



# Wilson's Mills Recollections

## Alex Wilson

Interviewed on May 15, 2025

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### Introduction

Alex Wilson, born in 1950, grew up and resided for much of his life in Wilson's Mills, North Carolina. Alex's memories stretch back to a time when the town was defined by its mills, farms, and a tight-knit community of families who helped shape its identity. As a direct descendant of the town's founding family, Alex provides a personal and historical account of Wilson's Mills from its earliest roots through its evolution into the present day.

### Wilson's Mills is Born

The name Wilson's Mills traces back to Alex's great-great-grandfather, John Marshall Wilson, who settled in the area and established a lumber business just behind the present-day elementary school. "He took the name Wilson's Mills because he had a lumber business here... They had a finishing mill there." The mill supplied wood for the Wilson's Mills Christian Church, which still stands today. "All the pews were made of the original wood. It was made there in the mill, the flooring, everything."

### The Bagging Mill

In Alex's youth, the Bagging Mill was a major employer. He noted that local resident Fanny Wilder was a key figure there. His grandfather, Howard Mitchner, played a role in bringing businessman Myron Mackler from Philadelphia to manage the mill. "He found out he was in the bagging business... and talked him into moving from the New York area down here to run the bagging mill." The mill burned down in the late 1970s but had already made its mark on the community.

### Farming Life

Alex remembers Wilson's Mills as a town built on agriculture. "Back then everybody farmed. The biggest thing in Johnson County were the farmers." In his early teens, Alex helped remodel the cotton gin to accommodate new equipment. "They had to raise the gin up about 10 to 15 feet because they moved some new equipment in." His grandfather, Harry Nelson Wilson, also owned a meat provision company across from the current elementary school.

## **Around Town**

Alex grew up near the Old Baptist Church in a brick house on what is now Wilson's Mills Road. "Everybody knew everybody," he said. His family owned many downtown buildings amidst those that once housed the post office and pool hall. "Wilson's Mills as a town used to be a closed-in family community," Alex said. "Most of North Wilson's Mills were workers for the mill and for the farmers around." He recalls longtime neighbors like the Wilders, Whitleys, and Uzzles as essential to the fabric of town life.

## **The School & Water Tank**

The old Wilson's Mills School was likely built in the 1920s and remained a central fixture for many years. "The old school was here until they tore down the building," Alex said, commenting that the new school building was erected just behind where the old one once stood. While he spent most of his school years in Smithfield, he recalled trying out for the Wilson's Mills basketball team in ninth grade. But because he was attending school in Smithfield, he wasn't allowed to join the team (even though the coach put him through all the rigors of an entire tryout!). One game against Clayton left a lasting impression: "We were behind, maybe by 20 points at halftime... the coach walked out!" The gymnasium remains, and so does Alex's memory of climbing the adjacent water tank: "Some slats were rotten on top and you had to squeeze around, looking down about 100 feet or so!"

## **The Train Derailment & Postal Service**

Alex had a front-row seat to the infamous train derailment of the 1970s. "I was sitting in my office right in front of it... I sat and watched the whole thing in slow motion," he recalled. He described the black dust, collapsing cars, and how the embankment was "bulldozed" as the cars crashed through town. Alex also shared memories of the town's early mail delivery system: "A man named Rogers would hang the mailbag up on a huge rack... the train grabbed that mail bag off that post," and in return, incoming mail was tossed to the ground.

## **Epilogue**

Though much of the town has changed, Alex's connection to Wilson's Mills remains unwavering. "What does Wilson's mean to me today? It's home." With every story he shares, Alex brings to life the deep history, community bonds, and enduring legacy of a town built by the hands of those who called it their own.