

A Colebrook Chronicle

Colebrook, Pennsylvania is considered an unincorporated community in South Londonderry Township. It is located at the intersection of Pennsylvania Route 117 and Mount Wilson Road. Colebrook originated as a small industrial village, founded by Robert W. Coleman in the 1790s.

Robert W. Coleman (image) was an Irish immigrant who settled in Central Pennsylvania. He was born in County Donegal, Ireland and settled in Philadelphia in 1764. At first, he began his work as a bookkeeper and clerk at the Hopewell Iron Furnace. He eventually amassed enough funds from this career to lease Salford Forge near Norristown in 1773. He immediately made a decent profit by manufacturing cannonballs at both Salford Forge and Elizabeth Furnace. With those profits, Coleman purchased a two-thirds share of the Elizabeth Furnace, and some shares of the Cornwall Furnace and the Upper and Lower Hopewell Furnaces. He was also able to assume ownership of the Speedwell Forge.

Shortly after the success of his other iron furnaces, in 1791, Coleman was able to construct the Colebrook Furnace. It was supplied with ore from the Cornwall pits via Mine Road. During the same time, he gained complete ownership of the Elizabeth Furnace and 80% ownership of the Cornwall Furnace and its deposits of iron ore. Due to the success of his iron empire, Coleman became Pennsylvania's first millionaire.

Similar to the Cornwall Iron Furnace, the Colebrook Iron Furnace was powered by charcoal, made by colliers, to process iron ore. Coleman's operation was useful in many aspects, including the Revolutionary War. It produced 114,000 tons of mined ore in just 57 years. While the furnace itself is not standing, it was located on what is now the Cliff and Lynn Orley Family farm (image), with the charcoal barn still standing intact on a slight rise. One can visualize the furnace down the hill (across the road from what is now Collins Grocery) and imagine the charcoal being transported by wagon to fuel its furnace. The village of Colebrook blossomed around the success of Coleman. The town was small, originally only containing the company store, iron worker's housing, the furnace, a sawmill, a grist mill and Coleman's mansion (called the ironmaster's mansion) at the corner of Mt. Wilson Road and Route 241. A church (St. Lawrence Catholic Church) was built in 1852 by St. John Neuman, to serve the workers. It closed its doors 1862 when the furnace ceased to operate. A small monument marking the spot can still be seen along Mt. Wilson Road heading north.

Upon Coleman's death in 1825, his son, Thomas Bird/Burd Coleman inherited both the Colebrook Furnace and the Ironmaster's mansion. By 1850, Colebrook was ranked fourth in the country for iron production. Recognition of the furnace grew when poet George Boker published "The Legend of the Hounds," a poem depicting the cruel furnace manager Squire Jacobs.

In this poem, it is said that after bragging about the skills of his hunting dogs, Jacobs took them for a hunt to prove it. Following an unsuccessful day of hunting, Jacobs was extremely angry with his hounds and ordered them to be thrown into the flames of the furnace. Whether or not this story is true cannot be proven, however those who still live in the area recognize the historical importance of the legend.

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In 1879, Thomas's grandson, Robert Habersham Coleman took over the family business. Shortly afterwards, he developed the Cornwall & Lebanon Railroad which ran from Cornwall to Elizabethtown (now a Rails to Trails path). He also founded the neighboring village of Mount Gretna as one of the station stops along his railroad.

Unfortunately, Coleman's wife, Lillie was frequently ill. They traveled to Europe, which was common for people to do when chronically ill, as it was believed a change in air and scenery could benefit the afflicted. Not long into their trip, Lillie died. Coleman was extremely distraught over this.

During the same time, a bowling alley was being constructed adjacent to the mansion in Colebrook and a new mansion with stables built in Cornwall. Devastated by his wife's passing, Coleman had the Cornwall mansion destroyed, though the stables there remained. The Colebrook mansion also remained, along with its brand-new bowling alley (across 241 in the now grassy area). This 1880s single lane bowling alley built by Robert Habersham Coleman was situated along the Conewago Creek. It was subsequently destroyed by the 1972 Agnes flood. Much of the property is surrounded by cast iron fencing, probably cast at Cornwall or Elizabeth Furnace.

As newer furnace operations, fueled by anthracite, became popular, the furnace was eventually shut down by 1862.

By the 1900s, the Youtz family owned the Coleman Mansion. Edward Youtz opened a hotel in the mansion in 1907. Over time an Atlantic gas station across from the hotel was converted to a tavern. During the 1920s, Rosa Youtz, Edward's daughter, opened a tea shop, The Colemanor Tea Shoppe, on the premises. According to local newspapers, it was rumored to have served, during the Prohibition Era, as a local speakeasy. It remained the Colemanor Tea Shoppe until Prohibition was repealed in 1933. The structure is still standing in Colebrook and is well-known to locals as the Colebrook Tavern (now closed)

Colebrook functioned as part of the large Pennsylvania National Guard military encampment from 1885

- 1935 training men for the Spanish-American War and World War I. and gained national attention. The encampment extended from Mount Gretna along Route 117 in to Colebrook. In particular, the horses for the cavalry were stabled in Colebrook. In June 1926, per an Army & Navy Journal article under the 104th Cavalry notes, "a swimming pool, used by the soldiers, was constructed at the Cavalry Field, Colebrook, PA." It was also said they waded the horses through it. Today, we know this pool as Cavalry Dam on the State Game lands as it still exists. It is now used as a wildlife habitat.

Colebrook's most famous resident and one of America's first dietitians was Sarah Tyson Rorer (image). Rorer was a world-renowned author and authority on diet and cooking who presented her recipes at the 1893 Chicago and 1904 St. Louis World's Fairs. She embraced the Chautauqua ideals and led efforts to raise money to build the Hall of Philosophy in Mount Gretna. She eventually settled in Colebrook, where she lived until her death in 1937. Her home still stands and used to be the Colebrook Post Office (image)

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Many of the original buildings in Colebrook are still standing. The Iron master's mansion, built in 1791 by Robert Coleman, is still well-kept and owned by Barry and Susan Bucks (image). This lovely property has been placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The old Colebrook Grist Mill about a mile west on Route 241 remains. Spring water can be obtained at the small spring house on the Orley farm along the east side of Mount Wilson Road. A more modern icon of Colebrook, Collins Grocery, started in 1950 and is still family owned as is the Twin Kiss next to Colebrook's playground.

Colebrook may be a small village, but it is packed with a rich history of both millionaires and the working class. It is a valued part of the Central Pennsylvania community.

Sources:

Bitner, Jack. Mt. Gretna: A Coleman Legacy.

Bucks, Susan. Personal Interview with Susan Hostetter. November 2020 Orley, Lynn.

Personal Interview with Susan Hostetter. November 2020 Newspapers.com