

## **ABSTRACT**

HAWKINS, LESLIE ERIN. "I Am History, Don't Destroy Please": Three Gristmills and Their Communities in Wake County, North Carolina. (Under the direction of David Zonderman.)

The custom gristmill was a center of business and economic activity. Mills ground wheat into flour and corn into meal for millions of customers, providing a source for staple grains for both consumption and trade. Blacksmith shops, cotton gins, wool carders, community stores, and distilleries often soon followed the construction of a new custom mill. These services made the mill more valuable to both the owner and to the community by bringing local farmers to the mill site, thereby generating additional revenue for mill owners. The local gristmill, however, was more than a place of business. Millponds were popular places to fish and swim, and local churches often used millponds for baptisms. Mill yards offered common ground for neighbors to meet, trade, catch up on the news, and even date. Some mill owners formalized the social uses of their mills and ponds by renting boats or allowing the public to fish, swim, and picnic at the site.

By using newspaper articles, oral histories, and county records to describe the history of three gristmills in Wake County, North Carolina, Yates Mill, Lassiter Mill, and the mill at Lake Myra, this thesis is able to elaborate on the importance of the social roles the custom mill played in the growth and development of its community. All three mills ground grain for area customers, and all three mills filled a variety of social needs for their communities as well. Traditionally, area residents could fish, swim, date, and trade goods at each mill as well. The last miller at Yates Mill began to formalize those activities by building and renting boats to mill visitors who wanted to fish on the pond. Today, Yates Mill is the centerpiece of a research and recreational park owned by NC State University and managed by Wake

County. The nonprofit group Yates Mill Associates restored the mill and continues to be responsible for the continued maintenance and interpretation of the mill. The Lassiter family more formally recognized the social and recreational uses of their mill site by allowing county residents to continue to fish, swim, and picnic, even after the mill itself burned. Homes now surround the site, but the milldam and a portion of the mill's foundation remain. The Lassiter Mill site is preserved as a part of the Raleigh Greenway System, with picnic tables and a plaque that briefly describes the site's long history. Finally, during the last decades of the mill at Lake Myra's operation, the site was developed and marketed more as a recreational facility with swimming, fishing, boat rentals, and a community store than as custom gristmill. The mill has collapsed, but the private family that currently owns the property is working with the Wake County department of Parks, Recreation, and Open Space to develop the lake into a county park.

“I Am History, Don’t Destroy Please”: Three Gristmills and Their Communities  
in Wake County, North Carolina

by  
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## **BIOGRAPHY**

Hawkins graduated cum laude from Clemson University in 2006 with a Bachelor of Arts in History. She also received her certification in secondary education for social studies during that time. While completing the requirements for a Master of Arts in History at North Carolina State University, Hawkins participated in a number of departmental projects and activities. During the 2006-2007 school year, she conducted research and wrote a preliminary report for the Department of History regarding the methods used to teach history at the community college level and the experiences of transfer students from the community colleges to the History Major at NC State University. That work has helped to shape discussions between the departments on ways to improve history education in the state of North Carolina. Hawkins served the History Department in the 2007-2008 school year by acting as the Events Coordinator for the History Graduate Student Association (HGSA), and by helping to plan, organize, and host the Fourth Annual North Carolina Graduate Student History Conference. In addition, Hawkins represented the HGSA in the University Graduate Student Association (UGSA) and served on the Judicial-Legislative Standing Committee for the UGSA. She also served as a Teaching Assistant for the survey course, Modern America, during the Spring 2008 semester.

Her interest in gristmills originated with a part-time job at Historic Yates Mill County Park. Her efforts in researching and interpreting the mill made her recognize how important the custom gristmill was to its community, and the lack of literature addressing the communal roles for the gristmill, the miller, and the mill owner. To further her education in the development of local communities surrounding gristmills, Hawkins assisted in the

development and organization of the park's archival collection and in furthering the staff and volunteers' understanding of gristmills throughout Wake County. This thesis, concentrating on three mills found in Wake County and the roles they played in the Wake County community, is the manifestation of that research.

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## **Introduction**

At one time, gristmills could be found everywhere around the United States. As industrial, commercial, and social centers, mills touched the lives of people, becoming interwoven in not only the economic fabric of American society, but in the nation's psyche as well. Mills ground wheat into flour and corn into meal for millions of customers, enabling them to have staple grains available for consumption and trade. But mills were much more than a food source to the people and the community they served. The local gristmill, in addition to providing the service of grinding grains, often had other services, such as cotton ginning machinery on site, or a blacksmith shop, community store, or distillery available nearby so farmers could most effectively use and enjoy their time spent away from working the land.

Mill yards became popular meeting places for farmers to catch up on local news. Before the days of radio and television, politicians often used mill sites while stumping through the countryside to host speeches and parties. In addition, millponds became popular fishing and swimming holes, and local churches could use the millponds for baptisms. Visiting at the mill even became a popular way for young people to meet and court. Millponds are scenic, beautiful places that many young people considered romantic spots to date away from the watchful eyes of adults, even if the mill operators did not appreciate that use of their site. Mary Lea Simpkins, one of the children of the last miller at Yates Mill remembered, "They'd date. They go around the pond and park and date, that's all they do – date! ... They park right there in the mill yard, yes sir. They didn't care. The moon would be shining; they'd park there in the mill yard, park around, anywhere they wanted to park....



Daddy didn't particularly like it. I'm telling you, you liable to find whisky bottles down there.”<sup>1</sup> Having the gristmill as a food source was important, but it was often the time spent at the mill not grinding grain that was the most fun, and the most memorable, for generations of Americans.

Two types of gristmills could often be found throughout the United States' countryside. Local, custom mills produced meal and flour to order for individual customers and the local market. Custom mills could be found along any creek with enough water to power a mill on even a limited, seasonal basis. Generally, the miller at the custom mill collected a “miller's toll,” or a portion of what the customer brought to the mill to be ground, as payment for his services. In contrast, merchant mills purchased grain from farmers on a large scale, then ground and sold the product for themselves. Merchant mills were more commonly located along larger waterways, ensuring there was enough water for the millers to run the mills on a regular basis. Being located along the larger rivers also eased the transportation of the flour to large marketplaces with ports providing access to national and international trade. Both types of mills played an important role in the agricultural economy of America: custom mills focused on the local, personalized markets and economy, while the merchant mills focused more on larger markets and turning a profit for the mill owners.

Because of the valuable services custom mills provided county residents, and the large number of natural mill sites available, at one time, Wake County, North Carolina had more than 70 mills. In 1891, the Southern Interstates Exposition Committee acknowledged “Wake County is traversed by many bold streams that flow in a south-eastern direction. The

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<sup>1</sup> Oral History Interview of Mary Lea Simpkins, conducted by Rebecca Cope and David Cecelski, March 28, 2001. A transcript of the interview is available at Historic Yates Mill County Park, in Raleigh, NC.

largest of these are Neuse and Little rivers, Walnut, Marsh, Boston's, Big Lick, Crabtree, Swift, Middle, White Oak, Buckhorn, Buffalo, Moccasin, Mark's and Richland creeks. These streams flow rapidly, and furnish many excellent mill-sites.... Many corn and flour-mills are found on the creeks and rivers. There are fully seventy-five mills of this kind in the county."<sup>2</sup> The large numbers of mills in Wake County around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is a testament of their importance to the county's residents as a food source and as a source of community interaction. This work will focus on the custom gristmill and how the community used the resource, especially three mills from Wake County, North Carolina: Yates Mill, Lassiter's Mill, and the mill at Lake Myra.

Much of what has been written on gristmills are local histories, tracing the life of a single mill or a series of mills in one area or along one creek. These histories often do not discuss much of the role the mill played in its community, outside of its role as a food source. Instead, these histories on custom gristmills concentrate on the mill owners, the structural changes to the mill, modern restoration efforts, and the grinding systems utilized by the mill.<sup>3</sup> For example, the history written on Dellinger's Gristmill in Mitchell County, North Carolina, begins by introducing the family who owned the mill and the buildings present at the site. The work tells the basic history of the Dellinger family, and the restoration process the family undertook in recent years. As the author states, "I want to share with you the story of

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<sup>2</sup> Southern Interstates Exposition Committee, *Wake County, North Carolina, its Resources! Its Products! And its People!* (Raleigh, NC: Edwards and Broughton, 1891) 8.

<sup>3</sup> Examples of such works relevant to North Carolina include: Grimsley T. Hobbes, *Exploring the Old Mills of North Carolina* (Chapel Hill, NC: Provincial Press, 1985); Bruce S. Cheeseman, *Kerr Mill and the Mill Bridge Community* (Raleigh, NC: Rowan County Historical Properties Commission, 1980); Jack David Dellinger, *Dellinger Grist Mill on Cane Creek, Mitchell County, North Carolina: A Personal History* (Folk Heritage Books, 2004); Julie Alison Shepherd, *The Seven Mills of Naked Creek: Gristmilling in Ashe County, North Carolina* (Boone, NC: Center for Appalachian Studies, 2005).

how the restoration of my great grandfather's enterprise came about, some of the obstacles that were overcome, some of the triumphs that occurred, and perhaps provide some pointers to other grist mill enthusiasts who may be interested in restoring a water powered grist mill."<sup>4</sup> Dellinger, like many authors writing on their families' histories, has no other purpose for his publication other than to tell the history of the one mill.

Not all works on custom mills focus solely on one mill or community. A few explain how custom mills helped in the development of a larger region or an entire state. Others focus on the controversies some communities faced when deciding whether or not to build a mill; concerns ranged from competition from other mills to the right to build a dam and what that dam meant for people who used the stream for travel or fishing. Additional works compare subsistence and market agriculture, and how gristmills served both groups of agriculturalists.<sup>5</sup>

One article that effectively discusses the custom gristmill and its larger community is "Watermills in the South: Rural Institutions Working against Modernization," by Larry

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<sup>4</sup> Jack David Dellinger, *Dellinger Grist Mill on Cane Creek, Mitchell County, North Carolina: A Personal History* (Folk Heritage Books, 2004) 8.

<sup>5</sup> Examples of the types of work mentioned above include: William Wyckoff, "Frontier Milling in Western New York" *Geographical Review* 1 (1986) 72-93; Harry L. Watson, "'The Common Rights of Mankind': Subsistence, Shad, and Commerce in the Early Republican South," *The Journal of American History* 1 (1996) 13-43; Richard Lyman Bushman, "Markets and Composite Farms in Early America," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 3 (1998) 351-374; Gavin Wright and Howard Kunreuther, "Cotton, Corn and Risk in the Nineteenth Century," *The Journal of Economic History* 3 (1975) 526-551; Darrett B. Rutman, "Assessing the Little Communities of Early America," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 2 (1986) 163-178; Orville Vernon Burton, "Reaping What We Sow: Community and Rural History," *Agricultural History* 4 (2002) 631-658; Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993); Stephen Aron, *How the West was Lost: The Transformation of Kentucky from Daniel Boone to Henry Clay* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Ellen Eslinger, *Citizens of Zion The Social Origins of Camp Meeting Revivalism* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1999); Craig Thompson Friend, *Along the Maysville Road: The Early American Republic in the Trans-Appalachian West* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 2005); Nicholas P. Hardeman, *Shucks, Shocks, and Hominy Blocks: Corn as a Way of Life in Pioneer America* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1981).

Hasse. In it, Hasse points out the differences between custom and merchant milling. He argues, “Historians have not clearly noted this dichotomy and therefore have not adequately distinguished between merchant and custom milling. Consequently, they often assume that watermills of all types necessarily promoted industrialism and the market economy. They did not have this effect, and the rural custom watermill cannot be understood through modern economic indicators such as capital invested, manufacturing output, and profit margins.”<sup>6</sup> Hasse later states that mills contributed greatly to the development of frontier communities, and that historians often assume their presence helped lead communities to enter the market economy. However, as Hasse explains, “Rural mills in fact were essential machines in maintaining rural communities as working, subsistency-dependent units. Moreover, in much of the South and many parts of the North, rural mills continued to act in this same capacity well into the twentieth century.”<sup>7</sup> Hasse’s central argument asserts that local watermills in the South, specifically the custom gristmills, actually helped slow the industrialization and modernization of rural communities in the South.

Like the work done on custom mills, studies of merchant mills also discuss the mill owners and the grinding process; but because merchant mills were a part of a larger system of mills found throughout the region and country, these histories generally also place these mills within a larger discussion of national and international trade. These works address a range of issues in milling, including water rights, laws regulating production, the international economy, and long distance and overseas shipping of the products. Studies of

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<sup>6</sup> Larry Hasse, “Watermills in the South: Rural Institutions Working against Modernization,” *Agricultural History* 3 (1984) 280.

