
ROBERTSON'S MILL SITE WAKE COUNTY LANDMARK APPLICATION SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS

8. SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION

A. Physical Description Narrative of all Resources on the Site

Robertson's Mill Site 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). The dam, originally constructed in the 1820s, is still in place. It is part masonry (approximately 130 feet) on the east, and part earthen embankment on the west, with the spillway over the masonry portion. The mill was constructed at the same time as the dam, but it was removed in the mid-1970s, with only the stone foundation extant.

The mill 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 mill pond is uncommon in the eastern piedmont, but is similar to the old mill ponds on black water streams of the northeastern coastal plain. The Robertsons 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.

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.

B. Historical Background Narrative

Sometime around 1820, William Avera moved to the Eagle Rock area, northwest of Wendell, from Johnston County with his wife, Mary, and two children, Thomas and Anna. The Avera's Federal-style house, gristmill, and mill dam were all constructed shortly thereafter. 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.

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.

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 farming 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. In the early 1870s, he moved the original c.1820 family home to a new home site on Robertson Pond Road. It still stands south of the Italianate residence that he built around the same time (listed on the National Register of Historic Places, 2003). 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.

In 1887, Avera sold 115 acres of the land to Moses C. Winston, including the mill and possibly the general store, but retained his homesite (the Dr. Thomas H. Avera House) and the remaining acreage. Winston immediately resold the mill site to Allen B. Marshburn. 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. 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 retail merchant, rather than farmer, and was operating a general store with his sons Milton and Marion.

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. Robertson is a descendent of James Robertson who was a founder of Watauga, North Carolina, and Nashville, Tennessee, although the exact relationship is unclear.

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.



Charles 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 then fell to 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.

Charles Robertson's land extended west of the pond, and his home was located on Marks Creek Road near the intersection of Puryear Road, approximately two miles from the mill site. The property to the west of the mill pond contained a tenant house, and census records suggest Robertson did employ the labor of tenant farmers. During the first decade of the twentieth century, Wake County saw dramatic increases in tenant farming, with almost half of white farmers and three-quarters of African American farmers working another's land by 1911. In the 1920 census, Robertson's son Howard was 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 lived 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 through the 1940s.

The Mill Pond became a popular recreational site in the 1940s for hunting, fishing, and paddling. At that time, fishermen could catch crappie, bluegill, and largemouth bass, and the site was featured in sport fishing magazines. There was also a place for fishermen to cook their fish along the banks of the pond.

In 1960, Charles Robertson Sr.'s estate was divided into eleven tracts to be drawn for and allotted to his surviving heirs. Each of the eleven tracts included 3.27 acres for tobacco, 1.38 acres for cotton, and 2.39 acres for wheat. 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. James Fowler's parents, John and Nettie Fowler, inherited the tract immediately west of his. They shared use of the two tracts, with John and Nettie operating a boathouse (since then removed) on their son's pond, and James farming tobacco, wheat, possibly cotton, and probably soybeans on his parents' farmland.

By this time, the mill was in a state of severe disrepair, having fallen out of use in the 1950s. Sometime in the mid-1970s, James Fowler demolished the building. He and his wife Mayme Glynn Hodge continued to acquire land, and upon their deaths in 1997, they owned nearly 400 acres throughout Wake County. The following year, their nephew, Edward Gehrke II, inherited their pond and mill site tract, which he sold to Wake County as part of the open space program



in 2013. Wake County Parks, Recreation, and Open Space plans to open the site for limited low intensity recreation, including hiking, paddling, and possibly fishing.

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.

C. Significance Statement

Robertson's Mill Site is significant as a focal point of economic activity in the Eagle Rock/Wendell community for almost two centuries. Beginning with its construction by William Avera in the 1820s and continuing for more than 100 years under successive owners, this activity centered on the mill. Later, as the mill fell out of use, the focal point became recreational activities in and around the mill pond created by the dam.

Robertson's Mill Site is also significant for its archaeological potential. Anecdotal evidence from members of the community suggests that there was significant Native American activity in the area, indicated by the discovery of arrowheads and other artifacts from the property. The nearly 200-year-old dam could potentially yield information about early construction methods, as it was the first dam built in the Eagle Rock/Wendell area. The mill itself was also likely the first mill built in this area, and the area in and around the surviving foundation of the structure has the potential to reveal much about early construction methods and operations of rural mills.

