

MILLS MILL COMMUNITY

GREENVILLE COUNTY, SOUTH CAROLINA

MILLS MILL COMMUNITY

GREENVILLE COUNTY, SOUTH CAROLINA

THE MILLS MILL COMMUNITY

By Judith G. Bainbridge

In 1895, Otis Prentiss Mills, age fifty-four, was one of the "oldest and richest entrepreneurs" in Greenville. Coming to the city immediately after the Civil War, he had begun a general store and shoe manufacturing plant with H.I. McBrayer at the intersection of Augusta Road and Pendleton Street. During the 1870s, he purchased several hundred acres extending from present day Otis Street to Grove Road and from Augusta Road to beyond Brushy Creek. Mills lived on Augusta Road, adjacent to his 300 acre dairy farm, "Millsdale," which supplied rich milk and butter from Jersey cows to local residents. In 1887, he established a successful cotton oil fertilizer plant on Vardry Street, and in 1891 he and McBrayer built a cotton warehouse (now a part of Greenville's Public Market) adjacent to the Farmers' Alliance Warehouse. The retired merchant had money, land, and a new son-in-law, Walter Moore, who had textile experience. Building a cotton mill seemed like a reasonable enterprise.

It was more difficult than he imagined. It meant raising additional funds from "the best and staunchest" Greenville businessmen, including T.Q. Donaldson, William Goldsmith, Frank Hammond of Peoples Bank, Henry Briggs of American Bank, James Birnie, William Wilkins, A.G. Gower, H.W. Cely, and several Charlotte executives, including textile engineer H.S. Chadwick, Jr., who were "interested" in the new enterprise. It also meant finding the best site and persuading Southern Railroad to provide a convenient siding. "Score another point for the pluck and energy of the Pearl of the Piedmont," the Greenville *Enterprise* and *Mountaineer* exclaimed in April 1895, when stockholders finally decided on a location, and the new Mills Manufacturing Company joined American Spinning and Poe Manufacturing in a race to begin operations.

O.P. Mills explained that the site, "opposite the old [Civil War] gun factory," was ideal: it had plenty of water and rolling, well-drained land, perfect for a healthy mill village. It would be finished, he estimated, by January 1896. He was overly optimistic. The Mills Manufacturing Company did not receive its charter until July, and the first brick, fired from clay on the banks of Brushy Creek, was laid in September. The company, which had only \$20,000 in cash from stockholders (in addition to Mills' funds), could not match American Spinning and Poe Mill's headstart; it was the last to open, and did so with only 5,000 spindles in the spring of 1897.

