

# Chapman's Mill ON THE MEND

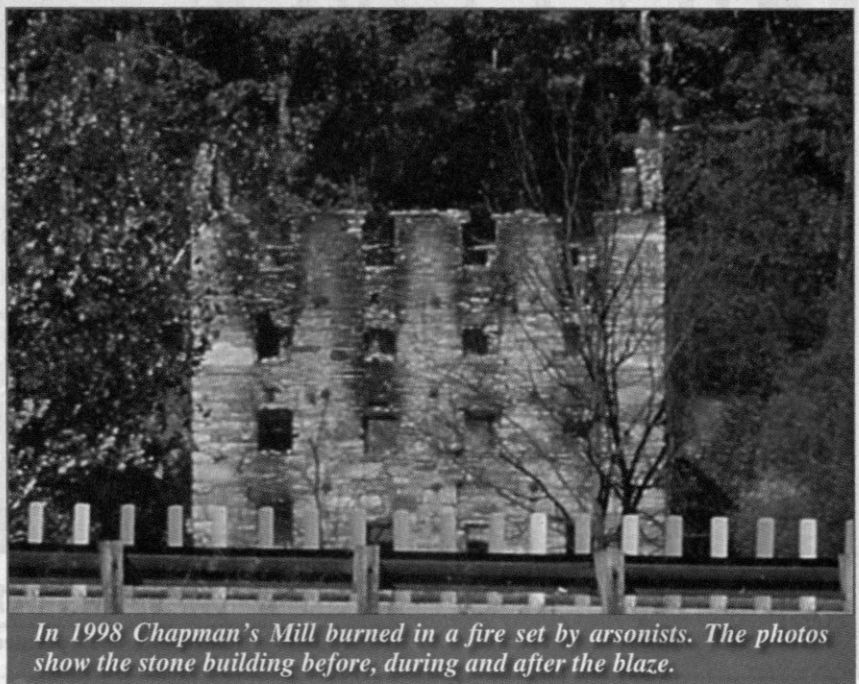
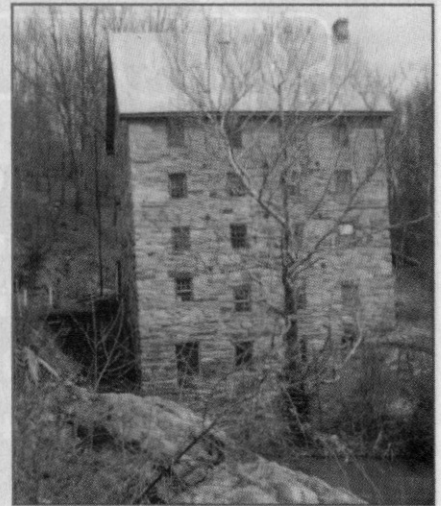
Local group working to stabilize building, open site to public

By Karen Akerlof

**A**s you drive west on Route 66 crossing from Prince William County over into Fauquier, the ruins of a towering stone mill stand within shouting distance north of the busy thoroughfare, maintaining its austere bearing under the barrages of traffic noise and time.

I've always wondered about the building, whose facade, charred and crumbling due to a 1998 fire, seems so haunting sitting in the shadows of the Bull Run mountains. These days, even from the road, you can recognize signs that the building is slowly coming back to life, a skeleton of metal scaffolding supporting the process of architectural rejuvenation. Chapman's Mill, aka Beverley Mill, is undergoing an enormous restoration effort through the work of the Turn Around the Mill Campaign, and this spring a book will be published detailing the structure's history.

Ellen Percy Miller, executive director of the group, unlocked the tall gates that keep out potential vandals and provided a tour of the site, all the while describing a history of one of the county's most important landmarks. It was originally called Chapman's Mill, reflecting the surname of the mill's builders. When the mill changed hands after the Civil War, the name changed as well to Beverley Mill. By whatever name you choose, the structure is still the tallest stone building in the United States, one of Northern Virginia's earliest



*In 1998 Chapman's Mill burned in a fire set by arsonists. The photos show the stone building before, during and after the blaze.*

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*The mill store functioned as the post office for Broad Run for a time.*

industrial sites, and the location of one of the bloodiest battles in the Civil War. It straddles the border with Fauquier County, half of the building on one side and half on the other.

To tell the full story, you have to picture a very different landscape than now exists where Route 66 passes through Pond Mountain to the south and Leathercoat Mountain to the north. This is the famous Thoroughfare Gap, which was once a narrow, barely carriage-wide cleft between the two mountains. The gap was the main route for the country's earliest residents to pass from the rich flood plains of the Shenandoah Valley, through the mountains and into Virginia's Tidewater region.

As European settlers began to farm the area, the gap remained an important passageway and it continues to be to this day. But it wasn't just the fact that anyone traveling west to east had to cross through this point that made it the perfect spot to build one of northern Virginia's oldest industrial buildings, it was the sheer force of Broad Run's waters. "It drops 87 feet in the gap, so that was a great source of power," said Percy Miller.

