



Chapter 3

The Place and Its People

“FOR MORE THAN TWO HUNDRED YEARS a wave of agriculture rolled across our landscape. The deep woods were turned to cropland and pasture. But the tide turned . . . and agricultural life has been, for the most part, retreating from the land. Left undisturbed, forest reclaims open land quietly and completely. It is ironic that what former generations wanted out of the way in their time is today an enduring visual proof of their existence: collections of stone.”

– Dan Snow, *In the Company of Stone: The Art of the Stone Wall*

Cryptic rock formations are scattered throughout Duke Forest. Walking down the western slope of Piney Mountain in the Forest's Korstian Division, David Southern and I come across a circular mound of rocks about two feet tall that seems to have been arranged with some semblance of order. We spot five other rock mounds solidly entrenched in the earth, tree shadows playing around them. Southern is an editor at Duke University Press and a historian who has boundless enthusiasm and curiosity for history on both the local and global scale. He lived about a mile from the Hollow Rock Store on Erwin Road for 32 years, and Duke Forest is his old territory. As we walk through the woods on this overcast April day, he shares tidbits of local lore and history that I hurriedly scribble down in my notebook.

Standing beneath the pale green spring canopy, we talk about the origin of these rock piles, musing

about whether they could be Native American cairns, or whether farmers used them to control erosion, or whether they were simply tossed aside as settlers cleared the woodland for plowing. "Stones were heartbreaking things," says Southern. "They can hobble horses and break plows, so farmers removed them from fields when they could." Although the Native American theory seems more romantic, we eventually decide that it is unlikely, and continue walking through the dim woods toward New Hope Creek.

The traces of Duke Forest's past inhabitants are inscribed in stone: spear points, building foundations, chimneys, rock walls, and grave markers. Some of these cultural records have clear origins, such as the remnants of the Patterson and Robson gristmills on New Hope Creek. But the more you dig into the past here, the more questions arise. Since only a few archaeological surveys have been conducted in the Forest's six disjunct divisions, sometimes you just have to speculate. Who built the rock wall beneath the old white oak in the Eno Division? What was historian William Boyd referring to when he wrote that "Indians undoubtedly had a village of considerable size at Patterson's Mill" in *The Story of Durham*?

Low rock walls, crumbling house foundations, unmarked gravestones, fence posts, deep erosion



Most old tobacco barns such as this one on the Duke Forest have collapsed and their foundations are all that remain. Duke Forest Photo Collection.



Remains of Robson's Mill, Korstian Division. Photo by Ida Phillips Lynch.

gullies, faint road beds, and a few mill dams are tantalizing traces of Duke Forest's past. Historians know enough about these remnants to piece together the human history in select areas of the Forest. Their work tells us that the Forest's past land use mirrors that of the Piedmont overall.



One of several family grave sites in the Duke Forest. Duke Forest Photo Collection.

"A new degree in scholarship is taken as soon as we learn to read in the woods as well as we read in the study."

– Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*, 1838

Reading the Landscape

Clues imbedded in the landscape can provide a biography of past residents and their impacts on the land. In "Landscape History and Ecological Change," published in the July 1989 *Journal of Forest History*, Norman L. Christensen Jr., professor of ecology and founding dean of the Nicholas School of the Environment and Earth Sciences, explains how the plant world can provide a record of past human activity:

The species that compose a forest community can also provide information about its past. The presence of shade-intolerant trees in the forest canopy is usually a sign of past disturbance. This is true today in the southeastern United States, where shade-intolerant trees such as pine or tulip tree in the forest canopy provide a reliable measure of the nature and extent of past disturbance. . . . Even some herbaceous plants indicate past forest history. For example, in forests of the southeastern U.S. piedmont, the common garden periwinkle (*Vinca minor*) is a faithful indicator of the location of old homesites and graveyards.



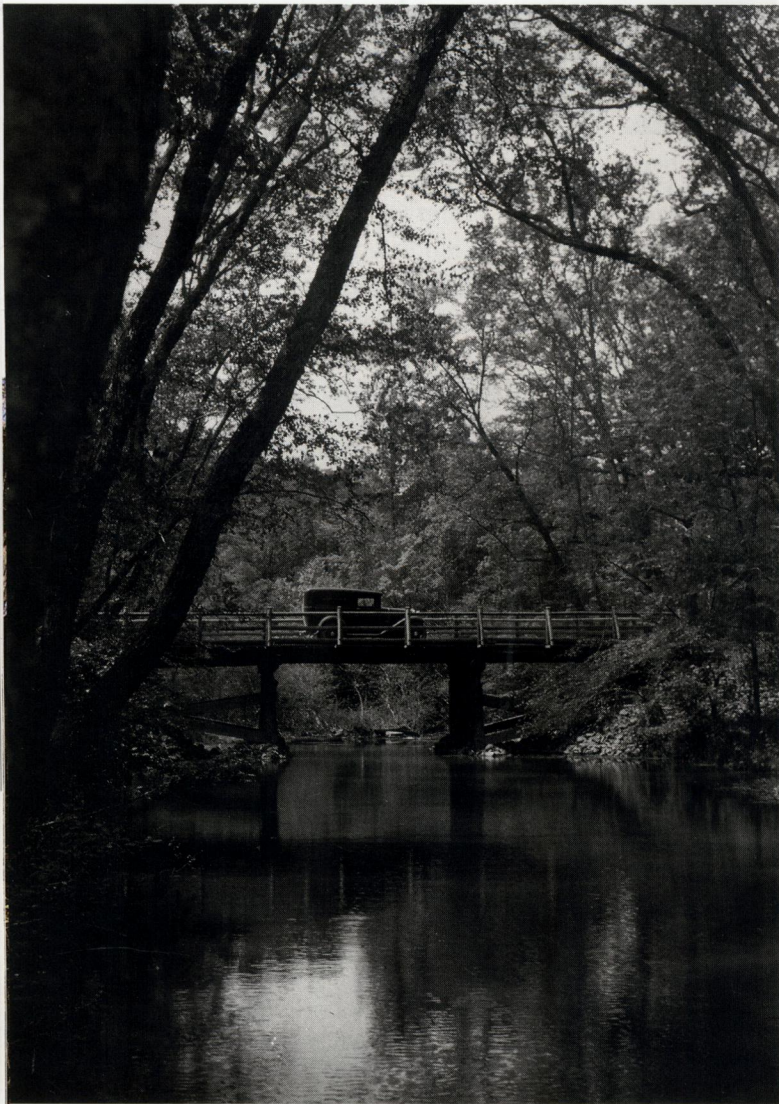
Natural springs once provided drinking water for many home sites. Duke Forest Photo Collection.