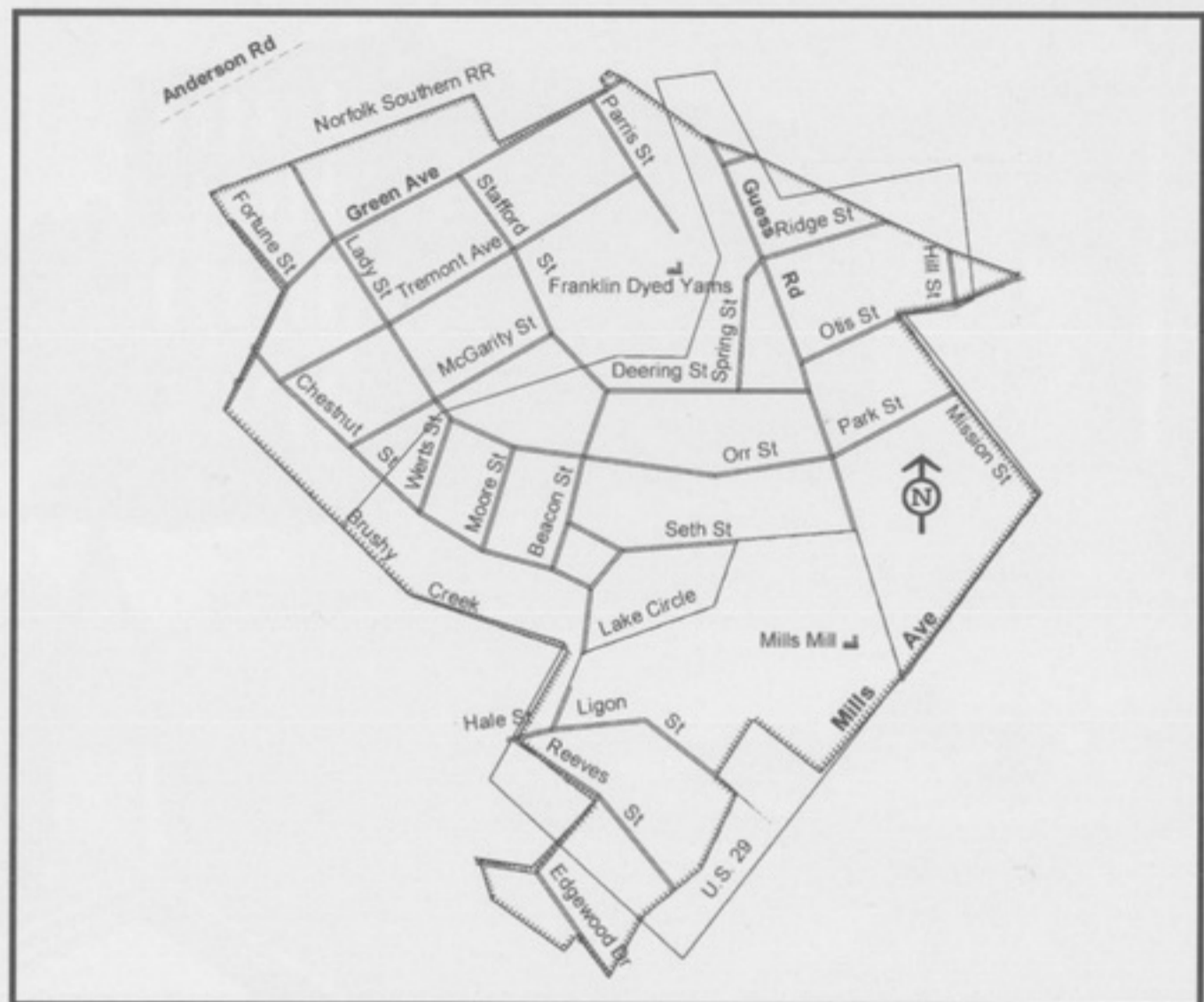
O.P. Mills and his son-in-law Walter Moore, the first General Manager, constructed houses on the barren, red-clay hills north of Brushy Creek for the two hundred workers and their families who came to work at the new enterprise. There was no school, no church, no store. During the cold, wet winter of 1898, the former tenant farmers from the mountains of North and South Carolina who initially moved into the village encountered soldiers from New Jersey, Missouri, West Virginia, and New York who were stationed during the Spanish-American War at Camp Wetherill on the southern border of Mills' property near Brushy Creek.

In 1900, Mills and Moore doubled the mill's size and their number of employees, increased capital, and added more houses, most on the south side of the creek. Joseph E. Sirrine, who had just gone into business for himself, designed an innovative clear-span brick auditorium costing \$4,000. Although the 1902 architect's drawing is labeled "YMCA," the building was primarily used as a company store until 1913. Both the YMCA and a "union" church, used on alternate weeks by Baptist and Methodist congregations, were completed in 1903.

Six years after the mill's opening, over 1,000 people lived in 120 small houses in the Mills Mill village, located just outside the city limits in order to avoid taxes. Mills built his electrified four-story brick factory with an elaborate Romanesque tower and adjacent cotton shed along Brushy Creek in order to have water for steam generation and a holding pond; the Southern Railroad siding edged the rear of the mill. Lake Drive and Spring Street curved around the pond and the meandering stream. The flood plain surrounding the creek was pasture land for workers' cows; the barn for the company's mules was located opposite the mill next to the brick office building. Mills Avenue, a hard-packed narrow dirt road built by the company, led to Augusta Road and the pleasures of the city; trolleys reached its intersection with Augusta in 1901. The road divided his extensive acres, and Millsdale Farm continued to operate on the eastern part of his property. Green Avenue (renamed "Guess Street" in 1945) intersected with Mills Avenue at the mill.

Four eight-room wooden homes were built for supervisors on Mills Avenue; along Green, Ridge, Otis, Park, and Hill Streets there were four-room duplexes, and six-room ones on Seth, Orr, Deering, Spring, and Church (renamed "Mission" by 1920) Streets. The duplexes gradually became one-family houses, although the larger ones housed two families well into the 1920s. The clapboard-sided houses were designed in a modified saltbox style with a central chimney, brick foundations, and small porches in the front and rear. Outhouses, pig sties, and chicken coops were located at the rear of the property.