<sup>7</sup> Hasse 287.

merchant mills generally focus on the central areas for the production and marketing of large amounts of flour for overseas trade, such as Baltimore, New York, or Pennsylvania; or on the large milling complexes that produced the flour, such as the mills along the Brandywine River in Delaware. For example, in “The Merchant-Millers: Baltimore’s Flour Milling Industry, 1783-1860,” G. Terry Sharrer discusses the growth and development of the flour trade in the city of Baltimore, Maryland. When explaining the growth of the enterprise and the development of new technologies, he points out that “Automated machinery and steam power were the most important technological advances in flour milling, preceding the steel roller and gradual reduction system of the late nineteenth century. The merchant-millers of Baltimore, who had so quickly adopted the automated mill design, however, saw little benefit in turning to steam power. They found steam engines, large enough to operate automated mills of six or more pairs of stones, simply prohibitively expensive.”<sup>8</sup> This argument combines both milling history and the history of technology, giving the technology a practical application and linking merchant milling in Baltimore to larger developments in trade and economics throughout the country. However, even though merchant millers were interested in producing large amounts of flour as easily as possible in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, they were still limited by their ability to utilize new inventions, such as steam power, capable of improving production rates. Gradually during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, merchant mills, and even some custom mills, made the transition to using turbines and steam power.

Some works on the merchant mills also explained the challenges the local community could face if all of the gristmills changed solely to merchant milling. This is one of the points

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<sup>8</sup> G. Terry Sharrer, “The Merchant-Millers: Baltimore’s Flour Milling Industry, 1783-1860,” *Agricultural History* 1 (1982) 146.

of John Hart's article, "Property Rights, Costs, and Welfare: Delaware Water Mill Legislation, 1719-1859." In 1785, the Delaware Legislature required merchant mills to devote certain days of the week to grinding wheat and other grains for local, family consumption because of the lack of mills serving the needs of the local population. As Hart points out, "Thus the assembly tenaciously held to its image of mills as public providers of a service for rural households, at a time when this image had become substantially anachronistic. Rather than encouraging or even tolerating the large merchant mills as a leading source of economic growth, the assembly substantially raised their costs of doing business by forcing merchant mills to provide the milling services characteristic of the rural gristmill."<sup>9</sup> The popular image of the custom gristmill had, in fact, become largely outdated for mill owners in the Mid-Atlantic states where merchant milling became a big business by 1785; but, custom mills remained essential for rural communities throughout the country for at least another hundred years.

Priscilla Evans notes that economic historians often "pay tribute to the gristmill for its role as an outlet for the local product in the community's transition from a subsistent to a market economy. Generally, they summarize the relationship of the mill to its community in one to three pages and then dismiss the topic."<sup>10</sup> Custom gristmills and the millers that operated them deserve more attention from historians because of their prominent role in growth of a community. Community histories describing the rural life of early America generally portray small subsistence farmers as individuals who lived and worked according

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<sup>9</sup> John F. Hart, "Property Rights, Costs, and Welfare: Delaware Water Mill Legislation, 1719-1859," *The Journal of Legal Studies* 2 (1998) 469.

<sup>10</sup> Priscilla Ann Evans, "Merchant Gristmills and Communities, 1820-1880: An Economic Relationship," *Missouri Historical Review* 3 (1974) 318.

to the cycle of the seasons, relying on the help of friends and neighbors for planting and harvesting. This life depended on the services provided by the local gristmill, and on the social contacts individuals made with their neighbors while visiting the mill. The role the mills played in this lifestyle, however, is rarely effectively addressed in these works either.

One historian who closely looks at agricultural economics and community, John Schlotterbeck, describes the rural economy focusing on subsistence agriculture as a “‘social economy,’ a dense network of trade and exchange of farm products, labor, services, and manufactured goods within the local community.”<sup>11</sup> According to Schlotterbeck, gristmilling was the largest industry in the local service economy tied to farming that included other businesses such as blacksmiths, wheelwrights, boot and shoemakers, cabinetmakers, milliners, and gunsmiths. What Schlotterbeck says about gristmills and the growth of the service economy is true. The focus of his work, however, is the growth of the social economy as a whole, not the role mills played in that development. Clearly, gristmills were tied to the local community and the local agricultural economy. Works that address the development of the local market economy and agricultural decisions made by the farmers, however, could do more to emphasize and explain that connection by elaborating on the types of trade and work being done in the gristmill’s community by the millers, blacksmiths, and wheelwrights, how all of their work was interconnected, and how everyone relied on each other for these services.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> John T. Schlotterbeck, “The ‘Social Economy’ of an Upper South Community: Orange and Greene Counties, Virginia, 1815-1860,” in *Class, Conflict, and Consensus: Antebellum Southern Community Studies*, ed. Orville Vernon Burton and Robert C. McMath, Jr. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982) 5.

<sup>12</sup> For more discussion of white yeoman farmers in the South, see Steven Hahn, “The Yeomanry of the Nonplantation South: Upper Piedmont Georgia, 1850-1860” in *Class, Conflict, and Consensus*:

Custom mills reduced the amount of labor associated with earning one's daily bread, enabling farmers to concentrate their time and energy on producing other goods for the family, or raising a cash crop for sale. Mills and their millers provided an opportunity for farmers to trade surplus crops for services at the mill, or with neighbors for supplies the family could not produce on its own. As a result, farmers had to be sure to produce extra grain to give the miller in exchange for services. The miller could then either use the grain himself or sell it into the larger market to obtain goods he needed. Finally, the mill was often a gathering site, not only to have food produced, but as a source for social contact as well, fulfilling another need in the growth and development of the community. Scholars should recognize all of the roles custom mills filled in Americans' lives from the time of settlement until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This work will place the local gristmill into some of the above contexts, filling a void in the literature on gristmills, as well as in the history of community in the rural South.

This thesis has been broken into three chapters to provide the most complete discussion of custom gristmills, their roles in the community, and how several Wake County mills served their local communities. Chapter one describes the basic gristmilling process, the laws regulating millers and mill owners, why mill owners selected certain locations for the construction of their mills, and the pros and cons the construction of a new mill represented for the community. The second chapter discusses the history of a single gristmill in Wake County, Yates Mill. By concentrating on the history of the mill and its owners, the

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*Antebellum Southern Community Studies*, ed. Orville Vernon Burton and Robert C. McMath, Jr. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982) 29-56.



chapter shows the importance of Yates Mill to the development of its community. The final chapter describes two other mills located in Wake County, Lassiter Mill and the mill located at Lake Myra. The owners of these two mills are not as well known as Yates Mill's owners. These mills, however, also offered social resources for Wake County residents in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

## Chapter 1: The Custom Mill, Its Community, and Its Significance

The gristmill and the church were usually the first two buildings constructed in any new American settlement because they provided vital services. The church protected the settlers' souls, and the mill ground the flour and meal for a family's bread. Without an easily accessible mill, farmers would have been reluctant to move to a new area because there would be no way to guarantee a steady supply of food products. Once the mill and the church were constructed, they often attracted more settlers, encouraging a community to grow and develop. Because their services were often considered valuable selling points to a property, advertisements in early America frequently mentioned when a mill or church were near a farm for sale. For example, John Mackey of North Milford, Maryland, advertised in 1783, "TO BE SOLD, A PLANTATION, pleasantly situated in North Milford hundred, Caecil [sic] county, Maryland, convenient to a gristmill, and several places of worship of different denominations... containing 200 acres."<sup>1</sup> Town promoters and the general populace considered gristmills a public utility, and used their availability to attract new settlers to a developing region of the country.<sup>2</sup>

A blacksmith shop, distillery, or sawmill often emerged next to a gristmill. A community store also quickly followed. These stores, in addition to selling goods imported into the area that could not be readily produced at home, sold products produced at the mill, including corn meal ground from the miller's toll, and whiskey produced at the distillery. "Through all these services a mill strengthened not only its economic base but its position as

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<sup>1</sup> John Mackey, *The Pennsylvania Gazette* 13 August 1783.

<sup>2</sup> Evans 318.

a community center.”<sup>3</sup> Mills drew in farmers and their families, as well as those who worked in the nearby shops and trades: millers, blacksmiths, distillers, storekeepers, and many more.

Most local, custom gristmills would have at least ground cornmeal. Producing stone ground cornmeal is a relatively simple process that can be done with any kind of rock fashioned into grinding stones. Granite, which can be found all along the eastern seaboard of the United States, would have been the preferred stone; but any hard, grey rock would have been considered sufficient. In order to make cornmeal, the farmer must let the corn dry in the field before harvesting it. After that, the farmer needed to shuck and shell his corn before carrying it to the mill. After the miller weighed the grain brought to him, he entered the corn into the system, where it would be carried to a screen cleaner to remove any harvest trash that may be mixed in with the kernels. The corn then went through the grinding process. The millstones were cut into patterns or grooves that continuously ground the kernels, as the centrifugal force of the moving upper grinding stone gradually pushed the meal to the outer edge of the stones. Once the meal exited the millstones, the casing surrounding the stones forced the meal into a spout leading to a receiving bin, where the ground meal collected. After the corn was ground, the meal needed to be sifted or bolted, but was otherwise ready for consumption.

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<sup>3</sup> Jean Anderson, “A Community of Men and Mills,” *Papers from the Seminar on Waterwheels and Windmills Held in Durham, NC, July 1978, in the Bicentennial Year of West Point* (Durham, NC: The Association for the Preservation of the Eno River Valley: Friends of West Point, 1979) 32.



**Figure 1: Quartzite millstones found inside Yates Mill. Notice the pattern carved into the stones. This pattern does the sheering, or cutting, of the corn kernels during the grinding process. When set up to grind, the upper, or runner stone, balances on the driving bar above the bottom, or bed stone. A case that is placed over the stones before the grinding process begins forces the meal to collect in the bin in the front of the picture.**

Producing stone ground wheat flour required much more work because most consumers desired the purest, whitest flour possible. The process was simplified in 1790, when Oliver Evans received the third U.S. patent ever issued for his automatic flour milling system that incorporated elevators, augers, and a totally new device, the hopper boy. After the wheat was harvested from the field and the wheat berries separated from the stalk through a threshing and winnowing process, the farmer brought his wheat berries to the mill. In Evans' system, the berries went through the cleaning process twice, once through a rolling screen cleaner to remove harvest trash, and then a second cleaner, commonly called a scourer or smutter, to remove finer particles and dust. After being cleaned, the wheat berries were then ground in a similar way as the corn. Wheat, however, required a specific kind of

millstones, made of French burr, a type of fresh-water quartz found only in France. French burr has been the preferred stone for producing stone-ground wheat flour since the 1300s because of the consistency of the grain in the rock, and the way it cuts the berries' shell without pulverizing the husk into the flour. After being ground, the miller had wheat meal, a warm, damp product, not wheat flour. To prepare the wheat meal for sifting, the meal was cooled and dried. A set of elevator buckets carried the meal to the upper floors and dropped it on the floor. At this point, a mechanized rake called a hopper boy slowly cooled and dried the meal. Afterward, the meal went to a bolter, a cylinder covered in different grades of silk cloth to sift the meal into three grades of flour: fine, middlings, and sharps.



**Figure 2: An example of Oliver Evans' hopper boy, found in Yates Mill. Prior to Evans' invention, millers would have hired a young boy to spread the wheat meal out manually.**

Traditionally, all mills would have run off of either animal or water power. Gradually during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, using steam to power turbines became more and more common, not just for merchant mills, but for custom mills as well. Several of Wake County's mills ran off of a turbine system, including Lassiter Mill and the mill at Lake Myra. Others, such as Yates Mill, continued to use only water power, likely either because of the cost of the new technologies, or their water sources provided sufficient power to run the mill. The transition to turbines took place for several reasons. Steam was a more efficient power source than water, and steam power freed the miller from dependence on a stream and millpond that might run dry in the hot summer months. Moreover, if more than one mill stood along the same stream, millers downstream were dependent on those upstream to release water held by their dam.

Owning and operating a gristmill was a private business. Individuals invested in the construction of gristmills because they saw it as a means to make money and to provide for their families. But, mills also fulfilled a public good by supplying a service everyone in the community needed to survive. As a result, state governments often found it necessary to enact laws regulating the millers' business practices. For example, a colonial North Carolina law of 1758 made all mills accessible to the public and required a license from the county court in order to dam a waterway to build a mill. The newly formed state of North Carolina reaffirmed this law in 1777, stating, "Every grist or grain mill, however, powered or operated, which grinds for toll is a public mill."<sup>4</sup> All gristmills came under the public domain because most colonies and states felt laws regulating their location and the ways millers

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<sup>4</sup> NC Laws, Chapter 73, Article 1-1, 1777.

conducted business were necessary to protect public interest in available waterways, as well as to protect the business interests of the public and other mill owners in the area.

