



BRANDON COMMUNITY

GREENVILLE COUNTY, SOUTH CAROLINA

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BRANDON MILL AND ITS VILLAGE

by Judith Bainbridge

As Captain J.O. Cagle, Greenville's premier contractor, began digging the foundation of Brandon Mill late in February 1900, Greenville was flourishing. Poe Mill and American Spinning Company were both expanding; a site for Monaghan Mill had been chosen; an opera house was planned; and elegant homes—some costing nearly \$5,000—were announced for the new Boyce Lawn development on Broadus Street. The first automobile, a "Locomobile" capable of going twelve miles an hour, had just been displayed to the city's 12,000 residents.

J. Irving Westervelt, president of Brandon Mill, must have been pleased to have the ground broken for the substantial five-story brick structure. Born in Pinopolis, S.C. in 1862, Westervelt had twenty years of cotton mill experience behind him when he first met with a group of Greenville businessmen to plan for a mill with 10,000 spindles and 400 looms on June 20, 1899. Seven months later the community, a village of 66 cottages where the "operatives" would live, was nearly complete. Construction then began on the mill itself.

Captain Cagle and his crew, consisting of both black and white bricklayers, plasterers, and carpenters, were building what the Greenville *Mountaineer* predicted would be "one of the prettiest cotton mill settlements in the state. The operatives' homes are among the trees along the Southern Railway and the Cox's Bridge Road. The location is high and beautiful. The section is already beginning to get lively and the signs of progress much evident." For almost a year, the impressive iron-framed, fire-resistant mill, designed by prominent New England architects Lockwood, Greene & Company, was under construction two miles south of busy downtown Greenville. It was finished in January 1901, and Brandon's first cloth was produced on February 8, 1901.

Westervelt had raised \$220,000 to begin the mill, which he initially named "Quentin." Directors included Greenvillians Ellison Smyth, Frank Hammond, T. Q. Donaldson, and William E. Beattie, in addition to Charlestonian J. Ross Hanahan and Summerfield Baldwin, Jr., of Baltimore, whose company, Woodward and Baldwin, was immediately appointed selling agent for the new mill. It was evidently Capt. Smyth, the president of Pelzer Manufacturing Co., who suggested that Westervelt change the name to "Brandon," for a town near Belfast, Ireland, where textiles had long been produced by Scots-Irish weavers, among them his forebearer, Samuel Smyth. The mill was immediately successful, and the directors increased its capital to \$50,000 and its spindles to 41,000 in 1903. Between 1908 and 1909 they added a 1.4 million dollar addition, also designed by Lockwood, Greene, and announced a 100% dividend on original investments. By 1916, Brandon Mill had 86,000 spindles; its capital was \$1.5 million.

The surrounding community grew with the mill's expansion. Employing 150 "operatives" (the term management used until the 1920s for mill workers) at its opening, by 1907 Brandon employed 420 men, women and children (only six under age of twelve, owners boasted); more than 900 people lived in the village. Between 1900 and 1903, 450 homes were built in the Brandon village to house families from the foothills and mountains of North and South Carolina who came to find regular employment and steady pay. Most workers lived on the mill tract, but some employees bought land nearby and built their own homes. Alester Furman, bragging about the increased value of Greenville land because of the mills, commented that a tract adjacent to Brandon was purchased for \$150.00 an acre in 1901, and that one-third of the land was divided into quarter acre lots and sold to mill workers at \$400 an acre in 1905. By 1907, land near the mill was worth \$1,000 an acre.

New workers were essential to increased production. Agents were sent out to scour the glens and hollows of the Appalachians to find dispossessed farmers and struggling sharecroppers who might be lured to Greenville to work. The "Great Migration" of 1905 brought hundreds of white workers into Greenville. When a Brandon Mill agent arrived in Newport, Tennessee, for example, he convinced Jessie Lee Carter's family to move to Greenville. All of the family's possessions were loaded into horse-drawn wagons provided by the mill; a milk cow was tied to the back of the last one. It took the caravan a week to get to Greenville, and immediately after this arrival, her grandfather, father, and uncles went to work at the mill. The village they moved into had far more "luxuries" than their Tennessee mountain home and must have been attractive to the Carter family: space for a large garden and pasture for their cow; an elementary school; a church erected and financed by the mill; electric lighting — one outlet per house — supplied by the company; a bank (by 1907 it had \$9,000 in operatives' deposits); "a young lady recommended by the local minister to undertake work like that done by the YWCA," and below the first line of mill houses, a baseball field for the Brandon Mill team.

