

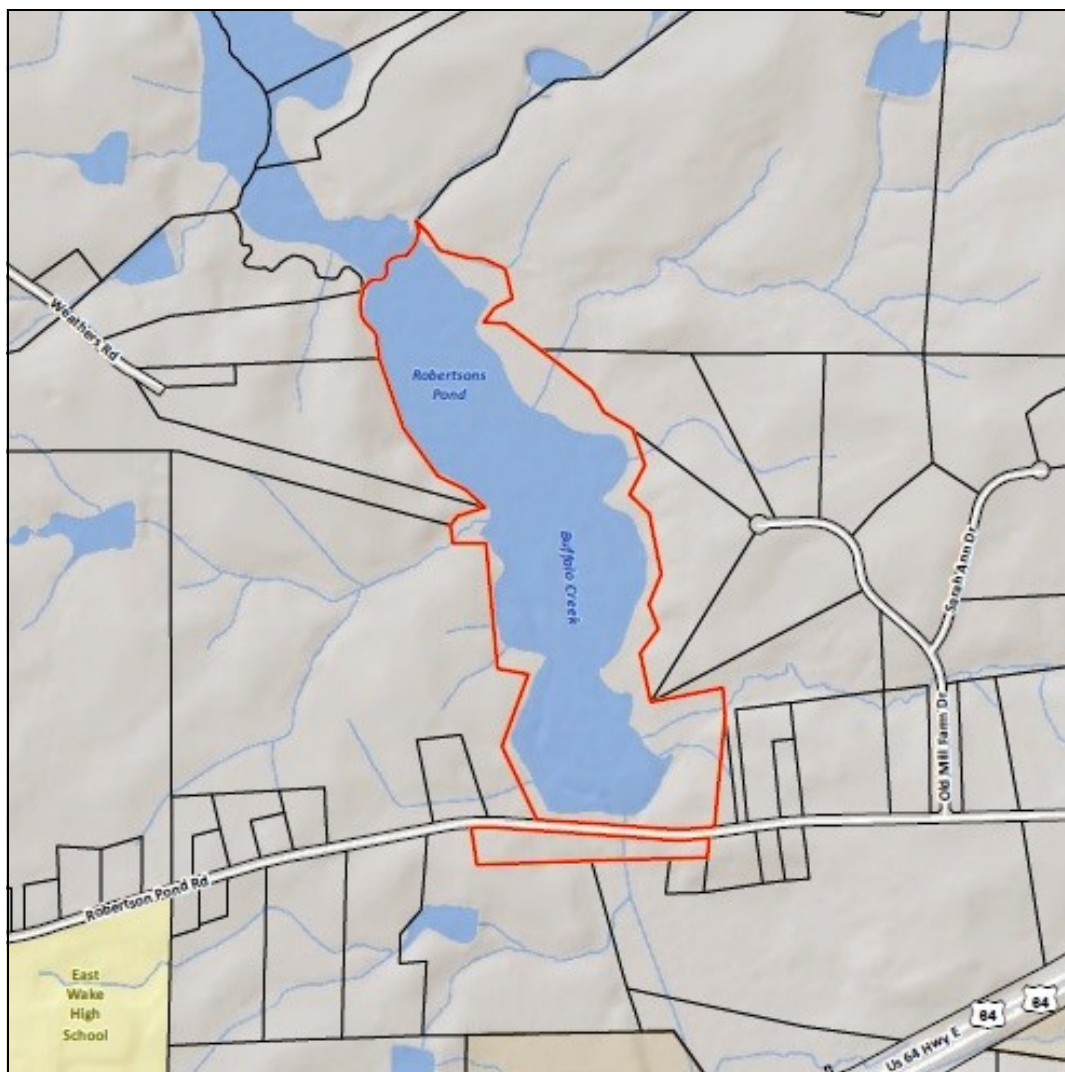
Robertson's Millpond



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for Wake County Parks, Recreation, & Open Space
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Introduction

Robertson's Millpond is located on Buffalo Creek approximately three miles northwest of Wendell. The associated dam is located just north of State Route 2324 (Robertson Pond Road). Wake County Parks, Recreation, and Open Space is considering purchasing this property, which includes the pond and former mill site. The dam, originally constructed probably in the 1820s, is still in place; however, the mill was removed in the mid-1970s. The millpond is a black water swamp more similar to Coastal Plain habitats than Piedmont, and which provides the only bald cypress habitat in Wake County. The area is significant both for its cultural and environmental history.



