



# WOODSIDE COMMUNITY

GREENVILLE COUNTY, SOUTH CAROLINA



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By Judith Bainbridge

One spring afternoon in 1901, John T. Woodside set out in a new buggy from his grocery store at the corner of Main Street and McBee Avenue determined to sell stock in the future; he was beginning a new Greenville textile mill, and he needed to raise capital. Within thirteen days he had promises of \$85,000 from local businessmen, enough money, when combined with his own savings and cash from Northern investors, to charter the Woodside Cotton Mill. It was the right time: the Piedmont teemed "with the roar of the locomotive, the piercing voice of the drummer hawking his wares, and the spectacle of mill-stacks towering over Carolina pines." And who better than John Woodside to take advantage of the moment?

A native Greenville, John T. was the 3rd son of a family long prominent in the southern part of the county. Woodside had been employed by his uncle, Jack D. Charles, at Reedy River Factory at Conestee between 1884 and 1891. This apprenticeship, begun when he was twenty, included working at the company store, where he "kept books, weighed cotton, bought and paid for cotton, worked in the mill, sold cloth on the road and collected for same, ditched, grazed the cows, and fished." By the time he was twenty-seven, he had saved enough money to invest in a store of his own at Pelzer, where he came to know supply merchants and cotton buyers. In 1894, Woodside opened a grocery store in downtown Greenville, which he ran with the help of a younger brother.

