

The Chatham Historical Journal

Volume 8, Number 3

Chatham County, North Carolina

November 1995

Bygone Mills on the Haw River in Chatham County

Herbert Poole*

The Haw River rises in northeast Forsyth County and flows through Guilford, Rockingham, and Alamance counties before entering Chatham County, where it eventually merges with the Deep River near the village of Haywood to form the Cape Fear River. Unlike the Deep River, which enjoyed a brief period of development and commerce as an improved but costly waterway, the Haw was unsuited to shallow-draft inland navigation because it lacked sufficient depth and was filled along most of its course with rocks, boulders, sand, gravel, and deposits of clay.

Named for the Sissipahau Indians, according to Englishman John Lawson who set out from Charleston to explore the Carolinas in 1701,¹ the Hau-River (as Lawson spelled it) was better suited to milling, and as such would experience for many years a type of commercial development different from that seen on the Deep River. However, the need for constant and costly maintenance and the spring freshets characteristic of both the Haw and the Deep ultimately limited the commercial utility of both tributaries of the Cape Fear River.

The most complete listing of mills operating at one time or another on the Haw is to be found in an 1899 publication by the North Carolina Geological Survey.² This publication records a total of twelve mills, including all but one of those shown on Ramsey's 1870 map of Chatham County³ or the 1880 census of manufacturing.⁴

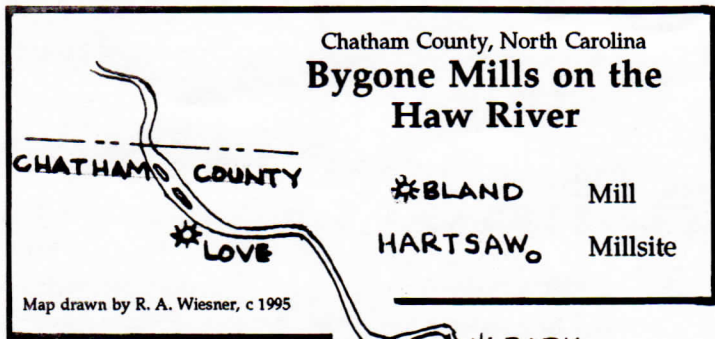
**Herbert Poole, Ph.D., is Library Director at Guilford College in Greensboro. Reared in Pittsboro, he has varied interests in local history. He relates that some years ago he discovered a common interest in water-powered mills with Guilford College president Grimsley Hobbs, who was restoring his father's mill, Baldwin's mill, on Terrell's Creek.*

These mills must have played an important, even vital, role in the commercial as well as in the social life of the county, and in the quality of the lives of the many families for whom they customarily ground corn, wheat, oats, and other cereal grains for cash, credit, or shares. In his book, *Exploring the Old Mills of North Carolina*, Grimsley T. Hobbs noted that these early mills served their communities as both economic and social centers.⁵ Building them, he wrote, required investments of capital sometimes too large for one individual, so that joint financing would be necessary. They also required extensive engineering and a strong knowledge of water flow in the streams on which they were to be located. The dams and raceways that impounded and channeled the water that turned their waterwheels or spun their turbines for the delivery of motive power to their millstones for grinding wheat and grain had to be located properly. In short, building and operating a mill was no simple task.

Mills also served as natural gathering spots for farmers and members of their families. Here one could "set a spell" or gossip with friends, exchange news, or politick while waiting for grain to be ground. You could also fish or go boating in the millpond. As Hobbs points out, many "came as much for the company as the cornmeal, so the mill quickly became the farmer's club, and the miller who presided over all this was an important man," both wealthy and prominent by local standards.

Sometimes the location of mills would determine the placement of roads or encourage the development of adjacent industry such as blacksmith shops, sawmills, and cotton gins. "A community which had a mill," Hobbs wrote, "was well on the way to becoming a town."

Mills on the Haw often suffered for lack of water during dry periods, when the water level in the river was low; and some mills could operate only for a limited number of hours per day due to the depletion of their impounded water supply. Then



(Note 2). The first mill located on the Haw River was situated just over four miles above its confluence with the Deep River, at a very favorable site.

Bland's Mill

Located on the same site as the present-day dam for Jordan Lake, Bland's mill was partially washed away in a freshet in 1880, then rebuilt only to be swept away once more. Ramsey's map located it on the eastern bank of the Haw just below the mouth of New Hope Creek. Opposite the mill, the western bank of the river rose in a steep rocky bluff to a height of about 100 feet. The dam for the mill ran diagonally across and up the river in a northwesterly direction to the bluff. Made of wood, the dam was reported to have been approximately 300 feet in length and 7 feet in height, with a vertical face on the downriver side and a sloped face on the upriver side. The impoundment behind the dam extended about a mile upriver, with an average width of 200 feet, all within the banks of the river. The mill contained two pair of stones and operated eleven months out of the year.