D. Landmark Boundary

The landmark boundary includes the mill site and mill dam, a total of approximately 0.5 acres.

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9. PHOTOGRAPH PROOF SHEETS



LM_Robertson's Mill Site_Dam & Mill Site



LM_Robertson's Mill Site_Dam



LM_Robertson's Mill Site_Dam & Cypress



LM_Robertson's Mill Site_Cypress Swamp



LM_Robertson's Mill Site_Mill Site

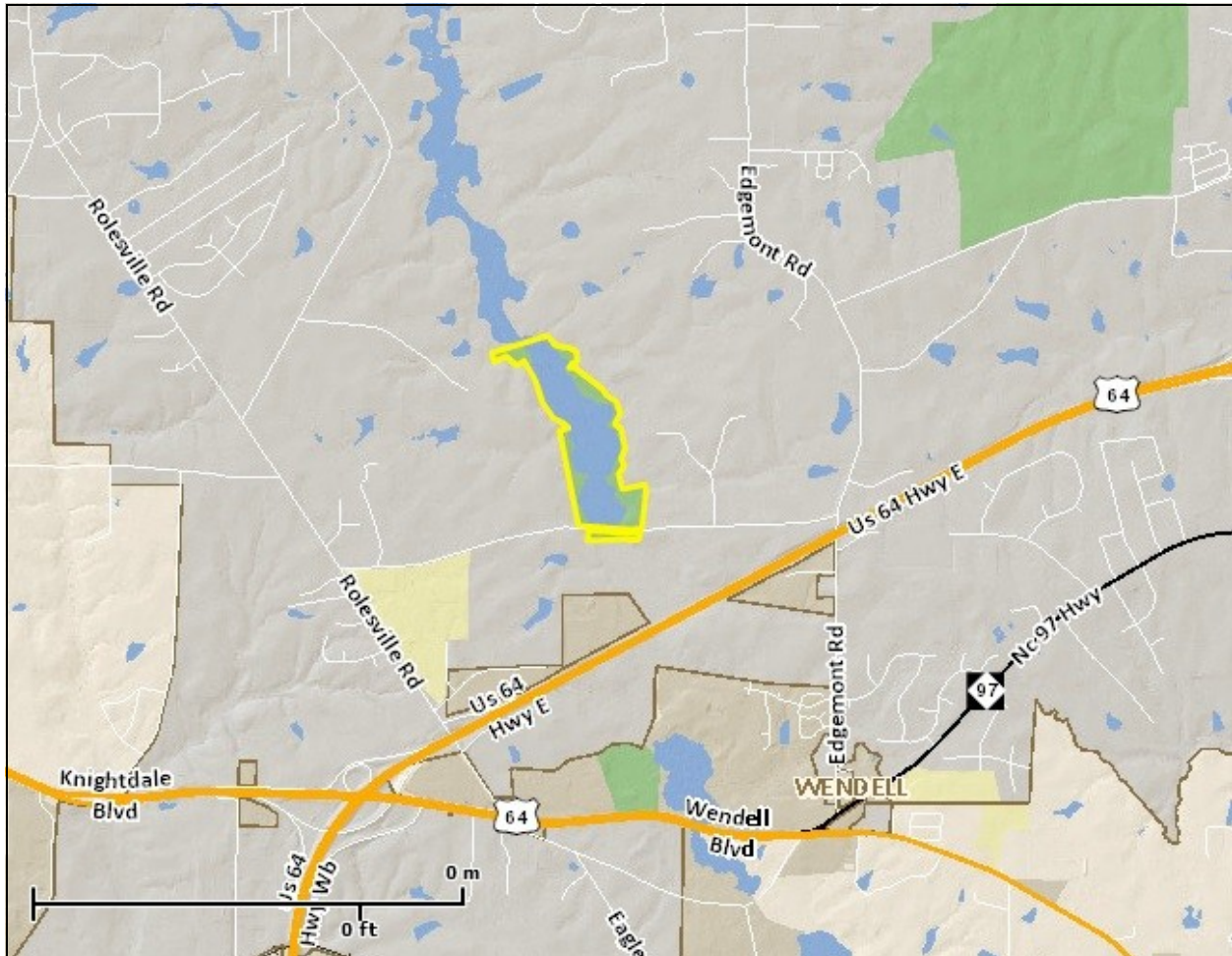


10. FLOOR PLANS

The mill structure was demolished c.1975, so no floor plans are included.