In 1742 Jonathan and Nathaniel Chapman realized the value of building a mill between the Shenandoah Valley, where German settlers were growing increasing amounts of wheat, and Alexandria, where the flour was sold. The Chapman family was well connected. "George Washington was not only a friend of the Chapmans, but he was in business with them," said Percy Miller. The Chapmans' business

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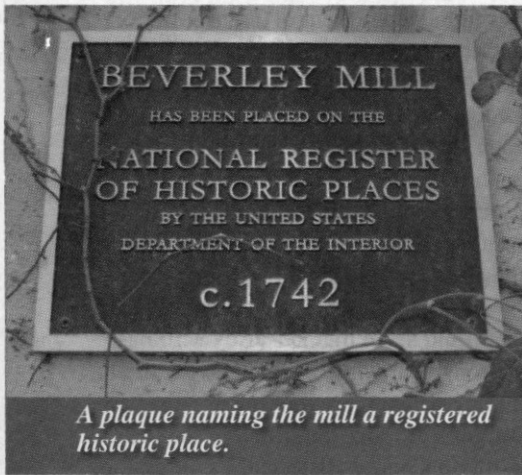
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most likely slaves. PercyMiller said this is one aspect of the building's history about which they know little, but they know the Chapmans were large slave owners.

About the same time the mill reached its full height, the Manassas Gap Railroad pushed through the divide, passing within feet of the building and initiating the first widening of the cleft between the mountains. The railroad radically shortened the shipment time of the Chapmans' flour to coastal markets, but in a few years the Civil War broke out, and the railroad became transport for soldiers. In 1862, Union General Ricketts and his troops established a blocking position at Thoroughfare Gap in an attempt to keep Confederate Generals Lee and Longstreet from reinforcing others amassing in preparation for the Second Battle of Manassas. General Ricketts failed to hold the pass, Lee and Longstreet made it to Manassas, and the battle had faded into history until recently. "Only a few people were aware of that battle, and aware

of the importance of that battle," said PercyMiller.

The mill changed hands many times after the Civil War, but was updated with the latest in milling equipment until approximately 1951 when it stopped operating. Decades later, PercyMiller said it was still "pristine inside" – a time capsule of milling technologies. Arsonists struck in 1998, and the 18-inch-square oak and chestnut beams which supported the stone structure went up in a roaring fire that firefighters were hard-pressed to put out, eventually blasting the gables apart with the high-powered hoses for fear that the unsupported stone would fall outward.

The Turn the Mill Around Campaign obtained the property soon after the fire, and began the slow job of fundraising and finding a firm to begin reconstruction. Stabilizing the building has become a project on the order of more than a million dollars, not including the costs of developing the site for public use with funds provided by private donors, the

acumen rapidly paid off. Within a few decades, wheat had become a major cash crop, behind only tobacco. By the early nineteenth century Virginia flour was being shipped to ports across the world.

The seven-story structure that can be seen today was the result of an enlargement in 1858. "It is very rare to find a stone building over four stories," said PercyMiller. "This was done by master craftsmen." These master craftsmen were

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Virginia Department of Transportation and the Virginia legislature. While the task of strengthening the structure is almost complete, much work remains, such as rebuilding the damaged gables and renovating the waterwheel. The group intends to maintain the mill as a ruin, develop a visitor center and open the site to the public.

"It would seem that Beverley Mill has a strong following. They have put their money where their mouth is," said James Burgess, Jr., vice chairman of the Prince William County Historical Commission. To that end, Burgess and Percy Miller have ventured into a joint project to publish a book based on a master's thesis by Frances Lillian Jones on the history of the mill. The thesis has served as the main resource on the building's history. The book titled "Beverley (Chapman's) Mill, Thoroughfare Gap, Virginia: A History and Preservation Plan" by Frances Lillian Jones is expected to go to print sometime this spring through the historical commission.

Jones, currently a Maryland resident, referred to the building almost mystically when asked how she chose it as her master's degree project, "The site just revealed itself to me." When the building burned, Jones was in England, and she hasn't been back since, saying that the destruction hit her hard. The combination of the stone building and the landscape appealed to the young graduate student, and she felt that its history had really been ignored. "Because the Colvin Run Mill was so successful, the Beverley Mill was neglected," she said.

But between the work of the Turn the Mill Around Campaign and Jones' upcoming book, that cannot be said any longer.

If you would like to purchase a paperweight made from the cores taken from the Beverley Mill during efforts to stabilize the building, the Turn the Mill Around Campaign sells various sizes as a fundraiser for between \$3-\$12. You can contact the group through their website [www.chapmansmill.org](http://www.chapmansmill.org) or call (540) 253-5888.

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