

Moore's Mills and Little River Dam Reflect 150 Years in Zebulon

By MaryBeth Carpenter

The Little River Dam in Zebulon which controlled water near the bridge over Route 97, was damaged from the rush of water created by Hurricane Matthew in October 2016. The dam is at the site of Moore's Mill, which is long gone except for its foundation stones near the dam site. But the mill had been active since at least 1868, and was a thriving center for the communities of Wakefield, Zebulon and Lizard Lick for generations.

William C. Moore came to this area and bought 55 acres of land alongside the Little River from A.J. Foster for \$2500 in August, 1868. His land bordered the lands of Rayford Chamblee and Samuel Strickland, among others. The deed states that the purchase included a mill and machinery. In Branson's Business Directory



or 1867 – 1868, A.J. Foster owned and operated a grist mill and sawmill on Little River. Foster's grist and sawmills then became known as Moore's Mills.

Mr. Moore interacted with a local Indian tribe that hunted and fished in the area. One local source, Charles Wood, Mayor of Lizard Lick, reported that his

Moore's Mill, Edythe Tippett Collection, Olivia Raney Library

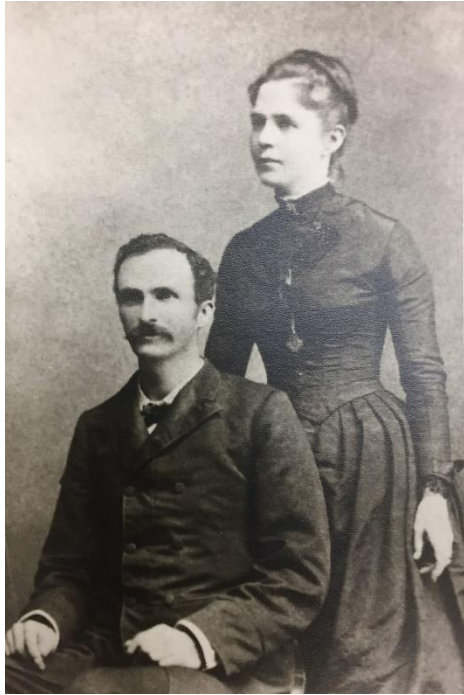
great grandfather, John Carter, was a stone cutter who fashioned a mill stone for Moore's Mill. He passed down a tale of a feast with William C. Moore, the local hired hands, and the Indians. "It was like a Zebulon version of the first Thanksgiving," Charles Wood reflected. John Carter the stone cutter met, fell in love with and married an Indian "princess" from the Tribe, and she became Sally Medlin Carter. They had a son, Bertie Carter, in 1890, who is Wood's grandfather.

Between 1868 and 1887, Moore bought other parcels of adjacent land. Moore and his wife Ophelia were also store owners and cotton ginners, and occasionally



Sally Medlin Carter & John Carter, 1890

provided dining service, in addition to their duties as miller. Ellie Beckwith Stringfield, wife of Oscar Larkin Stringfield, tells of traveling to the mill on her wedding day for dinner and a wedding night stay on her first trip to Wakefield, in 1882, in *The Heritage of Wake County* by Lynne Belvin and Harriette Riggs. "We got to Raleigh about 9:00 and were met by a man from Mr. W.C. Moore's who had brought a nice horse



**O.L. and Ellie Beckwith Stringfield,
Edythe Tippett Collection, Olivia Raney Library**

and buggy for us to drive to Mr. Moore's where we were invited to take our wedding dinner. We arrived at 1:00, before Mrs. Moore was ready for us, but Mr. Moore met us and made us welcome. This was 4 miles from Wakefield (two miles north of Zebulon) where we were to live. We spent the night and next day went to Wakefield to meet Mrs. Kemp with whom we were to board," according to Mrs. Stringfield's memoirs.

By 1874, Moore's Mills had a post office, and its first post master was Nancy N. Liles. Local farmers and merchants obtained their mail from the mill, which was delivered by pony express there. "By 1884, nearby merchants including J.R. Bolton, S. L. Horton, Willis High Jr., W. H. Hopkins, I.M.

Procter, A.J. Richardson and C.M. Rhodes were in business, giving Moore's Mills as their address. The post office was moved to the growing village of Wakefield in 1888," according to Elizabeth Reid Murray's book, *Wake, Capital County of North Carolina, Volume II*.