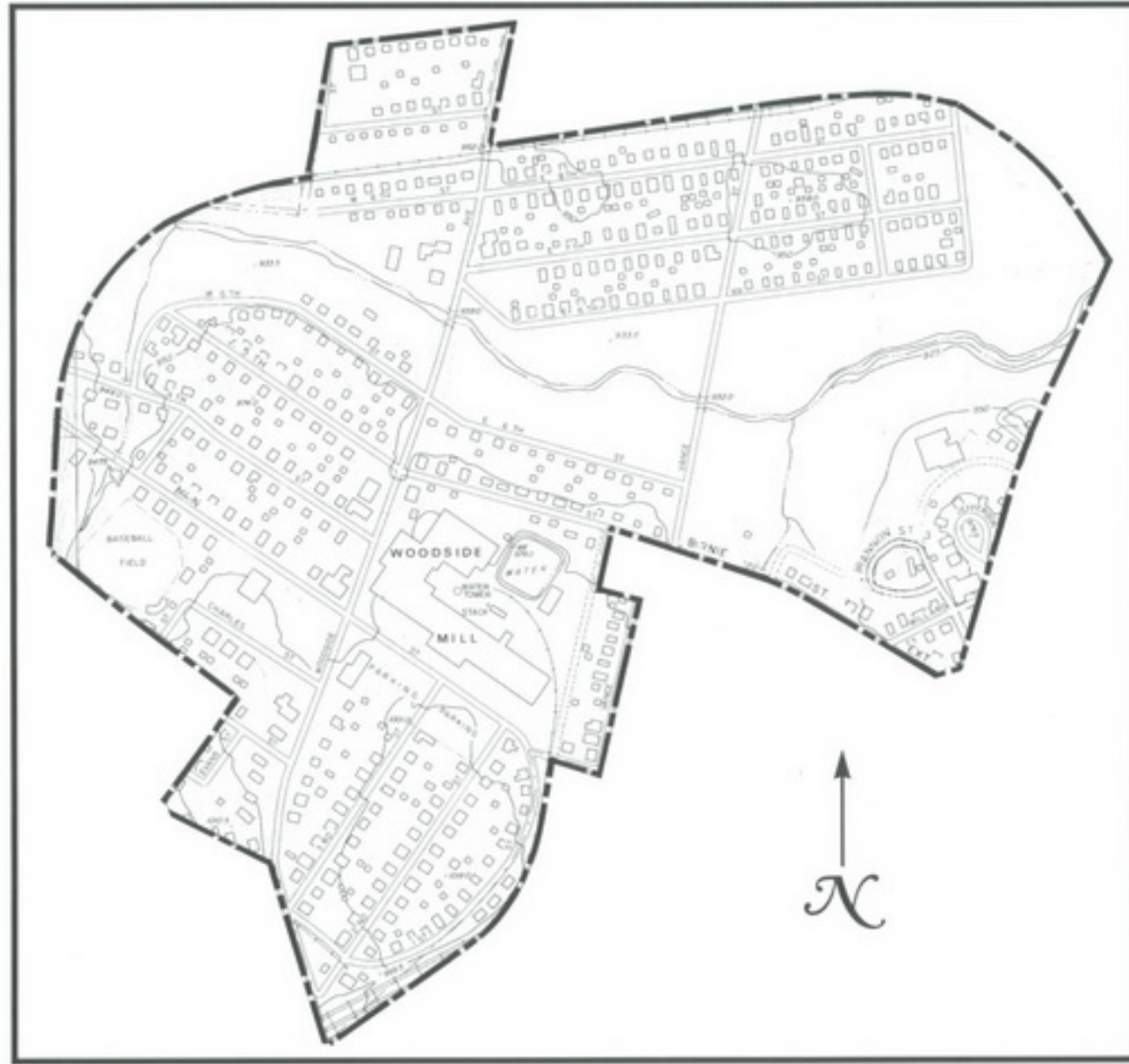
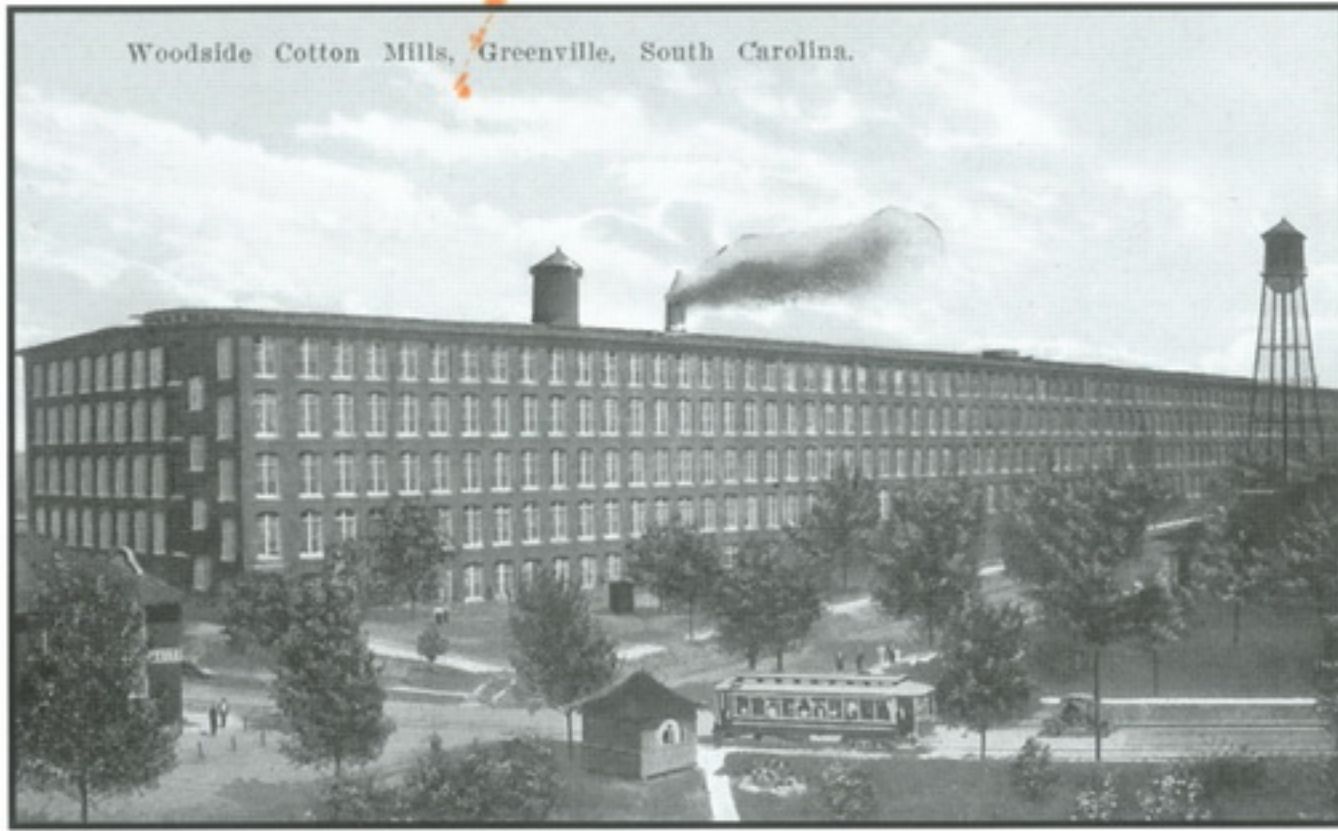
In January, 1902, he sold the store and began to concentrate on building an 11,000 spindle mill, which opened in 1903 with 100 "operatives" and \$200,000 in capital. The four-story brick building was sixty feet long, had ten bays (rows of windows), a two-story support building, and a one-story cotton shed. Situated on a ridge overlooking Long Branch, a creek that flowed into the Reedy River west of Greenville's city limits, it was located between the new Brandon and Monaghan Mills, and was bordered on the east by Southern Railroad tracks. A new street, Woodside Avenue, linked these westside mills, and the new "Beltline trolley" soon ran along it to provide easy access to downtown Greenville. The initial village plan was unusual: the mill, its office, and the gridded village lay to the south; the church, school, and soon a store were across the avenue to the west; a grassy pasture around the floodplain of the Long Branch created the northern boundary. The Woodside Mill and its village were designed by Joseph E. Sirrine, a Furman graduate who had been head of southern operations for Lockwood, Greene & Co., and who had recently gone into business for himself as a mill architect and engineer.