Because access to ground grain was necessary for a community's survival, the North Carolina's legislature had to guarantee the availability of millers to serve the community once the mills were constructed. One threat to that availability was the requirement for men ages sixteen to sixty to serve in the in the local militia. However, "several categories of people were exempt from military duties, including ministers, ... practicing attorneys and physicians, former military officers, the clerk of court, and citizens operating public mills or ferries. These were all considered essential services."<sup>5</sup> Without individuals such as ministers, physicians, and those who operated custom mills and public ferries, society would not have been able to properly function. Thus, state legislatures felt compelled to ensure those services would always be available, regardless of the state's other needs, even military service. As a result, millers, but not mill owners, were exempted from military service in colonial and early national era.

Another North Carolina law regulated the payment millers could charge their customers. Custom mills provided valuable services to their neighbors, and their customers benefited greatly by having one nearby. This tight sense of interdependence, however, sometimes led to accusations of dishonesty and exploitation. The miller's dishonesty can be traced back even to the Middle Ages, when Geoffrey Chaucer, in his "Miller's Portrait" described the miller, "He was a jangler and a goliardese / And that was most of his sin and

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<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Reid Murray, *Wake: Capital County of North Carolina* (Raleigh, NC: Capital County Publishing Company, 1983) 35; N.C. Laws, Chapter 1, 1746 and N.C. Laws Chapter 4 1749.

harlotries. / Well could he stealen corn and tollen thrice, / And yet he had a thumb of gold pardee.”<sup>6</sup> Chaucer’s miller represented what many believed all millers to be: dishonest, garrulous, thieves. Traditionally, millers working at custom mills did not accept cash as payment for their services; instead, they took a miller’s toll, or a portion of the grain the customer brought to the mill. Most states, therefore, established laws regulating the amount of toll a miller could collect for his services.

In North Carolina, the law specifically instructed millers to “grind according to turn, and shall well and sufficiently grind the grain brought to their mills, if the water will permit, and shall take no more toll for grinding than one-eighth part of the Indian corn and wheat... and every miller and keeper of a mill making default therein shall, for each offense, forfeit and pay five dollars (\$5.00) to the party injured.”<sup>7</sup> This statute insured mill customers were not cheated out of their meal or flour, and millers did not show preference toward one customer over the other. While other forms of payment existed, such as cash or barter, the miller’s toll was generally the preferred method of payment. In North Carolina, “From earliest settlement, millers customarily received a portion of the grain for their services. A census taker in northeastern Wake County reported in 1860 that eleven grist- and flour mills in his area ground corn and wheat ‘only for toll & do not buy & sell but very little, and with one or Two exceptions the owners could give me no correct information concerning the

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<sup>6</sup> In this passage, Chaucer was saying that a miller is loud and a joker, as well as dishonest. More specifically, Chaucer accuses many millers of taking three times the allotted toll for his services. The final line insinuates that an honest miller had a thumb of gold, possibly meaning that there is no such thing as an honest miller. Geoffrey Chaucer *The Portrait of the pilgrim Miller from the General Prologue*. The version quoted here can be found at

<http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/webcore/murphy/canterbury/4miller.pdf> accessed 2 March 2008.

<sup>7</sup> NC Laws, Chapter 73, Article 1-2, 1777.



Amount annually realized from the investment.”<sup>8</sup> Collecting a miller’s toll allowed the miller to either feed his own family, or to sell or trade for items the family needed but could not produce on the homestead.

The location of a new mill was not always an independent decision made by the miller. Wake County is lucky in the fact that it lies along the fall line of the Little and the Neuse Rivers, providing a natural drop in its creeks and streams. For these streams in Wake County, the fall line means an abrupt increase in downhill gradient, as well as the narrowing of the creek bed, and the creation of rapids and waterfalls. Early settlers favored sites along fall lines for the construction of mills and dams because an elevated water source, as well as the natural narrowing of the waterway, made it easier to build a dam. These sites in Wake County can be easily identified because of the outcroppings of Falls Leucogneiss, a type of metamorphic rock. Historic mills in Wake County situated along the fall line include Yates Mill, Lassiter Mill, and a succession of mills constructed along the Falls of the Neuse River.<sup>9</sup> A second determinant for the location of mills was the availability of a power source, specifically creeks and streams. Thankfully for early settlers, Wake County has a plentiful supply of streams that offer a number of good potential mill sites. As a result, custom mills served communities scattered across the county, rather than having all of the mills in the county collected around only one or two sources of water.

Proposals for constructing new mills also often had to be approved by local and state governments to determine if the new mill would fill a void in the local community without

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<sup>8</sup> Kelly A. Lally, *The Historic Architecture of Wake County, North Carolina* (Raleigh, NC: Wake County Government, 1994) 12.

<sup>9</sup> Edward F. Stoddard, “Influence of the Falls Leucogneiss on the Human History of Wake County, North Carolina,” Paper No. 44-0, presented 5 April 2002.  
[http://gsa.confex.com/gsa/2002NC/finalprogram/abstract\\_31150.htm](http://gsa.confex.com/gsa/2002NC/finalprogram/abstract_31150.htm), accessed 3 July 2007.

hurting previously constructed gristmills and other businesses already located in the area. A variety of concerns might prevent government officials from approving a new mill. Some potential mill sites were rumored to produce sickness among nearby residents. For example, in 1849, William Boylan, a Wake County resident, prominent businessman, and mill owner himself, answered a number of questions from the Wake County courts about whether or not a milldam could and should be rebuilt on Walnut Creek near downtown Raleigh. The court was concerned that “bilious fever and ague” or malarial illnesses might return when the millpond was reestablished. The mill in question had been previously shut down and its millpond drained after it was believed to be the source of an epidemic in and around the city of Raleigh several years earlier. Boylan reported to the court “that he does not suppose the erection of said Mill would produce irreparable mischief to the relators [sic], but he should have some fear of sickness at this residence.”<sup>10</sup> He did, however, also state that the reconstruction of the mill “would be of public convenience to the citizens of the town and neighborhood.” Others, however, disagreed with Boylan’s assessment of the new mill’s benefits. R.N. Seawell stated that “he thinks that the public necessity does not require the erection of a mill there; but... it would be of convenience in seasons of drought, to the vicinity of the place, and perhaps to some citizens of Raleigh; although as to most of the citizens of the town, ... it would be of not much public convenience at any season.”<sup>11</sup> Seawell believed that Wake County already had a sufficient number of mills to serve the needs of the community in question and that the proposed gristmill was unnecessary.

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<sup>10</sup> Deposition of William Boylan, NC Archives, Misc. Records Wake County, C.R. 099.928.10 1838-1849.

<sup>11</sup> Report by Robert Seawell, NC Archives, Misc. Records Wake County, C.R. 099.928.10 1838-1849.

Just because a gristmill provided a valuable service to the local community did not always mean that everyone welcomed the new mill. One man's energy source for a gristmill was another man's navigation route or fishing spot. Some residents expressed concern that the construction of the milldam along a navigable river or stream would impede the transport of cash crops to markets downstream. This dam, these farmers argued, would cause more damage to their families' income than the extra effort required to reach a more distant mill.<sup>12</sup> Similar problems arose when the construction of a milldam threatened to prevent the annual migration of fish through the regions' rivers. Hindering local fishing was a threat to the poorer inhabitants of an area, because fish from local waterways formed a large part of their subsistence.<sup>13</sup> Even though gristmills and the milldams that served them provided a source of food and offered to make the lives of area residents easier, their practicality and importance had to be considered in comparison to the other means of livelihood in the community.

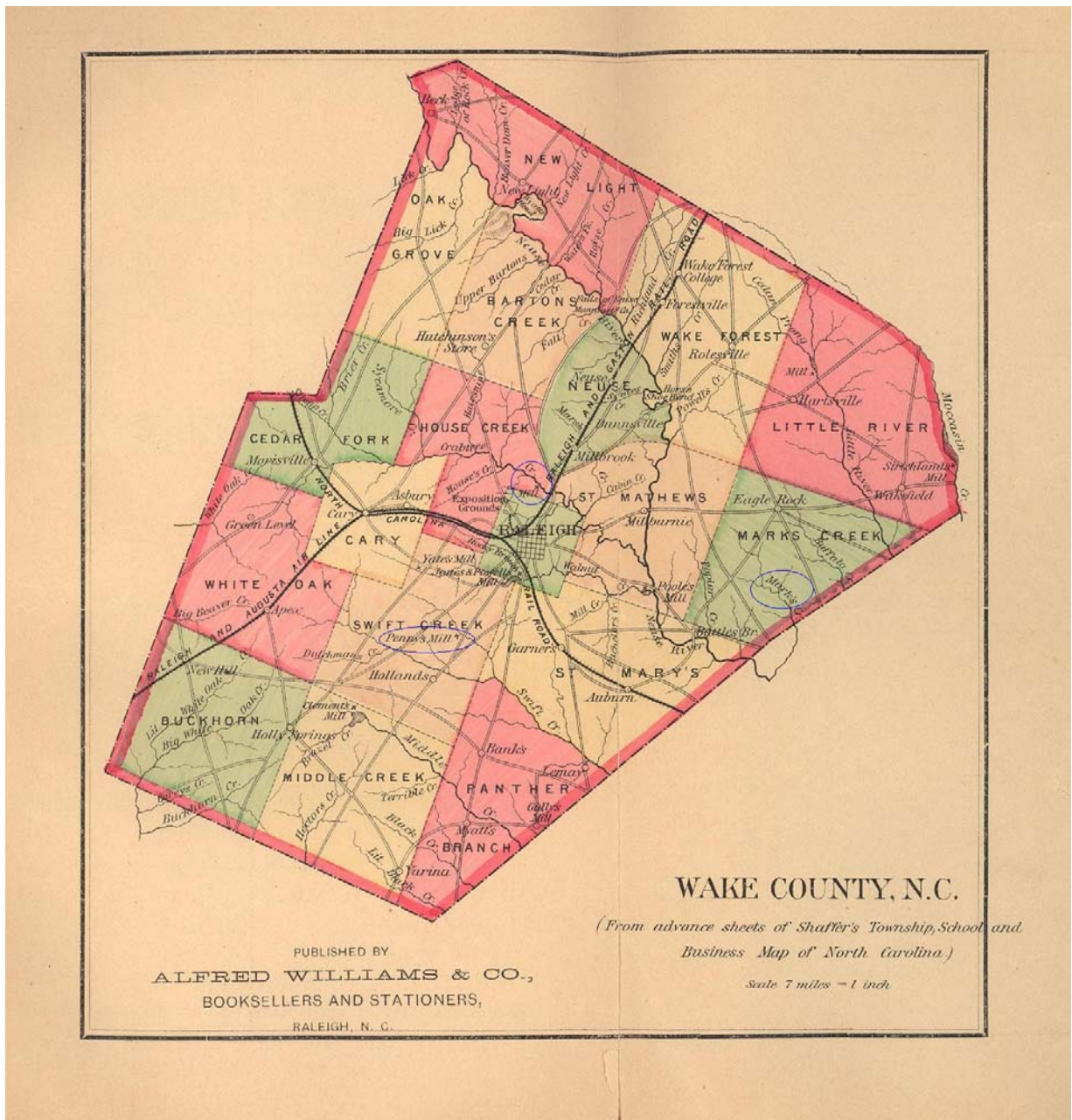
More than seventy mills were hard at work in Wake County during the 1870s, the heyday of water-powered grist milling. During the next thirty years, however, consumer demand changed. New technology improved the grinding and refining process of flour and cornmeal production, creating a finer, purer product. Americans, desiring the finest white flour and cornmeal available, often preferred products from the newer, bigger mills to the coarser products generally available from the traditional local gristmill. Developments in

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<sup>12</sup> An example case of the debate over services provided by mills versus access to navigable waters can be found in Bourbon County, KY, when Laban Shipp applied for a permit to build a milldam and gristmill. An explanation of the events can be found in Stephen Aron, *How the West Was Lost: The Transformation of Kentucky from Daniel Boone to Henry Clay* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996) 118.

<sup>13</sup> For an example of mill construction affecting fishing rights, see Harry L. Watson, "'The Common Rights of Mankind': Subsistence, Shad, and Commerce in the Early Republican South," *The Journal of American History* 1 (1996) 13-43.

national transportation, including the widespread expansion of the railroad at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the introduction of the automobile during the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, made the shipment of the new products faster and more cost-efficient. Around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, farmers generally found it easier and cheaper to grow a cash crop and purchase their flour and cornmeal from the store rather than to grow the wheat and corn for themselves.