By 1907, Mills Mill employed 450 workers who operated 27,000 spindles. It produced fine twills, cotton sheeting, and satens, and had a yearly payroll of \$80,639; its capitalization had increased to \$355,600. The company had invested \$1,000 to build a small school on Church Street and paid the salaries of two teachers employed to instruct the seventy students under twelve who were enrolled. Just what happened to the other eighty elementary school-aged children in the community is unclear; thirteen (eight boys, five girls) aged seven to twelve were employed in the mill, but the others are not accounted for. An apologist for mill owners pointed out that year that child labor



reformers were impractical since there were few ways other than textile employment for children to earn their own living. The work week at Mills Manufacturing Company was sixty-six hours; in 1915, it was reduced to fifty-five hours and children under fourteen were forbidden to work without (easily obtained) parental permission.

Yet the mill did provide religious and recreational facilities. In addition to the union church, the mill paid for homes for two ministers. By 1919, the Baptist congregation had built its own sanctuary on Green Avenue; it was first Mills Mill Baptist, but became Emmanuel Baptist in the 1920s. The union church became Mills Mill Methodist. Management also developed a ballpark between Park Street and Mills Avenue, tennis courts and croquet grounds for workers, although just when they were expected to use them is unclear.

By 1915, Mills and his son-in-law had weathered the storms of undercapitalization, the 1907 stock market crash, and increasing competition from more than a dozen textile operations established in Greenville since the turn of the century. It had become one of the "Textile Crescent" mills that surrounded the city, competing fiercely for workers and status. The \$700,000 plant now had 31,000 spindles and was debt-free; the fully-equipped brick YMCA on Green Avenue housed two full-time social workers and an active women's club.

When Mills died in 1915, Walter Moore became president. The public-spirited new chief executive had a deep interest in Greenville's Park and Tree Commission and employed a full-time English gardener (really a landscape architect) to beautify the mill property and village. It was Moore who paid for the broadening, paving, and shade trees along Mills Avenue, and the planting of azaleas, forsythias, dogwoods, flower beds, and grass around the mill building and the office, although housewives still swept the bare dirt yards around their homes with straw brooms. Moore's brother-in-law, O.P. Mills, Jr., vice president of Mills Manufacturing, was primarily responsible for developing "Millwood, a beautiful residential section" on the family's former pasture, and for building homes on West Prentiss, Otis, and Mills Avenues, he too made use of the gardener's expertise.

Moore, who sought to improve the "health and happiness" as well as the surroundings of his mill workers, invested \$25,000 in water works and a sewer system for the village, designed by J.E. Sirrine and Company and constructed by Gallivan Building Company, with water from the Paris Mountain reservoir. The new system provided running water for each home (the spring at the head of Spring Street had been the only previous water source) and replaced outhouses with commodes installed in tiny, unheated rooms built on back porches of village houses. "The time has come," Walter Moore said, "when such improvements as these should be made. This section is becoming thickly populated, and the installment of a sewage system will not only benefit the people of the Mills Mill village from a standpoint of health, but other people as well." The "other people" included workers at the "million dollar" Dunean Mill, established south of Brushy Creek in 1910.

Moore survived his father-in-law by only three years, dying on February 12, 1918. His heirs sold Mills Manufacturing Company to Alan Graham, the former president of Vardry Mill, who sold it to the newly formed Reeves Brothers Company of Spartanburg in 1920. H. Arthur Ligon was appointed company president and M.R. Reeves was vice-president. Although the Mills Manufacturing Company charter was dissolved in 1919, the old name was retained.

The village expanded in the 1920s as more houses were built on empty lots and on Ligon and Reeves Streets south of the mill. The children who lived in the village now attended

few fortunate ones continued their education at Parker High School. They and their families looked forward to the mill's annual week-long vacation during the Fourth of July holiday, to bags of fruit at the churches' Christmas parties and firecrackers on Christmas Day, to winter hog-killings and sausage-making in back yards, and to cheering the Mills Mill Millers on to victory at the baseball park. Youngsters shot marbles and played "peg" in their neat dirt yards, practiced basketball layouts around outdoor hoops (the YMCA's ten-foot ceiling made indoor practice difficult) and dreamed of beating Woodside Mill in the Southern Textile Basketball Tournament. A dime admitted them to the silent picture show at the Drace Theatre on Green Avenue. And if they were fortunate enough to abscond with a foul ball hit out of the Greenville Spinners' park on Augusta Road at Dunbar Street, they could even play baseball. Rudy Cothran, eleven years old when his family moved into the village in 1928, remembers how treasured those balls were and the stout curved needle his father gave him to repair worn seams and dilapidated gloves.

