

Knauer's Mill (the John Knauer House and Mill) was listed on the [National Register of Historic Places](#) in 1985. Portions of the text, below, were selected and adapted from a copy of the original nomination document.

Description

Situated on the west side of French Creek and on the north side of Route 23, close by the road, a group of four 18th century buildings includes a 2-1/2 story stone house, a stone mill, a stone and frame barn, and a small stone house. Together they present an authentic picture of substantial building techniques and commercial success in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. All buildings face south. They were built, circa 1785-90, by John Knauer to replace the log structures of his father's mill and associated buildings.

The miller's house is a straight forward five bay rectangle with the main entrance in the center bay. The house is two bays deep. There are secondary entrances at the center rear, the west side rear, and at the east side, lower level, facing the mill. Although the house is built into the hillside so that there are two levels, it does not appear so from the front view. A gable, terne tin roof is finished off with a wide, simple cornice. Broad cut stone chimneys are a dominant feature on each gable end, capped with a flat stone. Downstairs windows are 6/9 while the second floor windows reduce to 6/6. A rectangular, 5 pane transom caps the six panel door.

The interior of the house reveals a large multi-purpose room on either side of the wide center hall. There is a particularly well designed closed string stairway with turned spindles and contoured rail. There are four rooms on the second floor, each with a plain mantel around its fireplace. Other surviving interior features are a

deeply routed fireplace mantel in the first floor east room with window reveals to match. Most of the original chair rail remains throughout the house. The basement kitchen is perfunctory with no detailing around fireplace or doors. Original wrought hardware is still in tact in the basement.

A stone and frame barn stands just west of the house. It measures 30' x 60' and has a one-story shed attached at a right angle from the west wall of the barn to the road giving shelter from winter storms. The main roof is terne tin; the shed roof is wood shingled.

The stone grist mill, a short distance east of the house, shows its early building, 31' x 42', clearly in the northern end of the structure. An addition of almost the same dimensions was added by Jonathan Knauer - son of John - in 1834. The bulk of the machinery, chutes and the wheel room are in the north, or early, section. The newer section includes an office with a corner fireplace, flue for stoves in the rooms above, and several rooms for grain storage. The overshot iron Fitz water wheel is still in place, although its buckets are almost disintegrated. It is a 16' wheel with 6' face (width of buckets).

Since the mill operated into the 1940s, the machinery was updated in some areas. A Midget Marvel Bolting Machine replaced the original bolter (Midget Marvel patented in September, 1909, and purchased for this mill shortly after May, 1912). A wheat scouring machine and a new bagger were purchased from Silver Springs, [New York](#). These machines remain in good condition, the scourer still attached to its chutes.

Just east of the mill, with only a cart path between, stands a small — 15' x 19' — two story stone house. It has one opening per wall per floor except on the east side where the wall is blank. There is a fireplace on the main floor. A mortised and tenoned foundation, at

the rear of the mill and the small house, is the site of the two log stables listed in the tax list. Remnants of the mill dam, races and holding pond are visible, the pond being in repairable condition. The present owners are rehabilitating the mill and small house for commercial purposes.

Significance

The John Knauer House and Mill reflect the enterprise and long standing influence of the Knauer family in Upper Chester County. Built by the son of German immigrant Johann Christopher Knauer, the mill was one of four 18th century corn or grist mills on Upper French Creek and was the center of Knauer family enterprises until the late 19th century. Architecturally, the John Knauer House provides a fine local example of late 18th century construction.

The Knauer Mill was one of four eighteenth century grist or corn mills on Upper French Creek and the only one on the north branch of that creek. The log Knauer Mill, replaced after 1785 with the present stone mill and later enlarged, was contemporary with the circa 1745 Hockley Mill, and the 1750 Reading Furnace grist and saw mill, both on the south branch of French Creek. A fourth mill, also on the south branch, now known as the James Mill, built by Jacob Hager in 1798, was converted into a dwelling about 1965. The Hockley Mill stands without most of its machinery and the Reading Mills have totally disappeared. Tax records reveal that the Knauer Mill was consistently assessed 25% higher than the above mills.