Parcel Map
(Map courtesy of Wake County Register of Deeds)

Cultural Significance

William Avera came to the Eagle Rock area (northwest of Wendell) from Johnston County probably in 1820. He brought his wife, Mary, and their two children, Thomas and Anna. The family lived in a Federal-style house, probably located on present-day Highway 64, where they operated a 600-acre farm and gristmill. It is likely Avera constructed the house, gristmill, and mill dam in the 1820s. The 1850 Agricultural Census shows the family kept horses, cows, sheep, and 100 pigs; grew 50 acres of wheat, 400 acres of corn, and 240 acres of oats; and produced significant amounts of wool, peas/beans, butter, and sweet potatoes with the help of twelve slaves. Avera died in 1847 and left his house and land to his children under the administration of his widow.¹

In 1857, Avera's son, Dr. Thomas H. Avera, received his share of the inheritance, including the house and gristmill. He had just completed his medical degree at the University of Pennsylvania and married Barthenia Smith. They were members of the Hephzibah Baptist Church just down the road from their home. They had five children, three of whom died in childhood.²

Dr. Avera was a successful physician and farmer, and he owned twenty-nine slaves by 1860. He served as a surgeon in the Confederate Army during the Civil War, after which he returned to farming. By 1870, Dr. Avera listed "farmer" as his primary occupation, and his farming operations included considerable amounts of corn. He also owned a general store, cotton gin, and orchard. That year he reported processing grain, corn, and wheat at the gristmill, but did not operate the cotton gin. He hired a local architect to design his simple, Italianate home in the early 1870s, which is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The original c.1820 family home was moved to the new home site on Robertson Pond Road. The building still stands south of the c.1870s home. By 1880, Dr. Avera was producing less as a farmer and focusing more on his medical practice, listing "physician" as his primary profession on the 1880 census.³

¹ Michelle Michael, "Dr. Thomas H. Avera House," National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, (National Park Service, 2003), 4-5, 7-8; Elizabeth Reid Murray, *Wake: Capital County of North Carolina, Volume I* (Raleigh, NC: Capital County Publishing Company, 1983), 658; US Census Bureau, "1850 United States Federal Census Agricultural Schedule," North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, NC; US Census Bureau, "1850 United States Federal Census Slave Schedule," www.ancestry.com (accessed February 27, 2013).

² Kelly A. Lally, *The Historic Architecture of Wake County, North Carolina* (Raleigh, NC: Wake County Government, 1994), 220-221; K. Todd Johnson and Elizabeth Reid Murray, *Wake: Capital County of North Carolina, Volume II, Reconstruction to 1920* (Raleigh, NC: Wake County, 2008), 572; Michael, "Avera House," 4-5, 7-8.

³ Lally, *The Historic Architecture of Wake County*, 220-221; Johnson and Murray, *Wake: Volume II*, 572; Michael, "Avera House," 4-5, 7-8; US Census Bureau, "1870 United States Federal Census Manufacturing Schedule," and "1880 United States Federal Census Agricultural Schedule," North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, NC; US Census Bureau, "1870 United States Federal Census," "1880 United States Federal Census," www.ancestry.com (accessed February 27, 2013).



William Avera House, built c.1820
 ("Dr. Thomas H. Avera House," National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, 2003)

In 1887, Avera sold 115 acres of his land⁴ to Moses C. Winston, including the mill and possibly the general store. Winston immediately resold the mill site to Allen B. Marshburn.⁵ Marshburn continued to farm the land and operate the gristmill with his second wife, Joanna Robertson, whom he married that year, and his young son, Otis.⁶ Marshburn and Joanna had four more sons and a daughter before her death in 1902. In the 1910 census, Marshburn listed his primary occupation as a "retail merchant," rather than farmer, and was operating a general store with his sons Milton and Marion.⁷

⁴ Avera retained a large acreage on the south side of Robertson Pond Road, which his daughter Lizzie inherited upon her parents' deaths. Lizzie married John P. Winston (his brother was Moses C. Winston, who married Lizzie's sister Mary). According to local legend, Lizzie and John's son, William Augustus Winston, may have given flying lessons to Charles Lindbergh at Brooks Field in Texas. (See Michael, "Avera House," 7-8)

⁵ "Thos H. Avera & wife to Moses C. Winston, Jr.," January 15, 1887, Book 94, Page 350, Wake County Register of Deeds, Consolidated Real Property Index, <http://services.wakegov.com/booksweb/GenExtSearch.aspx> (accessed February 18, 2013) (hereafter referred to as Wake County Register of Deeds); "M.C. Winston & wife to Allen B. Marshburn," April 6, 1887, Book 95, Page 299, Wake County Register of Deeds.

