

THE DESERTED OLD FISH HOUSE



Club's Request to Occupy One Time Home of State in Schuylkill Abandoned, and the Park Commission Considers Demolition of Building

An old Park landmark the one-time iron mill at Riverside, which lately has been the Schuylkill club house of the "State in Schuylkill"—will probably be demolished. About a year ago it was abandoned by the Fishhouse Club¹, as the "State in Schuylkill" is colloquially known, as it had been rendered uninhabitable by the floods from the Wissahickon.

Recently a newly-formed, unnamed social club, of which Worrell Wagner, a son of John Wagner, is the prime mover, asked permission of the Park Commission to make the old mill its headquarters. The Commission, however, regards the structure as dangerous for habitation, susceptible as it is to floods, which often reach the second story and compel the housekeeper to make his exits and entrances by means of a boat, and have about decided to refuse the new club's request.

The matter, however, has not been definitely decided upon, pending an investigation on the part of the Commission's chief engineer and the Committee on Superintendence and Police.

The mill was built some years previous to the American Revolution and was the first nail mill located in the country. It was operated with a wheel swung under the side of the structure, turned by the waters of the Wissahickon carried through a mill race, which emptied into the Schuylkill.

After the Revolution, newer and larger mills, with improved machinery, put the old place out of business, and it was, abandoned for its original purpose and used as a dwelling.

Was Purchased by City

About 1860² it was purchased by the city and added to the Park Property to prevent the contamination of the water by sewerage. It was then used as a stable for Park guard horses, until the "State in Schuylkill," in April, 1876, secured its possession for their club house, at a nominal

rental³. It then became the scene of many of the festivities which have made this social fishing organization famous. They fitted up the old structure in an attractive way inside, allowing its outward seeming to remain as it had stood for a century.

It was the habit of the club to give fish dinners on the lawn, a lawn redeemed from the old mill race by filling it to a level with the banks and fencing it in from the Riverside property. Here, out in the open air, in an iron oven the rock fish and perch were boiled and panned after the method of the ancestors of this old club.

The "State in Schuylkill" marks its birth—1732. It was organized by a coterie of well-known citizens of Philadelphia, who enjoyed cooking the fish taken with their own lines. Their first home was located on the west bank of the Schuylkill on a spot between the Pennsylvania Railroad and Girard avenue bridges, as they now stand, and the ground was given them by "Baron" William Warren, who exacted a yearly tribute of three sun perch, which the club served him on a huge pewter platter.

Famous for Its Punch

The club house was known as the "Castle." In 1820 the Castle was floated down to Rambo Rock, on the Lower Schuylkill, opposite Bartram's Garden, where it remained until 1888, when it was taken apart and reset up at Eddington, on the Delaware, across the river from Beverly, and is now the rallying ground of the anglers under the sobriquet of "The Fishhouse"—famous for its punch as well as fish stories.

The old mill on the Schuylkill was selected as a handy spot for parties and it was used quite as much as the "Castle,"⁴ until the floods drove fishermen away.

These floods, a member of the {State in Schuylkill} club says, have been due to the narrowing of the channel at that point⁵, the remit of encroachments made by the Pencoyd Iron Works, which for years has been dumping slag along the bank. It is thought that it would be impossible to prevent this flooding except at a great expense, and as a result, the Commission has practically decided to tear down the old landmark, take away the fence, and level the ground to conform with the treatment of the bank all along the River Drive.

³ \$5.00 per document in the Fairmount Park archives.

⁴ In 1887, the Colony's 'real' Castle was in Eddington; it moved to Andalusia in 1944. The March, 1902, the flood waters rose two & a half feet into the Mill's main room. The 1902 flood matched 1869 levels in some places per the July 2020 Manayunk Main Street Historic District Flood Guide.

⁵ East River Drive entranceway added c. 1891-1893.

¹ The Club moved its official Colony Castle and HQ in 1887 to Andalusia, but its lease of the Mill did not expire until 1902.

² It was a property appropriated for public use by the Act of Assembly, 14 April 1868, but not Deeded over until 1874 for \$10,000.