

The Cement Mill: Ruins of Historic Site Tell a Story of Industry and War

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The Cement Mill site rests on the banks of the Potomac River one mile south of Shepherdstown on River Road. The 18 acre property adjoins river flood plain and limestone hills, which were once critical resources for the operation of the Mill complex. The nearly 200 year old site operated for less than half of that time, yet the site's historic significance remains prominent in the telling of our shared past.

The Mill's beginnings date back to 1826, when a Shepherdstown physician, Henry Boteler, and a businessman, George Reynolds, partnered to build a water-powered grist mill on the Potomac River. By January 1828, Boteler realized that limestone on the property could be used to make hydraulic cement, the preferred mortar for masonry structures. As a result, indentions and man-made crevices on the cliffs on the adjacent side of River Road still bear the marks where the limestone was mined in the years of the Mill's operation. Boteler and Reynolds built a small experimental kiln followed quickly by a larger kiln, to burn or "calcine" the stone. The mill then ground the calcined stone to cement to ship to construction sites.

By late 1828, construction had begun on the C&O Canal on the Maryland side of the Potomac, which increased demand for cement produced at the Mill. Recognizing the need to increase production for the growing operation, Boteler and Reynolds then built a bank of six kilns in 1829 and 1830. Also in 1829, they built a dam of rubble and stone-filled wooden cribs across the Potomac, upstream from the mill, to create a pool for the mill-race to provide water power. The dam can still be seen today when the Potomac's water level is low enough.

The Mill became the sole property of George Reynolds after Henry sold his interests to his partner in 1835. 11 years later, Alexander Boteler, Henry's son, purchased the Mill in full from Reynolds, operating the Mill successfully until 1861. By August 1861, Virginia's secession from the Union had drawn a line of division along the banks of the Potomac River. Alexander had been commissioned a colonel in the Confederate army and was also elected a representative to the Confederate legislature. Many believe that it was because of Boteler's position within the Confederate government and war effort, accompanied by impetus to destroy Confederate infrastructure that the Mill was burned in 1861. Later in 1864, Boteler's home called "Fountain Rock" was also burned by Union forces under General David Hunter.

Following the Battle of Antietam, fought September 17, 1862, General George McClellan ordered his forces to pursue the Confederate army across the Potomac into Virginia, now West Virginia. On September 19, advance units of Union General Fitz John Porter's Corps quickly overran Confederate pickets and artillery located around and above the Cement Mill site, capturing four Confederate cannon. The following morning, Confederate General A.P. Hill counterattacked with intense fighting culminating in a Federal withdrawal back across the river. This stage of the fighting also witnessed the confusion that ensued as orders to retreat were passed up and down the Federal lines which were miscommunicated, ultimately stranding the 118th Pennsylvania Infantry on the heights above the Mill. The "Corn Exchange

Regiment” as they were known, suffered heavy casualties as they made a panicked retreat from the larger Confederate force bearing down upon them. As the battered Federals made their way to safety under heavy fire, the kilns and structure of the Mill provided cover for the shaken troops. The fighting that day would become known as the Battle of Shepherdstown, or Boteler’s Mill. It was the final action of General Robert E. Lee’s 1862 Maryland campaign and it was McClellan’s failure to trap Lee that ultimately led to his replacement as General and Chief of the Union Army.

In 1867 a group of trustees rebuilt the mill. It continued to grind calcined lime in to cement until about 1901. In the century that followed, the site fell silent, resting quietly along the Potomac River as a reminder of a time come and gone. In 2011, the Mill site was preserved through a partnership with the Jefferson County Historic Landmarks Commission, Civil War Trust, Shepherdstown Battlefield Preservation Association and the Save Historic Antietam Foundation. Following the purchase of the property, it was placed under conservation easement by the Land Trust of the Eastern Panhandle and has been protected ever since with the long term goal of donating the property to Antietam National Battlefield. The site can be viewed daily from dawn to dusk and from the River Road.