waters of the Raccoon on the east.

Matthew Dillow also settled in the early 1770s. His Virginia Certificate states his 400 acres adjoins Thomas Armor. It is not clear which settler came first.

Dillow built a fort for protection from the Indians who were very hostile for more than two decades after the first settlers moved in. The fort provided a haven for all the neighbors, but Dillow lost his own life to the Indians while clearing land with his son John. Dillow was killed on the spot and his son was taken captive.

While working in the forest one day Thomas Armor heard the ring of an axe across the Raccoon. Upon investigating he found Thomas Bigger clearing land on the east side of the creek. That was in the mid-1770s as the Bigger History tells that Thomas Bigger and his family traveled over the Allegheny Mountains from Philadelphia in 1774. They located on the Waters of the Raccoon where they found a partly built log cabin. The cabin had been abandoned so they took possession and settled on tracts reaching from Raccoon Creek to the present Robinson Church, totalling about 1000 acres. The Biggers remained on those acres for six or seven years. The Indians became so troublesome that Thomas and Matthew Bigger took their families to the Mt. Pleasant area near Hickory and made improvements there until 1786.

In 1786 George Washington came to claim a 2000 acre government grant in Washington County. The Biggers were among the settlers on his claimed lands. Without any ceremony he evicted them all. Thomas Bigger and Matthew Bigger returned to their original holdings on Raccoon Creek for a new start. Thomas Bigger then built a two story log house. Remains of that log house are still standing in the bottom lands below the Bigger stone house on Bigger Road. The stone house was built in 1848 on a foundation of solid rock. It is one of the landmarks in our community.

When John White and his brother Thomas wandered down the Hunters' Path before 1780 they found enough settlers clearing lands and building cabins that they saw the need for a grist mill to tie the community together. The grist mill was so important to any community that many of the later towns evolved from the villages that grew around the mill site.

Because grain had to be hauled by horse and wagon to the mill, a blacksmith soon set up shop to be available for shoeing horses while the farmer waited for his flour or meal. Other tradesmen followed. Usually there was a general store, a church, a school, a shoeshop, a hatshop, and homes.

There was no church building at White's Mill. There are accounts, however, which lead us to believe there were gatherings at designated places before 1800 for the purpose of worship. From records kept by Rev. John McMillan, a famed early evangelist, we find that Rev. McMillan preached at "Petato [sic] Garden Run" on the second Sabbath of November 1786. Robinson Church was planned at an outdoor meeting around a bonfire for heat and light in 1830 on property owned by Matthew Bigger, Alexander McBride, and Samuel Wallace. The first building was ready and the church established in 1833. Before that time, people had gone to earlier established churches in Burgettstown, Frankfort Springs, Hopewell, or held services in tents.

Thomas White built his three story log and frame mill on Raccoon Creek near the mouth of Potato Garden Run prior to 1780. A heap of rocks in what is now known as Allan Cox's garden lies north of the exact site of the mill building. Traces of the dam on Raccoon Creek are still visible. On the east bank, carefully laid rocks show where one end of the dam was placed. A jumble of rocks in the creek bed makes riffles and music now where they were washed in the Labor Day flood of 1912. In the flat land on the east bank of the creek there is still part of the sluice gate of the millrace. The mill race ran from the dam, through the bottom land, under the road, and on to the mill where it turned the wheel that turned the burrs to grind the grain. All signs of the millrace were removed when a new three-lane cement bridge was built in 1962. In 1804 Thomas White sold the mill to Joseph McCoy and John Leeper. Sometime after that it passed into the hands of Robert Withrow who owned and operated the mill until its closing in the early 1920s.

White's mill had thrived as a village for over fifty years. Times could not have been too easy because the Indians were very hostile on into the 1790s. The Hunters' Path led right through the heart of their valued hunting grounds which reached from the shores of the Monongahela on the east to the Ohio River on the west. The Indian trail which became the pioneers' road reached from Devore's Ferry, now Monongahela, to Mintow's Bottom on the Ohio. As the settlers crossed the Alleghenies and began chopping down trees and building permanent homes in that choice land, the Indians rightfully became alarmed and angry at seeing their hunting grounds gradually grow smaller and smaller.

By 1833 the village of White's Mill had gained enough importance to warrant a United States Post Office. It was established in the General Store of John P. Murdoch. Mr. Murdoch was named the first postmaster and the village became known as Murdocktown. Later it was changed to Murdocksville, the name still used for the area.

