

Biographical/Historical note

Thomas Leiper was born December 15, 1745 in Strathaven, Lanark, Scotland. He was educated at Glasgow and Edinburgh and immigrated to America in 1763, landing in Virginia where his brother already resided. He was immediately introduced into the business of tobacco, and within several years moved to Philadelphia where he opened a tobacco shop and "engaged in the storing and exportation of tobacco," (Leach). During the Revolutionary War, Leiper became the principal tobacco provider in Philadelphia. In 1776, Leiper purchased land in Delaware County that included a mill at a waterfall on the Crum Creek. He established snuff mills and later purchased a stone quarry. In addition to Leiper's tobacco business being very successful, over approximately 20 years, he "acquired a total of 728 acres following Crum Creek to the Delaware River," (Leiper Church). According to Leach, Leiper "amassed a large fortune, which enabled him to subscribe freely to the improvement of Philadelphia and that part of Delaware County in the neighborhood of "Avondale," his country residence."

Leiper was one of the founders of the first troop of Light Horse of the City of Philadelphia, and served in the Revolutionary War, seeing action at Trenton, Princeton, Brandywine, Germantown, Monmouth, and York. Along with his troop, he acted as bodyguard for George Washington and as a defender in the "Fort Wilson Riot" which took place at the home of James Wilson. While most sources state that Leiper served as lieutenant and treasurer of that troop, other sources indicate that he served as a private. Politically, Leiper was a democrat. He served as a presidential elector, director of the Banks of Pennsylvania and the United States, and served as President of the Philadelphia City Council from 1802 to 1805. He also served as a member and President of the Common Council of Philadelphia in 1813. He had much interaction with politicians in the early republic including George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, to whom he rented a house in Philadelphia.

Leiper's quarry produced granite for "curbstones in Philadelphia ... door steps for city homes, ... buildings on the Swarthmore College campus, homes in Swarthmore, and ... the Leiper Church," (Leiper Church). In part due to the success of Leiper's quarry business, Leiper was faced with a growing problem in transporting the stone to Philadelphia and the surrounding area. According to Leiper Church, "in wet weather, the wagons became bogged down on the dirt roads and since Crum Creek was not navigable, barge transportation was not an option." Therefore, Leiper first requested permission to build a canal (which was not approved) and approximately 20 years later, built a railroad from his quarries to a spot on Ridley Creek which was navigable.

Leiper married Elizabeth Gray, daughter of Speaker of the House of the Pennsylvania State Legislature, in 1778. They had 13 children, 10 of whom lived to adulthood. Leiper died on July 6, 1825.

Soon after his death, his descendents started a two vat paper mill which was managed by John Holmes in 1826, and by George G. Leiper in 1829 until it burned in 1836. The two snuff mills were operated, along with the eight mulls and two cutting machines, until 1845. Thomas Leiper had also started "a tilt- or bade-mill, with Nathum Keys as operator, and in 1826, his yearly output was 200 dozens of scythes and straw knives," (Jordan, page 364). George G. Leiper operated it until 1830. In 1843, Leiper's estate was divided.