

## RECYCLED MILL VILLAGES

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### Introduction

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Industrialization in North Carolina quickened in the 1880s, led by the textile industry. Textile mills sprang up in rural areas and towns where they could use local surplus farm labor, water supply and later the electricity generated by the Duke Power Company. By the 1920s when the industry reached its peak, mills were concentrated in a broad southwest to northeast swath across the inner Piedmont and continued into South Carolina. In order to attract and hold their labor force, mill owners built mill villages nearby consisting of clusters of simple but durable frame houses of various sizes marked by similar architectural styles and starkly basic facilities. The grander home of the owner, or larger houses for supervisors, commonly stood nearby. A company store provided a narrow range of basic foods and supplies for worker families, often on a credit basis, and church, school, baseball field and a few other amenities added to make the village self-contained.

Numerous historical studies, some based upon oral accounts by mill workers, tell of the typically hard life: primitive, often dangerous working conditions in the mills, low pay that made it hard to make ends meet and the patronage of mill owners attempting to keep workers productive and tied to the mill (Miller, 1980, Tullos, 1989 and Hall, 1989). For the urban geographer interested in the process of town genesis, mills and mill villages created new free-standing communities or were distinctive additions to existing towns. In either case, they frequently were the nucleus around which a larger and more diversified urban unit eventually grew.

By the 1930s, changed economic circumstances brought the usefulness of mill villages into question. Accelerated road building in the 1920s enabled mill workers to live elsewhere and to commute to work by car. Federal and state governments attentive to social conditions were legislating or advocating higher housing standards and working conditions, shorter work weeks and higher wages, all of which meant higher costs for mill owners. These trends, spurred by the Great Depression, were omnipresent in the 1930s, slowed during World War II, and accelerated after the war. Once cost efficiency replaced labor retention as the priority owner concern, mill villages became a liability and, consequently, mill houses were sold en masse to resident workers or at public auction during the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s

*The author compares the different fates of three Piedmont mill villages, Bynum, Sazapahaw, and Carrboro*

(Herring, 1949). In one case where the mill burned down, the houses were sold and moved to other localities (Foushee, 1977).

*Many circumstances have contributed to the decline of the mills, but how the villages have fared is a matter determined largely by their unique location*

The North Carolina economy has grown greatly in size and diversity since the 1970s. The historically important textile, furniture and tobacco industries, while still locally important, have declined in relative terms and have been replaced or supplemented by new industries and services. The major concentration of new employment and higher income and living standards is in the Piedmont Urban Crescent, the arc of growing cities between Raleigh and Charlotte, and in dispersed localities on its periphery. Most former mill villages lie within or near this dynamic zone and have been affected by external economic forces to some degree. This article traces the broad outlines of how the functions and character of three former mill villages - Bynum, Saxapahaw and Carrboro (Figure 1) - have been altered by the widening economic influences of one part of the Piedmont Crescent, Chapel Hill and the broader Research Triangle region.

Bynum and Saxapahaw were introduced briefly in this journal earlier (Patrick et al, 1992).