But for the men and women working long shifts at the mill, times were hard. In 1927, orders fell as the first signs of the Great Depression hit the South, and Reeves Brothers instituted new efficiency measures. Mills Mill, like other Greenville mills, instituted the "stretchout" and cut wages. Workers were forced to work far harder for thirty percent less pay. Both management and workers felt the impact: in January 1929, the mill paid only a one percent dividend, and that from reserve funds. Dismayed by their increased workload and falling income, 500 workers, including many overseers, went on strike in June 1929.

They asked for a twenty percent wage increase, restoration of conditions that had prevailed before the stretchout, and protection for union members. Most employees had signed up with the AFL-affiliated United Textile Workers Union, and one, J.D. Fortner, the vice chairman of the workers' committee, was dismissed several days before the strike. Workers may have been encouraged to walk out by the outcome of a strike at Brandon and Pinsett Mills, settled on May 16 in favor of the strikers. Arthur Ligon, alerted to the workers' demands, called them together at 10:30 a.m. on Friday, June 1, paid their salaries, and explained that since the mill was losing money, he would not accede to their demands.

Four days later, Communist organizers from the Workers International Relief Committee appeared in the village with union sign-up cards, which asked, to Greenville's astonishment, "What language do you speak?" The workers' Grievance Committee ordered the organizers to leave and assigned their own members to guard the plant so that strikers couldn't be blamed for any damage that might occur. Several days later, Ligon returned to address workers and their families, who gathered around the steps of the mill office, crowding the sidewalks and flowing into Mills Avenue. Rudy Cothran was there. He remembers the company president's emotional talk, explaining that it cost money to operate the mill even when the strike was going on, and that before the strike the mill was barely breaking even. But, he pleaded, if workers would return, conditions would eventually improve. With tears in his eyes, Ligon implored the workers to stop the walkout: "If the mill stays closed for a long time, the company will go bankrupt." Workers, however, stuck by their request for arbitration of their grievances and their condition of amnesty for union members.

Without money, workers established a Relief Committee, which raised funds from local businesses so that strikers' families would not starve. The strike was settled, to the advantage of neither side, on July 18. But men and women who had gone hungry understood its message; when the union called a nationwide General Textile Strike for September 1934, Mills Mill was quiet, its workers sent home

early, and the "Flying Squadrons" of union organizers from Spartanburg sent to shut down Greenville mills paused there only briefly. By 1936, with a forty-hour workweek for wages averaging between \$10 and \$24, conditions in the village were still difficult, yet a study by Furman sociology students noted that workers "seem very well pleased and some of them have money to spend." It also mentioned, however, that the village was not as clean as those at other mills and management seemed uninterested in workers.

By 1937, Southern Franklin Processing Company and its village had wedged into a slice of land south of Brushy Creek between the Dunean and Mills Mill villages. Lady and Stafford Streets, each with a store or two, extended from the new village down the hill, awkwardly joining Park and Deering Streets in the Mills village. The finishing company, smaller and later than its long-established neighbors, had no school or church, but the Tremont Avenue Church of God at its borders soon attracted worshipers from nearby villages and grew rapidly. When its original sanctuary burned down in 1947, the congregation immediately rebuilt.

In the late 1930s, more than 1,600 people lived in the Mills Mill village's 215 houses. Harold Lowery, whose parents and grandparents were employed at the mill, was one of them. He remembers their four-room house, which rented for \$.25 a room a week, its front room fireplace, the kitchen coal stove which warmed the water for Saturday night baths in a tin tub, the chill of the unheated porch room where the commode, shared by two families, was located. He remembers the imposing presence of Furman Guess, the "outside superintendent" responsible for the village, and Mrs. Guess, who supplied towels and hot water for showers at the old YMCA, which had become the "community building," housing at various times a laundromat and barber shop. He remembers window-shopping on Main Street, cows grazing along Brushy Creek, scalding hogs with the mill's steam, catching chickens for his grandmother's Sunday dinners.

Still a child in the 1940s, Lowery does not remember the return to prosperity brought about by the war, when three shifts worked seven days a week to produce herringbone fabric for Marine uniforms. But Gene Gillespie, who was superintendent from 1941 to 1953, and Rudy Cothran do. Their red-letter day was March 27, 1943, when Reeves Brothers' three upstate plants, Mills Mill No. 1 in Greenville, No. 2 in Woodruff, and Fairforest Finishing Co., won the coveted "E for Excellence" from the Armed Forces for "service over, above, and beyond that which we should expect of the best textile manufacturers." The entire village gathered at the ballpark that Saturday afternoon to hear dignitaries applaud their efforts. The Parker High School band played the Marine Hymn, WFBC radio provided live coverage, and Greenville's heard Governor Olin Johnston recall "serving his apprenticeship" at Mills Mill and mention by name his old friends in the crowd. During the impressive ceremonies moderated by radio celebrity Lowell Thomas, employee representatives M.E. Bishop, Mrs. Sunie Putnam Porter, and Mrs. J.B. Abbott received "E for Excellence" pins which workers proudly wore for many years.

