

Robeson County's first industrial site

by Henry A. McKinnon Jr.

A question from a friend put me on a trail to the “rediscovery” of what might be called Robeson County's first industry more than 200 years ago. When Grover Soesbee asked me if I knew anything about an old “mill race” on Raft Swamp near its entry into Lumber River about four miles upstream from downtown Lumberton, I recalled discovering the oldest known map of Robeson County in the 1980s while doing research in Raleigh for the Robeson County Bicentennial in 1987. The map, made about 1796 by Jacob Rhodes, who was active in founding Lumberton and Robeson County, indicated major geographical features of the county, including Raft Swamp and Lumber River, and in places indicated landowners.

Soesbee and his wife Patricia, who operate Carolina Grains, Inc., have their home on a tract of land extending southward along the east side of Raft Swamp from the Clyborn Pines community. On the southern end, in lowlands adjoining the swamp there is an unusual canal, which leaves the main run of Raft Swamp and runs in a loop of about one-half mile, diverting swamp waters through higher lands and then returns to the run, creating an island of about 35 acres.

There is evidence of other canals connecting with this one and of an elevated area on the banks that could have served as a place to locate a mill house above the canal. A few old timbers remain, but nothing else, and no evidence of a millpond. All that Soesbee knew was that the canal has been called “the mill race”

for years. I remembered the Rhodes map had written on it the words “Col. Willis” and “Willis Mills” at about the location of the Soesbee lands. At the time of discovering the map, I had made some inquiries about mill sites in the area, but did not get any good leads.

My only other knowledge of such mills was from an article about Dr. Richard M. Norment, of the well-known Norment family of Robeson County, in *The State of Robeson* by R.C. Lawrence, published in 1939. The article said that Dr. Norment's grandfather, William Norment, “moved from Georgia to Robeson County about 1800, purchased land in Raft Swamp Township and erected ‘The Norment Mill,’ the remains of which can still be traced.”

Grover Soesbee's question led me to explore local records to see if I could add another piece of the picture of what life was like in Robeson County more than 200 years ago.

Land transfers

Searching the records, I found that in 1779 one Jacob Blount received a grant from the new state of North Carolina for 300 acres of land on the east side of Raft Swamp “including Geo. Goen's old improvement.” Geo. Goen must have been in possession of the land, but had not acquired legal ownership, not unusual in the race for land grants going on at that time.

In 1791 Jacob Blount made a deed to John Willis for the same land “including the mills, etc. where Patrick Travers now lives.”



Part of the Price and Strother 1808 survey showing lands of General Willis.

Accompanying this deed was an agreement by John Willis which stated: “the saw mill on Raft Swamp and 300 acres, which was patented by Jacob Blount and sold to said Travers, but when I purchased the same Jacob Blount made a deed to me.” This agreement suggests that there was some trade with Travers that went sour and that Blount then deeded the land to Willis.

Other early mills

From the earliest days of colonial settlement water-powered mills, both for sawing and for grinding grain, were among the first commercial structures to be built, to serve the owners’ needs and those of their neighbors. The settlers clearly had knowledge of water mills, and in some cases brought mill stones with them from Europe. Old maps show mill sites on many streams, and many became the identifying landmark of a community. In our area, McPhaul’s Mill on upper Raft Swamp and McKissack’s Mill on Ashpole Swamp are referred to in documents as early as the 1750s, and there were likely others here before the Revolution.

Leading citizen

John Willis, who acquired this mill site in 1791, was the principal figure in the creation of Robeson County and the founding of Lumberton. From the end of the Revolutionary War until 1798 he was the county’s leading citizen.

His father, Daniel Willis, and two uncles were the earliest recipients of royal land grants in the Lumberton area, acquiring lands on Saddletree Swamp in 1753, along the present I-95 corridor passing through Lumberton. John Willis was born about 1756, and may have been among the first children born to European settlers in what came to be Robeson County.

It is not known where he was educated, but it must have been in one of the older colonies or in England. He had skills as a civil engineer and as a lawyer, and there were no schools in North Carolina to provide such training. Willis served as a captain in the Revolutionary forces and later was colonel and then a general in the new state’s militia.

Gen. Willis began acquiring land in the Lumberton area as soon as the war ended, and by 1787 he was the largest landowner in western Bladen. He led the movement to create Robeson County from Bladen, and provided the land on which the new county seat was to be established on his “Red Bluff Plantation on the banks of Drowning Creek.” He was the county’s first senator and served the state in several capacities.

Business ventures

His business activities in the new county

included being a planter, a shipper of local products and an importer of goods from other states and abroad. At the end of the Revolution the only “money crops” of consequence were forest products – timber, tar and turpentine – and tanned hides. He was a dealer in all of these.

In the 1790s John Willis was involved with others, including John Grey Blount of Washington, N.C., and Jacob Rhodes locally, in land speculation on a large scale. These speculations were in so-called “vacant lands” in North Carolina and Tennessee that had not previously been granted by colonial government or the new states. Scandals and a grand jury investigation resulted, and John Willis was indicted but not tried. An exchange of open letters in a Fayetteville newspaper and Willis’s will, both written in 1795, indicate that he was disgusted with happenings here and was considering moving to another territory. By 1799 he had moved to Fayetteville and was practicing law.

Newspaper advertisement

A chance discovery of a 1799 advertisement by John Willis in a Wilmington newspaper provided me a far better description of the Raft Swamp mill site than I could ever have hoped for from local records and gave me new leads. On September 5, 1799 John Willis advertised in The Wilmington Gazette:

FOR SALE

“MY MILLS on the Raft Swamp, about four miles above Lumberton, all new and now in good order. This seat is on 12,000 acres of land, on which are six plantations, a saw mill with two saws, a grist mill with two pair of stones, and receives more custom than they can possibly discharge (other mills being in want of water, of which this never fails), a rice machine new and complete that will beat 120 bushels per day; a large and well finished two story house, kitchen, meat house, stables, and every other necessary & convenient buildings for Negroes, workmen, & about two hundred acres of rice land completely banked, and can be overflowed at pleasure; a large young orchard just beginning to bear; a pasture of 400 acres very convenient to oxen and all kinds of flock. This seat is a most delightful situation, affords plenty of fish every day of the year, fine water and is remarkably healthy. It has been rented at 1500 dollars per annum, but the contract is now changed, and the saw mills alone rent for 100 per month.”

The advertisement also offered another plantation of 1,000 acres adjoining the town of Lumberton, two town houses and 5,000 other acres of land in the neighborhood. Willis offered to take lands in the district of Tennessee in partial exchange for these lands.

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