Learning to interpret these vestiges of the past takes time. "As they walk around the Duke Campus, some students see the big trees and feel like they're walking through an ancient forest," says Christensen. "But 130 years ago, Duke's campus was a cotton field. If you look very closely you can see the gullies and rows where cotton was planted. There have been enormous changes in this area, and people are often astounded to learn what happened here in the past."

Christensen has used Duke Forest as his outdoor classroom for 30 years, and the Forest is prominently featured in some of his classes. On a muggy August day in 2005, Christensen led one such class, a group of incoming Nicholas School students, on a walk to one of his favorite spots in the Forest: the Wooden Bridge on New Hope Creek.

"To understand this forest you have to understand people's interactions as well," he told the attentive group. He then summarized the changes reflected in the evolving woodlands of Duke Forest. He described the collisions between Native American and European culture, the shift from subsistence farming to market farming in the Piedmont, and the "social downward spiral that was tied to the decline of the landscape." He told the students that they were standing just downstream from the ruins of the

Robson gristmill and homeplace, where a family's fortunes were intimately tied to their environment. This family of Scotch-English settlers dammed the creek and built a stone and wooden gristmill that served the local community and may have sparked the growth of other cottage industries. But by 1880 the mill pond had backed up with sediment, and New Hope Creek's mill culture was in decline.



The bridge over New Hope Creek between Compartments 16 and 19, New Hope Creek Division, built by the Civilian Conservation Corps with material provided by Duke Forest staff, 1934. Duke Forest Photo Collection.

Seeing how humans and nature have shaped this small section of the forest underscores Duke Forest's great value as a place to observe the effects of land use and settlement. "The Forest is a continuum that goes all the way back to when it was forest primeval," explains Christensen. "You can look at the Forest and imagine its deep history, as well as its future."

Native Americans in the Duke Forest

As David Southern and I wend our way toward Piney Mountain, we stop to admire a clump of crested dwarf iris blooming atop a boulder on the bank of New Hope Creek. We carefully cross a log over Piney Mountain Creek, and I see a mud turtle swimming in the water. Sedum with white flowers covers a rocky outcrop at the base of Piney Mountain, where wizened cedar trees grow in the sparse soil.

Standing on the outcrop, Southern spots what he was looking for: a line of rocks extending across part of New Hope Creek that forms an eddy in the current. Years ago while researching in deed books, he came across an old estate division that referred to a "fish dam" on this section of the creek. Intrigued, he hiked here and constructed a basket from muscadine and honeysuckle vines in the Native American tradition, and waded



*The dwarf crested iris (*Iris cristata*) is one of the many showy spring flowers in the Duke Forest. Photo by Jeffrey S. Phippen.*

into the water behind the line of rocks and caught a little fish. "It's just a natural, accidental string of rocks that forms a barrier in the creek, and with a bit of human manipulation, it became an effective fish trap," he says with a bemused look on his face.

Archaeology in North Carolina's Piedmont region is a relatively young field. Many of the region's archaeological surveys were initiated in order to excavate and catalog artifacts from sites slated to be flooded by the construction of reservoirs, such as Falls and Jordan Lakes. Although most of the archaeological research conducted in Duke Forest has focused on early European settlements, there are some clues about the first inhabitants.

People first appeared in North Carolina's Piedmont approximately 12,000 to 13,000 years ago, but little

evidence of these Paleo-Indians remains except for the fluted spear points that turn up occasionally in plowed fields and river floodplains. Archaeologists conjecture that Paleo-Indians of the Piedmont survived by hunting small mammals and foraging for nuts, seeds, and fruits, but the lack of solid evidence of their passage led archaeologist Trawick Ward, author of *Time before History*, to dub the Paleo-Indian period in North Carolina a "hazy world." The archaeological record provides more information about the Archaic period, the next phase of Native



New Hope Creek in the Korstian Division. Photo by Jeffrey S. Pippen.

American culture, which lasted from about 8000 to 1000 B.C. Archaeologist Randy Daniel, a professor at East Carolina University, has some hypotheses about Native American activity around present-day Duke Forest during that time period. In 1993, Daniel surveyed the Korstian and Blackwood divisions of the Forest while conducting a comprehensive archaeological study for Orange County. Most of his findings in the county dated from the middle to late Archaic period, approximately 6000 to 1000 B.C.

"Archaic folk were hunters and gatherers," explains Daniel. "Agriculture did not develop until about A.D. 1000, so in the Archaic period Native Americans spent most of their time hunting game and gathering wild food sources. Because of their diet, they could not live permanently in one place, because they would literally eat themselves out of house and home. So it was in their nature to be somewhat nomadic and follow the resources seasonally."

If Native American tribes roamed through present-day Duke Forest, they probably set up temporary hunting camps along ridges and knolls overlooking the rich bottomlands along New Hope, Sand, and Mud Creeks. In addition to white-tailed deer, they hunted wild turkey and mammals such as black bear, rabbit, opossum, gray squirrel, and raccoon. They burned areas of woodland to drive game in "fire drives." They also caught turtles and fished, possibly by building weirs in the creeks. Archaeologists have found concentrations of rock shards on hillsides in the Forest that are thought to have been quarry sites where Native Americans gathered stones to craft spear points and other tools.

Native American culture changed dramatically during the Woodland period, which extended from approximately 1000 B.C. to about A.D. 1600. "Three interrelated innovations marked the end of the Archaic period and the beginning of the Woodland period: pottery-making, semisedentary villages, and horticulture," writes Ward in *Time before History*. A few woodland sites have been excavated in Orange County, along the Eno River near Occaneechi Town,

but evidence found to date leads Daniel to believe that "other than the Eno River villages, Woodland occupation in Orange County was probably limited to hunting trips or other special forays."

The clearest traces of Native American culture after A.D. 1000 in the central Piedmont have been excavated from settlements in the bottomlands of the Eno, Flat, and Haw Rivers and their tributaries. In the early 1700s, small Siouan-speaking tribes inhabited Orange and Chatham Counties, including the Eno, Occaneechi, Adshusheer, Shocoree, and Sissipihaw. Their culture and lifestyle were notably similar: "All built villages of circular bark houses along the rivers and creeks," writes archaeologist James H. Merrell in *Excavating Occaneechi Town*. "All followed a seasonal subsistence routine that balanced farming the bottomlands along the river, fishing the nearby waterways, hunting in the hills or canebrakes, and gathering wild plants at selected sites." Perhaps the Occaneechi Indians, who settled near Hillsborough, traveled through the Duke Forest woodlands in search of prey.

