

HISTORY OF YATES MILL

Yates' Mill, on Steep Hill Creek in Wake County, operated as a water powered mill of varying kind for over 200 years. It is an outstanding example and record of the evolution of early industry in the lower Piedmont region of North Carolina. The exact date of construction has not been determined; however, by reference to available records, it appears that the first mill was built between 1746 and 1778. After numerous rebuildings and remodelings, it discontinued operation in 1953.

Samuel Pearson, the builder of the original mill, was born in 1721.¹ He was an early resident of Wake County (formerly part of Johnston County), and married Mary Simmons in 1747^{2 3} in Johnston County. Legend asserts that Samuel Pearson moved to the Steep Hill Creek area in 1748 from New Bern.⁴

Previously written accounts of the history of the mill indicate that around 1750, Samuel Pearson purchased some land in what was then Johnston County from John Monk. If so, actual record of this transaction was lost in a courthouse fire in 1878. The first documented land record for the mill is a Granville grant which was surveyed for Samuel Pearson in October 1756 by W. C. Haywood. The actual grant is dated 1761.⁵

Johnston County court minutes of April, 1759⁶ refer to Samuel Peirson (sic) being appointed "overseer of the road from Walnut Creek to Swift Creek," indicating that he was living in the neighborhood, likely on the property at that time. As overseer he was required to keep the road in good repair. The distance of road in his charge was approximately eight miles, which would indicate a rather large slave work force⁷ to maintain such a distance.

These same court minutes refer to Sam Pearson many times over the next few years, primarily as a member of the Grand Jury for Johnston County. Records after 1769 refer to Sam Pearson only once. Wake County was formed from Johnston and other counties in 1771, so references beyond that date should be in Wake County records.

An original title to a portion of Sam Pearson's lands appears in the Secretary of State's Land Grant office. On July 15, 1778, Joel Lane, who was serving as the Entry Officer of Claims for Lands, ordered a survey for Samuel Pearson. The tract of land contained "640 acres ... on the North side of Swift Creek and on both sides of the waters of Steep Hill Creek joining his own land on the South and West sides, encluding [sic] his mill of running up 2nd? creek for Compliment?." This warrant, which was issued to the surveyor, outlined the area to be included in the survey. The survey was conducted by Theophilis Hunter, an early resident of the area and the owner of significant acreage of land, who had received four Granville Grants. Pearson's first grant abutted Hunter's land. The chain bearers were Phares Pearson, son of Samuel Pearson, and Matthew Wood. The survey is dated August 13, 1778, and is a boundary survey which makes no reference to the mill or Steep Hill Creek. The final step in the land grant process was completed by the Secretary of State, who recorded the grant, issued on August 9, 1779, as grant number 28.⁸

No other records have been found that refer to operation of the mill in the 18th century. Mr. Pearson apparently owned the mill until his death in 1802. In his will, he divided his 1490 acres of land among his four sons, and the proceeds of the sale of his personal property to his six daughters. Mary Pearson, his wife, was left a small amount

of furniture, and a life estate in the "plantation" house. He bequeathed to his son, Simon, "340 acres including the old mill".⁹ Again, there are no records available referring to the mill's operation.

Simon Pearson apparently bought from his brothers most of the land left to them, as well as some land owned by Nadar Nutt. In 1819, he was forced to sell 1529 acres including the mill in a sheriff's sale. The sale was conducted by Samuel Whittaker, sheriff of Wake County. The property was sold at auction for \$3031 to William Boylan, a prominent Raleigh business man and director of the State Bank of North Carolina, co-plaintiff in the foreclosure. The judgment was in the amount of \$316.00 and cost of court.¹⁰

Numerous references to Boylan's Mill are found in depositions taken during 1849 in a civil suit, Jane G. Johnson *et al.* vs Theophilus H. Snow *et al.*, which sought to prevent a dam being rebuilt on Walnut Creek. From these depositions, we know that there were thirteen mills serving Raleigh in 1849. Of these, Mordecai's, D. Roger's, Speight's and H. Whittaker's mills were listed as the only saw mills "near Raleigh" (these are also referred to as being grist mills). However, several other deponents stated that timber was carried to Boylan's, indicating that it did saw lumber. It may be that the saw mill had recently been added. Regarding the condition of Boylan's mill, Silas Burns, operator of Burns' mill, stated, in a comparison of mills with which he was familiar, that Boylan's mill had been recently repaired. He and other deponents mentioned the fact that Steep Hill Creek did not provide as constant a source of water during times of drought, as Crabtree and Walnut Creeks. Several deponents stated that they took their wheat to Boylan's Mill, even though they took their corn to another mill for grinding. This could indicate that not all mills ground wheat, or that Boylan's Mill made better flour.