Hartsaw's Millsite

Swain *et al* reported a potential source of power two miles above Bland's mill.

Known as Hartsaw's millsite, it was described as an "unimproved" site located above the mouth of New Hope Creek. The site was probably just below an island that existed in the river, at that time known as Gunter-Harris Island.⁶

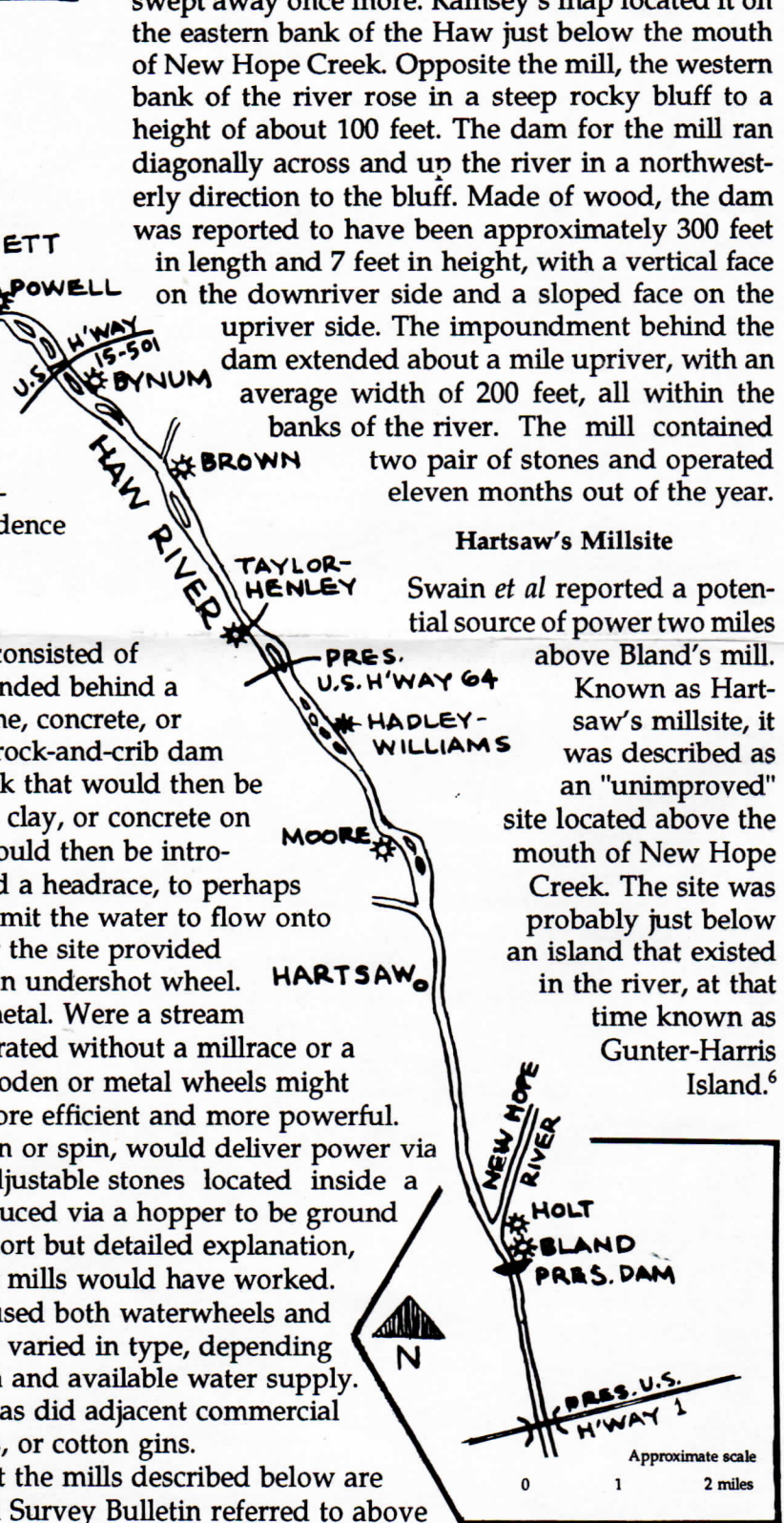
they would be forced to wait until a sufficient amount of water could accumulate so that they could resume operation. Conversely, too much water could be just as bad, or even worse, than too little. Freshets were frequent along the Haw, and they often brought tremendous volumes of water pouring downstream, sweeping everything before them. The cost and difficulty associated with rebuilding often discouraged or bankrupted mill owners. Some millers rebuilt, only to be washed out again. So, unfortunately for mill lovers, there is little to no evidence today of the early mills on the Haw River.

