

French Jacob by Bruce Teeple

One joy you get from reading historical materials is in finding the unique stories that breathe life back into long-dead characters.

Enough bizarre tales about “French Jacob” Groshong fortunately survive to help us understand how one person made decisions on the Susquehanna frontier. We usually see French Jacob’s name associated with the 1780 Native attack at his mill north of Mifflinburg. Earlier life events, however, gave him a widespread reputation for more than just grinding grain and sawing timbers.

While the family name was originally “Grosjean” (or “Big John”), pronunciation along the borderlands of France and Germany follows its own bilingual logic. It was here that French Jacob was born in 1725. At the age of 26, he arrived in Philadelphia, bought several hundred acres in the Millersburg area two years later, and erected a mill.

Stone milling is more than an “art, trade and mystery.” Millers not only had to adjust the milling process to temperature and humidity fluctuations; they needed excellent political and social skills, for the mill was the center of community life. Farmers went to mills to have their grains ground into flour or distilled into the more profitable whiskey. Waiting in line gave them the chance to get the news, discuss and vote on the issues, or buy lumber if the miller also operated a sawmill. Success required a trustworthy, engaging personality able to handle competition effectively.

It didn’t take long for French Jacob to seek a commercial advantage by demonstrating his supernatural powers. A wave of his hand was said to control snakes and bears. His “magic words” reportedly cured disease and turned unruly children into wild animals. When a forest fire raced down Berry Mountain (near Millersburg), French Jacob drew a line in the dirt and reassured his neighbors that the fire would go no farther. Any attempts to fight it, he warned, would break the spell.

Another story, about French Jacob’s secret silver mine, swirled around the valley. Neighbors swore that whenever he needed money, they saw him wait for the right phase of the moon, utter an incantation, walk into the mountain, and then return with a silver bar.

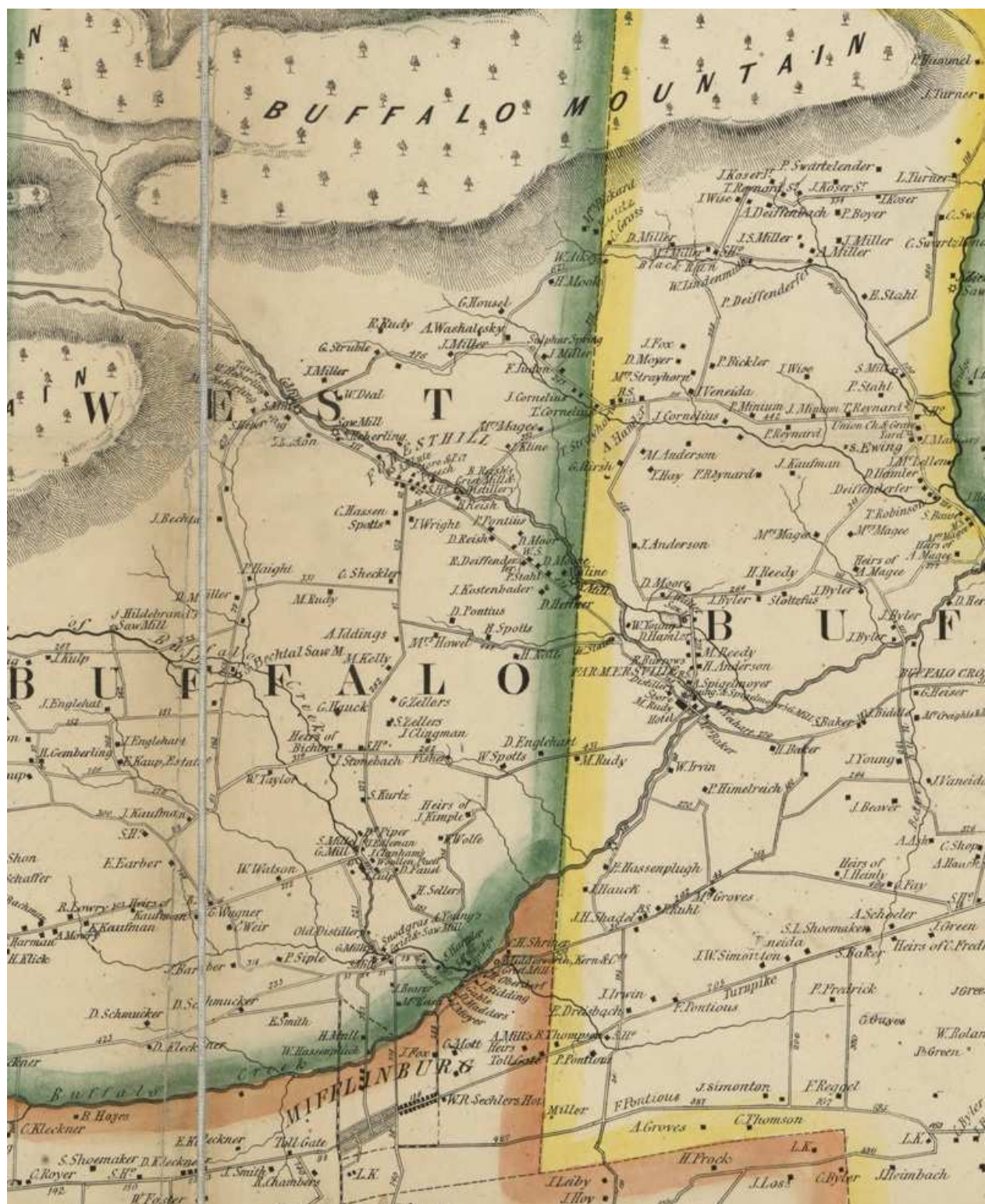
On the eve of the American Revolution, French Jacob moved his milling operations from Millersburg, 50 miles north and west to Buffalo Township. He is listed among the inhabitants of Buffalo Township in April 1780: “Groshong, Jacob, grist-mill.” Losing a lawsuit over the site’s ownership, though, led him to relocate his mill down the road in 1783-84. He added a sawmill in 1785.