Knauer's Grist and Saw Mill was the main part of the Knauer "commercial operation" from the early days of German settlement until 1880 when Davis Knauer opened the Black Granite Quarries at St. Peters. The Mill, however, continued to be the only grist mill on the north branch of French Creek, and was one of a very few flour

mills in upper Chester County that operated as late as 1940. It remained in the Knauer family until 1977. From 1880 forward, the Knauer quarries at St. Peters operated conjunctly with the mill, the Knauers being the only employers of any consequence in the neighborhood. At one time, Knauers owned every house in Knauertown and in the company town of St. Peters. Even the Knauertown Band was comprised entirely of Knauers at one time.

Johann Christopher Knauer, the Knauer immigrant, was expressing the hopes and dreams of hundreds of Europeans when he spent a part of his inheritance on a Warrant for 100 acres in Pennsylvania in 1731. He continued to purchase more land contiguous to his first purchase. When he died in 1766, he left two minor sons to whom he bequeathed all his lands. Son John was to have the mill and land on the west side of French Creek, and son Christopher to have the land and improvements on the east side of the creek.

John Knauer, the son, continued to expand the grist and saw mill to provide for a growing German settlement. During the Revolution, his mother managed the works while John served in the Pennsylvania militia. After 1780, when he returned to Knauertown and the mill, he began a total reconditioning of the operation. The log buildings were, one-by-one taken down and replaced in stone. In 1789, John purchased 75-1/4 acres of wood and creek land on his north line to accommodate a dam in French Creek from which a new race was dug to a holding pond above the mill.

When John died in 1825, he willed the mill site to his sixth son, Jonathan, who was living at home and operating the mill with his father. Jonathan put the addition on the mill which practically doubled its size, and ran the mill the next twenty-three years until he died at age 60. His older brother, David, then took over until he died in 1856 at age 70. David, a stone mason as well as a miller and

farmer, probably was the one to actually build the mill addition as he lived close by. David had eleven children, of whom Davis was the ninth child and youngest son.

Of all the Knauers, Davis, and later his son, David John (known as D.J.), were the most enterprising. Davis learned the milling trade by his father's side and when he was only 16 years of age, improved cider mill techniques. At 18, while still assisting in the management of the mill, he entered into the lumber business in Knauertown. He became the owner, eventually, of 4000 acres of woodland from which he was the largest distributor of charcoal in Pennsylvania, hauling it to different forges by teams of 10 or 18 mules.

A fifth generation son, David John, continued his father's many business enterprises including the old flour mill at Knauertown. Here he made flour for the bakery he operated in St. Peters as well as for public sale. He expanded every facet of business in which his family was involved. Both he and his father were very able executives; always finding the right person to manage their many enterprises. During much of D.J.'s years the mill was operated by John Ortlip and Morris Knauer, a cousin. D.J. produced electricity for the village by utilizing water power in 1915, almost 20 years before the average local resident had electric lights on the farm. He allowed the first telephone in town on the store porch at the Falls. He also brought silent films to the village in the days of Harold Lloyd and Mary Pickford using the water powered electricity he generated from French Creek.

After the ironmasters, the Knauers were the most important single influence in the upper reaches of French Creek. Their importance lasted far beyond that of the ironmasters as the valley turned to agricultural pursuits. The services provided by their commercial operations through the following century and a half were vital to

everyone in the community. The old mill ceased grinding cattle feed in the 1920s, but continued by meeting the need for finer flours until 1948. Through all of its operating years, it was managed by the Knauer family — almost 200 years of continual service to the valley.

Architecturally, the Knauer House exhibits [Georgian](#) characteristics of symmetrical plan and fenestration. The building's hillside accommodation, large quarried sandstone quoins and restraint of ornamentation further define this fine example of early 19th century construction. Since the house has no major extensions or additions, it may be contrasted with add-on houses frequently found in this area.

References

Chester County (PA) Recorder of Deeds Office, West Chester, Deed Book F3-149.

Chester County (PA) Archives: Tax Records - 1740-1900.

Chester County (PA) Register of Wills, West Chester, Will of Johann Christopher Knauer - Book 5, page 155 (Estate Papers #2519).

[https://www.livingplaces.com/PA/Chester County/Warwick Township/John Knauer House and Mill.html](https://www.livingplaces.com/PA/Chester_County/Warwick_Township/John_Knauer_House_and_Mill.html)