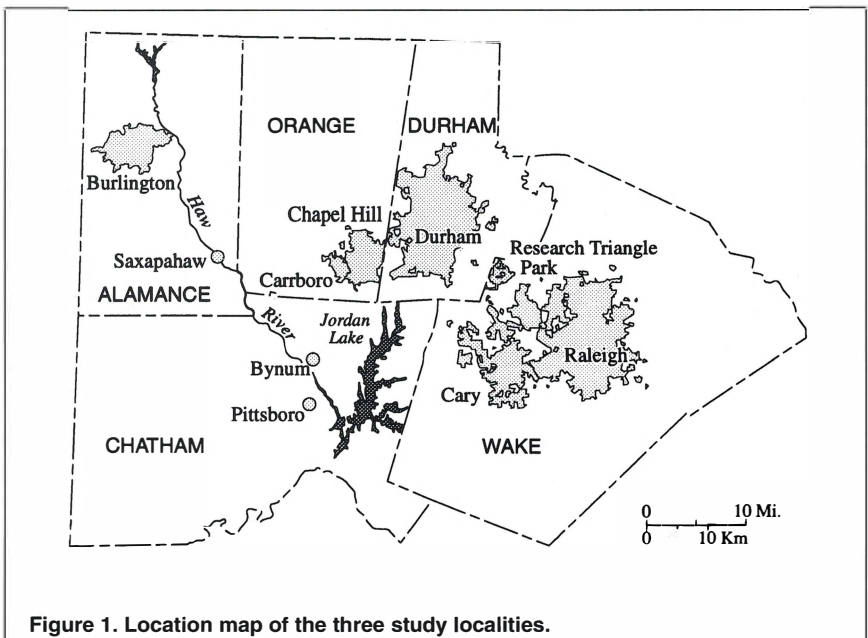


Figure 1. Location map of the three study localities.

Chapel Hill has almost 40,000 population and an economy shaped around the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (23,000 students, 2000 faculty, 6000 staff) and North Carolina Memorial Hospital (2000 staff).

Chapel Hill, Durham and Raleigh are the anchor cities forming the Research Triangle, which is centered on the Research Triangle Park, one of the nation's largest and most successful (35,000 employees) industrial research parks.

## **Bynum**

Of the three study sites, Bynum is the smallest. It lies in northern Chatham County along the Haw River five miles north of Pittsboro, the county seat, and 15 miles south of downtown Chapel Hill, on the short Bynum Road that branches eastward from and curves northward to rejoin NC 15-501, the main Pittsboro-Chapel Hill highway. Like so many unincorporated places, it is of vague extent within its township. From its former mill village nucleus on and around a hill on the Haw River north bank, more recent housing is scattered along Bynum Road. It ranges northward and consists of simple bungalows, larger and more expensive properties and a small trailer park. One informant volunteered that "some rural people who live as far as ten miles away claim to live in Bynum." Local guesses place the core settlement at "about 200 or 250".

Bynum derives its name from a local pioneer family who built a dam across the river and set up a grist mill in the early 1800s. Members of the same family organized the Bynum Manufacturing Company in 1872 and built a wooden cotton mill, the oldest in Chatham County, on the present town site. Fourteen frame houses for workers were also built on the mill above the mill. Two better houses were built and occupied by Bynum brothers, one on either side of Bynum Road, at that time the main link between Pittsboro and Chapel Hill, to facilitate check on workers' movements (Williams, 1988).

Changes came gradually to the new mill village as opportunity and necessity dictated. The original wooden mill, destroyed in a 1916 fire, was rebuilt with brick and underwent modest expansions, the last in 1952. A concrete dam that replaced the old timber dam in 1922 remained the only electric power source for mill and village until private utility lines were extended from Pittsboro in 1928. Bynum Methodist Church, an attractive brick edifice on the crest of "The Hill" was organized in 1901. The number of mill houses increased sporadically from 14 to 44 (another account lists 48). The mill itself endured mixed economic times under the Odell Manufacturing Company from 1886 until 1979, a long tenure marked by gradual decline and a final work force of about 250 (Williams, 1988). New owners kept a reduced operation for only seven years before the mill was resold, used as a lamp and lampshade factory with only two employees before closed for good. Today the derelict mill is boarded up, a forlorn reminder of Bynum's former economic focus.

Several important developments along with the mill's decline and eventual closing, have shaped Bynum's present. The mill sale of 1979 was a

landmark event because the Odell firm sold all the mill houses to individual buyers, and federal-county funds brought paved streets, new water and sewer lines and house improvements, including indoor plumbing. Such improvements were badly needed; newspaper accounts of the day called the mill houses "substandard and in great disrepair". The mill's turbine was also sold to new owners who sell its electric output to the local utility company. Then in 1951, NC 15-501 was rerouted over a spacious modern bridge a short distance upstream, a shift that effectively isolated Bynum and Bynum Road from the main north-south traffic flow. The old bridge, popularly called the "chicken bridge" because of the former heavy flow of trucks across it with stacked crates of live chickens from Chatham County poultry raisers destined for northern markets, is still marginally functional.