When the first European settlers arrived in Piedmont North Carolina in the 1740s, they found a landscape that had been modified by Native Americans. "Animals seeking salt licks, water holes, and fording places, and Indians following their prey or traversing their blazed paths on the ridges had threaded the forest with trails which the explorers and traders made use of," writes historian and genealogist Jean Bradley Anderson in her book *Durham County*.

Primary among the trails was an ancient route known to the Europeans as the Indian Trading Path or the Occaneechi Trail. It led from present Augusta, Georgia, to the Catawba Indians near the North Carolina border, northeast across North Carolina (passing through what would become Durham County) to Fort Henry, an important trading post in Virginia now known as Petersburg, on up to Bermuda Hundred on the James River.

The Trading Path provided the Native American tribes with an important trade route for exchanging spear points, baskets, and pottery with distant tribes and for trading deerskins for European goods such as knives, toys, and later, guns and alcohol. The exact route of the Trading Path is hotly debated among local historians, but it is thought to have roughly paralleled today's Interstate 85, running near present-day Duke Forest. The trail crossed the Eno River west of Hillsborough and may have extended into the Forest in the Hillsboro Division.

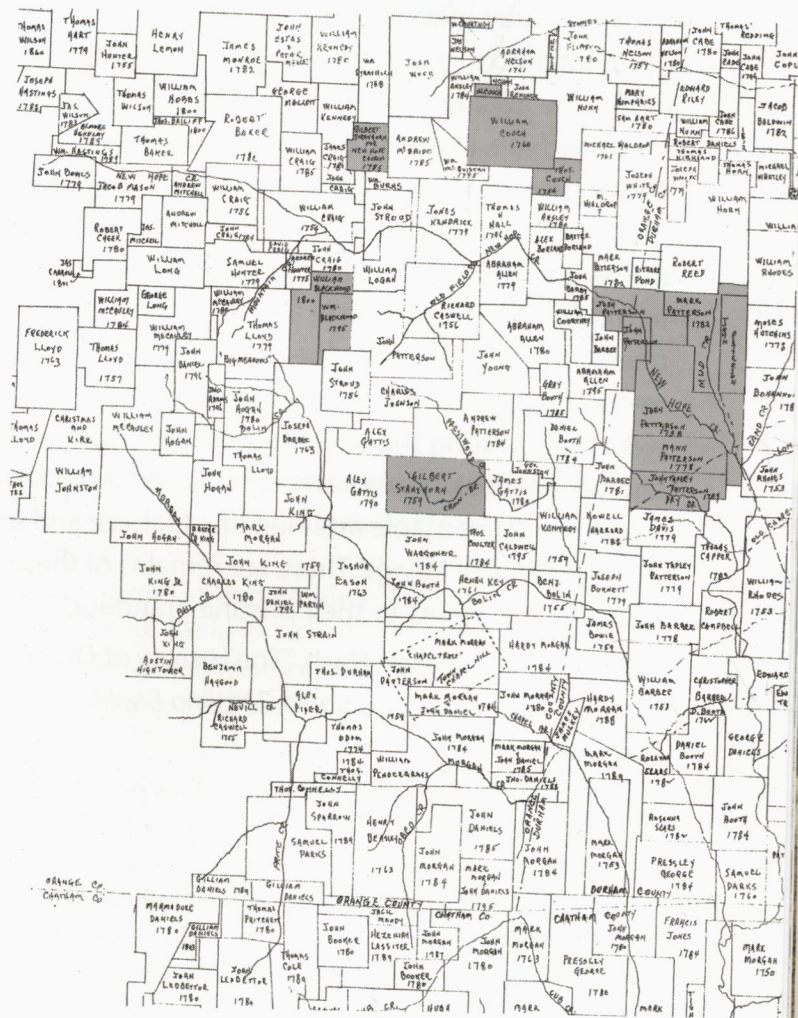
John Lawson, the young surveyor general of the Carolina colony, traveled on the Trading Path as he explored the hinterlands of North and South Carolina. He witnessed the waning of Native American culture in the Piedmont: when he visited Occaneechi Town in 1701, the original inhabitants were suffering from the effects of ills that arrived in the country with the Europeans, including a medley of diseases such as smallpox and measles. By the time the first land grants were issued in Piedmont North Carolina, Native Americans had almost faded from the region and many of them had retreated to other states to join the remnants of other tribes, such as the Catawba Indians in South Carolina. "Except for a few scattered, isolated families whose relatives remain in the region today, the first Europeans to permanently settle in the North Carolina Piedmont found only abandoned villages and vacant fields," writes Ward.

European Settlers

When Europeans began trickling into present-day Durham and Orange Counties in the 1740s, the untrammled Piedmont was called the "backcountry" or "Hill-Country." Most of these early settlers journeyed from northern states and North Carolina's coast in search of cheap, fertile farm land. A wave of English settlers emigrated from the first North Carolina settlements in the eastern part of the state, and another group traveled

from Virginia on the Indian Trading Path. A tremendous influx of German and Scotch-Irish settlers entered the region by following the Great Philadelphia Wagon Road from Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Maryland.

These Europeans settled in the area that eventually became Orange County, a region that early North Carolina historian Francis Nash described in biblical terms in 1910: "In its genesis, Orange County, like the earth, was without form and void."



This map, prepared in 1973 by A. B. Markham, depicts a portion of the original "old Orange County" land grants and shows parts of the present Orange, Chatham, and Durham Counties. The names Strayhorn, Blackwood, Couch, and Patterson are discernible, among many others. Courtesy of Annie P. Markham and A. B. Markham, Jr.

In fact, when the county was formed in 1752, it had distinct boundaries and comprised some 3,500 square miles, extending from Virginia southward to the northern portion of present-day Lee County. Between 1770 and 1881, Orange was whittled down as portions of the region were carved out to create 10 new counties, including Durham, where part of Duke Forest now lies.

"It was a country of high hills and narrow valleys, with here and there gray, gravelly ridges, or elevated plateaus with much intermixture of sand with clay. The valleys were always fertile. The hillsides and tops and sandy uplands were only moderately so, while the gravelly ridges were generally poor and non-productive. Throughout all this territory, except on the poorer ridges, the forest growth was magnificent, with the oaks predominating. The soil seemed peculiarly adapted to the flourishing growth of all the hard wood, deciduous trees. Oaks four feet in diameter at their base were not uncommon, and occasional specimens six feet in diameter were found. Along the streams these oaks and hickories, birches, beeches, poplars and sycamores towered high, and the elm and the maple attained unusual size and unusual magnificence of foliage. There are remains of these forests to-day, which testify to their pristine grandeur."