It was the baseball field which brought fame to Brandon and fortune — as well as notoriety — to one of its workers. The Joseph Jackson family had worked at the Pelzer mill in the 1890's; when they came to Brandon, their oldest son, Joe, had already been employed for perhaps six years as a sweeper. Born in 1888, he would have been about thirteen when he went to work in the mill and began to play baseball on the trampled dirt field just south of the main building. A catcher at first, then a pitcher, Joe Jackson attracted the attention of baseball-crazy workers, who evidently watched him practice from the mill's windows. Even as a thirteen year old, he was better than most adults, and the loom fixers and doffers who saw just how far he could throw and hit invited him to join the Brandon team.

The age of textile mill baseball was dawning; "Champ" Osteen led the way to make it the most popular pastime of workers throughout the South Carolina Piedmont. Joe Jackson was a natural, an untrained and uncoached player who could hit the ball far into the dump at the end of the center field and who could, in his prime, throw a baseball more than 400 feet. His prowess, and Brandon's success, became legendary in the years that followed.

Every Saturday afternoon in the spring and summer, the teenager with "Black Betsy," his bat, hammered the fast balls of opposing pitchers out of sight, creating legends of his "Saturday Specials," the home runs that made him famous. Each time Joe homered, his younger brothers would pass the hat among the audience, often receiving \$25.00 or more in "tips" for his accomplishment, in addition to the \$2.50 he received for each game with the Brandon team. Since his monthly salary at the mill was \$35.00, his baseball earnings contributed substantially to



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the Jackson family's income. The "Carolina Confection," as Jackson was called, earned his more familiar nickname in 1908, while he was playing for Greenville's first professional team, the Spinners. One hot summer's day he was wearing new spiked shoes, which hurt his feet. He took them off, and played barefooted. No one noticed until the seventh inning, when he got a triple, and ran barefoot around the bases. "Shoeless Joe" he became, and "Shoeless Joe" he stayed at the end of the season. The nickname later suggested both his naiveté and his Southern roots to major league players and fans.

The hard-hitting mill worker became a local hero; a scout for the Philadelphia Athletics heard of his prowess, and after watching just one game, signed him to a contract to play for Manager Connie Mack. But Joe Jackson was not at all sure that Philadelphia and the American League A's were where he wanted to be. He delayed his departure from Greenville once, then again. In the meantime, tales of his hitting and throwing for the Greenville Spinners were circulating in Philadelphia newspapers, and A's fans awaited his arrival with increasing anticipation. Early in September 1908, he boarded the Southern Railroad train for Philadelphia after intense persuasion from the scout who had signed him, and who telephoned to Manager Mack that Jackson was on his way. But he did not arrive. He got off the train in Charlotte and hopped another, returning to Greenville. A week later he was finally convinced to travel all the way to the North, and he proved, in the few days left in the season, that he was indeed one of the great all-time baseball players.

In the years that followed, he played for the A's, the Cleveland Indians, and beginning in 1915, for the Chicago White Sox, bought by owner Charlie Cominsky for \$65,000. His salary was a princely \$6,500, and with it he was able to buy his parents a home in Brandon, to be a flashy dresser, to purchase a pool hall in Greenville, and to save a few dollars for a rainy day. His exploits were legendary: he batted .408 in 1911 and had a lifetime major league average of .356; he bested Babe Ruth, Ty Cobb, and Tris Speaker in a throwing contest in the All-Star game in 1917, and he led the White Sox to two American League pennants, in 1917 and 1919.

In the World Series of 1919 the White Sox lost to the National League champions, the Cincinnati Reds. Shoeless Joe Jackson was accused, with several other White Sox players, of throwing the series for a payment of \$5,000. The evidence is not clear that Jackson was involved in the resulting "Black Sox" scandal, and he was cleared by a Grand Jury in 1921. But the day after he was declared "not guilty," Baseball Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis banished him from the game for life. After some years in Savannah, Joe returned to Greenville and to Brandon in 1929, where he owned and operated a large dry cleaning establishment and later a liquor store on Pendleton Street. He played semi-pro baseball, where he remained a hero to young players. In 1948, on his 60th birthday, "Joe Jackson Night" was celebrated at Brandon Field. There were several attempts to have him reinstated and his name cleared. In 1951, the South Carolina General Assembly even passed a resolution asking that his banishment be revoked. When he died a month later, his funeral at Brandon

Baptist Church was attended by hundreds of loyal fans. But baseball authorities have never relented, and one of the game's greatest players has never been voted into the Hall of Fame.

More recently, "Shoeless Joe" was portrayed in a very positive manner in the much acclaimed movie, *Field of Dreams*, starring Kevin Costner.