Design of a Water-Powered Mill

Typically, a water-powered mill or mill site consisted of several basic elements. Water would be impounded behind a dam, which might be constructed of earth, stone, concrete, or logs, solely or in combination. For example, a rock-and-crib dam would be made from logs forming a framework that would then be filled with heavy stone and backed with earth, clay, or concrete on the impoundment side. The water so stored would then be introduced by way of a gate into a sluiceway, called a headrace, to perhaps a second gate which, when opened, would permit the water to flow onto or under a waterwheel, depending on whether the site provided suitable drop for either an overshot wheel or an undershot wheel. The wheel might be made of either wood or metal. Were a stream fast enough, an undershot wheel could be operated without a millrace or a millpond. As technology became available, wooden or metal wheels might be replaced by a bucket turbine, which was more efficient and more powerful. The wheel or the turbine, when allowed to turn or spin, would deliver power via shafts and bevel gears to an opposing set of adjustable stones located inside a wooden case, into which grain could be introduced via a hopper to be ground into flour or meal. Hobbs's book provides a short but detailed explanation, with diagrams and pictures, of how early grist mills would have worked.

Mills on the Haw River in the 19th century used both waterwheels and turbines for powering their stones. Their dams varied in type, depending on the millsite and what best suited the terrain and available water supply. The pairs of stones at each site varied as well, as did adjacent commercial operations, such as blacksmith shops, sawmills, or cotton gins.

Unless otherwise noted, specific details about the mills described below are taken from the 1899 North Carolina Geological Survey Bulletin referred to above



Moore's Mill

Ramsey's map shows Moore's mill approximately 3.5 miles upstream from Bland's mill. Locals during my childhood confused Moore's mill with Hatch's mill, which was located on Robeson Creek, a tributary of the Haw. The cause for the confusion may have been that a Robert Hatcher was for many years the operator of Moore's mill.

Moore's mill did not use a dam, as it was located on a natural sluiceway, 600 feet long, on the west bank of the river just below and northwest of a bridge that spanned the Haw River at that time.⁷ Water for the mill's power was directed into this sluiceway by a natural shoal in the river. In times of low water, a rough stone dam would also be constructed to divert water into the sluiceway, but it had to be replaced following each freshet.

Moore's millsite was home to several operations. One was a gristmill with several pair of stones. Other operations on the site at some time included a sawmill, a cotton gin, and a foundry.

Hadley-Williams Mill

Approximately 1.5 miles above Moore's mill, on the east bank of the river, was a mill known by at least two names. In 1870 when Ramsey published his map of Chatham County, this mill was called Hadley's mill, but by 1899 it was known as Williams' mill. By that time it was in poor repair and no longer in use. This mill maintained a seven-foot dam and an impoundment 1,200 feet in length, which provided water to power a summer sawmill, a gristmill, and a foundry. The mill was located on

In the possession of the author is one of two known issues of a charming handwritten document by someone named John Cowan, who was likely staying in Pittsboro during a part of the year 1865. Entitled The Illustrated Sun, the manuscript has the format of a newspaper, dated September 11, 1865. Not only does it contain a pen-and-ink sketch of the bridge and mill at Bynum as they appeared to "our special artist" in 1865, according to the sketch's caption, but it reports, "...the bridge is a new one made by Mr. Bynum, the old one being washed away by the great freshet last winter which was the largest we have seen here in forty years. The mill seems to be a very popular one for all the people here send their corn flour to it, although there are a great many more mills nearer. It is also a charming place for muscadine grapes, for our artist tells us that he stuffed himself before he attempted to make the sketch and that was the reason it was not done well."



Bynum's Bridge and Mill. [*From a sketch by an special artist.*]

a site where the river was quite wide, extremely shallow, and divided by an island one-half mile in length known as Seven Islands.

Taylor-Henley Mill

The Taylor-Henley mill stood on the west bank of the river approximately one mile north of Griffin's bridge on what is now U.S. highway 64, which crosses the river four miles east of Pittsboro. The mill was known as Taylor's mill, but was commonly referred to as Henley's mill, having been owned at one time by Stephen Henley. In the late 1890s this mill was owned by W. L. London of Pittsboro. A gristmill, it was powered by water from an impoundment created by a 3.5-foot dam of 500 feet in length that extended across the river to an island. This dam, constructed in either 1874 or 1875, directed water into a race and thence to the mill, at which there was a fall of eight feet.

Brown's Mill

Two miles above Henley's mill on the east bank of the river was Brown's mill, owned by Daniel Tillman in 1899. Two mills on this site were washed away over a period of a few years.

