2.2   History of the Manor Kill

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Conesville's Manorkill Creek flows westerly through the valley emptying into the Schoharie Creek in a spectacular waterfall. The Conesville-Gilboa town line is the center of the Schoharie Creek, now the Reservoir.

Settlers first came to the valley of the Manorkill in 1764. Earlier, in 1753, the British government appointed John Dies to survey the heavily wooded wilderness between the VanBergen Patent and Breakabeen on the Schoharie Kill. Apparently Dies found the land desirable for he then became connected with Ury Richtmyer and several others in the purchase of part of that land. Two patents were granted in 1754. The first patent became West Conesville (first called Strykersville), and Gilboa. The second patent was known as Dies's Manor and covered an area from the hamlets of Conesville (Stone Bridge) to Manorkill (The Manor). The creek was referred to as Diesman's Creek. In 1760, to bring settlers to the patent, Dies improved the Indian Trail over the mountain from Durham and early maps show this road as John Dies Road.

The earliest settlers made their homes along the creek. After the Revolution, people from over-crowded New England States poured into this area and settled on the hills. John Dies Road was once again improved and called the Susquehanna Turnpike. Thousands of people passed this way on their way west, traveling this turnpike. In 1836 the township was formed from parts of Broome, Schoharie County, and Durham, Greene County, and named Conesville. By 1850, the town had its highest number of residents. There were stores, schools, churches, taverns and small business of all kinds.

This was always an agricultural area. Large farms along the fertile Manorkill Creek prospered through the years, as well as smaller farms on the hills. Mills were always an important part of life in the Town of Conesville. Grist mills ground the farmers' buckwheat and rye flour and cornmeal; there were carding and knitting mills, furniture-making shops,

cider mills, tanneries, and numerous saw mills, as the country was growing and everyone was building.

Barent Stryker is said to have built the first mill in the town at the mouth of the narrow gorge above the Falls. However, a very early write-up tells of the "Fanning Mill" somewhere in town before the Revolution.

Barent W. and Peter M. Stryker, sons of the Barent the first, built a once busy tannery in 1830 where raw hides were made into leather. The great hemlock forests that covered the sides of the mountains brought the tanning business to this area at an early period. The bark was rich in tannin that could convert hides into enduring and useful leather. Settlers who lived on the hill farms brought in load after load of hemlock bark to the tannery in Strykersville. They were paid $1 a load. The forests were soon stripped of hemlock and by about 1845 the business began to decline. The gaps left in the forests were soon covered with new growth—not hemlocks and pines, as the young seedlings do not thrive well under the sun, which beats down on a clearing. Instead, dense stands of hardwoods—birch, ash, maple and oak soon covered the mountains.

Gershom Stevens, Jr. built a mill on the lower Falls about 1835. This was still operating in the late 1800s.

In Strykersville there was a carding mill, a knitting mill and a sawmill. A large gristmill and sawmill was near the present concrete wall, just above the village. The foundation walls of the mill are still standing. The mills were destroyed by fire around 1900. An 1805 map shows another mill near Pangman Road.

In Stone Bridge, a water-powered sawmill was on the creek operating as early as 1847, where the town recreation field is today. The flood of 1874 destroyed this mill. (This flood was disastrous to this area; one man died, many homes and businesses were washed away).

Just up the Bearkill was a gristmill and sawmill in 1898; a steam-powered sawmill in the early 1900s; and a diesel operated sawmill in the 1960s. Still visible in 1980 was the dirt raceway of the original mills that led water from a dam upstream. Several miles up

Bearkill, a high sawmill wall is still standing on the Stanley Fancher place, operated by the Hawver family in the 1800s.

Back to the Manorkill Creek, across "the square" in Stone Bridge on Champlin Road was a dam and water wheel turning mill on a small stream that joins the Manorkill. Hand rakes and handles were manufactured from 1851 until 1875. One man in 1854 bought 24,280 broom handles at 8 ½ cents each, from this "Shoemaker Rake and Handle Factory". This too was destroyed in the 1874 flood.

On up the valley, past South Mountain Road, on the former Freeland Case farm a sawmill was operating in the early 1800s. The remains of this mill dam can be seen where the creek comes near the road. The flood in 1874 also washed away this mill. The South Mountain Brook joins the Manorkill on the Bradley Case farm. On this brook, up a narrow gorge is a large formation of stonework that once was a sawmill operated by William E. Richtmyer in the 1800s. One old-timer said "There was awful strapping big pines up in there by this mill."

Above Manorkill village was a mill dam near Schermerhorns, and another in a deep hollow in back of the house formerly owned by DeWitt. This is near the headwaters of the Manorkill. Mills on other Conesville streams included a busy gristmill in Dingmanville in the early 1800s; a mill on up South Mountain Brook; one on Toles Hollow where a high wall (12 feet by 8 feet wide) of the dam is still standing as well as iron gears as big as a wagon wheel; mill on Brand Road; another on the west branch of Bearkill on Leroy Road that was in operation before 1839; a mill on Robinson Road shown on a 1805 map; and on Bull Hill stream just out of West Conesville was the Morse cider, saw and planning mills that burned to the ground in 1913.

At one time, a drive through the Manorkill Valley showed grand farms with green meadows bordering the creek. Up until about 40 or 50 years ago, the farmers could clean out the creek on their land, thereby keeping it within its banks. One local contractor, Sam Bliss, did much of the creek repair in this area using a bulldozer. Since this is no longer allowed, much of the fertile valley farmland has been washed away or flooded and can no longer be used to grow hay and other crops.

The Manorkill Creek played an important roll in the settlement of this town. Today we have no water-powered mills along the Manorkill. This scenic and historic area remains one of the most rural sections of the state. Up until a few years ago this was exclusively a farming community. Small farms now have been divided into seasonal housing developments. A large percentage of residents now commute outside the town for employment. Many families have lived in these hills and valleys for over 200 years; others moved here with the last 25 years, moving their families out of the cities to enjoy our wholesome country living.