⁶ Allen Marshburn married Mattie Helen Chamblee in 1871, and their son Otis was born in 1873. (See "Marshburn Family Tree," www.ancestry.com)

⁷ US Census Bureau, "1880 United States Federal Census," "1900 United States Federal Census," "1910 United States Federal Census," "1920 United States Federal Census," and "1930 United States Federal Census," www.ancestry.com (accessed February 18, 2013); See also "Marshburn Family Tree," <http://trees.ancestry.com/tree/52782622/family> (accessed February 18, 2013); Johnson and Murray, *Wake: Volume II*, 572.

Upon Marshburn's death in 1914, his land and mill were sold at public auction. Joanna Robertson Marshburn's brother, Charles W. Robertson, purchased the 75-acre site. Robertson continued to purchase property and expand his landholdings to approximately 750 acres through the early 1900s, including additional parcels of the Marshburn estate from Allen Marshburn's heirs.⁸

Robertson married Corinna Williams in 1892, and the couple had seven children before her death in 1905. Robertson had another six children with his second wife, Beulah Scarboro.⁹

Robertson and his brother George E. Robertson were two of the first general merchandisers in the town of Wendell. Charles ran a small store from a shed adjacent to the pond that sold candy, drinks, cigarettes, and other goods to fishermen. George Robertson owned a general store on Rolesville Road that the brothers may have operated together. The store was next owned and operated by George Robertson's son, Cary Robertson, for whom C.N. Robertson Pond on Horton Road is named. Cary Robertson's descendants still own the store on Rolesville Road.¹⁰



Charles Robertson Farm on Marks Creek Road
(Photo courtesy of Cheri Szcudronski, 2013)

⁸ "Oris M. Marshburn, Comr. To C.W. Robertson," March 16, 1915, Book 290, Page 446, Wake County Register of Deeds. Also, Robertson is a descendent of James Robertson who was a founder of Watauga, North Carolina, and Nashville, Tennessee, although the exact relationship is unclear.

⁹ "Robertson (Marks Creek) Family Tree," <http://trees.ancestry.com/tree/52211337/family> (accessed February 25, 2013); US Census Bureau, "1920 United States Federal Census," "1930 United States Federal Census," and "1940 United States Federal Census," www.ancestry.com (accessed February 25, 2013);

¹⁰ "The North Carolina Year Book and Business Directory," The News and Observer, Raleigh, NC, 1910, 1911, and 1915, www.library.digitalnc.org (accessed February 25, 2013); Johnson and Murray, *Wake: Volume II*, 644; Personal Interview with Ervin Privette by Cheri Szcudronski, February 27, 2013; Personal interview with Edward Gehrke by Cheri Szcudronski, March 8, 2013; US Census Bureau, "1910 United States Federal Census," www.ancestry.com (accessed March 8, 2013).

Charles Robertson's land extended west of the pond, and his home was located on Marks Creek Road near the intersection of Puryear Road, just two miles from the mill site. The property to the west of the millpond contained a tenant house, and census records suggest Robertson did employ tenant farmers in the 1920s and possibly the 1930s as well. In the 1920 census, Robertson's son Howard is listed adjacent to his father and renting property, as well as an African American family of farm laborers, James and Mollie Rogers and their children. In the 1930 census, Howard and the Jones family no longer live adjacent to Robertson, but there are other African American farmers renting land near him.

Robertson farmed his land until his death in 1939, and probably also still operated the mill. His son, Charles, Jr., continued to farm the land after him, and may have operated the mill for a few more years. The mill fell out of use by 1950."



1859 Aerial Photo of Mill, Mill Dam, Millpond, and Agricultural Homestead
(USDA Historical Aerial Photos, <http://www.lib.unc.edu/reference/gis/USDA/wake.html>)

" Kelly Lally, "Charles William Robertson Farm, Knightdale Vicinity," 1991, North Carolina State Archives, Photographic Collections, Historical Preservation Photographs; Personal Interview with Edward Gerhke; US Census Bureau, "1910 United State Federal Census" and "1920 United States Federal Census," www.ancestry.com (accessed March 8, 2013); Personal Interview with Ervin Privette.