There is architectural evidence that the mill was enlarged during Mr. Boylan's ownership, perhaps the repairs mentioned above. This will be discussed in more detail later. Mr. Boylan owned the mill for 37 years, until he sold the mill to John Primrose, Thomas H. Briggs and James Penny on June 30, 1853.¹¹

Thomas H. Briggs was a prosperous Raleigh businessman. He started the building materials business that continues to this day as Briggs Hardware. He and a partner, John Dodd, established a company, Briggs and Dodd, that furnished lumber for and built many prominent houses during the second half of the nineteenth century.

The Raleigh Register of February 18, 1856 reports that all or part of the mill was advertised for sale.¹² In 1858, there is in the same paper an advertisement "miller wanted by Penny, Briggs & Co."¹³ In 1859, James Dodd bought John Primrose's share of the mill.

The Industry Schedule of the 1860 Census is said to list James Penny and Co. as operating a mill which ground wheat and corn, and sawed logs. It produced 85 bbls of flour, 800 bu of corn meal, and 300,000 feet of sawn pine lumber.¹⁴ James Penny conveyed by a quit-claim deed to Thomas Briggs and James Dodd of Briggs and Dodd one-half interest in the land bought from William Boylan.¹⁵ On March 2, 1863, Penny, Dodd, and Briggs conveyed 94 acres of land and the grist and saw mills to Phares Yates, James Penny's son-in-law.¹⁶

There is a legend that the sale resulted from James Penny's involvement in the murder of a Mr. Franklin, a Union sympathizer during the Civil War. He apparently feared that Union soldiers, having been told that Penny murdered Franklin for his political views, would extract retribution. Court records show that Penny killed Franklin January 1, 1866 and was indicted for Manslaughter. He was found not guilty.¹⁷

Phares Yates was married to Roxanna Penny, James Penny's daughter. He owned the mill until the end of the nineteenth century. The Census of 1870 shows Parras (Sic) Yates and (his brother) Alvis Yates owning a mill, with an 18-foot diameter wheel, for grinding corn and wheat, and Parras Yates owning a mill, almost certainly the present day Yates' Mill, with 2 wheels, 12 feet in diameter and 7 feet wide, grinding corn and wheat, and sawing pine and oak logs.¹⁸ An 1878 map of Wake County shows Penny's Mill on Steep Hill Creek, and a Yates' Mill on a tributary of Walnut Creek.¹⁹ Apparently, the mill was still known as Penny's Mill at this time, probably to avoid confusion. No other records of Yates' Mill during the latter three decades of the nineteenth century have been found.

In his will dated August 20, 1902, Phares Yates left his real estate, including the mill, to his son, Robert E. Lee Yates and his wife Roxanna, for her life, one-half to each.²⁰ After Roxanna Yates' death, the entire ownership passed to Robert E. Lee Yates, a math professor at NC State College. Robert Yates willed the land and mill to Minnie Johns Yates when he died December 28, 1937.²¹ This will was an irregular probate since the will had not been recorded, but was found among his "important papers."

Minnie John Yates maintained ownership until July 1947, when she sold the mill to Trojan Sales Company, a subsidiary of A.E. Finley Associates.²² It was during this tenure of ownership that the pond was known as Lake Trojan. Later that year the title was conveyed to N.C. Equipment Co., another subsidiary of A.E. Finley Associates. The mill continued operation for several years until it was closed in 1953. North Carolina State University obtained title to the mill in 1963 when it was included in a purchase of 1000 acres to be used as experimental farms.²³ It was shortly following this transfer that the mill was known to operate for the last time. According to legend, the old miller,

John Lea, ground a bushel of corn for photographers and a motion picture was made. No evidence has been discovered to verify these stories, but many people remember the film being made.

Since this time the mill has been idle. Many of the smaller artifacts have been removed or stolen. The windows, shutters and doors have become dilapidated and most are not in place. The wheel and forebay (flume) have disintegrated. In the last several years, the north foundation wall has been damaged by hydraulic pressure and undermining caused by the flood waters of the pond. Additionally, there has been major damage to the main structure of the saw mill shed addition, and minor damage to the beams supporting the rafters and to the rafters themselves at the northwest corner of the grist mill portion. NCSU has had some temporary stabilization work performed to shore up the sawmill shed and weatherize it. Subsequent sections of this report document the existing condition of Yates' Mill and discuss the steps to be taken for stabilization and restoration.

Recently a broken stone dam and mill foundation was found immediately across Penny Road from Yates' Mill. Whether this mill was also build and/or owned by one of the owners of Yates' Mill, as well as how old it is, will have to await further, primarily archeological investigation. One possibility is that this could have been the site of the earliest Pearson's Mill.