**Figure 3: 1886 Map of Wake County, North Carolina. Townships, major roads, creeks, and streams are all listed. In addition, important community stores and gristmills are also included. Penny's Mill in the Swift Creek District is the mill now known as Yates Mill. Lassiter's Mill was located on Crabtree Creek. Hood's Mill was on Mark's Creek. Map courtesy of the North Carolina State Archives.**

Of all of the mills that once served Wake County, only one, Yates Mill, remains standing today. The others have passed into history, disintegrating as robberies, fires, the

elements, and time have taken their toll. However, evidence of the other mills and the important functions they filled in society still exists. Old milldams, grinding stones, and machinery can still be found throughout the county. Even street names like Edwards Mill Road, Yates Mill Pond Road, or Lassiter Mill Road continue to be subtle reminders of where the old mills once stood, and the significance they held for the local community. In fact, the location of mills often determined the location of roads, and the availability of roads in turn helped determine the location and success of mills.

The three mills discussed here, however, have all managed to find new life in the modern Wake County community. Yates Mill is the centerpiece of a research and recreational park owned by North Carolina State University and maintained by Wake County. A local, non-profit group restored Yates Mill and is responsible for the continued maintenance and interpretation of the mill. The Lassiter Mill site is on the City of Raleigh Greenway System and is marked with a plaque briefly describing the mill site's long history. While the mill itself is gone and homes now surround the site, the milldam, part of the mill's foundation, and a cement sign for the Lassiter Lumber Company still stand as reminders of the thriving mill businesses that once existed along Crabtree Creek. The mill at Lake Myra collapsed, but the rubble remains, as well as several of the other buildings; the store, built when Lake Myra served more as a recreational facility than a mill site during much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, still stands. A private family currently owns the property; but the Wake County department of Parks, Recreation, and Open Space is in the process of developing a plan to purchase the property and make a county park so the community may use Lake Myra for recreation once again.

## **Chapter 2: The Last Mill Standing: Yates Mill**

Pearson's Mill, later known as Boylan's Mill, Penny's Mill, Lakewood Mill, and Yates Mill, was one of the first mills established in the area of North Carolina that would become Wake County. Through its long history, Yates Mill has seen thirteen different owners from eight different families, businesses, and institutions. Of the more than seventy mills once in operation in Wake County, Yates Mill is the only one that still stands. Without being in consistent use from its construction in the 1760s until the 1950s, and without the added interest in its preservation by its current owner, North Carolina State University, and community groups such as the Wake County Historical Society and Yates Mill Associates, it is unlikely the mill would have lasted so long. Recent preservation efforts and the mill's continued existence are a testament to the mill's importance in the development and history of Wake County.



**Figure 4: Yates Mill in 2007.**

The mill started in the early 1760s, probably around 1763, when the first owner, Samuel Pearson applied for a grant for the tract of land where the mill now stands. Pearson moved to the North Carolina colony from Maryland sometime in the early 1700s. He married his young wife, Mary, in 1748, when she was living with her parents in what was then Johnston County, North Carolina. In the early 1750s, Pearson purchased his first known tract of land in what would become Wake County. Pearson laid claim to and began the application process to receive the grant for the land where the mill now sits in 1763. However, due to events outside of his control, Pearson was unable to secure an official grant at that time. The Earl of Granville's Land Grant Office closed after the Earl's death later the same year, and failed to reopen before the beginning of the Revolutionary War in 1775. When the war began, the newly formed State of North Carolina seized British controlled lands. In 1778, North Carolina began issuing its own land grants. At that time, Pearson again requested a survey to be conducted on the same land he applied for in 1763. Pearson's 1778 request for a land survey by North Carolina asked for "six hundred and forty Acres, lying in the County aforesaid [Wake], on the North side of Swift Creek and on the waters of Steep Hill Creek joining his own land on the South and West Side, Including his Mill Running... for Complement."<sup>1</sup> This 1778 survey is the first known document to mention the mill's existence and operation. By the time of his death in 1802, Pearson had gradually built a plantation of almost 1500 acres in Swift Creek.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Request for a Land Survey Issued 9 August 1778, Entered 15 July 1779, Book 38, No. 85, North Carolina Archives. Pearson acquired his first known piece of land in Swift Creek when he entered a Warrant for a land survey on 4 April 1756.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Pearson Will, June 8, 1802, Wake County, North Carolina, Will and Estate Records, Clerks Office, Book G, page 1.



By bringing the first gristmill to the Swift Creek District, Samuel Pearson offered vital services previously unavailable to the new community. Before Pearson's mill, settlers would have traveled much longer distances to have corn and wheat ground into meal and flour suitable for cooking. Visiting the mill would have also provided the new residents of the sparsely settled area a way to trade, learn the news, and meet each other to form both friendships and romantic relationships. Pearson himself also served his new and growing community in ways beyond running a farm and a mill. Samuel Pearson served in the Johnston, and then later Wake County militia. By 1772, he earned the rank of Captain, with 1 Lieutenant, 1 Ensign, 3 Sergeants, 3 Corporals, 1 Drummer, and 64 Privates under his command.<sup>3</sup> Part of his responsibilities included maintaining an eight-mile stretch of road between Walnut Creek and Swift Creek that ran past his mill. Because the location of mills often determined the location of roads and vice versa, Pearson's road would have served a dual function in this new society. The road gave friends, neighbors, and customers a means to get to the mill, and helped Pearson's business by directing people to his mill and the services he provided. His rank as Captain in the local militia is likely a symbol of his experience and the status he held in society. That status was due at least partially to the fact that he built the first gristmill in the immediate area.

Pearson's will divided his property between his sons, and his daughters were to benefit from the sale of his personal property at a public auction. His son, Simon, was given "Three Hundred and forty Acres of land more or less lying on both sides of Steep-Hill Creek

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<sup>3</sup> Murtie June Clark, *Colonial Soldiers of the South, 1732-1774* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1983) 828.

Joining Paris Pearson's land, including the old Mill."<sup>4</sup> Simon, however, would not be as financially successful as his father in managing the mill or his real estate investments. He acquired land, and loans, faster than he could pay for them. In the seventeen years between his father's death in 1802, and 1819, Simon Pearson managed to purchase huge amounts of land, mostly from the tracts left to his brothers. He was thus able to create a farmstead of 1,500 acres in the Swift Creek District of Wake County. His large purchases, however, quickly put him into debt. In 1819, the State Bank took Simon and his business partners, Levi Jones, Southy Bond, and William Pope, to court to force payment on their defaulted loans. The judgment against Simon Pearson came down during the spring term of 1819, forcing him to pay \$316.50 of his debt and costs, "of which sum three hundred dollars is principal."<sup>5</sup> Pearson was unable to pay the fines, and the Bank confiscated all of his 1,500-acre property, including the mill, and sold it at a sheriff's sale. William Boylan was the highest bidder, paying \$3031 for the entire confiscated tract.<sup>6</sup>

Another wealthy Wake County businessman, who was also oriented toward public service, now owned the mill. In addition to owning his gristmill and significant amounts of land around Steep Hill Creek, Boylan acquired a total of three plantations in Wake County; he also invested in properties near Chapel Hill, in Johnston County, and in Mississippi. Boylan served as the second president of the State Bank, from 1820-1828. He was a charter supporter of the Raleigh Academy in 1801, and built the first county poorhouse. He served on the commission to build a new state capitol in Raleigh in 1831; and he established

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<sup>4</sup> Pearson Will, 1802.

<sup>5</sup> Judgment Against Simon Pearson, Minutes of Superior Court Docket, Spring Term 1819, page 23.

<sup>6</sup> Sheriff's Sale from Simon Pearson to William Boylan 1820, Wake County Register of Deeds, Book 3, page 384.

Raleigh's first newspaper, the *Raleigh Minerva* in 1803, and later established the *Raleigh Advertiser*.<sup>7</sup>

Boylan's interest in investment and the development of the Raleigh area likely prompted his purchase of the mill and the subsequent changes he made between 1820 and 1850. One of those changes was the inclusion of a sawmill, which tax records indicate was operating by the 1840s. The exact location of this sawmill, however, is unknown. Two potential locations have been identified – the shed that was attached to the mill at a later date, and the abandoned dam found near the mill also on Steep Hill Creek – but neither has been confirmed as the actual location. This additional service would have made the mill more valuable to the community, because residents could now have lumber produced or purchase lumber from a local source, rather than having to have it shipped from other mills in Wake County, or from elsewhere in North Carolina. Travel at this time was still slow and difficult, so even though other mills in Wake sawed timber for the county's residents, including the mill owned by Durrell Rogers on Crabtree Creek, having a sawmill close by would have been appreciated by area residents and possibly would have made Boylan's Mill more attractive to potential customers who used other gristmills.

Boylan owned the mill for 37 years before selling it to James Penny, John Primrose, and Thomas Briggs on 30 June 1853. Boylan sold approximately 1,900 acres, as well as the grist and saw mills, possibly to pursue different interests.<sup>8</sup> Primrose kept his share of the mill

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<sup>7</sup> Murray 113, 252, 272; Sarah McCulloh Lemmon, "Boylan, William," in *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, Volume 1, A-C*, ed. William S. Powell (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1979) 205.

<sup>8</sup> Sale of Mill from William Boylan to Primrose & Briggs 1853, Wake County Register of Deeds, Book 20, page 185.

and land for only six years before selling his share to James Dodd in 1859. Penny, Briggs, and Dodd then retained ownership until 1863. After the initial purchase in 1853, the mill was known as Penny's Mill. It retained this name even after it entered the Yates family in 1863 to avoid confusion, because the Yates family also owned a mill located on Walnut Creek.

Like their predecessors, Penny, Briggs, Primrose, and Dodd managed the mill and benefited from its operation financially, but did not run it themselves. These men generally concentrated on other business, and political interests in Raleigh, Wake County, and the South as a whole. For example, James Dodd and Thomas Briggs were both contractors in Wake County and had a shared interest in a hardware store in downtown Raleigh. The sawmill operations Boylan added during his ownership likely attracted Dodd and Briggs to invest in Boylan's mill. John Primrose concentrated more on financial investments. For instance, he was one of the local directors of North Carolina's first insurance company, North Carolina Mutual Fire Insurance Company.<sup>9</sup>

While many owners of local, custom gristmills likely would have operated their mills themselves, most of Yates Mill's owners were wealthy and prominent enough to be able to pay someone else to run the mill for them. Penny, Briggs & Co. advertised for a miller in the *Raleigh Register* in 1858: "MILLER WANTED, TO ATTEND TO our Mills; five miles southwest of Raleigh. None need apply who is not of good moral character. Our terms are liberal."<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, the identities of the millers who worked at Yates Mill are largely unknown because local gristmills, operating through the miller's toll and barter, often did not keep formal records of employees, or how much grain was ground.

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<sup>9</sup> Murray 273.

<sup>10</sup> Advertisement, *Raleigh Register* 31 July 1858, page 2.

The mill owners' interests did not stop with business concerns; Briggs and Penny were both active in the secessionist movement. When war broke out in 1861, Penny decided to join the fight, leaving his wife to manage the mill's business. Since he owned the mill rather than operating it, the North Carolina laws prohibiting mill operators from joining the military did not bar Penny from fighting. During his absence, Hinton Franklin, a mill customer, ran up a \$700 debt to the mill. When Penny came home on leave in 1863 and discovered the huge debt, he went to confront Franklin and collect the money. According to local legend, a fight ensued. The Penny family claims Franklin struck first, hitting Penny across the face with a whip, and that Penny carried a scar from that attack for the rest of his life. Regardless of who initiated the fight, Penny hit Franklin repeatedly in the head, neck, and face with a stick approximately two inches thick. Franklin's wounds proved to be fatal.<sup>11</sup>

The legend then claims that when Sherman's troops reached Raleigh late in the Civil War, Franklin's widow told them that her husband's death was due to his Northern sympathies, not his debt, prompting Northern troops go to Penny's Mill and attempt to burn it down. Neighbors discovered the fire and managed to extinguish the blaze before the mill was damaged. Very little evidence exists of the attempted fire other than a charred beam found underneath the entrance porch during restoration efforts. Penny's legal troubles in 1863 possibly prompted the sale of his mill to his future son-in-law, Phares Yates (Phares married Penny's daughter, Roxanna, in 1866<sup>12</sup>). Yates did not purchase the entire tract of land from Penny, Briggs, and Dodd. He acquired only the grist and saw mills and 94 acres

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<sup>11</sup> Manslaughter Indictment of James Penny 1867, Wake County, Minutes, Docket of Superior Court 1852-1871, 2 vol., pages 521-523.