In late 1904, Woodside's capacity tripled; by 1907 it had increased again, to 45, 120 spindles and 600 employees (only seven under the age of twelve); 1200 people lived in the expanding mill village. With a three-teacher schoolhouse attended by 150 of the village's 300 children (although only 75 came regularly), a full-day kindergarten, a "union" church (used on alternate Sundays by Baptist and Methodist congregations) built by the company, which contributed one-third of its expenses, and an "excellent brass band," the Woodside Mill was flourishing.

The mill's officers included, in addition to John T., the president, his brothers J. D., the vice president and treasurer; Edward, the vice president and operations manager, who had textile experience at Pelzer Mill when he joined the company in 1907; and Robert, a banker who was president of the Woodside-controlled Farmers and Merchant Bank; M. O. Alexander, was general manager of the mill. In 1906 they purchased controlling stock in the Fountain Inn Manufacturing Company, and in 1908 they built the 25,000 spindle Simpsonville Cotton Mill. But the Woodside Mill on the western edge of Greenville was their major enterprise, and in 1909 they added a mill building, cotton storehouse, mechanical building, and 75 additional houses across Woodside Avenue on the western side of their property, all constructed by J. E. Sirrine at a cost of \$500,000. At the same time they increased their equipment to 85,000 spindles and doubled their number of looms.

The rapid expansion of Woodside and other new Greenville mills led to intense competition to recruit and retain workers. Like other local mills, Woodside lured tenant farmers from the mountains of North Carolina and Tennessee during the Great Migration of 1905, when hundreds came to work in Piedmont textile plants. But these former farmers were not used to the regimentation and harsh industrial conditions of mill life and were an unstable workforce. Greenville's textile mills vied with each other to offer incentives to keep "operatives" content, adding "social welfare workers" and facilities. The welfare workers planned community activities, but their primary responsibility was turning former tenant farmers into model textile employees. When one community worker complained to J. T. Woodside that "We have some bad people in the village who must be run out," the irritated mill president replied, "If all people were good, we wouldn't need you."

The success of the business was clearly reflected in the life of the community. Because recreational facilities were attractions, in 1910 the Woodside built "one of the handsomest YMCA buildings in the South." It was dedicated with unusual ceremony: Clemson Professor D. W. Daniel and Furman President E. M. Poteat spoke to a large crowd gathered in front of the new \$10,000 structure designed by J. E. Sirrine. "Baseball fever" had infected Greenville, and a new gymnasium even provided facilities to play the game indoors. In March 1911, Boston landscape architect Harlan Kelsey, interviewed by the *Greenville News*, praised the cleanliness of the yards and homes at Woodside as models of neatness.