The Brandon village that Shoeless Joe returned to in the late 1920s had changed greatly from the one he knew as a boy. J. I. Westervelt had had "financial reverses" in 1913 Aug W. Smith of Spartanburg became the president when the mill went into receivership. In 1919, New York agents Woodward and Baldwin gained control of the mill's stock, but local management did not change. The mill originally produced print cloth and fine sheeting; Smith built the Brandon Duck Mill (producing heavy cotton fabric), and added a steam power plant and warehouse, all designed by J.E. Serrine, in 1920. The enterprise became known as the Brandon Mills; the company also purchased the Carolina (renamed the Pointsett) Mill; and in 1928 Baldwin and Woodward formed the Brandon Corporation when Renfrew Bleachery was built in Travelers Rest.

By 1925 the village around Brandon Mills had a population of more than 2,000 people. They shopped in busy nearby West Greenville, which was considering changing its name to "Branwood," to indicate its important location between the Brandon and Woodside Mills. It had finally, thanks to police officers provided by the mills, become less disreputable than the "wide open" crossroads called "Stradleville," that Jackson had known at the turn of the century. It was becoming "cited," with wider streets and new buildings. Mill workers boarded the beltline trolley at its Brandon Mill terminus and, for five cents, rode it around Greenville on Saturday afternoons, sometimes taking in a movie (later a "talkie") at the Carolina or Bijou theaters on Main Street or at their local Branwood Theatre. On Sunday they worshipped at Brandon's Baptist and Methodist churches, each of which had a social worker. Brandon Baptist had a brand new sanctuary, seating 800, which had been built after a disastrous 1923 fire. Workers had access to a grove for public meetings, a day nursery, a laundry, bustling mill store ("the store of the masses and classes") at the corner of Cooper and Draper Streets, and, of course, the ball park.

Baseball continued to be a passion. The Brandon Field had been improved and reoriented since Joe Jackson's playing time, with a backstop, bleachers, and a refreshment stand added. Mill teams competed with each other in three leagues; Brandon and several other mills fielded first and second teams. Sometimes as many as two thousand people would attend Saturday afternoon games. By the early twenties, teams had become semi-professional, with mills attempting to lure players away from each other. In 1925, owners announced plans to stop the increasing professionalism, but hard-hitting loom fixers continued to receive substantially higher wages than their non-playing colleagues.

Brandon's annual Community Day was the great event of the year; the mill shut down and the "day was given to entertainment," with speeches, a picnic dinner, and sports. But mill village life was active throughout the year: In September 1925, for example, there were a girls' sewing and cooking class, a Parker District flower

show, a mill village beauty contest, regular visits from the Greenville Library System's traveling collection, examinations by a roving dentist, and sports. In addition to baseball, a basketball team was practicing (a textile league tournament was begun by L.P. Hollis in 1921), and soccer, "much played in the east," had been introduced to Greenville, and was becoming popular. Thanks to the initiative of Thomas Parker, children who attended Brandon School now had the opportunity to further their education in the newly opened Parker High School. Brandon had become one of the "textile crescent" villages which formed the western boundaries of the city of Greenville; it was a world unto itself.

But in the late 1920s it became an unhappy world. Mill owners, facing falling prices for their goods, instituted the "stretchout," increasing the work load on employees by forcing fewer operatives to work more looms, and at the same time lowered wages and dismissed older workers. Without education or resources, mill workers were trapped.

The Depression came to Greenville before the stock market crash in October 1929. Cotton prices fell disastrously in 1926; land values plunged downward; cotton mill stock lost its value. For Brandon employees, working sixty-six hours a week for salaries of \$14.00 to \$23.00, the increased work load, lack of job security, and falling wages led to a series of strikes and a "walkout" at the mill in March 1929. Twelve hundred workers struck on March 27, leaving only 55 in the cloth room. Mill Secretary C. E. Hatch told the *Greenville News* that operatives were demanding an end to the "stretchout." The workers compared themselves to the children of Israel, who were forced to work for the Egyptians, and complained that mill owners did not have the moral right "to take advantage of employees to pile up profits." Two days later, 500 more Brandon employees at the Duck Mill and the Pointsett Mill joined the action.

In response, the South Carolina General Assembly appointed an investigative committee to study life in the mills. They reported that conditions in many mill villages were "deplorable," and found working families in real need. On May 11, members of the committee, led by Robert McCaselin of Greenwood and Olin Johnston of Spartanburg, addressed the Brandon strikers and their families — perhaps 2,000 people, the *News* estimated, in front of J.E. Christopher's store on Pendleton Road. They commended workers for their conduct and their efforts to protect mill property during the strike. And Johnson told them that they were right about the stretchout.

Without salaries during the strike, many workers' families went hungry, since they had no income or outside support available to them. John Wrenn, the pastor of Brandon Baptist Church, urged a settlement of the strike and helped to start a relief fund. On May 15, an organizer for the United Textile Workers Union arrived in town, and 1,500 workers, many from Brandon, filled out applications for membership. On the next day, a compromise was announced: a few more looms were added, new workers were hired, and pay was raised slightly. The following October, the Cotton Textile Institute promised to improve conditions and to eliminate night work for women and minors under eighteen. After the compromise and return to work, membership in the UTW declined.

