



# Wilson's Mills Oral History

## Donald Byrd

Interviewed on May 15, 2025

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### Introduction

Donald Byrd, born in 1947, has spent nearly his entire life on the same stretch of farmland in Wilson's Mills. At 77 years old, he shares a rich and heartfelt narrative shaped by a deep connection to the land, the rhythms of farming life, and a tightly woven community. From childhood chores to schoolyard memories, Donald's reflections offer a vivid picture of a Wilson's Mills many have never seen—but one that helped define the town's heart and soul.

### Early Life on the Farm

Donald was born and raised on the family farm on Powhatan Road, a property his father bought from the government for \$2,500 in the 1940s. "My mother told him it was crazy and he'd never pay it off," Donald recalled. "But he has, several times!" Farming was the family's lifeblood. "The first thing I did was truck tobacco when I was six—that was with a mule," he said. By 12, he was priming tobacco. "When I left home, I told myself if I ever get away from this farm, I'll never farm again!" Yet after serving four years in the Marine Corps and spending decades in construction, he found himself right back on the farm.

### A Farmer's Heritage

Farming ran deep in Donald's family. His father began as a sharecropper, working for others until he could buy his own land. "He farmed for different people up to about 44 or 45," Donald said. Relatives lived throughout the area—on the Southerland land, across the Neuse River, and beyond. Donald grew up working long days in the fields, recalling routines that started before dawn. "We'd go about 4:00 in the morning and take the tobacco out and then go eat at 7:00, then get in the field and start producing another barn of tobacco."

### Wilson's Mills School & Marriage

Donald met his wife, Fleta, at a graduation at Wilson's Mills School. "She went to Wilson's Mills School one year—for her senior year," he shared. The couple married when she was 17 and he was 19. "We've been married about 58 years—59 this coming August." He remembers the school as a hub of activity, surrounded by homes and businesses. "A lot of people don't remember there used to be three houses on school property... A teacher lived in one, one was an Ice cream store... and the other one, Billy Creech's family lived in for years."

## **Around Town**

Donald recalls biking or taking a tractor to local stores to trade eggs for treats. “A Parrish man had a store—you used to step in there and look around you. You could barely fit in there!” There was also a store called Durant’s in “Colored Town” (the north part of Wilson’s Mills with predominantly black residents) run by the school janitor, Theodore Durant. “He was a fine man. He really was.” Donald remembered watching outdoor movies projected on the back of a store in the early 1950s, and community traditions like Farmers’ Day in Smithfield where new equipment and agricultural films were showcased.

## **Segregation & The Community**

Donald spoke openly about the racial divisions of the time. “When they segregated the schools, I didn’t understand what was going on because I played with them all my life.” He formed strong friendships with Black children in the community, sharing meals, sports, and everyday play. “We were raised together, we worked together, played together. None of us understood what was really going on.” He fondly recalled Bobo, the first Black student at Wilson’s Mills High School: “He’s just like a brother.”

## **The Church**

Church was a cornerstone of Donald’s life. He remembered the community building beside what is now the Touch From Above ministry center as a gathering place. “Our church would have a chicken pastry supper when I was little... The women would make it and sell it for \$2.00 a plate... That’s how we made money to keep the church going.” Sundays were special family days, too. “Every Sunday, all us siblings came together. My mama cooked for it every Sunday.”

## **Train Accidents**

Donald recalled two train accidents in Wilson’s Mills. The first, in the early 1950s, happened behind his property. “Full of coal. And they come through our property with bags toting coal out.” He also recalled scorched woods from a train spark: “It scorched them pines. It took them years and years to come back—it burned the woods!” A later derailment in the 1970s occurred near the police station and spilled boxes of cereal and coal.

## **Wilson’s Mills Today**

Despite the changes, Donald still treasures life in Wilson’s Mills. “It means a place for friends, where our friends live. A close community... We can call on each other if we need something.” He reflects on the town’s spirit with pride. “I think it’s been a wonderful place to live.” When asked why people wave to each other here, he answered simply: “It’s friendly, being friendly.”