*Bynum wooden cotton mill, originally built in 1872, burnt in 1914, and was rebuilt in brick with subsequent modest expansions. Resold twice, it was closed for good in 1987*

Although the mill was still operating in the 1960s, increasing numbers of mill family workers were attracted to Chapel Hill, where University growth and the new N.C. Memorial Hospital meant jobs with better pay and fringe benefits. This made it necessary for the mill to hire more outside workers; "by the 1970s there were as many mill workers coming from outside as there were in it" (Williams, 1988). The Chapel Hill labor shed continued to expand southward in the following decades to where it now encompasses Pittsboro and much of northern Chatham County.

The early 1970s brought a reverse trickle of "outsiders" in response to the social upset of the Vietnam War era and the search for a simpler and cheaper lifestyle free of formal restraint. Since the 1980s, the influx of newcomers has increased and includes retirees and younger professional families seeking a quiet, pleasant, semi-rural place to live, and others with modest income seeking cheaper and more affordable land and homes, either in the old mill village or in newer areas nearby. Until the 1960s, Bynum could claim a small commercial function consisting of a movie theater and five stores, including a gas station, grocery and barbershop. Only one grocery remains. Most shopping is done in Chapel Hill or at intervening stores by the heavy daily flow of commuters to Chapel Hill jobs. Nearby Pittsboro has few job opportunities but does provide Bynum with legal and governmental services, water supply and police and fire protection, and schools.

More prosperous residents have spruced up the former mill houses with modifications and decoration to match owner needs and taste (Figure 2). One of the most unusual mill houses belongs to Clyde Jones, a self-taught local folk artist who specializes in large wooden sculpture fashioned from weirdly shaped tree trunks and limbs with garish embellishments. Bynum's best known resident, he has only a tiny income but refuses to sell

**Figure 2. Well-maintained former mill houses in Bynum. Some others have been expanded or otherwise modified.**



**Figure 3. Tuck's Country Store, Bynum's only store and post office.**

**Figure 4. Former Saxapahaw mill houses now serving as rentals, neatly landscaped and maintained.**





**Figure 5. The Sazapahaw Community Center, Built by B. Everett Jordan and the Sellers Manufacturing Company. Privately funded, it houses a wide range of community athletic and social activities.**

**Figure 6. Carr Mill Mall, the commercial center piece of Carrboro's revitalized former mill village and mill-related business district.**



**Figure 7. Carrboro's former train station, now a restaurant, located adjacent to Carr Mill Mall.**

few of his creations even though the best are temporarily on loan in art museum shows across the U.S.

Bynum boasts no institutional organizing center, although the Methodist Church, a Ruritan chapter and summer Haw River Festival, an educational program organized by a local group, promote limited community cohesion. The one common town facility is Tuck's County Store. An old-fashioned store housed in a frame building, it provides postal services, staples, local foods and crafts, a corner for old-timers to sit and swap stories and a large front window where announcements of community interest can be posted (Figure 3). Christmas brings a toy display, holiday foods and a visit from Santa. The store has been Bynum's nerve center and gathering place under three sets of owners since 1938.

## Saxapahaw

Saxapahaw lies 15 miles upstream from Bynum on the Haw River in an Alamance County location between NC54 (Chapel Hill-Burlington) and NC87 (Pittsboro-Burlington) (Figure 1). The bulk of its 1990 population of 1178 is concentrated in and around a former mill village that is divided by the winding river into eastern (or northern, by local reference) and western (or southern) positions. The former contains the main mill buildings, while both share the residential function. Saxapahaw has been a classic mill village where the mill remained in operation until 1994 and the mill company retained ownership of its mill houses until 1978, much as in Bynum. However, its more isolated location meant greater delay in getting paved roads to outside centers and longer retention of its mill village form and function. It is distinctive in the degree of direction given its improvement by B. Everett Jordan, who rose to prominence as U.S. Senator from North Carolina, 1958-73. Since 1978, his son, John M. Jordan, has continued the family leadership with a long-range plan for the town's role within the Chapel Hill economic orbit, which also now encompasses southeastern Alamance County.