<sup>12</sup> Marriage License between Pharis Yates and Roxanna Penny 1866, Wake County Wills and Estates.

surrounding them.<sup>13</sup> Penny sold his share of the remaining 1788 acres of the joint property to Briggs and Dodd in 1864, also possibly because of his legal troubles during the Civil War.<sup>14</sup>

After Phares Yates bought the mill in 1863, he was the first of four generations in the Yates family to own the mill on Steep Hill Creek. In addition to maintaining the grist and saw mill businesses, Phares also likely added wool carding to the list of services offered at Penny's Mill. North Carolina at this time was still a state of small farmers living in small settlements. Raleigh was a growing city, but it was still mostly surrounded by small farms that produced enough food and other household supplies to fill most of their needs. By offering the greatest number of services at one stop, such as a gristmill, a sawmill, and a wool carder at one site, the mill would become more financially viable and successful, as well as more valuable to the community as a whole. Some local residents claimed the mill carded wool for uniforms for North Carolina during the Civil War. However, no business or tax records list wool carding as a service provided by Penny's Mill prior to Phares Yates' acquisition. In addition, the wool carder currently on the second floor of the shed inside the mill has a patent date of 1869. As a result, it is unlikely that Penny's Mill was involved in carding wool for the Civil War effort.

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<sup>13</sup> Sale of Mill from Briggs, Dodd, & Penny to Yates, 1863, Wake County Register of Deeds, Book 8, page 652. While the original transfer of land took place in 1863, it was not registered with the Probate Court and the Office of the Register of Deeds for Wake County; see Wake County Book 28, page 652-653, 23 November 1869.

<sup>14</sup> Sale of Land to Briggs and Dodd by Penny, 1864, Wake Count Register of Deeds, Bok 24, page 318.

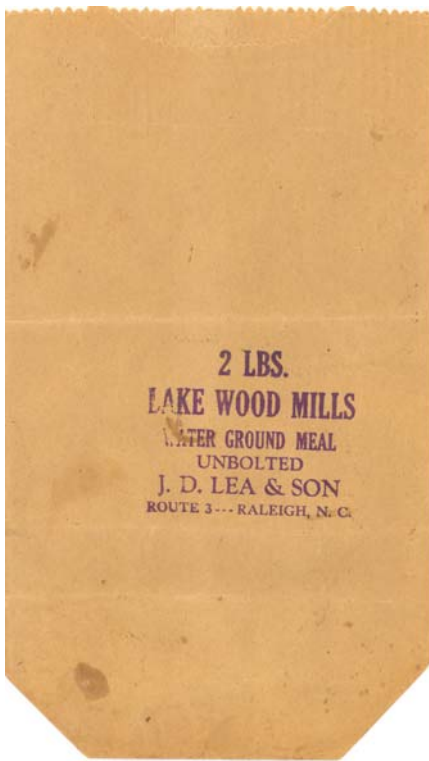


**Figure 5: A postcard from the 1890s featuring Yates Mill and some of its visitors. This is the oldest known photograph of Yates Mill. Joe Dautridge, whose great aunt picked up the postcard when she was visiting the Raleigh Area around 1900, donated the image to Historic Yates Mill County Park. Image courtesy of Historic Yates Mill County Park.**

Upon his death in 1902, Phares Yates' will left the mill and 199 acres to his son, Robert Edward Lee (R.E.L.) Yates, and stipulated that Roxanna "have half interest in the said Mill during the term of her natural life." Phares also left Roxanna the house and 156 acres so she would be able to continue to live comfortably.<sup>15</sup> In addition to owning his father's mill and running a dairy farm in the Swift Creek Township, R.E.L. was a math professor at North Carolina State College. He named his dairy Lakewood Farms, and the mill Lakewood Mill. It was during R.E.L.'s ownership that the mill started scaling back on its operations. The mill no longer produced lumber or carded wool. John Daniel Lea, Sr., the last miller, is known to have ground corn throughout his tenure as miller. It is possible that in the early years Lea also produced flour at Lakewood Mill; but, as the machinery started needing repairs and

<sup>15</sup> Will of Phares Yates 1893, Wake County, Register of Deeds, Wills and Estates, Book E, page 69. The will was registered in 1893, but was not executed until Phares Yates' death in 1902.

replacements, he cut back to simply grinding cornmeal. His daughter, Mary, stated in an oral history interview that he ground “cornmeal and he would grind graham flour and it made good biscuits, real good, a lot of people loved it, liked it.... Did that for a while and then it kind of, you know, give out, it had to have some work done on it and they stopped doing that [producing graham flour].”<sup>16</sup> Despite the cut back in production, Lea continued to produce cornmeal for anyone who wanted it, and sell the meal he produced from his miller’s toll to local grocers, throughout his service as the miller from 1898-1953, when the mill closed.



**Figure 6: Meal bag used by John Daniel Lea, Sr., at Lakewood Mill in Raleigh, North Carolina, when the mill was owned by R.E.L. Yates. Lea sold his cornmeal to local grocers and area residents in bags such as this one. The bag is located at Historic Yates Mill County Park.**

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<sup>16</sup> Simpkins Interview 2001.



When R.E.L. passed away in December 1937, he left the mill, as well as all his other “real and personal property” to his wife, Minnie John Yates.<sup>17</sup> Minnie shared ownership of the mill with their son, Wilbur, for ten years. In 1947, one year before Minnie’s death, they sold the mill to the Trojan Sales Company, a subsidiary of A. E. Finley Associates, a construction equipment distribution company. Finley had been interested in the mill and the millpond for several years before the actual purchase from the Yates family. Finley visited Lea and took boats out on the pond starting in 1943. Those visits likely piqued Finley’s initial interest in the site, providing him an opportunity to see how a site like that could be used as a retreat area close to the city for company employees. Dick Thompson, a former employee of A. E. Finley, described the purchase, “it was in early 1947 we were back out here, I know it was cold weather, and Mr. Lea said something about Wilbur Yates, that was Mrs. Minnie Yates’ son, and Professor R.E.L. Yates’ son. Said something about Wilbur might want to sell this thing, the mill, the millpond... And it wasn’t long before they, you know, we got in touch with Wilbur and then Mrs. Yates and they arrived at a price... that was in early 1947.”<sup>18</sup> Later that year, the Trojan Sales Company transferred the property to the North Carolina Equipment Company, another A. E. Finley Associates’ subsidiary. After that transfer, the North Carolina Equipment Company would retain ownership of the land as long as the A. E. Finley Associates owned the property.

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<sup>17</sup> Will of Robert Edward Lee Yates 1929, Wake County Register of Wills. The will was originally a handwritten copy without a witness’ signature and was found among R.E.L.’s papers after his death. His children, Wilbur, Elizabeth, and Gladys attested the handwriting as belonging to R.E.L. after his death in 1937.

<sup>18</sup> Oral History Interview of J.D. “Dick” Thompson, conducted by Rebecca Cope and Sarah Rice, 26 July 2005. A transcription of the interview is located at Historic Yates Mill County Park.

A. E. Finley Associates were also active at the site. Finley purchased neighboring lands, creating a 1,007 acre property. On that property Finley's employees ran a cattle ranch and an orchard. Finley also designed and had a retreat lodge constructed near the mill. Dick Thompson explained that the lodge was initially built for "business purposes mainly, because that's where we would hold sales meetings and service meetings and that sort of thing. And see we operated all the way from Norfolk to Miami and we'd bring all those people up... for meetings and also our service personnel would bring them in here for meetings... and I guess the idea of it being used for civic people and churches and personal use was sort of secondary to the main reasons."<sup>19</sup> In addition to the lodge, the facility also included picnic tables, fire pits, and even a shuffleboard court for recreation. As a result, Finley employees and area residents alike could continue gathering at the mill for both work and play, even after the mill closed.

Even with its new, corporate owner, Lakewood Mill continued its custom mill operations serving the local, Wake County population until 1953. Area residents came out to the pond to fish, swim, and go boating. As an additional source of income, Lea built rowboats, and charged visitors who wished to fish or use a boat on the pond. Mary Lea Simpkins recalled that her father rented the boats for day, "It could have been 75 cents a day and they could fish as long as they wanted to."<sup>20</sup> Much of the money Lea earned by renting the boats went to the mill's current owner, either the Yates family or A.E. Finley Associates, as rent for the mill and pond. A. E. Finley Associates continued to host meetings and to allow company and family gatherings at the site throughout the 1950s.

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<sup>19</sup> Thompson Interview 2005.

<sup>20</sup> Simpkins Interview 2001.

Yates Mill Pond was also used by local churches for baptisms until the 1950s. Because churches and gristmills were generally built nearby to provide for the same communities, millponds traditionally served as typical locations for baptisms. Inwood Baptist Church, located just down the road from Yates Mill, had used the nearby millpond for its baptismal service since the church's establishment in 1877. Inwood stopped using Yates Mill Pond for baptisms in 1952, but several members of the church remember being baptized in the millpond.<sup>21</sup> Mary Lea Simpkins recalled being baptized in the mill pond at the age of thirteen, "when they had a baptizing, everybody would come.... I was baptized there and several other people at the same time."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Roger H. Crook, *Living Stones: A History of Inwood Baptist Church* (Columbia, SC: R.L. Bryan Company, 2000) 77.

<sup>22</sup> Simpkins Interview 2001.

Fishing		1948
June 29	1 Boat	3.25
30	1	1.75
July 2	1	3.25
3	1	1.75
4	7	17.50
5	7	23.00
6	2	6.75
7	3	10.00
8		4.00
9		9.25
10		2.50
11		2.50
		94.50
		8.25
		86.25

*Thomas A. Wadford*  
*Paid*  
*1-12-48*  
*Thank you*

Figure 7: Page from a ledger book kept by John Daniel Lea at Yates Mill. This page shows how many fishermen visited the pond and rented the boats Lea had built during a two week period in June and July 1948. In addition to running the mill and renting boats, Lea was responsible for paying rent to Thomas Wadford, the Secretary-Treasurer of the mill's owner A.E. Finley Associates, for use of the property. The ledger is located at Historic Yates Mill County Park.

Lea closed the mill in 1953 after nearly two hundred years of service because fewer people came to have meal ground as the number of local, small farmers dwindled and consumer preferences changed to store bread and bleached white flour. Lakewood Mill could not compete with national merchant mills using new technology to supply Raleigh grocers with a more desirable product. And, as Mary Lea Simpkins said, “I guess there’s not as many farmers, you know, as there was.”<sup>23</sup> Despite the mill’s closure, local residents continued

<sup>23</sup> Simpkins Interview 2001.

fishing and swimming in the pond. And the mill certainly would have remained a scenic spot for picnics and for young adults looking for a romantic place to date.

In 1958, two students from the NC State School of Design, Max Evans and Robert Cole, made detailed drawings of the mill equipment and the waterwheel's construction. Those drawings would become invaluable several decades later during the restoration process, because years of rust and decay, as well as generations of use, left the mill and its machinery in complete disrepair. It was not until 1963, however, that North Carolina State College (it became North Carolina State University in 1965) assumed ownership of the mill. At that time, the school purchased the 1,007 acre property from the North Carolina Equipment Company and A. E. Finley Associates to develop into research farms for the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALS). The mill was included in this purchase, but it was not considered a focal point of the property because no one was sure what to do with it. Lea supposedly ran the mill one last time shortly after NC State bought the mill as a demonstration.

Because NC State recognized the historic importance of the old mill, the school was interested in the future of the mill and in finding a way to appropriately use and preserve the historic site. One of the first actions taken by the school was to rename the millpond. In 1964, Carroll Mann, Jr., Director of the Office of Business Affairs, Facilities Planning Division, wrote to Chancellor John Caldwell,

It has come to my attention that the U.S. Geological Survey has made inquiry concerning the official name of the lake, on the Finley Farm property which we recently acquired.

In recent years this lake was renamed Trojan Lake, or Lake Trojan by the North Carolina Equipment Company when they acquired this property. This name, I

believe, was derived from one of their subsidiary companies, the Trojan Sales Company.

The lake, and surrounding property was for many years in the Yates family, and Professor Yates... was a member of our faculty in the Mathematics Department for many, many years....

As long as I can remember, and up until it was recently renamed, this lake was always known as Yates Mill Pond. The old mill is still there.

It is my recommendation that we reinstate the original name, and that this lake be now known officially as “Yates Mill Pond.”<sup>24</sup>

Chancellor Caldwell agreed, and as a result, the mill and its pond were both renamed Yates Mill in honor of the last family to own the mill.

By the late 1960s, the mill was beginning to fall into poor condition and required significant repair and restoration to be operable again. The school took some initial protective measures, such as putting a new roof on the mill to help prevent further deterioration, and building a fence to keep some potential vandals out. Because of the diverse services the mill provided while in operation, “interest in preserving the mill has been expressed by people in several NCSU schools, including textiles, forest resources, agriculture, and design.”<sup>25</sup> Each of these departments saw the mill as a potential tool to educate their students in the history of their programs and industries. More significantly, in 1974, an architecture class from the NCSU School of Design taught by Donald Barnes took a special interest in Yates Mill, making a set of detailed architectural drawings of the mill and the machinery inside.