For Woodside Mill was doing well at the time. In the same year, the brothers merged their Greenville, Simpsonville, and Fountain Inn operations to establish Woodside Cotton Mills, with capital of \$1.2 million, and began planning an immense addition to their Greenville operation, which would be built debt-free because so much stock in the operation had recently been sold. By 1913, the mill was 180 feet long and operated 112,000 spindles; it had become the largest cotton mill under one roof in the nation. It was, the Woodsides boasted, "as healthful as modern science can make it with the best class of mill operatives." Two thousand people now lived in the village.

There is, however, some doubt about just how healthy the mill was and how well these "best class" employees were treated. John Heath went to work at Woodside in 1915 when he was 14 years old. He recalled that "they had passed laws about children working, so Mother had to sign a paper" to allow him to work eleven hours a day, five and a half days a week, for a wage of six cents an hour—\$3.30 a week. (By 1923 that starting wage had increased to \$9.60 a week.) Heath, interviewed in the 1950s, recalled that the mill was dirty, that women dipped snuff and men chewed tobacco and "they'd spit it right on the floor." He also remembered how much his father hated the Woodside boss who "held a boy by his feet and dangled him out of the window; that was to make him work. They did that to kids."

The wonders of modern science did not extend to safety measures. Heath explained that "When I first went to Woodside you sucked the thread into the eye of the shuttle with your mouth." A big steam engine operated the mill, which had holes in the ceilings of each floor with shafts going through them; ropes pulled the shaft with leather belts. Heath remembered the "quarter hand," who worked from eleven until two, when other workers went home for lunch. He got his clothes caught in a rotary cone where six rolls of fabric went into one set of rollers, and "when he came out to lunch, he didn't have a stitch on!"

Conditions at Woodside and other local mills may have encouraged the short-lived union activity and strikes that hit in Greenville in 1914, and they certainly contributed to mill workers' enthusiasm for the gubernatorial candidacy of Coleman L. "Colie" Bleasie, a racist rabble-rouser who appealed to white factory workers' hatred of blacks, policemen, and owners. More than a thousand people gathered at Woodside Avenue and East Main Street to hear him speak "on the stump" that summer and voted for him overwhelmingly that fall.

At about the same time, a northern postcard company came to Greenville to photograph the city's most attractive and well-known sights. In addition to the falls and bridge of the Reedy River, Main Street stores, and imposing homes, "the largest cotton mill under one roof in the nation" received considerable attention. Panoramic postcard views of the immense Woodside Mill were published for a dozen years afterwards as a symbol of Greenville's textile importance.

In September 1923, for example, a reproduction of the photograph was on the cover of the textile issue of *The Civic and Commercial Journal*, the monthly magazine published by the Chamber of Commerce, which boasted that the Woodside village was "a place of great beauty" with neat lawns and well-kept streets. The workers, the article inside went on to say, were people "of the purest Anglo-Saxon stock" and no "malcontents" lived there. The mill village churches (in 1911 the Baptist congregation built a frame church, which burned down after the first service and was then rebuilt; Methodists worshipped at the Woodside "Forum," the old YMCA, until the early 20s, when they erected "a pretty church" of their own) had combined their efforts and were "invincibly and irresistibly advancing on all the enemies of Industry, Enlightenment, God, Home, and Native Land."

By the 1920s, increasing prosperity in the textile industry had led to improvements in Woodside's "Native Land." Although there was still no running water or inside plumbing in village houses (facilities were not installed until 1930), streets were now paved, the baseball park had been renovated and both the first and second teams had new gray uniforms with green stripes that proudly bore the WCM initials. Mill baseball and basketball teams were immensely popular; baseball stars were basically semi-professional, vigorously recruited and paid premium wages until 1925, when mill owners, including the Woodsides, decided to abandon the practice, but the annual Fourth of July double header against Brandon Mill remained a summer highlight. Basketball fans were so enthusiastic that almost the entire community went to Textile Hall to cheer the Woodside team on to victory in the first Southern Textile League Basketball Tournament in 1921.