As Greenville and the rest of the nation sank deeper into economic depression, the Brandon Corporation teetered on the edge of bankruptcy and closing. Work hours were reduced to fifty-five a week across the state, and both mills and their hourly employees earned less. According to a newspaper story some years afterwards,

Aug W. Smith went to New York to raise money to keep the mills open. His former backers refused help; they told him to shut down the operation. "I will resign as president of Brandon Corporation," the paternalistic mill president is said to have responded, "before I will shut down a mill. Thousands are depending on these mills for a living, and I will not allow any one of them to suffer while I am president." Although demand for cotton cloth decreased as Americans had fewer dollars to spend, Brandon remained open throughout the depression years. And Smith's loyalty to his workers was matched by theirs to him.

In 1934 a General Textile Strike was called by the United Textile Workers and "Flying Squadrons" of union workers arrived in Greenville from Spartanburg to shut down all mills. They were successful at Dunean, but when they arrived at Brandon, they were met by a hostile crowd of loyal workers brandishing "picker sticks," rifles, and yelling "Keep going!"

Brandon, like most of Greenville's mills, recovered with agonizing slowness from the effects of the Depression and then burst into war production in the early 1940s. At the beginning of World War II, textile workers were called into the armed forces; half of most mills' production was dedicated to the war effort; and rationing became a fact of life on the home front.

A "brave new world" lay ahead for Brandon workers after V-J Day. The old Brandon baseball field had not heard the crack of a bat or the cheers of the fans since 1942, when most male workers joined the armed forces and textile league baseball was discontinued. But in 1945 the Brandon Foundation was set up "to combat juvenile delinquency" and Jackson's playing field was refurbished. The Brandon Recreation Center began; Brandon was the only mill to offer a range of community facilities, like bowling, which were housed in the old laundry.

In 1946, Abney Mills acquired control of and in 1949 merged with the Brandon Corporation, and began to sell the houses in the Brandon community to mill workers. A substantial number of employees had saved money during the war years, and others had G.I. benefits that made it possible to purchase the houses they had previously rented. But individual ownership also brought an end to the mill management's responsibility for the village, which had included roads, police protection, and recreation, including the baseball and basketball teams that had so long been a part of mill village life. More efficient textile equipment eliminated jobs of longtime workers; elsewhere new opportunities at higher salaries opened for young people. Few new families moved into the village; many older ones did not have the funds for continuing maintenance on their fifty-year old homes. Although times were reasonably good in the fifties and early sixties, Greenville no longer boasted about being "The Textile Center of the World."

In March 1977, with textile prices and demand falling and companies increasingly looking beyond U.S. boundaries for inexpensive labor, Abney Mills closed its Brandon Plant. Within a year they sold the seventy-seven-year-old mill to Clarkson Brothers to be used as a warehouse. The Brandon community was no longer a close knit "family," and West Greenville, its old center, had almost vanished. "One of the prettiest cotton mill villages in the state" needed help if it was to survive. The Greenville County Redevelopment Authority responded; it began targeting its work in the Brandon Mill Village in 1978. In the past fifteen years, the agency has expended \$3,642,900 on housing and infrastructure improvements in Brandon. The GCRA found a community of 450 houses, many of them sub-standard, and offered assistance which resulted in the rehabilitation of 186 of them. Drainage structures and streets were also upgraded in the neighborhood. Today a stable neighborhood, with nearly 70% of the homes occupied by owners, surrounds the old mill building, which is over 90% leased, the new K & M Fabrics operation, and Joe Jackson's "Field of Dreams." That field may once again be a proving and playing ground for the young people of Greenville. The Greenville County Recreation District and the Redevelopment Authority are collaborating to improve Brandon's baseball field, and students in Clemson University's College of Architecture created plans to make "Joe Jackson Field" a major focus of a revitalized Brandon community.

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Judith Bainbridge is an academic administrator and associate professor of English at Furman University. She received her Ph.D. in English from the University of Iowa. Deeply involved with the historic preservation of Greenville, Judy has written extensively about local history since coming to Furman and to Greenville in 1976. She is a former member of the county Historic Preservation Commission and the board of the Historic Greenville Foundation. She currently chairs the city's Board of Architectural Review.

Greenville County Redevelopment Authority Board Members During 1978 Brandon Mill Renovations

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GCRA Executive Director Lance Crawford
Project Director Lanning Hughes
Public Relations Charlie Pate
Artist Judith G. Bainbridge
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