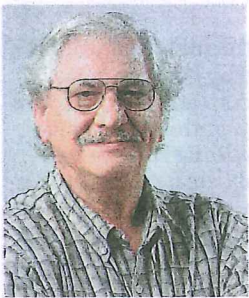


HISTORY

Preserving the Past *By Ron Devlin*

The Pine Forge Historical Society



The Thomas Rutter house serves as the home for the Pine Forge Historical Society on the grounds of the Pine Forge Academy in Douglass Township.

READING EAGLE:
HAROLD HOCH



THOMAS RUTTER bought land along the Manatawny Creek, north of Pottstown, and built Pennsylvania's first iron furnace in 1716.

A Quaker blacksmith who emigrated from England, Rutter had planned on exporting iron to the mother country.

His plans never materialized, but Rutter would go down in history as the father of the iron industry in Pennsylvania.

The Pine Forge Historical Society, headquartered on Rutter's estate in the village of Pine Forge, is the keeper of an iron making tradition that's about to celebrate its 300th anniversary.

In 2016, the society will join the National Iron & Steel Heritage Museum in Coatesville in celebrating Rutter's contribution to Colonial America.

Cynthia Poole, a society board member, said Rutter's influence on early America cannot be overstated.

"The impact he had was not just on Pennsylvania but on the nation," said Poole, former

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headmistress of Pine Forge Academy.

The Allegheny East Conference, Seventh-day Adventists, which runs the academy, owns the Rutter estate in Douglass Township. In addition to Rutter's 1725 stone Manor House, the estate includes a commissary and paymaster's office built in the 18th century.

"These treasurers are for future generations to learn about the courage, dedication, foresight and value the early settlers placed on freedom for all men," said Phyllis Mitchell, historical society president. "The commonwealth of Pennsylvania has recognized Rutter's estate as an American treasure and placed it on the National Register of Historic Places."

Rutter, a devout Quaker, was an early abolitionist who signed a document declaring slavery "unjust and immoral" in 1694.

Indeed, Rutter's descendants used his manor as a stopover on the Underground Railroad, offering fleeing African-American slaves shelter and sustenance as they made their way to New England. Some were employed in the iron works.

A state historical marker describes Rutter as a "pioneer ironmaster and opponent of slavery who built Pennsylvania's first ironworks in 1716."

In 1720, with Thomas Potts, Rutter founded Colebrookdale Furnace in Colebrookdale Township, near Boyertown.

The former owner of Mitchell Packaging Materials in Boyertown, Mitchell said the historical society is trying to obtain grants to restore Rutter's manor house and outbuildings.

The plan, she said, is to restore the home to the way it looked when Thomas Rutter lived there in the 18th century. He died in 1730.

It's an ambitious project, she concedes, but one that would have lasting merit for generations to come.

The Pine Forge Historical Society was founded in 2004 to recognize Rutter's work.

In addition to its annual Pine Forge History Day, the group has developed programs in Colonial history for children.

Working with the Friends of Thomas Rutter, the society has developed an educational program for children ages 5-12. Recently, the group, which

Birth of an industry

What: In 1716, Germantown blacksmith Thomas Rutter built a bloomery, a crude furnace for smelting iron, in the hamlet of Pine Forge. It is widely acknowledged as Pennsylvania's first iron furnace, and Rutter is considered the founder of the iron industry in the state. In 1720, with Thomas Potts, Rutter founded the Colebrookdale Furnace in Colebrookdale Township. At that time, smelting shifted to Colebrookdale, and the bloomery became a finishing mill.

Who: The Pine Forge Historical Society, founded in 2004, to preserve the history of the early ironmaking industry.

Underground Railroad: The Rutter estate was a stop on the Underground Railroad in the mid-19th century. A staunch Quaker, Rutter was an early abolitionist who signed a document decrying slavery in 1694.

Preservation: Thomas Rutter House, known as the Manor House, is under restoration. Also on the property is a commissary, paymaster's house and former barn.

Officers: Phyllis Mitchell, president; Mike Jones, vice president; Kirk Mitchell, secretary; and David Rutter, treasurer.

Events: Rutter house is open to the public on History Day, May 3. Children's history program on the third Sunday of the month from 2 to 4 p.m. Preparations are underway for the 300th anniversary of Rutter's furnace next year.

Information: email tutorphyl@gmail.com.

meets on the third Sunday of the month, did programs on ancient carpentry and archeology.

Poole, assistant superintendent of the Allegheny East Conference, sees wisdom in preserving the past.

"The contributions Thomas Rutter and the early ironmakers made cannot be overestimated," she said. "It's always important to respect the past." ☺

Contact Ron Devlin: 610-371-5030 or rdevlin@readingeagle.com.

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