– Francis Nash, "The History of Orange County,"
The North Carolina Booklet, October 1910

Whether they were fleeing religious persecution and economic hardship in their native Europe, or escaping the already crowded northern colonies, the settlers must have been pleased with this hospitable, sparsely settled region, which Nash proclaimed "one of the most beautiful sections of North Carolina." The rich floodplains of the Haw, Eno, Little, and Flat Rivers, and tributaries such as New Hope Creek in the southern part of the county provided farm and pasture land. The homesteaders coveted land on or near a water source, so many of the early land grants

spanned out from waterways. Once settlers located a desirable tract of land they went through the cumbersome process of obtaining a land grant from Lord Granville, one of the original Lords Proprietors, who held title to 26,000 square miles of North Carolina. Most of the early land grants were between 100 and 500 acres. Although the first settlers did not leave extensive written records, researchers and genealogists have compiled histories of some of the first colonists to settle in present-day Duke Forest and neighboring areas.

Finding New Hope

In a shady, low-lying grove of red cedars off of N.C.

Highway 86, a few miles from Duke Forest's Eno Division, you can visit the graves of some of the first Europeans who settled in and around the Forest's Eno, Korstian, and Blackwood Divisions. More than 200 hand-incised and unmarked gravestones mark the resting places of the founders of the New Hope Church. In early spring, blooming ephemerals such as blue-eyed grass, green-and-gold, and periwinkle add color to the grays and browns of the stones and cedars. A mottled gray stone marks the site of the original New Hope Presbyterian Church, which was built here about 1756. The

founders of the church, who may have migrated from the same area in northern Ireland, had originally settled along the Haw River in an area called Hawfields in the late 1740s, where they founded Hawfields Church in 1755. Hearing rumors that their land grants might be disputed, several of the families, including William Craige and Gilbert Strayhorn, moved 10 miles eastward to claim land along New Hope Creek, where they founded New Hope Presbyterian Church.



New Hope Presbyterian Church Cemetery. Photo by Ida Phillips Lynch.

Springing from its source in western Orange County near Hillsborough, New Hope Creek flows southeastward into Durham and Chatham Counties and drains into the Cape Fear River (what is today the Jordan Reservoir). In *A Historical Sketch of New Hope Church in Orange County, N.C.*, Reverend David I. Craig noted that “for more than a century it [New Hope Creek] was famous for its abundant production of fish, and at the present time few streams of like size yield a better supply or quality.” Craig describes how the pilgrims named their new home:

They came into the neighborhood of New Hope, where they saw rich bottoms, numerous creeks and springs, spacious meadow lands, and fine forest trees. They had an eye for the best lands, and here—after weary wanderings, untold hardships, and anxieties of body and mind—they were inspired with “new hopes,” and at once determined upon their permanent home. They looked upon the prospect and called it a “New Hope.” This is the explanation that has been handed down to me through generations, of the origin of the name of the stream which is called “New Hope” unto this day.

The founding families spanned out around the nearby landscape and established homesteads along the creek and nearby waterways such as the Eno River. William Craige (the family name later became Craig) “settled, lived and died about two or three miles west of the church, on the south bank of New Hope stream.” He and his four sons owned “all the lands on both sides of New Hope stream, several miles in width and extending up and down the stream, . . . to the present possessions of William Robson, on the road leading from Hillsboro to Chapel Hill, embracing a large area of country south and west from the church,” according to David Craig. William Robson operated a gristmill on New Hope Creek in the 1800s.

Gilbert Strayhorn settled along present-day New Hope Church Road, near Duke Forest’s Eno Division, and later amassed a large property that bordered the Craig holdings on New Hope Creek.

Farther afield, “William Blackwood, one of the first settlers, and also the Kirkland family, located to the south-west of the Craigs, and owned large bodies of land known to this day as ‘the big meadows,’” writes Craig in his *Historical Sketch of New Hope Church*. “And to the east of these lands is quite an elevation, which has always been known as ‘the Blackwood mountain.’” Today, 744-foot Blackwood Mountain is a prominent feature in Duke Forest’s Blackwood Division. The “meadows” remained a common local term, as the 1918 *Soil Survey of Orange County* noted that about two square miles between Blackwood and Balls Mountains (present-day Bald Mountain, also located in the Blackwood Division) contained “natural prairie” and that when “Hillsboro was first settled the farmers each year came down to the area now known as the ‘Big Meadows’ and cut and cured hay from the native grasses. Since then the area has grown up to forest.”

Settling the Land

These hardy, self-sufficient yeoman farmers worked with their hands and primitive tools to build one-room log houses, clear and burn the forests for farm and pasture land, and plant their crops. Living as they did in a landlocked region with primitive roads, they were unable to transport their crops to market, so they tended to be subsistence farmers, growing peas, beans, corn, wheat, and potatoes on small properties. According to Randy Daniel, "During the last half of the 18th century more than 75 percent of property owners [in Orange County] held between 40 and 200 hectares (100–500 acres); only 5 percent of the land owners held more than 405 hectares (1,000 acres)."

Only farmers with holdings over 500 acres in size and a large labor force comprised of family members or slaves had the manpower to grow labor-intensive crops such as tobacco and cotton. Most Piedmont landowners lacked such a labor force: the slave

