

Why Has Northern York County Historical and Preservation Society

Built an 18th Century Reproduction

Distillery at Dills Tavern?

The easy answer is that in 1750 the Dills had a distillery business operating on the property and made a respectable living doing it. The Eichelberger family bought the property in 1800 and started a large distillery as soon as they were able. They made most of their income producing rye whiskey and peach brandy. NYCHAPS, as a historical society that emphasizes "hands on" living history, has embraced telling the stories of these two influential pioneer families. One of the most interesting and unrecognized stories, not only of these families, but also the whole state, is the history of early Pennsylvania distilling. This story has all but disappeared from the collective memory of the states' citizenry including historians. Prohibition completely destroyed the industry and erased a rich heritage of what was once a huge agricultural and financial endeavor.

The Dill family, headed by our town's founders Matthew and Mary Dill, ran a small frontier distillery starting sometime before 1750. Matthew Dill passed away in 1750 and in his will he left a still, other distilling equipment, and a large amount of grain to his wife Mary Hamilton Dill. Why would he do such a thing? Women did "not" run businesses in this era. In essence, he gave her the family business. He would only do this if she knew how to distill and he expected her to carry on the family trade. This is a most unusual situation and probably would only occur on the frontier. Mary may have been the first and only female distiller west of the Susquehanna River in 1750.

Two generations of Dills passed and in 1800 they sold out to the Eichelberger family. The Eichelbergers were inn keepers, wheelwrights, farmers, millers, politicians and most importantly, distillers. They ran a virtual empire of trades and businesses locally and the most lucrative, was their distillery. They used their huge farm to supply the distillery which produced thousands of gallons of rye whiskey from 1803 to 1833. The Eichelberger ledgers owned by NYCHAPS, detail the family businesses, including the distillery. Over 15 years of research on the ledgers made NYCHAPS aware of the importance of distilling to our site and the rest of the state. Up to 10 % of all the grain grown in Pennsylvania at this time ended up in still houses. This took a massive amount of labor and financial commitment to create such a commercial enterprise; and yet, almost no one knows about it today.

The late 18th and early 19th centuries saw York County become one of the busiest centers of spirit production. The area was peppered with hundreds of stills. The surrounding counties also produced copious amounts of spirits. Pennsylvania, early on, was the undisputed champion of spirit production in the colonies and later the United States. The large influx of settlers from Northern Ireland in the 18th century brought distilling technology to Pennsylvania and it was practiced with great gusto. Several states claim that whiskey production began within their borders, but the first "great" American distilling realm was in Pennsylvania.

People in Harrisburg might say, "Why should we care about some early distilling family businesses in Dillsburg? What does that have to do with us?" Well, Fort Hunter is a revered historical location in Harrisburg. The famous owner of that property was Archibald McAllister. He was renowned for being a Revolutionary War hero and builder of various early structures on the property, including the mansion house. How did he afford to build all those buildings, especially the grand mansion house? He did it by running a large distillery from the late 18th into the early 19th century. Most of his fortune came from his distillery, which was located just below the grist mill. Archibald's connection to Dillsburg? He was Matthew Dill's grandson!

At the same time that the Eichelbergers in Dillsburg, and Archibald McAllister at Fort Hunter operated their still houses, a famous scientist toiled away in a laboratory further up the Susquehanna River in Northumberland. That man was Thomas Cooper and he was experimenting with the use of steam to improve the distilling process. The use of steam would end up revolutionizing the industry. Cooper was working in the laboratory of internationally famous scientist Joseph Priestley, the man who discovered oxygen. Priestley moved from England to America and purchased a huge estate in Northumberland. On the estate, Priestley built a stately mansion house and continued his scientific research. He passed away in 1804; but his son, Joe Jr., allowed Cooper to use the laboratory to do research on steam distilling. John Priestley ended up building a distillery on his estate presumably using Cooper's steam technology to run the stills. What does Cooper have to do with Archibald McAllister? Well, Archibald McAllister ran a mercantile business out of Fort Hunter, that supplied the Priestley Estate. All kinds of supplies were sent up the river from Fort Hunter by boat to the Priestley estate. It is not documented, but we know McAllister was one of the first area distillers to use steam stills. It seems quite likely that he learned of Cooper's experiments and incorporated steam technology into his still house as a result.

The Eichelberger Distillery at Dills Tavern will be a place where one can see period equipment being used to make distilled products, especially rye whiskey. Wood fired copper pot stills, and large copper wood fired boilers encased in masonry just as they were in the 18th century come to life again. Recipes from early distilling manuals are utilized to turn out original products that our ancestors would have enjoyed in their day. Education of the public by demonstrating how an early stillhouse was operated and telling the stories of Matthew Dill, Mary Hamilton Dill, the Eichelbergers, Archibald McAllister, Thomas Cooper, John Priestley, and the hundreds of early distillers and inventors that populated our commonwealth, is our mission. There was also an army of related businesses that supported the distilling industry, farmers, coopers, teamsters, copper smiths, etc. These forgotten people deserve to be recognized and this invisible industry needs to be revealed to the public once again. Kentucky and Tennessee get most of the credit for the history of whiskey in America and they do deserve a tremendous amount of acclaim. However, a huge share of the pioneers that moved to those states and made their whiskey what it is, originally came from Pennsylvania. In early America, rye whiskey was king, not Bourbon, and the king of rye whiskey production was Pennsylvania.

We encourage you to visit the Eichelberger Distillery at Dills Tavern and experience a day in the life of 18th century stillhouse workers. The wonderful smells of grain cooking. Feel the steam in the air from the wood fired boilers. Hear sounds of rolling wood barrels, paddles stirring the mash, wood being chopped for fires, and workers discussing their labors. You may even be asked to join in and stir some mash yourself. You won't get closer anywhere to early whiskey history than this.