But people no longer fell for the old gimmicks. Shrewdness and efficiency were replacing monopoly and sorcery as sustainable marketing strategies. Increasing populations, more competition and promises of opportunity always forced French Jacob farther west.

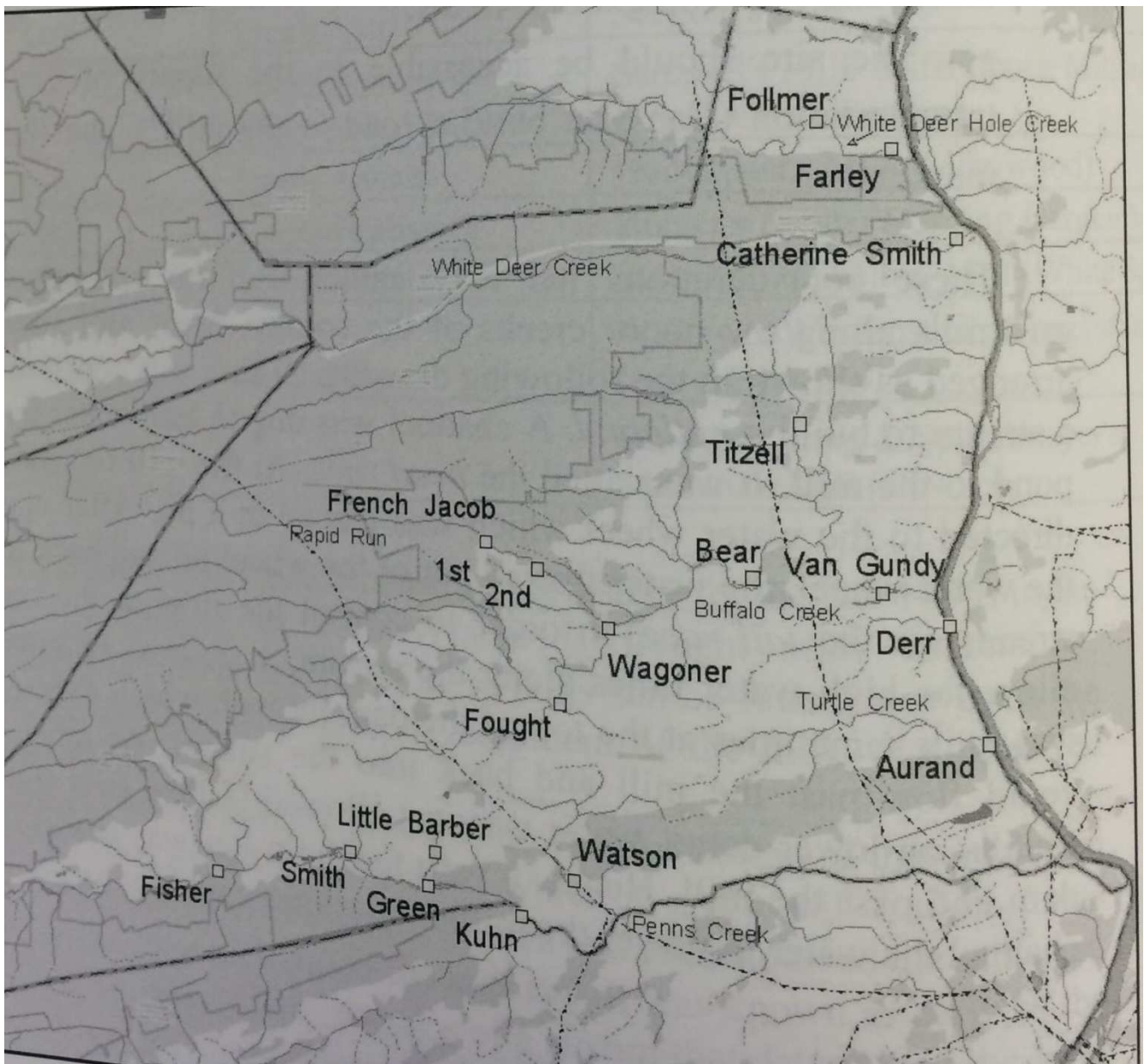
Records indicate that French Jacob Groshong worked in Centre County for a few years in the early 1790s. His name disappears from the Buffalo Township taxables list and his mill is assessed to Enoch Thomas in 1794.

After that, the stories become less clear. Conflicting accounts say he died either in Kentucky in 1800 or in Missouri in 1826.

As 19th century historian William Egle summed up this unusual life: “He knew whatever was to be known, and much more than he knew he’d own.”



French Jacob's mill was called Heberling's on this 1856 map –look just below the "S" in West Buffalo. The site, according to Thomas Rich and David Del Testa in *Water-powered Gristmills of Union County*, was near the current intersection of Buffalo Road (Rte 192) and Wabash Road, near the entrance to Brush Valley Narrows through which an Indian path passed. A large spring at the Narrows is called Frenchman's Spring. Nothing remains of mill.



In colonial times, a number of mills competed for customers in Union County. Source: *Water-powered Gristmills of Union County*, which details the history and technology of this important industry.

Note: *Water-powered Gristmills of Union County* was published by the Union County Historical Society in 2013. A copy may be purchased at the society's office in the Union County Courthouse or at the Barnes and Noble book store in Lewisburg.