In 1974, the students and Dr. Barnes also started research on Yates Mill’s history, including conducting an interview of Hugh Champion, a nephew of Mr. Lea, who told the students that a blacksmith shop once stood across the road from the mill. Based on that

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<sup>24</sup> North Carolina State University Special Collections, University Buildings, Sites, and Landmarks, 1888-2005, UA 050.004, Box 9, Folder 11: Yates Mill, 1964-1997.

<sup>25</sup> Tom Byrd, “NCSU Seeks Means to Save Historic Yates Mill,” *The Journal of North Carolina State University*, 9 (1971) 1-2.

interview, the students wanted to reconstruct the blacksmith shop in the mill yard and then use it to launch the full restoration of the mill. The students located a portion of an old tobacco barn that was going to be flooded over during the construction of Jordan Lake, and arranged for that barn to be moved to Yates Mill. This recycled tobacco barn was supposed to be the students' blacksmith shop. The university did not have the funds, however, to financially support the restoration, and so the project did not go forward. Dr. J. Lawrence Apple, the director of the Institute of Biological Sciences in the School of Agriculture and Life Sciences, admitted in 1971, ““The University cannot spend public money on the mill. At least \$100,000 would be required to place the mill and machinery in operating condition. Another \$50,000 to \$75,000 would be needed annually to maintain and operate the mill as a public attraction.””<sup>26</sup> As a result an outside group would be needed to raise the funds necessary to care for Yates Mill.



**Figure 8: Yates Mill as it looked in the 1980s, before Yates Mill Associates began the restoration process. Photo taken by Gaylen Daves; courtesy of Historic Yates Mill County Park.**

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<sup>26</sup> Byrd 1.

The restoration of the mill would require significant funding and a long-term commitment of time and energy, neither of which the established historical groups in Wake County had in any quantity. These problems were compounded by the fact that a large mill restoration project was not central to the missions of any of the existing groups. Thanks to the initial interest and work of the Wake County Historical Society and NC State University, which teamed up in the late 1980s, fund raising efforts to preserve Yates Mill began. Then a group of volunteers created an organization whose sole concern was the restoration and continued preservation of Yates Mill. Community members established and incorporated the Yates Mill Associates (YMA) as a non-profit organization in July of 1989.<sup>27</sup>

In 1996, YMA, in partnership with NC State University, Wake County Parks, Recreation, and Open Space, and the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, developed a plan for a 176 acre park. Wake County leases the property from NC State University and manages the day-to-day operations of the park; NC State, as owner of the property, continues to have access to the facilities at the park for research; and YMA is responsible for interpreting the mill, as well as the continuing maintenance of the mill. Having so many groups interested in the preservation of the mill and the recreational activities at the site has insured enough long-term support for the project. However, each group also has specific responsibilities that are not always aligned with each other. Wake County has to provide programming and services to the public that go beyond the mill site; NC State has to preserve enough of the site for future research projects on natural resources;

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<sup>27</sup> From a letter calling for individuals to join the Charter Board of Directors for Yates Mill Associates. A copy of the letter is located in the folder, History of YMA, located in the offices of Historic Yates Mill County Park.



and YMA needs to continue active fundraising to provide for the ongoing preservation of the mill.



**Figure 9: Yates Mill after Hurricane Fran. Notice that the shed attached to the mill has collapsed, and that the original dam was destroyed. It is believed that the dam had stood since its construction in the mid 1700s. Photo taken by Rebecca Cope; courtesy of Historic Yates Mill County Park.**

Restoration of the mill and development of the park faced a serious setback in the fall of 1996, when flooding from Hurricane Fran breached the original dam, drained the mill pond, and destroyed the shed. The hurricane, however, helped increase awareness of the impending threats to Yates Mill and the gristmilling traditions in Wake County. Ten years after park planning began, Historic Yates Mill County Park finally opened to the public in May 2006. The centerpiece of the park is the historic mill; yet, the park has also enabled the mill to once again serve as the center of its community by providing hiking trails, picnic areas, a visitor center with an exhibit hall and research facilities, fishing on the pond, tours of

the mill, and other educational programming for the public. Because of the committed members of YMA who refused to watch Wake County's last remaining gristmill fade into history, and the members of the community who once again utilize and enjoy the opportunities for fun and education, Yates Mill continues to serve in its role as a community center, a role it has filled for 250 years.

## Chapter 3: Mills and Their Communities: Lassiter Mill and the Mill at Lake Myra

### Lassiter Mill

John Giles Thomas began the construction of Lassiter Mill on Crabtree Creek in the early 1760s, around the same time Yates Mill was founded.<sup>1</sup> Thomas petitioned the Johnston County Court for permission to build a mill at the “Great Falls of Crabtree” in 1760. Then, in September 1764, Thomas acquired an acre of land from William Lindsay that was “condemned by order of Court of the said county for the use of John Giles Thomas, Esquire’s Mill on the north side of Crabtree Creek running down the courses of the creek.”<sup>2</sup> Finally, Thomas received the required permission from the Wake County Court in December 1771 to operate a public gristmill along Crabtree Creek.<sup>3</sup> Like Samuel Pearson, Yates Mill’s founder, John Giles Thomas was also an overseer for the roadways in Wake County; he was responsible for the maintenance of the road that led from the Wake County Courthouse to Crabtree Creek, which presumably ran near his mill. In addition to his gristmill, his farm, and his responsibilities for the roads, Thomas also operated an ordinary. Travelers to the Raleigh

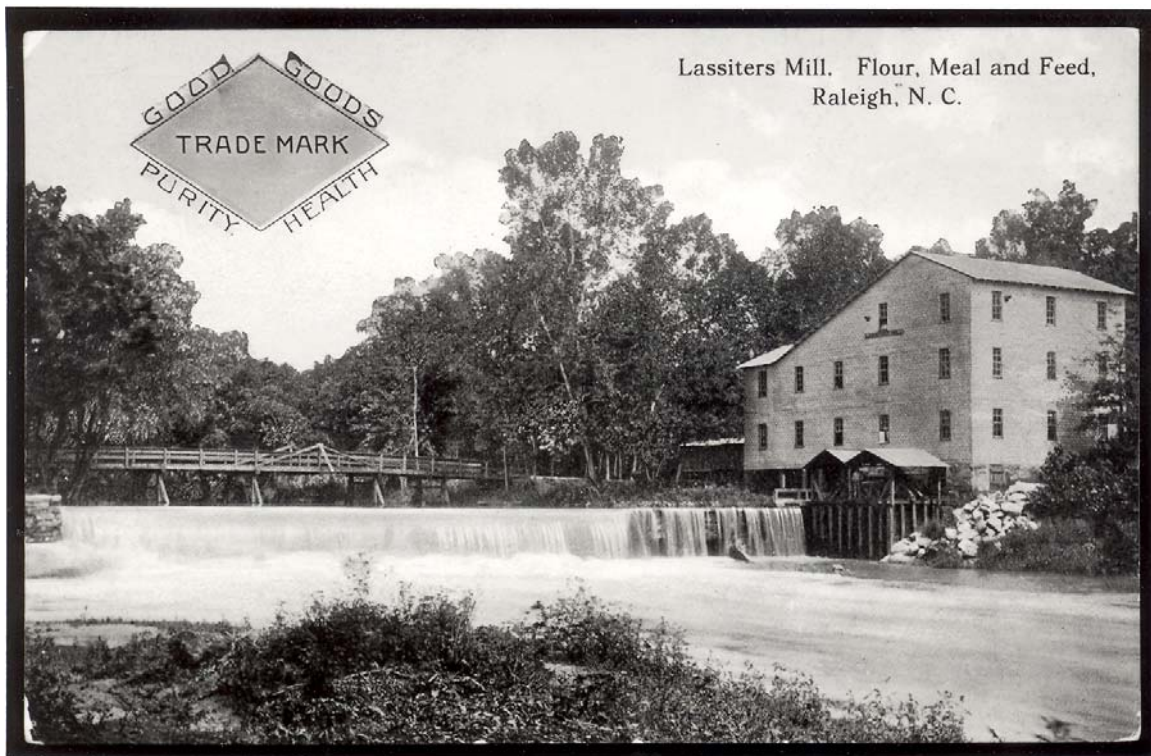
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<sup>1</sup> Much is known about Yates Mill and its owners because of extensive research and preservation efforts over the past 40 years. Yates Mill also benefits from being owned by a number of prominent Raleigh and Wake County residents who left a lot of information about themselves and their interests. Virtually all of Wake County’s custom mills would have created sites for fishing, swimming, and meeting one’s neighbors, like what was found at Yates Mill. However, very few of the custom mills that once stood in Wake County have a history that is so well known as Yates Mill because most mill owners and millers remained relatively anonymous in the larger Wake County record. While some of the early mills’ owners and their families were involved in the development of Wake County and the City of Raleigh, not all of the owners were as active in the larger community as their contemporaries at Yates Mill. The mills discussed in this chapter are even more well known than most because of the prominent roles they played in the social development of the Wake County community in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>2</sup> Johnston County Deed Book 1, page 185 between William Lindsay and John Giles Thomas dated 24 September 1764. Wake County formed from Johnston County, Cumberland County, and Orange County in 1771.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Reid Murray Collection, Business and Industry, Box 9, Folder 1, located at the Olivia Raney Local History Library, Wake County.

area needed places to stay and to board their horses; ordinaries offered lodging and taverns for food and drink. Thomas' ordinary was conveniently located near what would become the state capital, helping promote business at his tavern.



**Figure 10: Postcard of Lassiter's Mill, produced between 1900 and 1915. The family's sawmill was located just downstream of the gristmill featured in this picture. Image courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of History.**

In 1784, Isaac Hunter, Thomas' son-in-law, purchased the mill property. Despite his extensive land holdings and several mills in the House Creek District of Wake County, Hunter is best known for owning an ordinary. His tavern was located on the main north-south road through North Carolina and it became a common stop for travelers on that highway. It was, therefore, well known to the delegates to the 1788 Convention selected to choose a "place for holding the future meetings of the General Assembly and the place of residence of

the Chief Officer of the state.”<sup>4</sup> Until that time, the state of North Carolina did not have an official, permanent location for the General Assembly, the state courts, and the governor. The convention nominated seven locations throughout the state, including Isaac Hunter’s plantation and tavern, to the General Assembly. The General Assembly was to select the final location, at which point a separate commission would lay out the specific site, providing that it would be within ten miles of the place the General Assembly named. On the second ballot, the General Assembly decided Isaac Hunter’s tavern would be used to locate the new permanent state capital. The commission chosen to select the actual site of the capital met at Hunter’s house on 22 May 1792. Hunter likely hoped to sell some of his land to the state for the permanent capital. The state, however, ultimately bought 1,000 acres from Colonel Joel Lane for the location of the new state capital.<sup>5</sup> As a result, Hunter’s tavern ended up being four miles north of the State House. With that decision, Hunter’s tavern likely declined in importance for travelers and local residents because it was not centrally located to the new capital.

Hunter retained ownership of his grist and saw mills and ordinary throughout his involvement in the development of the City of Raleigh. The gristmill on Crabtree Creek burned in April of 1804, but was likely rebuilt soon thereafter.<sup>6</sup> Finally, in December 1813, Hunter advertised in the *Raleigh Register* his desire to sell his mills. His son-in-law, Durrell Rogers, purchased the mill at the Falls of the Crabtree in November 1819. From this point

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<sup>4</sup> Nov 11: Bill to Carry into effect ordinances for establishing a place for General Assembly meetings; Senate Bills 1788, General Assembly Session Records Nov-Dec, 1788.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid; Thornton W. Mitchell, “Hunter, Isaac” in *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, volume 3 ed. William S. Powell (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988) 237.

<sup>6</sup> *Raleigh Register and North-Carolina State Gazette* 23 April 1804, page 3.

until when Cornelius J. Lassiter purchased the gristmill in 1909, the mill was known as Rogers Mill.