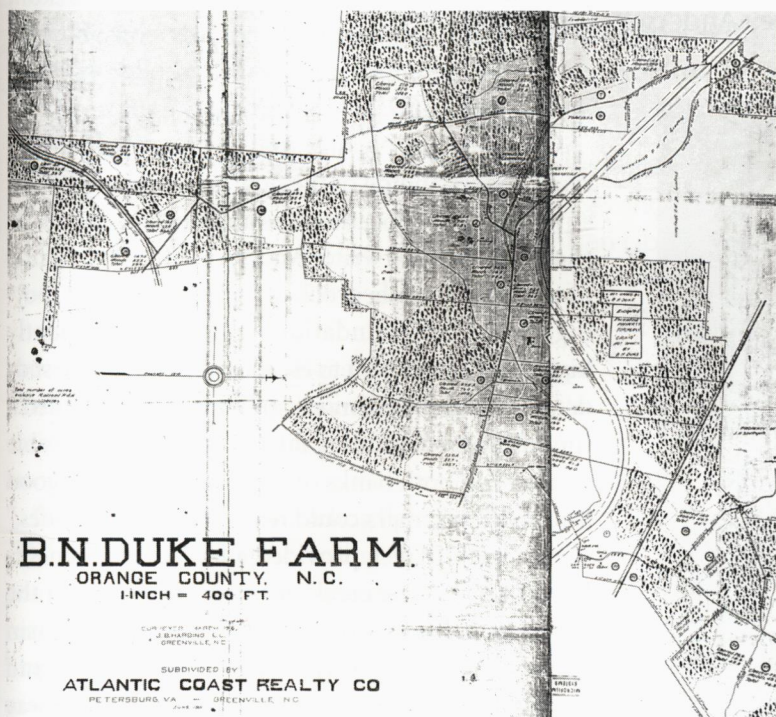
population in North Carolina's Piedmont region was smaller than that of the large plantations of the Coastal Plain. According to Kenzer, in 1755, 8 percent of the white families in Orange County owned slaves. By 1860, 33 percent of the Orange County population was African American, and the majority of these people were held as slaves.

"My grandfather used to keep hunting dogs for Ben Duke when he was a young man, and they'd come out here to what they called the Duke Farm, which was originally owned by the Strayhorns."

– Bob Strayhorn, descendant of Gilbert Strayhorn

Families supported each other through tightknit communities that often centered on the neighborhood church. As families expanded, new generations tended to settle near their parents, and marriage between cousins was customary. Neighborhoods organized around these clans developed throughout Orange County and assumed the names of the prominent family or natural feature, including the New Hope, Eno, Cane Creek, White Cross, and Patterson neighborhoods.

The colonists widened historical trade routes and game trails, expanding the road network and enabling wagon trade with distant communities such as Fayetteville and Petersburg, Virginia, that were gateways to seaports. Road intersections and river fords attracted businesses such as general stores, post offices, and gristmills. The enterprises often became the nexus of the neighborhood, where people gathered to socialize, gossip, and barter.



A 1909 survey plat showing the B. N. Duke Farm, a portion of which is contained in the Eno Division of the Duke Forest. Office of the Duke Forest.

Mill Culture in Duke Forest

Before the adoption of steam power after the Civil War, colonists depended upon water-powered mills to grind their household wheat and corn and process wheat into flour to be sold at market. While not as extensive or storied as the mills that historically supported communities along the Eno River, several mills on New Hope Creek once sustained a lively mill culture.

"Mills played more than an industrial and economic role in the building of that early society. They played a social role as well, offering isolated families a place to meet their neighbors and to exchange news, opinions, encouragement, and information, and where they could hear the harangues of county politicians and list their taxables with the sheriff's constables. The millpond offered a swimming and fishing hole to the men and boys, and the thunder of the intricate machinery and glorious rush of water over the wheel added wonder and pleasure to their flat, work-ridden lives."

– Jean Bradley Anderson, *Durham County*



Remains of the Patterson mill dam, Korstian Division, along New Hope Creek. Photo by Ida Phillips Lynch.

Downstream from the sandstone bluffs of Hollow Rock, you can see remnants of the Patterson mill dam, an impressive 13-foot-high rock structure spanning more than 90 feet across the creek. A massive boulder looms over the creek and provides a base for one end of the dam about 300 feet upstream from Erwin Road. John Patterson, who immigrated to North Carolina from Maryland and Virginia, received a land grant for several parcels along this section of

the creek in 1744, according to a history of the Patterson family by Mann Cabe Patterson. Patterson is thought to have operated the first gristmill on that reach of the creek and his family apparently maintained this enterprise in the future. According to a genealogy written by Hugh Conway Browning, in 1793, Mann Patterson, George Johnston, and Page Patterson obtained permission to build a gristmill

and sawmill on New Hope Creek.

Choosing a successful mill site required an intimate understanding of the flow and topography of a stream. "A mill's location was an integral factor in its success or failure," writes Anderson. "It required first of all a site where bedrock could offer a secure footing for the mill foundation, preferably sufficiently high above the stream to escape the worst of the sudden flooding in Piedmont streams. Next it needed a site within a burgeoning farm population accessible by roads on both banks of the stream and by a good ford so that farmers could reach it from both sides."

New Hope Creek provided a few natural benefits for gristmills. The creek drops dramatically in the long descent down the edge of the Triassic Basin between N.C. Highway 86 and Erwin Road, and the rock outcrops that occur along the waterway were sturdy and well placed to anchor the dams. Patterson's mill was strategically located where the

“On Saturday last ... we had a grand Pic-Nic party ... if it will not tire you, I will endeavour to give you some idea, how a Pic-Nic party is conducted on Chapel Hill. The day was a very beautiful one, and about 9 o'clock all the vehicles which the village could boast were paraded in front of Miss Nancy's and after being almost filled with provisions, fishing rods, and the whole party including myself, mounted to our respective seats, and preceded by our fine College Band marched out of town. We found the roads to be in excellent order, and as was appointed, we drove out to the Mill, some five miles off, belonging to a Mrs. Patterson. When we reached there, all commenced fishing, but finding but little sport in practicing the 'angling art,' we adjourned to the Mill-House, where a dance was got up, and continued until we received the order from Miss Nancy to come to dinner. The table was spread under some large trees by the bank of the creek, and spread with 'eatables.' ... The exercise we had taken gave us fine appetites, and we did full justice to the good things set before us. ... The day, upon the whole, was a very pleasant one, and as such things are rather unusual here, will no doubt be long remembered by both young and old.”



Hollow Rock along New Hope Creek. Photo by Ida Phillips Lynch.

– Letter from Rufus L. Patterson to Samuel F. Patterson, April 18, 1849, in the Jones and Patterson Family Papers #578, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

precolonial New Hope Road forded New Hope Creek (at the present-day Erwin Road bridge over the creek)—“on the ‘shore line’ of the Triassic Basin,” remarks David Southern.

“Mill owners were the leading lights of their day,” says Southern. “They were the most prominent people in a community because building a mill required capital for building and buying equipment like millstones. The Patterson Mill seat became a major community center, with a post office.” Mann Patterson’s grandson, Samuel F. Patterson, built a general store in the Patterson neighborhood in 1875;

it was the predecessor of two other general stores and community centers in the area, Trice’s Store and the Hollow Rock Country Store.