The early growth of Saxapahaw, whose name is derived from Indians living there in pre-colonial times, is recounted by a long newspaper account by local historian Ben Bulla (1949), based in part on oral accounts by old residents. A local Quaker, John Newlin, built the first mill in 1844-48 on the hilly east bank of the Haw River. A rock dam across the river and a mill race provided water and power, and surplus farm labor from the surrounding countryside manned the mill. Following sale of the mill to larger Burlington interests in 1873, production was expanded and diversified and the first mill houses were built. By the 1920s, 66 company-owned houses had been joined by a store, post office, church and grade school.

In 1927, the mill was sold to the Sellers Manufacturing Company, formed of Sellers and Jordan family members. As secretary, treasurer and general manager, B. Everett Jordan took up residence in a comfortable home

in the village, quickly made operations profitable and showed a generous hand in dealing with the mill labor force. Additional company houses were built in the 1930s, and in the postwar 1940s a community center was added and some houses owned by mill personnel were built with company financial assistance. Mrs. Jordan personally oversaw the planting of grass, trees and shrubs and the painting of the mill houses to make worker life brighter. The company donated land on which the present elementary school was built and contributed to the expansion of three churches. A new concrete dam and power plant enhanced the electric power supply.

A reversal of Saxapahaw fortunes coincided with the Jordans' move to Washington, D.C. for his long period of public service. Mill houses and grounds deteriorated; car ownership and improved roads encouraged more mill workers to live elsewhere; and growing job opportunities with higher salaries lured young people away from mill employment. The village was literally dying and some mill houses stood vacant. In 1978, Sellers Manufacturing sold the mills to Dixie Yarns of Chattanooga, TN. The dam and power facilities were sold to another outside firm. Sellers Manufacturing also disposed of the mill houses, selling 33 houses on either side of the river and 600 acres of raw land to Jordan Properties, owned and directed by John M. Jordan, a former N.C. State Representative. The mill continued in operation until 1994, when severe storm damage and the closing of uneconomical mills by the parent firm brought its demise.

*Saxapahaw's cotton mill was built in 1844-46. Expansion and modifications followed sales to new owners, the last being Dixie Yarns which closed the mill in 1994*

Jordan Properties adopted different strategies for its mill house holdings on the two sides of the river. Those on the west bank were sold; first option was given resident mill personnel at easy financial terms, yet the response was so limited that three-fourths of them had to be sold on the open market. However, the 33 east side houses were retained, upgraded and beautified as rentals. They remain attractively painted, planted trees provide screens and shade, generous sized yards allow home gardens and large wood stoves using local wood supplies provide supplementary winter heat (Figure 4). The targeted market for the rental houses from the outset has been graduate and professional students in Chapel Hill. The short commute, quiet environment and rental prices well below the Chapel Hill average have kept the houses fully occupied. In addition to the flow of renters, home owners from both sides of the river commute to Chapel Hill jobs. Jordan Properties, which also develops property at locations other than Saxapahaw, has subdivided a large tract near its rentals into 110 building lots that are targeted at retirees and Chapel Hill home buyers. Several small, unrelated housing developments by other owners are being carved out of rolling farmland along the road between Saxapahaw and NC54 as the pace of land speculation increases.