Bynum's Mill

Two miles above Brown's mill was a mill owned by Carney Bynum. On the Bynum millsite were located a gristmill, a cotton gin, and a roller flour mill. A 3.5-foot dam 500 feet long created a pond of 10-12 acres, and a 600-yard race led to a 16-foot fall at the mill. The village that grew around Carney Bynum's mill remains today as what is commonly referred to as a mill village. It was home for several generations to employees of a hydroelectric-powered spinning facility operated by the J. M. Odell Manufacturing Company. The Odell facility made

use of an improved concrete dam across the Haw River approximately 200 yards northwest of present-day U.S. highway 15-501, as well as both headrace and tailrace. The headrace was for many years a favorite place to "strike" fish such as suckers during their springtime breeding runs. The Odell facility closed a number of years ago, but it continues to serve as a reminder of Bynum's original mill and bridge, all traces of which have long since disappeared.

Mills Above Bynum

Upriver from Bynum were several additional mills. One was known as R. J. Powell's mill. Swain located it "one mile or less above" Bynum's mill. Its dam was of wood and stone and extended entirely across the river. It burned sometime prior to 1899.

Above Powell's mill, one mile or less, was a site belonging to the Burnett family.

Immediately above the Burnett site was Pace's mill, with four pair of stones for flour and corn, a sawmill, and both wagon and blacksmith shops. The Pace dam was reported to be 100 feet in length and 8 feet in height with a raceway 450 feet long. Ramsey's map of 1870 lists the mill as "Pace & Cottons" mill.

In 1971, Grimsley Hobbs wrote that he had "been to the Pace mill site and talked with the son of the former miller. It was destroyed by a tornado which left timbers in the tree tops, and one child was killed and blown into a tree top. I saw two sets of millstones which have since been removed."⁸

Approximately one-half mile above Pace's mill was the Willis Dark mill, a gristmill that was destroyed by high water sometime prior to 1898.

Finally, just downstream of the Chatham County line was another mill known as Love's mill. The site contained a gristmill and a sawmill, powered from a 700-foot dam and a 400-yard race.

The Haw River and the mills that once operated along its banks were important to the development of commerce and agriculture in Chatham County and to the quality of life of its residents. Had the geological evolution of North Carolina and its streams proceeded differently, however, this era of the county's development might have taken place in a different way.

If the Cape Fear River had been easily navigable along its entire course above Fayetteville, and had the Haw River, like the Deep River, possessed a medium or deepwater channel suitable to navigation, a dream of early developers of the state--that of opening inland navigation far into North Carolina's interior--might have been realized. Instead of

the gentle sound of water flowing onto waterwheels and the creak of the venerable wheels themselves, or the sound of millstones grinding grain for farmers and staples for consumers, or the buzz of neighborly conversations on mill porches and the cries of happy children fishing or playing around millponds, the banks of the Haw River might well have reverberated to the blast of steam whistles, the chuffing of engines and the rhythmic slap-slap of paddlewheels. And boat captains, deckhands, and roustabouts would likely have taken the place of millers like Carney Bynum, Stephen Henley, and James Pace.

NOTES

1. John Lawson, *A New Voyage to Carolina*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967), p. 60.
2. G. F. Swain, J. A. Holmes, and E. W. Myers, *Papers on the Waterpower in North Carolina, A Preliminary Report*, North Carolina Geological Survey Bulletin No. 8. (Raleigh: Barnes, 1899), p. 146-151.
3. Capt. N. A. Ramsey, "Map of Chatham County," (New York: Snyder, Black & Sturm, 1870).
4. Wade Hadley, "Water-Powered Grist Mills in Chatham County, North Carolina, as of 1880," *Chatham Historical Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 1, January 1991, [p. 2]. See also Chatham County Register of Deeds, Books AO-542, AP-559, AT-431, AS-429, and AU-60 for property transactions related to Bland's and Holt's mills.
5. Grimsley T. Hobbs, *Exploring the Old Mills of North Carolina*, (Chapel Hill: Provincial Press, 1985). Recommended also is John Reynolds, *Windmills and Watermills* (New York: Praeger, 1970).
6. G. P. Stout, "Historical Research Map: Chatham County, N.C." (Greensboro: G. P. Stout, 1974).
7. A steel bridge on this site (S. R. 1943), removed when Jordan Lake was developed, had replaced a covered bridge, known as Moore's bridge or "the covered bridge," which was swept away in the floods of 1946.
8. Grimsley T. Hobbs, Personal letter to author, 1971. See also J. Lamont Norwood, "Mt. Pleasant Church and Pace's Mill Bridge," *Chatham Historical Journal*, Vol. VII, No. 3, (September 1994), [p. 1-2].

The **Chatham Historical Journal** is an occasional publication of the Chatham County Historical Association. To be considered for publication, articles or photographs should be previously unpublished, of reasonable length, and include detailed sources of information.

Back issues, beginning in 1988, are available while they last. Letters should be addressed to the Secretary, CCHA, Box 913, Pittsboro, N.C. 27312.