Durrell Rogers held onto the mill until his death in 1852; his will gave the mill to his son, Isaac. The mill then transferred to Isaac's sisters in 1890 when he passed away. "I will and devise my entire estate of all kinds both real and personal to my four single sisters... jointly for the period of their several natural lives.... It is my will and desire that my estate shall be kept together for the benefit of all of my sisters until the last one dies, but should they at anytime desire to change any investment which I may leave they shall be at full liberty to do so."<sup>7</sup> Because one of his sisters was widowed and the other three never married, Isaac wanted to make sure his sisters had every available means to support themselves as they saw fit. These sisters, however, did not operate the mill after Isaac Rogers' death.<sup>8</sup>

The Rogers sisters sold the mill site to Wiley Clifton in 1894. Clifton planned to refurbish the mill and surrounding site, building a new set of businesses in addition to the gristmill.<sup>9</sup> Clifton, however, was unable to begin development of the property before he was forced to forfeit ownership when he defaulted on loans, for which he used the mill site as a security. Fabius Haywood Busbee, one of Clifton's investors, purchased the mill at a courthouse sale in October 1901.<sup>10</sup> In 1907, Busbee sold the Rogers Mill site and four acres of land to Willis Whitaker, the owner and operator of Whitaker's Mill, located just downstream from Rogers Mill. Whitaker, however, quickly turned around and sold the mill site to Cornelius Jesse Lassiter in 1908.

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<sup>7</sup> Isaac Rogers 1890, Wake County Wills 1771-1966 Robeson – Rogers, Lydia W. C.R. 099.801.89.

<sup>8</sup> "Mill site has long history" *Raleigh Times* 14 August 1973.

<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Reid Murray Collection, Business and Industry, Box 9, Folder 1, located at the Olivia Raney Local History Library, Wake County.

<sup>10</sup> "Mill site has long history" *Raleigh Times* 14 August 1973.

According to family legend, Cornelius Lassiter had been interested in owning and operating gristmills since his childhood. His mother had been widowed by the Civil War and had a difficult time providing for her family. As a result, she could only allow her children to have a biscuit on Sunday. The story claims that because of his love of biscuits and the desire to always have the money and supplies to make them whenever he wanted, Cornelius was determined to own his own gristmill. As an adult, Lassiter obtained a mill with a twenty-four-foot overshot waterwheel and a large lake for a water supply. In the mill, he had stones for grinding wheat, stones for grinding corn, and a cotton gin. He also had a store and sawmill nearby. In the market to expand his mill holdings, he then bought the Rogers Mill site on Crabtree Creek. The mill was no longer standing and only a portion of the dam was left. According to his daughter, Mary Lassiter, there was not even a road leading to the site any longer. "He took his own hands and built the road from Six Forks Road down to the mill and then on up to Glenwood Avenue, as far as Glenwood Avenue. So that's why it was called Lassiter Mill Road. And I do not know whether it was called Glenwood Avenue at that time or not. But the intersection of what is now Glenwood Avenue and Lassiter Mill Road is St. Mary's Street, was at that time called Lassiter Crossing."<sup>11</sup> Lassiter was determined to create a successful milling business along Crabtree Creek, and to provide a way to get to the mill itself.

In addition to building the road, Lassiter built two houses on the site, and reconstructed the mill dam. Finally, he rebuilt the mill itself, with a lumber mill, a cotton gin,

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<sup>11</sup> Lynn Steven Brown's recording of Mary Lassiter, ca. 1980. Transcript by Elizabeth Reid Murray. A copy of the transcript and a recording of the interview can be found in the Elizabeth Reid Murray Collection, Business and Industry, Box 9, Folder 1 at the Olivia Raney Local History Library.

and stones for grinding both flour and corn meal. When all of that construction was finished, he built a boat house and purchased a number of boats for rental use. With all of the buildings completed, Mary Lassiter recalled, “He invited friends from every direction down to the mill, and it was quite a day. Friends brought picnic baskets for a big picnic. Boats were all over the creek and people were fishing.”<sup>12</sup> Lassiter wanted to offer a number of services at his mill to make his business as profitable as possible. He also recognized that renting boats and allowing fishing would make his mill more socially valuable to the Raleigh community. In addition, Lassiter generally enjoyed having Raleigh residents use the mill site as a recreational area.



**Figure 11: The Harrison Family at Lassiter Mill in the 1920s. Photo donated to Historic Yates Mill County Park by Clarence Harrison. At the time of the donation, Harrison told park staff during an oral history interview, “On Sundays sometimes my father would walk us to Lassiter’s Mill. We’d sit up on the dam and have our picture made.” Photo courtesy Historic Yates Mill County Park.**

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<sup>12</sup> Mary Lassiter recording.



C.J. Lassiter continued operating the mill until 1945, when he became ill and unable to work. At this time, his daughter Mary, son Lendon, and son-in-law Melville Wolfe, Jr. purchased the milling businesses. Three years later, Mary bought out Lendon and Melville's shares in the gristmill business, and became the only female member of the North Carolina Corn Millers Association.<sup>13</sup> Mary Lassiter continued operating the gristmilling business on Crabtree Creek until a fire destroyed the mill in 1958. She did not, however, allow the fire to destroy the Lassiter Milling Company entirely. The gristmill on Crabtree Creek was never rebuilt, but Lassiter had other nearby milling companies continue to produce Lassiter Corn Meal according to her recipe. In this way, Lassiter Milling Company was able to continue serving its past customers and the local grocers throughout Wake County.

This system continued until 1971, when Lassiter sold her company to House-Autry Mills, Inc., in Newton Grove, North Carolina. She explained she had received offers from three different mills wanting to buy, "the Lassiter Corn Meal name, the machinery I had bought, the trucks... and the equipment I had. So, in 1971 I sold the business to the House-Autry Mill. They were going to continue to take care of our customers with Lassiter Meal, because I knew everybody wanted the Lassiter Corn Meal and I wouldn't have let them down."<sup>14</sup> Lassiter understood the Lassiter Milling Company customers enjoyed having a high-quality stone-ground product available locally; and, to her, House-Autry Mill was most likely to best provide for her loyal patrons. In a December 1970 letter written to all of her customers, Lassiter explained the sale,

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<sup>13</sup> Lynn Steven Brown, "Miss Mary Virginia Lassiter" in *The Heritage of Wake County North Carolina* ed. Lynn Belvine and Harriette Riggs (Raleigh, NC: Wake County Genealogical Society in cooperation with Hunter Publishing Co., 1983) entry number 458.

<sup>14</sup> Mary Lassiter Recording.

House-Autry Mills, Inc. is the merger of old, experienced, and highly reputable milling companies and operates in a wide area of the state. The House-Autry Mills, Inc, will continue serving you as we have in the past, and we hope you will see fit to give them your continuing business.

It is our understanding that under the new management of House-Autry Mills, Inc. our customers will continue to receive the same high quality of both service and product.

I am deeply grateful to you for your friendship, confidence and patronage in the past and extend very best wishes to you and yours.<sup>15</sup>

House-Autry Mills continued selling cornmeal under the Lassiter Corn Meal name until the 1980s; today, all products are marketed under the House-Autry Mills name. After selling the gristmilling business, Lassiter continued to maintain her family's interests at the site, and to operate the family's small country store by Crabtree Creek until a fire destroyed the grocery building in April 1975.<sup>16</sup>

Mary Lassiter recognized the popularity of the mill site for picnickers, swimmers, and fishermen. The mill's accessibility to those living in Raleigh made it one of the most popular picnic grounds near the city. In the 1920s, Susan Iden, a writer for *The Raleigh Times*, eloquently described some of the most popular pastimes found at Lassiter Mill, "Close by the stream are the dead ashes and burned out logs of many a camp fire; there are well worn foot paths through the woods and along the creek, and below the dam sand mounds where children have come to play and build their castles.... Bird lovers count it no hardship to forsake their beds in the early morning to go a-birding at Lassiter's Mill."<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, as

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<sup>15</sup> Letter from Mary Lassiter to "All Customers of Lassiter Milling Company" 28 December 1970. A copy of this letter can be found in the Elizabeth Reid Murray Collection, Business and Industry, Box 9, Folder 2, in the Olivia Raney Local History Library, Wake County, North Carolina.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Lynch, "Suspicious Fire Destroys Last Part of Lassiter Mill" *The News and Observer*, 19 April 1975, 32.

<sup>17</sup> Susan Iden, "Lassiter's Mill Place of Camp Fire Suppers and Picnics on Crabtree" *The Raleigh Times* 1927. A copy of this article can be found in the Elizabeth Reid Murray Collection, Business and Industry, Box 9, Folder 2, in the Olivia Raney Local History Library, Wake County, North Carolina.

the spot became more and more popular, the public gradually stopped showing respect for the many privileges Mary Lassiter allowed them on her property. As she lamented in the early 1980s, “From the time my father built the mill until the time that I had to close it in 1975, we enjoyed having people come out and use the Lassiter Mill grounds, the beach, free of charge. But today I have to keep it closed because if I do not close it to the public there would be no supervision... I’m sorry that I have to keep it closed to people today.”<sup>18</sup> Lassiter closed the site to the public because of the amount of litter visitors were leaving behind, an issue visitors had been warned about repeatedly. A newspaper article announcing the changing policy at Lassiter Mill stated, “Miss Lassiter said she had gone to the area as many as three times a day to pick up litter. Some intruders, she said, had also broken her rules about drinking, cursing, and throwing people off the Lassiter Mill Bridge.”<sup>19</sup> At the time she closed her property, as many as 300 people a day were coming out to the site.

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<sup>18</sup> Mary Lassiter Recording.

<sup>19</sup> David Zucchini “Lassiter Swimmin’ Hole Falls Victim to Litter Bugs” *The News and Observer* 9 July 1975.



**Figure 12: Lassiter Mill Dam and surrounding neighborhood in 2007. Only the dam and a portion of the mill's foundation remain from the Lassiter Milling Company. Modern homes are now where the mill once stood and surround the dam.**

Today, growth in the city of Raleigh has surrounded the once calm, and even remote, Lassiter Mill site. What once was a quiet creek surrounded by woods, is now a housing subdivision in the midst of a growing metropolitan city. As early as the 1970s, members of the Wake County community pushed to make the Lassiter Milling property a Raleigh City Park so the city would accept responsibility for maintaining the site. Supporters of the proposal argued “Park value alone justifies city determination to keep up the Lassiter’s good work, but the property has historical importance, too.”<sup>20</sup> The mill site did not become a formal city park. In 1985, however, a quarter-mile segment of paved walkway was added to the Raleigh Greenway system, extending the trail to the old Lassiter Mill site. At the end of the trail are a plaque, millstone, and a piece of the old bridge that once crossed Crabtree

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<sup>20</sup> “Lassiter Mill Deserves Park Status” *The News and Observer* 27 March 1974.

Creek at the mill. The bridge was put there in the 1920s and it stood until the 1980s, when flood damage prompted the city to condemn it and tear it down. While none of the Lassiter Milling Company buildings still stand today, a portion of the site itself and the memory of the services provided by the mill are preserved thanks to the Greenway System.



**Figure 13: The monument at the Lassiter Mill site. The site along the Raleigh Greenway system offers Wake County residents the opportunity to enjoy some of the same activities that were offered in the past, such as picnicking or hiking. The plaque gives a brief history of the mills that stood on the site, focusing the most attention on the Lassiter Milling Company, and the recreational activities that took place at the site.**

### **The Mill at Lake Myra**

The Lake Myra mill site was first developed by Thomas Price, Jr. around 1812. Price was a substantial landowner in the Mark's Creek District of Wake County. Around 1808, he purchased 211 acres along Mark's Creek that would be known as the Lake Myra mill site in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By 1820, he had become one of the wealthiest landowners in the community; tax records showed him owning 2151 acres of land and 21 slaves. Also by 1820,

he was not only operating the local country store, he was also the local banker, either lending neighbors his own money or endorsing their notes with the Bank of Newbern located in Raleigh. In addition, in 1823, he was appointed a justice in the Wake County Court.<sup>21</sup>

Price's wealth and status in the Mark's Creek and Wake County community was based on his agricultural, business, and commercial acumen. Price owned a total of five mills in Wake and Johnston Counties. Four of the mills were located in Wake County, three along Mark's Creek and one on Buffalo Creek. The fifth was located on the Johnston County portion of Buffalo Creek. His sons also displayed Price's talent for business, as well as his interest in investing in milling operations. His son, Washington, moved to Fayette County, Mississippi, where he managed extensive farming operations and three mills, including a gristmill, sawmill, and cotton gin. Price's son, Needham, inherited approximately half of his estate, including two of the mills along Mark's Creek. One of those mills, most commonly known as Price's Mill, eventually became part of the Lake Myra property.<sup>22</sup>

Needham Price retained ownership of the mill until his death in 1870; his will left all of his property to his wife, Nancy Price, including land, stock horses, hogs, cows, mills, and household possessions.<sup>23</sup> Nancy Price's will, executed in 1874, divided that property between their children and grandchildren, based on decisions she made with her husband before his death. Their daughter Mary Mangum, and her husband Priestly Mangum, were given about 1,150 acres of land, including "The Mill Tract" "and all the mills situate thereon, or on any

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<sup>21</sup> "Oakey Grove, Wake County, North Carolina," 5-6. Located in Elizabeth Reid Murray Collection, People, Price, Thomas, Box 34, Folder 14, in the Olivia Raney Local History Library, Wake County, North Carolina. This essay on Thomas Price was written by Elizabeth Reid Murray, based on her research on the history of Wake County and its residents.