Saxapahaw has among its assets three churches, an elementary school and a heavily used Community Center (Figure 5). However, it must turn to the nearby Eli Whitney volunteer department for fire protection, to the Alamance County Sheriff's Office in Graham for police protection, to middle and high schools some eight miles away on NC87, and upon medical services in Chapel Hill and elsewhere. Since there are no retail stores or gas stations, residents who formerly shopped in Burlington, their "downtown" of two decades ago, now shop in Chapel Hill-Carrboro or convenience stores along NC54. However, in early fall, 1995, Jordan Properties purchased the deserted textile mill buildings and plans to convert them into an apartment - office - shop complex that will add measurably to the town's commercial attractiveness for further growth.

No event captures the community spirit of the "new Saxapahaw" as it moves away from its mill village past than the Redbud Festival staged by residents and renters in April, 1995 to raise funds for the Saxapahaw Community Center. Major events included a demanding triathlon and a host of family - oriented fun activities. The festival is to become an annual event.

## Carrboro

Carrboro's growth and functions have been strongly conditioned by its location adjacent to Chapel Hill in southern Orange County. Its character as an expanded mill village served by a small commercial area prevailed until the 1940s and mill closure. It then became an economic appendage of Chapel Hill, home to primarily blue-collar and office staff employed at the university. Large-scale apartment construction in the 1970s to house university students reinforced its dependence as a bedroom town for its neighbor. However, the past two decades or so of spirited growth in population (11,552 in the 1990 census) have been accompanied by a transition from small town to full-fledged, varied urban form and function. Improved government and political awareness have created the full range of municipal services; a vigorous commercial life is shaped around a central shopping mall fashioned from part of the former textile mill, several other shopping centers, a farmers' market and several downtown blocks of small shops, offices and restaurants/bars; and new suburban housing developments that are annexed periodically expand the town's corporate limits.

Carrboro traces its origins to 1882, when a railway spur from what was later the Southern Railway was built southward to a point, soon called West End, one mile west of Chapel Hill. The main purpose of the line was to ship iron-ore from a small local deposit to Pennsylvania, but the venture was short-lived. (The mining site is now occupied by Ironwoods, a Chapel Hill housing development). It had a

*Rail transport provided in 1882 the nucleus of manufacturing establishments from which emerged the Carr cotton mills as the dominant force in 1909*

more durable function in shipping local farm output and as a destination for students attending the university. Serving as a nucleus, the station attracted a commercial cluster - grist mill, cotton mill, flour mill, cotton brokerage, blacksmith shop and some stores (Brown, 1983). Following the trend for cotton textile manufacturing expansion in the Piedmont, already noted, a cotton spinning mill was built in 1899. Ten years later, the mill and additions were sold to the wealthy Durham industrialist, Julian Carr, as another unit in his large textile, especially hosiery, operations. The little commercial cluster was renamed Venable in 1911 to honor a UNC president, and two years later Carrboro in honor of the mill owner.

Mill-owned housing to accommodate workers moving from rural areas was built, mostly in the 1910-15 period, on several tracts near the mill. The frame houses were much like their counterparts in other mill villages, with variations in size and structural details. The worker housing stock was greatly expanded by the construction of privately owned rental houses of similar design on adjacent areas opened for speculation. "In 1920, when Carrboro had approximately 280 textile workers, only one-third of the town's 223 houses were owned by the mills" (Brown, 1983). Some mill workers built their own homes, some larger houses were operated as boarding houses, and a few more substantial houses were occupied by mill supervisors. A black community already well established in Chapel Hill spread westward into Carrboro. Overall, the housing was relatively good compared to many mill villages - Sturdivant's 1924 study found all houses painted, two-thirds with electric lights and one-third with refrigerators.

The mill ownership exercised typical paternalism: rents were cheap; space was set aside for a pasture, orchards and gardens; trees and shrubs were planted; land was donated for a church and school; and recreational facilities were built. Through concern for worker welfare, Julian Carr experimented with a program in "industrial democracy" that involved worker representation in mill operations and profit sharing. Short-lived, it did create the basis for later good management-labor relations (Brown, 1983).