In 1960, Charles Robertson's estate was divided into eleven tracts to be drawn for and allotted to his surviving heirs. Each of the eleven tracts included allotment to grow 3.27 acres of tobacco, 1.38 acres of cotton, and 2.39 acres of wheat.¹²

The mill and pond tract, Tract #10, totaling 61.3 acres, was inherited by James Fowler. The mill appears in aerial photos of this site as late as 1971, but was not present during Kelly Lally's survey of Wake County in 1991.¹³

John and Nettie Fowler, James Fowler's parents, inherited Tract #11 to the west of the millpond. In the 1960s, John operated a boathouse on the pond, renting wooden fishing boats to fisherman. Local residents remember that only patient fishermen could catch fish successfully in the pond. In 1961, John and Nettie transferred their crop allotments for Tract #11 to their son James on Tract #10. James farmed tobacco and wheat, possibly cotton, and probably soybeans.¹⁴



Robertson's Mill c.1970
(Photos courtesy of Edward Gehrke)

¹² "Mrs. Nettie Robertson Fowler et al vs Rudolph R. Robertson et al," December 9, 1960, Book 1456, Pages 249-254, Wake County Register of Deeds.

¹³ "Iola May Robertson Nowell and Walter Nowell to James M. Fowler," October 28, 1959, Book 1386, Pages 45-46, Wake County Register of Deeds; "Mrs. Nettie Robertson Fowler et al vs Rudolph R. Robertson et al," December 9, 1960, Book 1456, Pages 249-254, Wake County Register of Deeds; USDA Historical Aerial Photos, "1971 Wake County," <http://www.lib.unc.edu/reference/gis/USDA/wake.html> (accessed February 25, 2013); Kelly Lally, "Robertson's Mill Dam," North Carolina State Archives, Photographic Collections, Historical Preservation Photographs, Raleigh, NC.

¹⁴ "Mrs. Nettie Robertson Fowler et al vs Rudolph R. Robertson et al," December 9, 1960, Book 1456, Pages 249-254, Wake County Register of Deeds; Personal Interview with Edward Gehrke; Personal Interview with Edward Privette; "Nettie Robertson Fowler et al to Rudolph Robertson et al," January 4, 1961, Book 1456, Pages 255-256, Wake County Register of Deeds.

The mill had been out of use for many years by this time and was in a state of severe disrepair, so James Fowler demolished the building around 1975. Fowler and his wife, Mayme Glynn Hodge, continued to acquire land, and upon their deaths in 1997, they owned nearly 400 acres throughout Wake County.¹⁵

The Fowler estate fell to James Fowler's sisters, Cora Fowler and Margaret Fowler Gehrke, and his nephew, Edward Gehrke II. In 1998, the land was divided into 18 parcels and turned over to G&F Properties, LLC, which was established to consolidate ownership of family properties. Gehrke owns both Tract #10 and #11 of his great grandfather's estate. The current house on Tract #11 is constructed near the site of one of the original tenant houses on Charles Robertson's farm. Part of the Gehrke property is horse pasture, and another part is leased to a local farmer who grows tobacco, wheat, and soybeans in rotation.¹⁶



Current Aerial Photo of Former Mill Location
(Image courtesy of Google Maps)

It is highly likely that the site also holds prehistoric and archaeological significance, as pond users have found a number of Native American artifacts (arrowheads, etc.) in the area. The pond is part of Buffalo Creek, named for the herds of buffalo once seen watering there, and it is likely Native Americans in the region would have lived and hunted along the creek.¹⁷

¹⁵ "Cora Powell Fowler, et al to G&F Properties, LLC," August 26, 1998, Book 8139, Pages 672-677, Wake County Register of Deeds; Personal Interview with Edward Gehrke.

¹⁶ "Cora Powell Fowler, et al to G&F Properties, LLC," August 26, 1998, Book 8139, Pages 672-677, Wake County Register of Deeds, Consolidated Real Property Index, <http://services.wakegov.com/booksweb/GenExtSearch.aspx> (accessed February 18, 2013); Personal Interview with Ervin Privette; Personal interview with Edward Gehrke.

¹⁷ Personal Interview with Edward Gehrke.