Moore provided a parcel of land for a one room school to be built in the area, according to deed notes in the Wake County registry. It is unclear if this became the Midway School or Rhodes School. He also lent money to several landowners in the area, according to papers registered at the Wake County deeds office. Moore became a Wake County Commissioner and owned property in downtown Raleigh on Fayetteville Street. In 1892, Moore moved to Mount Airy, and became a Mount Airy Commissioner while living there. He died in 1913 and the mill was sold.

In early 1915-1920s, the mill had a generator powered by a 12 cylinder Cadillac engine, and electricity was provided two days a week, on Fridays and Saturdays, for local people. Eventually 36 street lights in Zebulon were illuminated from the energy powered by the mill and an adjacent electric plant on the river.

One visitor to the mill reported in the Zebulon Record that there was a merry-go-round inside the mill which had four seats and was water powered for entertainment. The mill also made and sold ice for customers.

In 1923, the land where the grist mill stood was transferred to the town of Zebulon. Charles Wood tells a story of his father's trips to Moore's Mill in the 1920s through the 1930s. "My Dad would take corn to the mill to be ground. He had no money so the miller would take toll. For every bushel of corn ground, the mill would take a peck as payment," he recalls.



Charles Wood gave a presentation to the Little River Historical Society on January 9, 2018 on the history of Moore's Mills and the dam. Then attendees told of their remembrances of the mill and dam when they were youngsters. Several local residents recall swimming below the dam while their parents conducted business there. There were bathhouses near the mill. Eva Liles says she swam there during summers when she was a teenager, and frolicking in the water resulted in a deep gash in her chin. Many life-long residents

Moore's Mill in January 2018 © MaryBeth Carpenter

recalled swimming and fishing while their fathers had flour ground at the mill. Lewis Liles said black mussels were frequently in the water, and the teens swimming there would often crack one open, hoping to find a pearl. "The eels were so plentiful we'd call them river robins. We had good times at the mill," Lewis remembers.

Glenn Privette reported that his grandfather Dave Privette was the last one to operate Moore's Mill. The two story grist mill was 28 x 34 feet, and had a one pair of mill stones. "It would mill 200 bushels of corn a year and about 400 to 500 bushels of wheat," he reports. Dave Privette hauled sand to the riverbank and created a recreation area there. "He called it Dave's Beach, and it had picnic tables, and was a wonderful site for people to swim and fish." He recalled eels in the water congregating by the water wheel to catch any bit of grain that fell out. "The eels were so thick they would stop the wheel from turning."

At some point in the 1950s, the mill ceased to exist. Some folks recall news of a fire there, but that has not been confirmed. The foundation stones for the mill are still there, but the millhouse is gone. The large millstones remained at the site for years. Charles Wood recalls finding the large millstone used as a firepit by a visitor recreating on the river banks. "When I found that, the stone had been broken into two pieces, and I buried it in the sand for safe keeping," he reports.



Moore's Mill in January 2018 © MaryBeth Carpenter

In 1963, a water treatment plant was constructed, and in the 1970s, the Little River/Jaycee Park was created on a three acre parcel.

The dam which traverses Little River has broken and been repaired three times. A hurricane damaged it in 1996, then another hurricane took it out in 1999. The first two times, NC Route 97 had a wooden bridge, then after the second repair, it was replaced with a steel bridge with state and FEMA funding. Apparently, it also broke in 1928, as Mr. Wood found graffiti -L.E.R. March 10, 1928 - carved into the stone on the

third layer, which would have been under the water line. Now 90 years later, the graffiti can be seen again on the top left side of the dam.



Moore's Mill in January 2018 © MaryBeth Carpenter

The dam, its boulders and quarried stones, and the mill's foundation stones still stand today as a dignified reminder of the Zebulon area's proud past and offer a dreamy glimpse of what life was like for this area's early settlers 150 years ago.

Sources: Wake County deed records; Elizabeth Reid Murray, *History of Wake County*, Volumes I and II; Bevers, map of Wake, 1871; U.S. Post Office Department, Records Film; *The Heritage of Wake County North Carolina, 1983*, by the Wake County Genealogical Society; Charles Wood, long-time resident and "Mayor" of Lizard Lick, presentation to Little River Historical Society, Jan 9, 2018, Zebulon; Comments made by long time Zebulon residents at Little River Historical Society Jan. 9 meeting; *The Zebulon Record*, August 28, 1975.

On January 8, 2018 at the Zebulon Board of Commissioners Meeting, the commissioners voted 3-2 against repairing the dam. There was some discussion about the lack of knowledge of the dam's history and that impelled Preservation Zebulon to research and write this report on the dam and mill's place in Zebulon.

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