

NEARBY HISTORY:

Grist Mills in the Catawba River Valley

In the days before electricity and steam engines, the power of water heading downstream turned the wheels of industry.

In January 2000, a survey of grist mill sites of the Catawba River valley was published by Legacy Research Associates of Durham, N.C. The report was the culmination of many months of study that combined archaeological skills and historical information largely supplied by the Catawba Regional Council of Governments based in Rock Hill, the Katawba Valley Land Trust of Lancaster and the S.C. Department of Archives and History.

This area had several types of industry in the pre-Civil War period. Col. William Hill's Iron Works in York County and Benjamin Haile's gold mine were two industries of importance. Both Hill and Haile had discovered rare spots and had no significant competition.

Grist mills were different in that they were smaller operations that depended on local customers. In the days before electricity and steam engines, water power turned the wheels of industry. Not just any spot on a flowing stream would provide enough water power to turn the wheels that ground corn and wheat. The mill also had to be accessible and near a road.

Eight grist mills were selected for study. Six were in Lancaster County: Adam Ivy/Turkey Point in the Kings Bottoms; Cureton Mill on Mill Creek; and on the Catawba River, the Foster's, Blair-Izard-Gibson and Wither- spoon mills. York County grist mills were the Garrison-Webb Mill on Steele Creek and the

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Springs & White Mill at the Nation Ford on the Catawba.

The grist mills were of three types: private mills, plantation mills and merchant mills. Private mills and plantation mills were usually quite small, the difference being that a private mill owner would also grind for his neighbors.

The merchant mill was large, usually powerful enough to gin cotton, saw timber or make molasses. Nearby would likely be a general store and perhaps a post office. Sometimes a farmer paid for the milling by tithing the flour or corn meal or by bartering farm produce.

The Garrison-Webb Mill site was uncovered on the Anne Springs Close Greenway by archaeologists while they worked on this project. A historical marker has been erected beside the ruins.

The Springs & White Mill was a large merchant mill erected by John Springs III of Springfield Plantation and William Elliott White, builder of the White Homestead in Fort Mill. The mill was built in 1832 and destroyed in the flood of 1887.

The Turkey Point Merchant Mills was built in the early 1850s. Four men of the Van Wyck area – the Rev. Adam Ivy, John Doby, Benjamin Massey and James

Stewart, all large plantation owners – pooled their capital. In 1860, Ivy reported the mill ground corn and wheat valued at \$22,000, a very large sum in that day. The mill was destroyed in the Great Flood of 1916.

Finding evidence for Cureton's Mill on Mill Creek was difficult, partly because Thomas Cureton seemed to have mills in more than one location. One apparently was built before 1844. According to the survey report, "The most impressive feature of this mill site is a 260-foot long stone dam."

Foster's Mill was another mill difficult to document. The earliest reference was found in an 1852 letter in the Lancaster Ledger about a group of picnickers at Landsford watching the mill being constructed. In 1907, Leroy Springs acquired the land, and he sold it to the Wateree Power Company in 1932.

The Blair-Izard-Gibson Mill is probably the oldest of the mills, with some evidence that Blair's Mill housed sick and wounded soldiers from Lord Cornwallis' army in 1780. From Blair, it was acquired by Ralph Izard in 1812. Walter Izard sold the mill to Samuel Gibson in 1835.

This is only a sample of the mills in the area. The 1880 census listed 30 mills in the three counties – eight in York, nine in Lancaster and 13 in Chester.

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