<sup>22</sup> "Oakey Grove, Wake County, North Carolina" 1.

<sup>23</sup> Needham Price, 1870, Wake County Wills, 1771-1966, Powell, Henry Hinton – Proudly. C.R.099.801.

part thereof, with the fixtures thereof, and all the privileges, appendages, and appurtenances thereunto belonging and used therewith.”<sup>24</sup> Mary and Priestly Mangum retained ownership of the property until at least 1878, because maps from that time period continue to identify the site as N. Price’s Mill.<sup>25</sup>



**Figure 14: Lake Myra Dam in 2008.**

By 1887, Price’s Mill had changed ownership; Wake County maps list the site as being Hood’s Mill at that time.<sup>26</sup> W.H. Hood was most likely the next owner of Price’s Mill along Mark’s Creek; in 1884 and then again in 1890, he is listed as a mill owner in the Eagle Rock vicinity of the Mark’s Creek District.<sup>27</sup> W.H. Hood was possibly a member of the Hood family who owned and operated a small-scale family farm in the vicinity of the mill. This family is thought to have run a mill on Buffalo Creek during the antebellum period on their small plantation. W.H. Hood was also an ex-Captain in the Confederate Army, a county

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<sup>24</sup> Nancy Price, 1874, Wake County Wills, 1771-1966, Powell, Henry Hinton – Proudly. C.R.099.801.84.

<sup>25</sup> Map of Wake County Drawn from Actual Surveys by Fendol Bevers 1878, MC.099.1878b1.

<sup>26</sup> Schaffer’s Map of Wake County, 1887. MC.099.1887s1.

<sup>27</sup> *Raleigh City Directory, 1883-1884*, 596; *Branson’s N.C. Business Directory, 1890*, 663.



commissioner from 1891 to 1895, and the Register of Deeds for Wake County from 1898 until his death in 1901.<sup>28</sup> Little, however, is known about the mill's operations, or development during its time as Hood's Mill.



**Figure 15: Lake Myra Mill in 1991. This structure was the last to operate as a gristmill and cotton gin at this site. The mill and many of the other buildings on the property have since collapsed. Photo taken by Kelly Lally; courtesy of the North Carolina State Archives.**

The timeline for ownership of the mill after the Hood family is not completely certain. A group of Raleigh doctors supposedly used the farmhouse once associated with the property as a clubhouse for several years during the 1920s, and the lake at this time was known as Doctor's Lake.<sup>29</sup> Then, in the 1930s, a man named Stone developed the lake into the Lake Myra recreational complex, probably for the owner, Charles Woodall. Clarence Martin obtained the property from Woodall in 1939; he continued to operate the site as a

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<sup>28</sup> "Capt W.H. Hood Dead" *News and Observer* 1 Feb 1901.

<sup>29</sup> Lally 225-226; Elizabeth Reid Murray Collection, Parks and Recreation, Box 9, Folder 3.



recreational facility and is thought to have built the store, the pier, and the boat sheds at the site. Martin's descendents continued operating the general store and allowing visitors to fish on the lake until the early 1990s.<sup>30</sup>

The gristmill continued to grind cornmeal until the 1960s, even though it was no longer the primary activity available for Wake County residents at Lake Myra, as more emphasis was placed on recreational use and the community store at the site beginning in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>31</sup> At the complex, visitors could swim, fish, picnic, camp, and catch up on the local news. A newspaper article from 1934 advertises special attractions for the Fourth of July at Holt's Lake and Lake Myra, two recreational facilities near the City of Raleigh. In the article, Lake Myra's owner, Charles Woodall said the lake had enjoyed good crowds during the hot days in May and June. The article also reported, "Fishing is at its best there now. Lake Myra is comprised of 115 acres of clear spring water, surrounded by a woodland of beautiful trees. Bathing, fishing, boating, and picnicking are the popular pastimes there. Its proximity to Raleigh makes it popular as a picnic spot."<sup>32</sup> Other newspaper advertisements also encouraged people to come out to Lake Myra for the Fourth of July, and listed some of the activities available, such as swimming and boating. One said "Spend July 4<sup>th</sup> Here, where it's cool and inviting. We are prepared to take care of 5,000 people. Come early and stay late. Lake Myra is a safe beach for children and women." The ad also mentioned having bathing suits and boats for rent, as well as a refreshment stand.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Lally 226.

<sup>31</sup> Fred Bonner, "Old Lake Myra full of big yarns, fish" *News and Observer* 28 February 1988.

<sup>32</sup> "Lakes Planning for Big Fourth" *News and Observer* 1 July 1934.

<sup>33</sup> "Lake Myra: 'Wake County's Own Lake'" *News and Observer* 1 July 1934.



**Figure 16: Lake Myra Store in 1991. Though closed now, this store remained open until the early 1990s, serving the local community by providing an opportunity for residents to gather and hear stories about the lake and the history of Wake County. Photo taken by Kelly Lally; courtesy of the North Carolina State Archives.**

The Lake Myra General Store remained open as late as the early 1990s, and visitors could go out on the lake to fish or “sit around the pot-bellied wood stove at the Lake Myra General Store and hear fascinating stories about the lake.”<sup>34</sup> Today, the gristmill, boardwalk, and boathouses at Lake Myra have all collapsed. Rubble is virtually all that is found where the gristmill once served area farmers and the recreational facilities once created a place of fun and relaxation for Wake County residents. The community store still stands, but has been closed since the 1990s. It stands next to the road, a silent reminder of all that once took place at that spot for those who drive by. The property is owned by a private family, but the Wake County department of Parks, Recreation, and Open Space is in the initial stages of planning a

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<sup>34</sup> Bonner.

new County Park at Lake Myra to once again provide an area where residents will be able to go boating and fishing in the eastern part of Wake County.



**Figure 17: The collapsed boardwalk and dock at Lake Myra in 2008. In the past, visitors to Lake Myra would have been able to fish and swim off of the boardwalk.**

Both Lassiter Mill and the mill at Lake Myra served their communities as active businesses for centuries. More important, and more memorable to recent Wake County residents, however, was the public's use of the mill sites for recreation. Millponds and milldams create excellent opportunities for swimming, boating, and fishing. They are also scenic areas for picnics, dating, and parties, all of which the Lassiter family allowed on their property. These activities were encouraged even more at Lake Myra, where the lake was developed and marketed as a recreational facility. Because interest in old gristmills, mill dams, and local history remains, the Lassiter Mill monument on the Raleigh Greenway

System and Lake Myra's future with the Wake County Department of Parks, Recreation, and Open Space will continue to preserve those sites for public use.

## Conclusion

Every custom gristmill served its local community and encouraged that community's growth and development. Mills provided a food source; mill ponds were baptismal fountains, fishing spots, and swimming holes; mill yards offered space for community members to meet, talk politics, trade, and even date. Many mill owners discovered that mill sites could turn a profit from more than grinding grain; as was the case at Yates Mill, Lassiter Mill, and the mill at Lake Myra. Gristmills often had a saw mill operation or a distillery associated with the site as an additional service and source of income. Blacksmiths and general store owners often found mill sites a convenient and profitable location. Encouraging the social uses of the millpond – for swimming, boating and fishing – often helped generate additional income for the millers. Mary Lassiter especially understood how important her mill site was to the citizens of Raleigh for recreation, and she wanted to keep the area open free of charge to the community, even after the mill shut down. Only when cleaning the area became too much of a burden did Lassiter close the site to the public.

In conversation with friend Lynn Brown, Mary Lassiter often described Lassiter Mill as “a photographer’s dream, a lover’s paradise, a fisherman’s ideal, a scenic attraction, a spot dear to the hearts of children, a place of fond memories for the aged, a haven for relaxing in the sun, and a treasure of natural beauty for all.”<sup>1</sup> While Lassiter certainly would have been most familiar, and pleased, with these roles her mill played for Wake County, Yates Mill and Lake Myra would have offered the same sort of benefits to the community. But rarely were recreational activities at the mill formally organized as they were at Lake Myra. Community

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<sup>1</sup> Brown entry number 458.

use and development around the mill site were generally based on an understanding between the mill owner, the miller, and the mill's neighbors. As a result, most of the knowledge people have today of these many uses comes from the collection and interpretation of oral histories, local traditions, and community histories, making the research of the mill's community and understanding all the roles the custom mill filled more difficult. The research challenges presented by the lack of official documentation, however, do not make those roles any less significant.

Before the establishment of the City of Raleigh in 1792, Wake County was simply a collection of local, individualized communities without a permanent town or county seat. Gristmills, ordinaries, and churches would have located themselves throughout the county to serve the varying needs of each local community and the travelers passing through. These individual communities would have been largely self-sufficient without a central town to attract local, regional, and national trade to promote economic growth. As a result, gristmills and their associated businesses such as distilleries, sawmills, and general stores provided a number of services that were not easily replaced until the later development of a full market economy in the city of Raleigh. Until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, travel by horse and wagon to the mill was still difficult, so having easily accessible gristmills and other community services throughout the county would have remained important. As Raleigh and Wake County began to rapidly grow and develop after the Civil War and Reconstruction, and as higher quality products could be more easily transported from across the country to area residents, the local, custom mills gradually began to shut down. Over time, all of Wake County's more than 70 gristmills closed for business.



**Figure 18: “I am History, Don’t Destroy Please.” This carving is found on the top of the casing surrounding the French Burr millstones in Yates Mill.**

Before the days when parks and greenways showcased and protected old mill sites, neighbors continued to understand and appreciate the historic significance of the local gristmill to Wake County. The above picture was taken inside of Yates Mill and is but one example of the graffiti found inside the building. Perhaps, however, it is one of the most revealing markings. The source of this carving is unknown; presumably it was done by someone who broke into the mill after it closed. Ironically, even though the carving was an act of trespass and vandalism, whoever left it clearly understood the value of the old mill, and wanted to insure that the mill and its machinery were left for future generations to see, learn from, and enjoy. Looting after a mill closed was common practice because the wood and machinery parts inside could be used construction elsewhere. The materials could have been

used to build a new mill or other business, and the gearing could be transferred to another industry. Use and reuse were common themes while a mill was in operation, and people would see no reason for the materials in the mill to go to waste as it slowly disintegrated.

A descendant of the Borland family, a milling family in Orange County, North Carolina, “philosophizes about the old days of watermills: ‘It would be difficult ... to assess the impact of these old mills over the years. I hold with the belief that they had a great and good influence... on the opening up and development of communities.’”<sup>2</sup> In fact, local mills gave people a place to meet and to exchange ideas on politics, morals, and religion. They also provided places for fishing, picnics, boating, and dating. These various social functions of the mills were probably not in the front of the minds of their builders or their patrons. Mill owners were often more concerned with financial gain and providing an economic service to the region; for them, the social and communal aspects of the gristmill were of secondary importance. The farmers who used the mills enjoyed having a convenient food source for their families, but also utilized the other services and activities available at the local gristmill. In retrospect, “all who lived in the days of watermills acknowledge the wider role that mills played in their lives: the excitement, the pleasure, the stimulation to growth of mind and sociability, and to a sense of identity and membership in a community and in a nation.”<sup>3</sup> Few of the structures still stand, but the foundations, dams, and millponds that remain continue to evoke feelings of excitement and wonder to visitors and past patrons alike.

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<sup>2</sup> Anderson 33.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.





**Figure 19: The remains of the gristmill at Lake Myra. Time and neglect allowed the mill to deteriorate after it closed for business, and as fewer and fewer visitors came to use the site recreationally.**

Today, the local, custom mills no longer serve their economic purposes. Without constant use, most have disappeared from the landscape. As the mills in Wake County continued disappearing, the residents of Wake County decided it was time to take action to preserve one of the few remaining structures and the memories of the gristmills that once stood. The fully restored Yates Mill, the historic markers at the Lassiter Mill site, and similar preservation efforts at mill sites across the country, are all physical representations of nostalgia for past businesses and communities, and all help preserve the legacy of gristmills and the local communities they once served. Most of the physical remains of the mills in Wake County have disappeared, and the memory of water-powered gristmills in operation is quickly fading as well. Only through the preservation of the memories of the county's gristmills will Wake County residents be able to continue to understand the economic and social importance of gristmills in the county's, state's, and nation's development. The mills,

the machinery, and the dams that remain are silent reminders of what were once thriving industries and communities that built the city and county we know today.

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