1. The Raleigh Register, May 11, 1802, page 3, column 5. "Died At his plantation near this city, in the night of the 4th, Mr. Samuel Pearson, in the 81st year of his life."

2. Raleigh Register, Feb. 8, 1822, page 3, column 5. Mary Simmons Pearson's obituary gives her age as 88 and states: "Mrs. Pearson was one of the first settlers of Wake, then Johnston County. When her father removed from a little below New Bern to within a few miles of where Raleigh now stands, he had no neighbor nearer than ...25 miles.... Mrs. Pearson was married at the age of thirteen and lived with her husband about fifty-five years."

3. Marriage bonds, 1747, Craven County, Re: Samuel Pearson. Samuel Pearson married Mary Simmons, age 13.

4. News and Observer, Sunday, September 8, 1957, Section IV, Page 1 (no sources cited). "Samuel Pearson came here from New Bern in 1748, built this mill about 1750."

Elizabeth Reid, a Wake County historian, believes the mill to have been built prior to 1759 for the following reasons:

- a. Johnston County Court records after April 1759 (records prior to that date were destroyed) include no mention of Samuel Pearson having been granted permission to build a mill on Steep Hill Creek, nor is there record of permission being granted to anyone else from that date through 1771, when Wake County was created out of Johnston. The law requiring court permission to build a mill was passed in the November-December, 1758 Session of the General Assembly. There is also no mention of Samuel Pearson having been granted permission to build a mill on Steep Hill Creek in the Wake County Court minutes. Therefore, unless the permission was requested and granted in the January, 1759 session of the Johnston County Court (for which the minutes are missing), it seems reasonable to assume that the mill was probably built prior to the law being enacted.
- b. No record of permission to build a mill would occur in the Craven County Court minutes, as Johnston County was formed from Craven in 1746, many years prior to the enactment of the mill law.

5. N. C. Archives, Secretary of State Land Grants 75-A. Grant dated January 9, 1761 from John, Earl of Granville to Samuel Pearson of Johnston County of 382 Acres in the Parish of St. Patrick, County of Johnston. Survey of tract made by W. C. Haywood dated October 18, 1756, is attached to one copy of the grant.

6. Johnston County Library, Johnston County Room, Court minutes, page 5.

7. 1790 Census of Wake County lists Samuel Pearson as owning eight slaves.

8. N. C. Secretary of State, Land Grant Records, File 552, Book 38, Page 85.

9. Wake County Courthouse, Record 6, page 1, file no. 207. Will of Samuel Pearson, probated May 1, 1802.

10. N. C. State Archives, Wake County Court Reference Docket, 1799-1832, C.R.099.306.1, May term, 1819.
N. C. State Archives, Wake County Superior Court Minutes, 1818-1827, C.R.099.311.1, Page 23 (March 1819 session).

Wake County Register of Deeds, Book 3, Page 384

11. Ibid., Book 20, Page 185. Wm. Boylan sold to John Primrose and Thomas H. Briggs "Including the grist and sawmill" formerly the property of Simon Pearson, Nadar Nutt & James Nutt w/ 1/2 of lands and the mills to James Penny when he complies with his agreement. In the Industry schedule of the 1850 Census, Penny and Co. is shown as operating, in the "Western District" of Wake Co., a mill which ground wheat and corn and sawed logs. It had 1 pair of Burr Stones for wheat, grinding 3000 bu of wheat a year to produce 545 bu of flour, 1 pair of Common Stones for corn, grinding 3000 bu of corn to produce 3400 bu of meal, and one saw, handling 500 logs of pine, oak, walnut and hickory to produce 120,000 feet of lumber. It is possible that Penny was operating the mill that Boylan owned at the time.
12. Raleigh Register, Feb. 18, 1856, p. 3, col. 7.
13. Ibid., July 31, 1958, p. 2, col. 6.
14. This Census schedule can no longer be found in the NC State Archives. The record of this listing is found in notes made by NCSU School of Design students researching the mill in 1975.
15. Ibid., Book 24, p. 318. This also mentions that 94 acres and the mill have been heretofore sold to Phares Yates.
16. Wake County Register of Deeds, Book 28, p. 652.
17. N. C. State Archives, Wake County Superior Court Minutes, 1852-1867, C.R.099.311.4, pp. 488-491 and pp. 521-523.
18. Census of 1870, Schedule 4, Products of Industry, Swift Creek Township, Wake County, NC.
19. N. C. State Archive, Map Collection, MC.099/1878b2
20. Wake County Courthouse, Book of Wills - E, p. 69, file 2254.
21. Wake County Courthouse, Book of Wills - N, p. 156, file 4896.
22. Wake County Courthouse, Register of Deeds, Book 984, p. 248
23. Wake County Register of Deeds, Book 1559, p. 515.