Non-mill employment increased with growth in the lumber industry; by the early 1920s, Carrboro was a major railway crosstie shipper and had several lumber firms. The commercial area adjacent to the mill village also grew. By the early 1920s, it provided a range of goods and services - groceries and meats, drugs, hardware, auto repair, shoe repair, laundry, barber-shop, bank and pool hall (Brown 1983). Stores along the main street were converted from frame to brick construction.

The Great Depression brought an end to mill operations, partly in 1930 and the rest in 1938. Company-owned mill houses were sold, some to occupants and others to investors as rentals. There was a brief use of part of the mill during World War II as an ammunition plant and subsequent use for woolen goods before permanent closure in the mid-1950s. At that time, Carrboro retained its small-town, semi-rural atmosphere but was already

dependent upon employment with the university and the newly opened N.C. Memorial Hospital in Chapel Hill. Occasional rumors of impending political merger with Chapel Hill found no approval among Carrboro residents, who viewed such a move as leading to loss of its distinctive identity, and dominance by its larger neighbor.

A boom in apartment and new home construction in the 1970s touched off the urban growth that continues to push the built-up area westward. The resultant entry of waves of UNC student renters and new home owners soon diluted the former mill village population. Revitalization of the historic mill village area got under way during the same decade. Many mill and mill-related houses were in disrepair or had been converted to non-residential users, and some had been demolished for space to build new large commercial buildings. A keystone preservation project was the conversion of part of the mill complex into a distinctive, award-winning shopping mall (Figure 6). The old train station, converted into a trendy restaurant, and several mill units won listing in the National Register of Historic Places in 1976 (Figure 7).

The Friends of Old Carrboro was organized in 1981 to promote further preservation. A first needed step was inventory, and the town Appearance Committee hired geographer Dr. John Florin of UNC-CH and two of his graduate students to conduct a detailed study of more than 150 properties erected prior to 1930. Results of their survey, joined with an excellent historical account of Carrboro's evolution (Brown, 1983), were used by a subcommittee of a Downtown Revitalization Task Force considering historical district zoning. However, such strict zoning did not prove popular and preservation has been largely left to individuals with a resultant unevenness in old house condition and appearance ranging from run-down to stylish gentrification. The old business area sports new restaurants, bars, small shops and offices due to much lower rents than in Chapel Hill and a Carrboro town revolving loan fund for new enterprises. A farmers' market and an active arts center are well patronized by the Chapel Hill - Carrboro communities.

Interaction between Chapel Hill and Carrboro has become commonplace and accepted by both, as shown by joint action in the school systems, water supply, volunteer ambulance service and chambers of commerce. Business in general treats the two as a single commercial entity. Yet older Carrboro residents are proud of the lingering small-town, slower paced, simpler and more dynamic and outer-oriented Chapel Hill, and hope that it will not be swept away by current trends. Their old mill village center provides them with a tangible link with the past as well as showing them how much things have changed.

## Concluding Thoughts

The three localities show the range of change that may occur, or may have occurred, in former mill villages through some combination of internal developments and outside influences. All three have become economic satellites of Chapel Hill and the adjacent Research Triangle area to varying degrees. In Bynum, change has come through unstructured, individual action; in Saxapahaw through planned growth directed by a leadership family; and in Carrboro through the actions of town government as well as increasing formal and informal interaction with Chapel Hill. Size differences are obvious: Bynum is small and growing slowly; Saxaphaw is also small but new growth coupled with historic preservation is under way; and Carrboro has boomed into urban character. Hopefully, these broad-brush profiles will generate more widespread, and more detailed, investigation in what is happening to other former mill villages in and around the Piedmont Urban Crescent, as one facet of North Carolina's changing urban structure.

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Considerable differences now exist in the fortunes of the settlements that started life as mill villages: Bynum lags through isolation, initial small scale of development and unstructured change; Saxapahaw benefits from a strong leadership family with a concern for historic preservation; and Carrboro is redeveloping benefited by its proximity to Chapel Hill

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