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"What's the Bright Idea: The Evolution of Lighting" New Exhibit at Pennypacker Mills

Schwenksville, PA (March 31, 2015) – Artificial light brought mankind a newfound sense of safety in the earliest centuries. The first lamps were nothing more than shallow vessels filled with grease from animal fat or oil and wicks to ignite them. Along with candles, these lamps provided the first lighting. In a new exhibit at Pennypacker Mills, visitors will trace the earliest lamps used to bring light into the home to the first electric light bulb, showing the transition in fuels, technology, design, and style. The free exhibit, included on all guided tours, opens Wednesday, April 1, 2015 and will run through January 31, 2016.

Artificial lighting became more sophisticated as fuels and designs improved. Candles were costly while fuels that used fat were cheap and readily available, but they were odorous. With the coming of the Industrial Revolution in America, improved, brighter, and longer lasting fuels became available. It was discovered that the oil from sperm whales burned brightly and clearly and did not have a disagreeable odor like other oils. The drawback was the cost, at $2.00 per gallon in 1854, which made it too expensive for most home use. Camphene was an alternative to whale oil, but this mixture of alcohol and turpentine was dangerous as it could explode.

The discovery of kerosene in 1846 introduced another fuel option, and with the advent of the commercial drilling of oil in 1859, kerosene became the fuel of choice before electric lights were an option. Less odorous and less expensive, kerosene was used everywhere, including at Pennypacker Mills.

When Thomas Edison developed the highly efficient incandescent light bulb and lighting system, it changed the pace of city life and the nature of work and play, and inspired countless innovations that changed every aspect of American life. However, it took time for this new invention to reach everyone,

and it wasn't until the electric motor was invented that it was really useful for anything other than lighting. First installed in major cities, it wasn't until 1933 that electricity was installed at Pennypacker Mills, and then there were only ten outlets in a 22 room house!

The exhibit will explore the transition between fuel types, costs, regional availability, and the challenges associated with each type of fuel. There will also be accessories on display that were used to light, fill, and service the different forms of lighting. Plan a visit to Pennypacker Mills for an interesting look at the lighting technology of the time and how it transformed people's lives past and present.

Pennypacker Mills is located at 5 Haldeman Road, Schwenksville, PA 19473. The site is operated by the County of Montgomery and is open year-round for guided tours, changing exhibits, educational programs, and seasonal events. For more information, please call 610-287-9349. Visit Pennypacker Mills online at http://www.montcopa.org/pennypackermills.