Environmental Significance

Robertson's Millpond is part of Buffalo Creek, which flows southeast from Rolesville until it dumps into the Little River near Kenly and then the Neuse River near Goldsboro. The creek is probably named for the herds of buffalo that roamed this region during the colonial era. The black water creek is a Small Coastal Plain Stream Swamp, according to a 1985 survey conducted by the Botany Department at NC State University. Buffalo Creek is dammed at State Route 2320 forming Perry's Pond and again at State Route 2324 (Robertson's Pond Road) forming Robertson's Pond. The dam is owned by Edward Geherke, along with the pond, but is overseen by the NC Department of Environment and Natural Resources. The dam is part earthen and part masonry, and it remains in stable condition.¹⁸



Robertson's Mill Dam and Pond
(Photo by Cheri Szcodronski, 2013)

Robertson's Pond is oriented north-south and its maximum depth is approximately 15 feet. It was a swamp habitat prior to the dam construction, and remains a shallow swamp today. It is dominated by medium-aged to mature bald cypress. The cypress swamp habitat provided by the millpond is uncommon in the eastern piedmont, but is similar to the old millponds on black water streams of the northeastern coastal plain. The Robertson's Pond bald cypress stand is likely the only native population of this species in Wake County. The cypress form a dense, closed canopy in most areas, and their bases are habitat for swamp rose and other woody shrubs, as well as cat brier, poison ivy, hog peanut, and other vines. There are very few aquatic plants.¹⁹

¹⁸ Barry Dalton, "Buffalo Creek Cypress Swamp," NC State University Botany Department, 1985; Julie Moore, "Robertson's Pond – Executive Summary," NC Natural Heritage Program, Department of Natural Resources and Community Development, Raleigh, NC, September 1982; William Denton, "Dam Safety Inspection Report, Robertson's Pond Dam," NC Department of Environment and Natural Resources, Division of Land Resources, Land Quality Section, March 2002.

¹⁹ Dalton, "Buffalo Creek Cypress Swamp"; Moore, "Robertson's Pond."

The cypress swamp is also habitat for an abundance of animal species. Common birds include Wood and Black Duck, Pileated and Downy Woodpeckers, Prothonotary Warbler, Screech and Great Horned Owl, Great Blue Heron, and more. Also present are Beaver, Muskrat, Raccoon, Black and Brown Water Snakes, and a variety of turtle species. As of the 1980s, it was still breeding habitat for the Four-Toed Salamander, which is threatened by habitat loss in North Carolina. It is also likely that this pond is the westernmost range of the Cottonmouth and Mud Snake. The fish populations are also more common to Coastal Plain habitats, and include Sawcheek and Swamp Darters; Mud, Bluespotted, and Pigmy Sunfish; Ironcolor Shiner, and more.²⁰



Robertson's Pond Bald Cypress Swamp
(Photo by Cheri Szcodronski, 2013)

The Millpond is a popular recreational site, and recreational is low intensity, with some hunting, fishing and paddling. Fishing was especially popular in the 1940s and was featured in sport fishing magazines. At that time, a patient fishermen could catch crappie, bluegill, and largemouth bass. There was a place for fishermen to cook their fish along the banks of the pond as well. In the 1960s, there was also a boat house where fishermen could rent wooden fishing boats, but it has been removed. Today there are few bass in the pond, but fisherman can fish for chain pickerel or brim.²¹

²⁰ Moore, "Robertson's Pond"; Alvin Braswell to Charles Roe, April 26, 1986, NC State Museum of Natural History.

²¹ Moore, "Robertson's Pond"; "Robertsons Pond," www.hookandbullet.com/fishing-robertsons-pond-dam-wendell-nc/ (accessed February 4, 2013); Personal interview with Ervin Privette; Personal interview with Edward Gehrke.

The site has been identified by the North Carolina Natural Heritage Program as one of 48 significant sites in Wake County with the recommendation that these areas be protected from development to preserve the distinct and diverse habitats they represent. The current landowner, Edward Gehrke, limits recreation on the pond. Access is now by permission only in order to protect the environmental resources of the site.²²



The 1960s boat shed at Robertson's Pond (left) and wooden boats for rent (right)
(Photos courtesy of Edward Gehrke)

²² Harry LeGrant and Christine Wiecek, "Executive Summary: An Inventory of Significant Natural Areas in Wake County, North Carolina," North Carolina Natural Heritage Program, 2003; Personal Interview with Edward Gehrke.