Robson Mill

George Johnston sold a 143-acre property, including a grist and merchant mill, to William and Edward Robson in 1811. The Robson family operated the gristmill near the present-day Wooden Bridge for more than 60 years, but today the remnants of this enterprise are slowly sinking into

the earth. In late April, jack-in-the-pulpit covers the red clay of the foundation and, rather than the hum of machinery, one hears the exuberant calls of oven-birds and other songbirds. Sections of the reddish-blue stone walls of the two-story millhouse are still standing. The hollowed-out headrace, the channel that carries the water that turned the mill wheel, is still intact, although trees and shrubs are growing in the channel and on the retaining wall. The tail-race, which returned the diverted water to the creek, is also visible.



Jack-in-the-pulpit (*Arisaema triphyllum*) at the Robson Mill site. Photo by Ida Phillips Lynch.

The Robsons were enterprising stoneworkers who built scores of stone walls that persist to this day, leading David Southern to dub them “lithomaniacs.” The late Glenn Whitfield, whose family settled in the area around Whitfield Road in the 18th century, recalled in a 1994 interview that “back in those days, instead of fencing up a piece of land for cow pasture, everyone just let their livestock range the country. And a man had a brand, like out West. So Robson and Johnston [a neighboring miller] gathered stones from out of the field and used them to build rock fences that kept the cattle out of his field.”

The Robsons sold their property to Robert Sharp in 1873. Erwin Cotton Mills purchased the land in 1925, and Duke University acquired it soon afterward, in 1927. Today the Johnston mill is protected in a Triangle Land Conservancy preserve upstream from the Robson mill.

Mill culture in the Piedmont thrived into the late 1800s. In 1860 “nearly half of the county’s [Orange] manufacturing firms were mills that ground the locally grown corn and wheat,” according to Robert Kenzer. Some of the mills along New Hope Creek likely operated until the early 20th century, but three factors caused their demise: the development of



Robson family cemetery. The periwinkle (*Vinca minor*) ground cover shown here has now been replaced with the invasive Japanese stilt grass (*Microstegium vimineum*). Photo by Judson Edeburn.

steam power enabled mills to move into growing industrial centers like Durham, sediment built up in the waterways, and devastating floods in the late 1800s and early 1900s washed away many dams and millponds.

The stone foundation of the Robson family homeplace lies uphill from the creek in a bramble of briars and saplings. The family cemetery is tucked into the woods beneath a few gnarled cedars about a quarter mile from the mill site. Three marked fieldstones weather under a mat of periwinkle and a recent invader, *Microstegium vimineum*. The inscriptions on the headstones memorialize these hard-working settlers, and give some indication of the lives they led:

Ann Robson
Wife of Wm. Robson
Born September 22, 1795
Decd. Feb. 7, 1872

William (Wm.) Robson
Born Royal Oak, England
May 25, 1783
Dec'd 4 April 1871

Memory of John Robson
Decd. June 28 1842
Agd. 23 yrs

Hartford Mill Complex

The bustling Hartford Mill Complex was, according to the late historian Mary Claire Engstrom, historically located in the present-day Hillsboro Division along the Eno River. In 1978, Engstrom presented the first formal history of this sizeable mill complex at a seminar on waterwheels and windmills, held in conjunction with the bicentennial of the West Point on the Eno Mill.

Engstrom determined that the complex was located on the west bank of the Eno, where U.S. 70 crosses the river. In 1755, a Quaker miller named Joseph Maddock and his apprentice John Frazier built the original mill, not far downstream from the mouth of McGowan's Creek. By 1768, the property had been sold to Thomas Hart. Engstrom wrote that "the genial, gregarious Hart was a daring land speculator and a born gambler who delighted in taking long chances." Hart's mill soon became a seedbed for other enterprises. According to Engstrom, "Maddocks' old grist mill under its new owner became the nucleus for a sizeable village of 'Mills Manufactories, &c,' as Hart called them—a saw mill, an oil mill, a fulling mill, a distillery with two large stills, a weaving house, a tan-yard from which wagons regularly took loads of shoes into Hillsborough, plus a veritable army of skilled workmen, both black and white: carpenters, painters, brickmasons, tanners, cobblers, smiths, weavers, and so on."

The 1779 tax records indicate that Thomas Hart was the richest man in Orange County. But the following year he left the area, probably for political reasons. By 1782 Jesse Benton had taken over ownership of the mill complex. His son, the future senator Thomas Hart Benton, was born the same year. Jesse Benton died in 1790, and the plantation and complex were dissolved upon his death. Today, few traces of this thriving industrial center remain.



Tom Magnuson (on right) of the Trading Path Association has searched this area of Orange County extensively for evidence of the Hartford Mill and the Hart and Benton families. Duke Forest Photo Collection.

Changing Land Use Patterns

Until the Reconstruction, the greatest agent of change in the landscape was farming. Prior to the Civil War, most Orange and Durham County residents scratched out a living by growing corn, tobacco, and wheat. An inferior road system continued to plague the region and hinder the marketing of crops until the advent of a good roads campaign in the early 1900s. The stories of two families that lived in the Blackwood and Durham Divisions of the Forest illustrate typical farm life in the area and reveal how farmers' agricultural and land management practices produced the infertile farmland that became Duke Forest.

Farming in the Blackwood Division

To an untrained eye, the significance of the antebellum Hogan Plantation is not immediately apparent. The word "plantation" conjures a certain visual image that is incongruous with the scanty remnants

of this farm. But archaeologists believe that the site contains significant information about the lives of enslaved African-Americans prior to the Civil War.

Alexander Hogan established a 380-acre plantation near present-day Eubanks Road in Chapel Hill in 1838. According to Randy Daniel, who helped nominate the Hogan property to the National Register of Historic Places, "The land had been in the family since the 1700s. . . . Wheat, corn, oats, and barley were the primary plantation crops."

Hogan married Matilda Robson in 1854, and they had eight children. By the end of the 1850s, Hogan had 13 young slaves working on his farm. Matilda inherited the farm when Alexander died in 1872, and when she died around 1890, the surviving children inherited the farm and sold part of the property to the Hogans' former slaves. The late Essie Leak, whose ancestors lived and worked on the Hogan Plantation, lived near the farm her entire life, and recalled the Hogan house as a two-story wooden plank house.



Essie Hogan Leak (center, in blue), great-granddaughter of Alexander Hogan, at the ceremony of the National Register of Historic Places registration of the Alexander Hogan Plantation Archeological Site, 1996. Duke Forest Photo Collection.



The Hogan Plantation Archeological Site, Orange County, was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in March 1996. Office of the Duke Forest.