Educational opportunities had also improved. The Woodside Free School now enrolled more than 450 students and the company's kindergarten nearly a hundred more. The mill's community building, the Forum, provided a convenient laundry in its basement, a stage for dramatic productions, the gymnasium, and meeting places for the Woodside Girls Club and the Hollis Literary Society. The Greenville Library's mobile "Pathfinder," named by Woodside resident R. E. Johnson, who won \$10 for his suggestion, arrived every Tuesday to supply books for village readers. After 1923, students could attend Parker High School, just a few blocks away. The vocational programs, extensive facilities, and activities that Superintendent L. P. (Pete) Hollis organized would soon make Parker a national model, but in 1926 most village residents were more interested in the selection of "Miss Woodside," a contest among village girls who, wearing dresses they had made themselves and "with no cosmetic assistance," would then compete for the title of Beauty Queen of the Parker District. Vallie Mae Cassell became Miss Woodside, but she did not win the contest. (In later years, however, Miss Woodside winner Jean Bennett went on to become Miss Greenville.)

A park with a zoo, which included 30 head of deer, was the pride of the community. But there was even more pride in the Woodside's latest innovation: Wildwood, a 1500 acre camp for employees in the Blue Ridge Mountains, about 25 miles from Greenville, opened in 1921 under the direction of W. M. Grier, who was in charge of the mill's community services. "The charms of Wildwood" were frequently described in local newspapers. Programs at the camp included Bible Conferences, swimming lessons, and "uplifting talks." A rustic lodge with six-foot-wide fireplace, a large swimming pool with an island at its center, twenty-five fully outfitted cabins (all with heavily hyphenated Indian names: Wa-ya-hi, Wak-on-da, Kis-sim-mee, for example), the Deer Path Inn with room for ten families and meal service—all were available by the week or for weekend trips, and in the summer of 1925, more than 2500 people, in groups large and small, vacationed there.

The Woodside brothers could afford the expense. They were enjoying almost unparalleled success, acquiring Easley Mill, building a seventeen-story "skyscraper" on Greenville's Main Street, leading the drive for the Poinsett Hotel, investing heavily in isolated beachfront property in distant Horry County. John T. Woodside had described himself as the richest man in Greenville County before World War I; his spectacular rise to wealth had occurred in about ten years. It took less time for his devastating fall. By the late 1920s, Woodside Cotton Mills were heavily

mortgaged to its northern commission agents, its bank had made unsecured loans and was on the edge of failure, and its huge Ocean Forest Hotel at Myrtle Beach was about to be foreclosed. The stock market crash in 1929, and the Great Depression that followed led to Woodside's ruin and his ouster from the mills' management by William Iselin and Company, Woodside Cotton Mills' New York selling agent. In addition to the mills, John T. Woodside lost his home and other businesses; later, Iselin successfully sued him for seven million dollars, but the New York firm never collected because he was bankrupt.

For five years between 1931 and 1936, the Woodside Mill teetered on the edge of disaster. Run by (new) Greenville managers but with northern owners, it operated on alternate weeks, and former workers who could find jobs with New Deal agencies like WPA grabbed for them. As for the others, "We had each other," says Mildred Harbin. Although the work week was reduced from 55 to 40 hours, there were few jobs available, and those few at radically reduced wages. Yet, in spite of all the financial difficulties they faced, Woodside Mill employees did not join the General Textile Strike of 1934. When "Flying Squadrons" of union organizers from Spartanburg descended on Greenville mills in September, 523 of Woodside's 525 workers signed a statement protesting the strike. On the Tuesday after Labor Day the strikers came to Greenville determined to close every mill in town; National Guardsmen, called out by the Governor, protected the properties. When union members arrived at Woodside, where they camped that night, they found workers drawing their pay envelopes and loyal employees equipped with shotguns. Strikers first threatened to tear down a fence; the Guard captain pleaded with them not to do so. Then they placed a women holding an American flag in front of the squadron, and told Guardsmen to respect the flag. When they attempted to rush the troops, they were driven away by men with fixed bayonets. Guardsmen finally fired tear gas on the strikers, and the organizers retreated. The General Strike failed.

