



Wilson's Mills Oral History

Sandra Wilson Carter

Interviewed on June 23, 2025

How a Town is Made

Sandra Wilson Carter traces her roots back to the very foundation of Wilson's Mills. Her great-great-grandfather, John Marshall Wilson, is credited with founding the town. "I believe they came from Warrenton [County]... the railroad was the reason." The Wilsons opened a lumber mill and a general store and extended credit to local families. When debts went unpaid, many settled with land, contributing to the Wilson family's significant landholdings. "They milled the lumber and sold it... shipping was possible because of the close proximity to the tracks. Hence one of the reasons the Wilsons became large landowners in Wilson's Mills." The mill, known for producing some of the highest quality lumber in the state, was essential to the town's economy and reputation.

Recollections of Home

Sandra recalls stories passed down from her grandfather, Dr. W.G. Wilson, Jr., and her father—stories that filled her childhood with a sense of place and pride. Her family home, built just after the Civil War, was rich in craftsmanship and lore. "There was a tunnel-type box that led from the attic to the lower floor... it was said to be a hiding place for money and valuables before banks." The house, filled with hand-carved fireplaces and an ornate staircase, never carried a mortgage and still stands today—relocated to Clint Collins' farm and listed on the North Carolina historic registry. "There was a well in the front yard... my mother told me the house was actually built a year after the Civil War ended, and that's why Sherman didn't burn it down."

The Lumber Mill

The heart of early Wilson's Mills beat at the lumber mill. Generations found work and purpose there, and its reach extended beyond Johnston County. "There were stories of places where the lumber from Wilson's Mills was purchased due to its superior quality... the stairs to the Governor's Mansion in Raleigh... a grand hotel in Morehead City called The Atlantic." While many also farmed or worked in small trades—a cotton gin, general stores, barbershop, and the train depot—the mill symbolized the strength and skill of the town's people.

The Whistle Stop Tour

Sandra vividly remembers an important day in 1964, when Lady Bird Johnson, wife and First Lady to President Lyndon B. Johnson, made a brief stop in Wilson's Mills as part of the *Whistle Stop Tour*. "We went down to the railroad tracks... and Daddy put me up on his shoulders so I could see." It was a moment of national attention in a small town—neighbors lining the tracks and waving, a little girl lifted to glimpse history. These memories, Sandra says, are burned into her mind with clarity and emotion.

Wilson's Mills Landmarks

The Wilson family legacy is etched across the map of Wilson's Mills. Sandra mentioned the Wilson/Uzzle Cemetery, where her ancestors are buried, and the Wilson's Mills Christian Church as sacred ground. "It's where we have married, buried, learned about Jesus, and worshipped for generations." Her father donated the land for the fire department, and her family's original homestead stood proudly across the road from the church, atop the hill. "The fire department was the first one ever. I remember Daddy saying if someone's house caught on fire, it usually burned to the ground before help could arrive."

Looking Back, Looking Ahead

Now living on Emerald Isle, Sandra rarely returns to Wilson's Mills, especially after the loss of her son in 1989. Yet the ties remain. "I still have close friends and relatives there... but my immediate family all live in Carteret County now." She speaks with reverence about the town that shaped her and a longing for its preservation. She has "tons" of old photographs, maps, and letters that she hopes to share—ensuring that the stories of Wilson's Mills and the families that built it are never forgotten.