After the war was over, men returned from service and the village prospered. More people had cars; some had telephones installed; women who had replaced men in service returned home. The Southern Textile Basketball League Tournament resumed after a three-year wartime hiatus, and the ballpark installed a loudspeaker system (which all too frequently played Fats Domino's "Blueberry Hill"). At noon, wives still handed lunches with mason jars of iced tea to their working husbands through the fence surrounding the mill; deliverymen placed ice and milk in porch iceboxes; men played horse-shoes and checkers after work; and expert ballplayers still got easy mill jobs in exchange for homeruns against Poe and Dunean Mills.

In the early 1950s, however, management decided to sell the village homes, and employed

the Moore Brothers, the sons of Walter Moore, to arrange the sale. Harold Lowery purchased his home in 1958 for \$3,250, paying \$19.51 a month for fifteen years. At the same time, Reeves Brothers discontinued financial support of mill teams and community maintenance and security. New owners made improvements to their fifty-year-old homes, and while young people had more opportunities and began to move away from the village, the company's workforce remained stable for the next twenty years. Residents saw increasing traffic and conversion of former homes on Mills Avenue to commercial uses when Mills Avenue was connected to Church Street and downtown in the mid-1950s and when Greenville Memorial Hospital was built on Grove Road a decade later. They grew increasingly aware of the threat of foreign competition and textile imports in the early 1970s, but it was still a shock when Reeves Brothers cut 200 workers from the Mills Mill payroll in August 1977, reducing it from \$3.5 to \$1.5 million dollars annually.

A year later, when they announced that Mills Mill would close, its workforce had been reduced to only 136 employees. Like so many turn-of-the-century mills, it could not easily be modernized and made more efficient. Unlike many mills, however, its location, close to the I-185 bypass and the expanding Memorial Hospital campus, was desirable, and the mill had a singularly elegant design. In 1979, Mills Centre Limited Partnership purchased the building, and after renovation operated an outlet mall there for several years. The YMCA building was converted to apartments. Developers purchased a row of foreman's houses and the mill ball field and built a medical office condominium. The residential village, however, was still in decline.

In 1985, the Greenville County Redevelopment Authority chose Mills Mill and the adjoining Southern Franklin Processing Company village as a target area. During the next three years, contractors made extensive changes to the villages' drainage systems, removed the remains of the old mill's dam, provided a concrete liner to the channel of the old mill's water supply below Deering Street, and realigned and repaved streets. The Authority also provided financing to renovate ninety community homes which completed its renewal effort.

In 1986, the outlet mall in the mill closed as retail shops were attracted elsewhere. Fortunately, interest in the building remained high; by 1992, a multi-use development including offices, condominiums, and stores had been announced, and in 1994, the Handlebar, a live music club, opened in the mill's old boiler room and has developed a regional following. In 1997, the mill sold again. With this new development and other redevelopment activities, the Mills Mill Community has been sustained as a vital part of Greenville County.

Copyright 1997, Judith G. Bainbridge

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

District 22	Roger G. Clinkscapes, Chairman
District 19	J. Daniel Page, Vice-Chairman
District 23	John D. Burton
District 27	Norton E. Cater
District 17	Vance E. Edwards
District 18	Thomas E. Farmer
District 24	Nancy C. Goldsmith
District 28	Larry J. Lassiter
District 25	Kenneth J. Mackenzie
District 20	Gertha L. Moyd
District 26	James R. Owings
District 21	John J. Schroeder



Greenville County Redevelopment Authority

The poster was designed and published in March 1997 by the Greenville County Redevelopment Authority. It was financed through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development under provisions of Title I of the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974 as amended.

GCR Executive Director	W. Lance Crawford
Project Director	Linning Hughes
	Public Relations
Artist	June Ellen Bradley
Research/copy	Judith G. Bainbridge, Ph.D.

Pictures on front of poster, from top to bottom:

1. Mills Mill
2. Old YMCA
3. Emmanuel Baptist Church
4. Typical Mill Houses Refurbished by GCR
5. Open Heart Baptist Church
6. 2 Story Mill House