Through the years, besides the General Store and Post Office, Murdocksville has had various business ventures come and go. At one time there was supposedly a hatshop in Eugene Fragapane's house and a cobbler's shop on High Street. On the Coventry Farm on the east bluff overlooking the village, there was a small building that housed the tailorshop of Thompson Stewart from 1844 to 1870. On May 1, 1888, the first oil well was drilled on the J. Ray Armor farm and the Hanover Oil Field was opened. Sometime after that a pumping station was erected on the property between the mill and Raccoon Creek. This consisted of a pump house, a boiler house, a water tank, and a huge wood-staved oil storage tank. A pipeline connected the Burgettstown oilfields with Freedom, Pennsylvania. Murdocksville was the booster station between the two points. Mr. P.N. Gardner was the last to operate this booster station which was discontinued in the late 1920s.

On the Thomas Bigger farm there was a Tanning Mill that closed shortly before the Civil War. Up the creek there were two more grist mills; one at the Richard Donaldson property and one at Bavington. The Washington County History books record that both of those mills hauled flour and whiskey to the Ohio River by four horse wagon teams to Kelly's Ferry near Steubenville, Ohio. From there it went by flatboat to New Orleans and on to Cuba where the flour sold for \$25.00 per barrel. Is it likely that some of the White's Mill flour went the same route ?

Dr. James Bigham who had been a schoolteacher, lived in Doug and Stacy Koerbel's house on High Street in Murdocksville. He ran his medical practice from there. Business was not too brisk so he tutored young people in his spare time. He called his school The Select School, and provided further education for the students who had finished Common School. The Murdocksville Independent Telephone Company operated from that house also. The original Blacksmith Shop is on the lot adjoining the Marie Wolfkill property.

Jennie Withrow Elder had a boarding house located on the hill at the left of the entrance to the Bigger Road. Teamsters passing through to the mill and to the oilfields were potential customers

Another establishment worthy of note was an early "horse changing station". It was the first change of horses for stagecoaches leaving Pittsburgh for the west. It was on the property of Lee Wilson, now David Grieco, who owns a large tract in Beaver County, still considered the Murdocksville area. Until the 1950s the two story log house and large barn that housed the accommodation stood near Potato Garden Run.

Murdocksville was in a unique position taking in the corners of three counties and five townships. Very early it was declared an independent school district under the jurisdiction of Washington County. It drew pupils from Findlay Township, Allegheny County; Hanover and Independence Townships, Beaver County; Hanover and Robinson Townships, Washington County. In 1913 the district operated on a budget showing total expenses - \$404.14 with a balance - \$118.11.

The one room school building stood on a corner of the Coventry farm at the intersection of Sunnyhill Road and ClintonFrankfort Road. Coventry School on Rte.22 near Bavington, Dillow School at the old Fort Dillow, and Robinson School near Robinson Church were the other early one room schools in northern Washington County. Murdocksville was the last to close in 1954.

As a fitting closing to this account of such a historic place it may be of interest to know that the lands of two prominent settlers of those early days are still owned and occupied by their direct descendants - Jean Armor Stout and her family on the Armor Tract and Thomas C. Bigger and sister Peggy Bigger Loncaric on the Thomas Bigger Tract. Both families have been the sole owners and occupants since the original deeds were granted as Virginia Certificates in the early 1770s and surveyed in 1786. Gorman and June Armstrong live in the remodelled and renovated house that was once the General Store. The home of the miller, Robert Withrow was owned until recently by Emmett Dawson ,Sr., then Allan Cox. It is now owned by Mr. and Mrs. George Lepre. The writer of this research lives in one of the original frame houses built in 1831 in the village of White's Mill. What was once a thriving country village is now a pleasant residential area in a deep green valley on the Waters of the Raccoon.

A permanent reminder of our heritage is a marker presented by the Beaver County Historical and Landmarks Foundation dedicated June 27,1993 commemorating the existence of the grist mill.

Resources

History of Allegheny County, Pennsylvania  
A. Warner & Co.  
1889

History of Washinton County, Pennsylvania  
Boyd Crumrine  
1882

20th Century History of the City of Washington and Washington County  
Joseph F. McFarland  
1910

Commemorative Biographical Record of Central Pennsylvania  
Centre, Clearfield, Jefferson, and Clarion Counties  
1898

Pennsylvania Postal History  
John L. Kay and Chester M. Smith, Jr.

Armor Family History -1939 - Jean Armor Leggo  
McCandless Family History - 1940 - Jean Armor Leggo

Thanks to the "Oldtimers" for their conversations  
Kenneth Caler, Emmett Dawson, Norman Elder, Jean Armor Stout