Ghost Roads

The ghost roads of Duke Forest mark the routes of wagon and trading paths. These dim hollowed-out depressions are found throughout the woodlands and often parallel existing modern roads.

The New Hope Road

This precolonial road is a principal tributary of the Great Trading Path, and its gist corresponds loosely to a section of present U.S. 15. A connector of ancient habitations—sites that would develop into Oxford, Chapel Hill, and Pittsboro—it traversed three major watersheds: Tar-Pamlico, Neuse, and Cape Fear. Broken sections of it exist today as city streets and county roads; more of it, now abandoned, may be discovered as deep gouges in woods and back yards. In some subdivisions, these eroded traces have been filled, packed, and smoothed-over to the surrounding level, and thus have been permanently erased from the landscape.

The road is called University Road in many old deeds and plats. The Bennehans, Camerons, and other early trustees of the University of North Carolina, traveled this road to conduct university business. Later names in other locations are Old Oxford Road, Old Chapel Hill

Road, Road to Petersburg, and Road to Chatham Courthouse, and all of these refer to a single, ancient path.

The road enters Duke Forest in the Durham Division, north of N.C. 751 and east of U.S. 15-501 Bypass, where a wonderful link has been perfectly maintained. This section of the road is unique because it is cobbled. Apparently an early owner of that tract decided to fix his section of the road in a way that would be permanent, and he succeeded. The cobbled section corresponds neatly with lines of old deeds and ends near another Duke Forest road. From there, the older track runs cross-country; on the other side of N.C. 751 it continues again as a Duke Forest trail of gravel and cinders to a bridge alongside the original ford of Mud Creek. At that point the track of New Hope Road veers from the maintained path and can be picked up intermittently, sometimes as fence lines beside fields.

South of where it crosses Cornwallis Road, the old road is evident in backyards and woods, and a piece of it is still used for farm vehicles within the Blaylock land. Very near the junction of Mount Sinai Road, its track merges with present Erwin Road, and it followed that loosely, from side to side, for about three-and-one-half miles to Old Oxford Road, just south of Weaver Dairy Road.

This section, for two hundred years, was Patterson territory. By tradition, the large white house at the intersection of Erwin and Whitfield roads contains a room or two from the original John Patterson cabin, the homesite marked "I. Paterson" on the 1770 Collet map. Among his descendants were Mann Patterson and John Tapley Patterson, and two early nineteenth-century plats mark the course of University Road through their lands on both sides of New Hope Creek. In addition, these plats demonstrate the junction with the important Hillsborough-Fayetteville stagecoach road, of which the unpaved portion of Cambridge road is a vestige. A large pit in Duke Forest alongside Erwin Road and near the sites of Trice's Store and Patterson's Mill marks this ancient junction.



The cobblestone roadbed known as the Old Oxford Road, or New Hope Road, passes through the Duke Forest. Duke Forest Photo Collection.

– David Southern, from an unpublished essay

Today all that remains of this plantation are the stone foundations of four or five structures and a cemetery with unmarked fieldstones. Students from Elon University conducted a preliminary archaeological survey of the site in 1993, and Daniel and other archaeologists later examined the site, which was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1996.

Daniel sees great potential for future archaeological surveys of the site, because "it represents an example of a small nineteenth-century plantation that spanned the antebellum and postbellum occupation of Orange County. Virtually no archaeological work has been done on any such site in the county." In particular, he believes that the ruins could provide valuable clues about African American life of the time, since "Much of the black American role in plantation life—and early American history in general—is recorded in the archaeological record rather than the written one."

"It must have been 1975 that Bob Peet and I took William Niering, a distinguished senior ecologist, out into Duke Forest. We were walking in an area of the Korstian Division that has since been badly damaged by Hurricane Fran. We came upon a giant oak tree with big spreading branches and a bunch of little oak trees. This tree must have been three feet in diameter and near it was a row of red cedar, a lot of them dead, and Frank looked at that and said, 'Well this was an old pasture, and this oak tree was in the middle of pasture. The red cedar was where the fence line had been, because birds would sit on the fence and defecate the cedar seeds.' He looked at the landscape and could tell a story about that place and the lives of people that once lived here. And I was amazed. I had always considered that having to deal with human effects was a negative thing—but at that moment I realized that in fact in order to study nature you also have to study people. People's lives are intertwined with the landscape. There are very few places where you can go in North Carolina that have not been touched by human hands."

– Norman L. Christensen Jr., 2006

The Couch Family Farm

The record of one Orange County farming family provides a meaningful illustration of farm life in land now managed as Duke Forest. In 1984, Duke University student Rachel Frankel tackled an ambitious thesis project for an honors history class: writing the biography of the land owned by the Thomas Couch family.

Frankel's thesis examined how five generations of a family used a piece of land near Piney Mountain Creek from 1750 to 1950 in the present-day Durham Division. While many historians have documented the archetypal southern plantation, Frankel profiled a small southern farm. Her research examined how popular farming methods contributed to the abandonment of the farm after the Civil War, a pattern repeated on small farms throughout the region.

Frankel recalls how her inaugural visit to the Couch farm seized her imagination: "At the suggestion of Syd Nathans, director of the seminar, I

went to the farm with Norm Christensen. I had never walked through the woods with a botanist, nor had I thought about the history of land use. When Norm talked in one sentence about the Couches, patterns of land use, and forest growth, this uniquely complex history unfolded, and suddenly the forest was dynamic in ways I had never considered. When we walked into this old broken-down house and found these old letters sticking out of the floorboards, it just became irresistibly intriguing to me."

By studying primary sources such as the Couch family's estate papers, deeds, property plats, wills, and letters, as well as interviewing surviving family

members, Frankel wove an intricate tapestry that examined “the possibilities and the limits of certain agricultural practices and the intelligent yet doomed approach to land-use the Couches chose,” writes Frankel.

The Couch family’s story in North Carolina began in 1754, when Thomas Couch received a 300-acre land grant near Piney Mountain Creek. This Scotch-Irish farmer had left Virginia in 1739 in search of better farm land after his Virginia holdings had become barren. Frankel explains that the size of Couch’s land grant influenced how he chose to manage his new property: “His land was so abundant that, as land became exhausted by eighteenth-century farming practices, he could afford to clear new ground. . . . Thomas did not have to waste his precious labor and capital resources on low-yielding land. . . . The most intelligent choice was to produce the greatest yields with the smallest amount of capital and land.”