In 1936, seasoned textile executives, Samuel M. Beattie (as president) and his brother, William H. Beattie (as treasurer), took charge of Woodside, and because of the industry-wide recovery brought about by the beginning of the Second World War, gradually returned the community to a degree of prosperity. They managed the huge enterprise until 1956, although Iselin-Jefferson owned a controlling interest. In spite of their experience and expertise, it was during the Beattie years that Woodside Mill became Greenville's only unionized textile operation. In June 1938, Local 268 of the CIO's Textile Workers Union of America won an election at the mill and began to negotiate a contract with management. It was not until March 1941 that S. M. Beattie signed a one-year contract with workers; it provided for a wage increase and set up grievance procedures. There seems to have been little ill will between management and union; organizers praised company officials "for the manner in which negotiations were conducted" without mentioning the fact that it had taken almost three years to hammer out the contract.

Woodside Mill remained a unionized operation until 1955, although after a frustrating and basically unsuccessful nine-week strike in 1950 its days were numbered. In the 1940s, however, it represented 800 of the mill's 1,000 workers. Its leader, Jess Mitchell, who remained at the company until he retired in 1962, was interviewed by

*New Republic Magazine* in 1947; the journal described industrial life in Greenville as a "pitiless, unending struggle" between the "all-powerful mills" and workforce "at the bottom of a feudal social heap." Mitchell and other union members, however, were probably less interested in class struggle than they were in realizing their dream of air-conditioned mills and home ownership for village residents.

Home ownership became a reality three years later, when 367 of Woodside's 420 homes were sold to workers for \$1.3 million dollars; house prices ranged from \$2930 to \$4725. A Parker High School horticultural teacher was on hand with plants, seeds, and landscaping advice for the new home owners. Fearing annexation, Woodside voters decided (by a vote of 63-6) to incorporate the town in July 1950. The mill, however, really ran the town; the "intendant," mayor, Arthur Pollard, was the overseer of the cloth room; there were no taxes; and the town limits only included the 50 houses that the mill had not sold. Town offices were located in the new gymnasium.

In 1956, Iselin-Jefferson sold Woodside Cotton Mills to Dan River Mills; in 1958, W. H. Beattie was named Chairman of the Board and Robert S. Small became president of the Woodside Division.

In the 1960s, the mill was neglected while Dan River built the "ultra-modern" (and air-conditioned) Beattie Plant on Greenville's eastside; few improvements were made in the next twenty years. In March 1984, company officials shut off machinery in the eighty-two year old mill and gathered employees in an empty weave room to announce its June closing. Workers gathered at Tucker's Soda Shop after they heard the shocking news. They remembered sitting at the mill's open windows, eating lunch and watching the trolley cars; they remembered when the village was a place where "everybody knew everybody."

For the village had already changed. Employment had fallen, some workers moved away; older ones retired; transients moved in. The town's charter was allowed to lapse in the early eighties, and its staff of one part time patrolman was let go. In 1982, the Greenville County Redevelopment Authority began rehabilitating village homes, fixing drainage problems, restoring alleys to make them usable by sanitation trucks, and improving deteriorated streets. The authority spent \$1.7 million to improve conditions in the neighborhood between 1982 and 1986. The County upgraded local bridges at the same time.

Dan River sold Woodside Mill to Alchem Chemical in 1984; they sold it to Eugene Stone. In 1987, while Stone owned it, the Woodside Mill and village became a National Register Historic District, important because of its design and history. Today, golf clubs are made at the old mill, neighbors gossip from the village's front porches, children play under its tall trees, and the Woodside Community maintains its special identity and importance to Greenville County.

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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 1982 Woodside Renovations

District 21	William R. Rowan, Chairman
District 24	Sybil Edwards, Vice-Chairman
District 28	Michael G. Burton
District 22	Roger Clink scales
District 19	Giles McDavid
District 23	Oscar Prioleau
District 27	James Skeaton
Philip R. Warth, Jr., Executive Director	



### Greenville County Redevelopment Authority

The poster was designed and published in September 1996 by the Greenville County Redevelopment Authority. It was financed through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development under provisions of Title 1 of the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974 as amended.

GCRA Executive Director	W. Lance Crawford
Project Director	Lirning Hughes
Artist	Renato Moncini
Research/copy	Judith G. Bainbridge, Ph.D.

Pictures on front of poster, from top to bottom:

1. Woodside Mill
2. Methodist church
3. Tucker Soda Shop
4. Parker High School
5. Woodside Baptist Church
6. Mill village houses