Couch initially planted small areas of corn for cornmeal and hominy and supplemented the family’s table by hunting, growing a vegetable garden, and fishing in New Hope and Piney Mountain Creeks. He transported his winter wheat to Robson’s Mill for grinding. As the village of Hillsborough (then spelled Hillsboro) grew, Couch took pork, grains, and some dairy products to market, where he probably sold them by bartering. Couch was fortunate that the old Hillsboro-Fayetteville road ran through his property, making it easier for him to travel to the market by wagon.

Couch followed a pattern of “shifting-field agriculture” that involved farming a field until it became unproductive, abandoning

the field, and clearing more woodland to plant a new crop. These agricultural practices were widespread among southeastern farmers at the time. “Prior to the USA’s Civil War in the 1860s, agricultural fields were mainly derived from newly cleared forest, from ‘fresh soil,’” write Daniel Richter and Daniel Markewitz in their book *Understanding Soil Change*. “After the soil’s productive capacity began to decline, land was abandoned. After several years of a forest fallow, the old fields may have been brought back into cultivation by re-clearing and burning, which at least temporarily regenerated nutrient availability.”

Thomas Couch Jr. inherited his father’s property by the turn of the century. Between 1790 and 1823 he purchased additional land, including frontage along Piney Mountain Creek, so that by 1823 the farm comprised 1,600 acres and would have been considered a small plantation. The additional land made it even easier to shift crops around the property.



In some parts of the Forest, only gentle depressions remain where old roadbeds once crossed the landscape. Photo by Ida Phillips Lynch.

In 1850, William Couch Jr. was managing the bulk of the family farm, following his father's farming practices. "William cleared woodland in order to provide fresh ground for growing crops and left the exhausted fields empty to grow wild grasses for grazing his livestock," writes Frankel. "William was also loyal to traditional methods of cultivation. He did not terrace his fields nor did he build hillside ditches. . . . Rather, [he] continued to encourage soil erosion by sowing and reaping his crops up and down the slopes and hillsides." Frankel concluded that William Couch followed these traditional farming methods because he had an ample land base and lacked the resources and transportation to purchase fertilizer.

Even as agricultural reformers like Edward Ruffin introduced soil conservation strategies to the Southeast, many farmers disregarded these practices, causing great consternation among the more enlightened farmers. Frankel writes that in the mid-19th century, Orange County farmer J. W. Norwood spoke to fellow farmers and lamented their poor farming practices, saying that "all three of our great natural laws of agriculture have been disregarded and violated." Norwood chastised the farmers for not rotating crops, preventing soil erosion, or using fertilizer and asked them to "behold the melancholy consequence of such a system of cultivation in the exhausted and worn-out condition of our lands, as of this moment they lie spread out before us to our view."

The farm passed to William's sons upon his death. In 1861, John W. and William Couch Jr. left the farm to fight in the Civil War. In their absence much of the farm was left untouched and may have had time to recover, but in the aftermath of the war, they returned to a land where "nearly all farmers in the southeastern USA, black and white, faced almost insurmountable operational problems," write Richter and Markewitz. "Communities were decimated. Nearly four million African-Americans had been freed from slavery, yet few owned land, animals, or farm implements. . . . Agricultural statistics

of the 1870 Census illustrate a region that was crippled, poor, and not likely to move ahead rapidly."

In this unsettled environment the historic makeup of the traditional family farm began to unravel. "Farm abandonment was very rapid in the 1920s. In the 1930s social scientists considered soil exhaustion a major player in farm abandonment, but I think when we look back now we know it was part of a much bigger picture. After the Civil War, many family-owned farms were divided into smaller farms and tenant farming and sharecropping developed," says Richter. Fertilizers became commercially available, cotton growing began to expand in the western United States and compete with the southern market, and people moved to cities like Durham to work in factories.

By the early 20th century, work opportunities in industrial cities such as Durham lured many young farmers away from the family property. When John W. Couch died in 1917, his will divided his 300-acre property between his four children: J. W. T. Couch, Nettie Couch, Jennie Cate, and Hibernia Couch. "JWT," the last person to farm the property, moved his 11-member family to Durham in 1920, leaving Nettie Couch as the only family member residing on the property. Nettie Couch survived by selling her handmade quilts and renting part of her property to tenant farmers. But tenant farming was an unreliable source of income and by the time Duke University offered to purchase the Couch property in 1947, the family was willing to sell. Through a life estate, Duke allowed Nettie to continue living on the property until her death and the University ran a power line to her house, which until then had never had electricity.

The lessons from this landscape study remain with Rachel Frankel today. Now the owner of an architectural firm in New York City, Frankel believes that the experience sharpened her vision. "I learned how to look at a landscape and understand it, and that is invaluable to me," she says. "And I learned how to associate generic information like maps and

censuses with human history. A lot of my architectural work is in an urban context, so being able to understand what's right under your feet illuminates it."

One dilapidated, white wooden house remains on the Couch property today, next to the fire trail. The house has no doors, and the beaded board interior walls are faded and buckling. The original Couch homesite lies uphill from that house, past a tributary of Piney Mountain Creek that may have provided the Couches with drinking water. Half-hidden on a knoll amid a tangle of wisteria are remnants of the roofing and part of the foundation of the original postbellum house, which had burned to the ground in the late 1980s. I visited it in the company of Duke Forest manager, Judd Edeburn, and Leanora Minai, a writer in the Duke University Communications Department, in July of 2006. Not far from the house site, we could make out the wooden walls of a structure, which turned out to be an intact, solidly built storage shed that may have once held grain or tools.

Edeburn pulled a nail out of the wall and showed it to us—it was a square "cut nail," he said, one that an archaeologist could use to date the building.

Near the house site, we walked through a grove of 70-year-old loblolly pines on a slope above the little stream. Knee-high oak and tulip poplar seedlings, mushrooms, and partridge berry dotted the brown pine straw underfoot. Edeburn pointed out the corrugated pattern in the ground: the ridges and furrows of the Couch family's farming operation. Some of the rows were plowed uphill, which would have caused the soil to wash away into the creek. Standing under the trees it was hard to imagine that not that long ago—80 years or so—this shady pine stand was an open cotton or tobacco field. "Just think about all the effort the Couch family must have expended to clear this field, and now it's completely overgrown," remarks Edeburn. "This is one of the basic lessons Duke Forest teaches us, every day—how quickly nature can overtake human endeavors."



All that remains of the Nettie Couch house. Lightning likely struck the abandoned home in the late 1980s. Duke Forest Photo Collection.