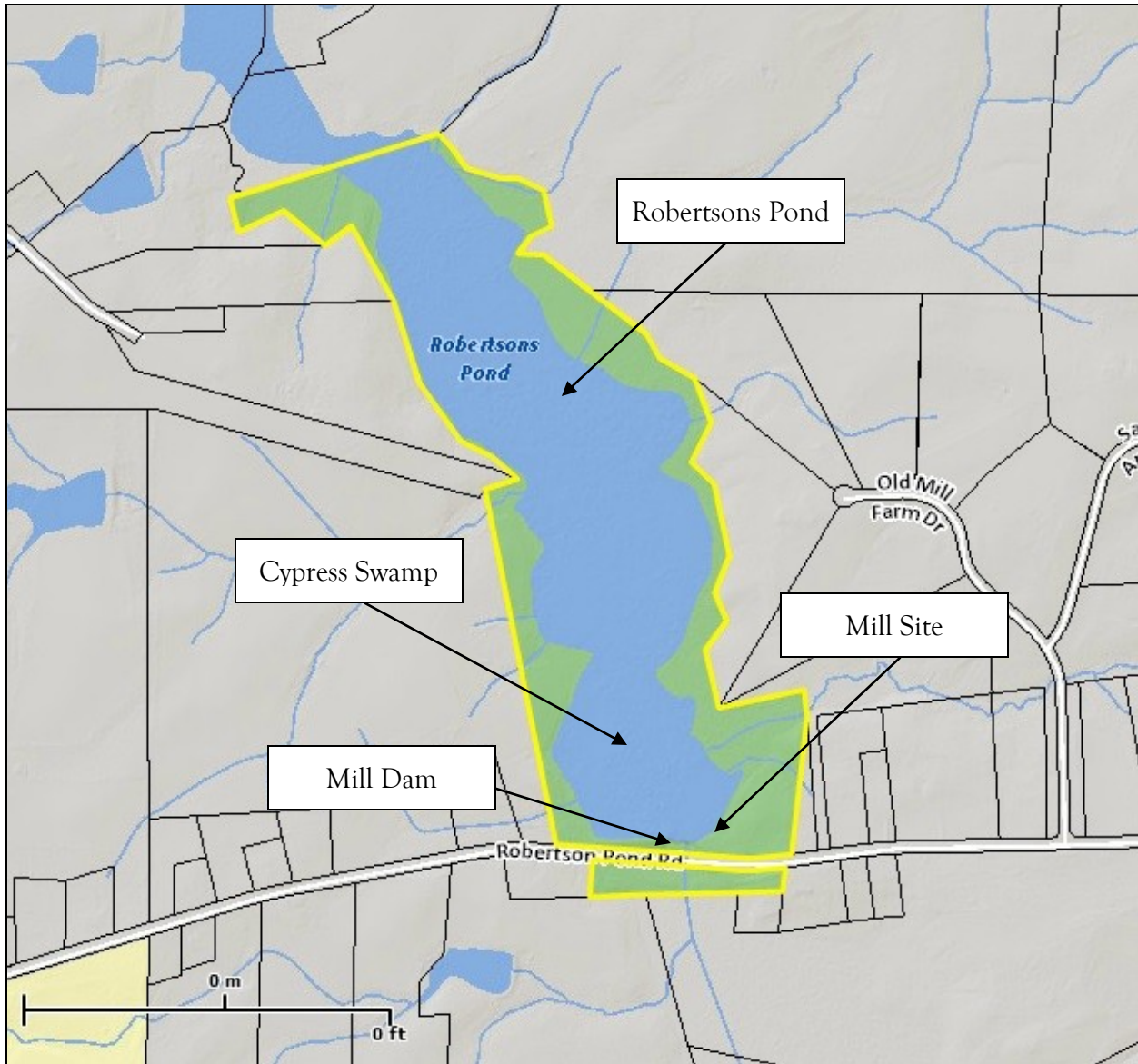
11. MAPS

Area Map



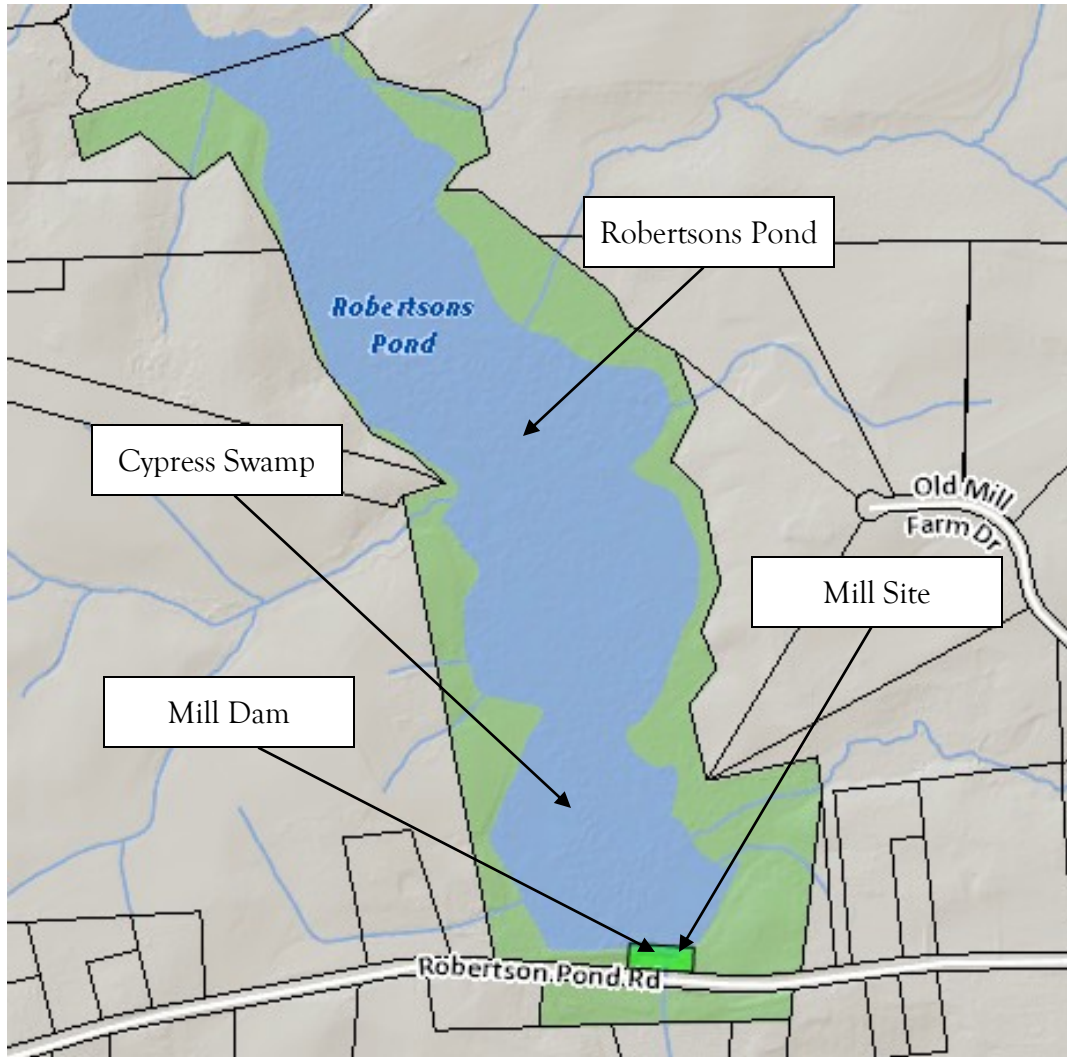
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Area Map, Total Property owned by Wake County



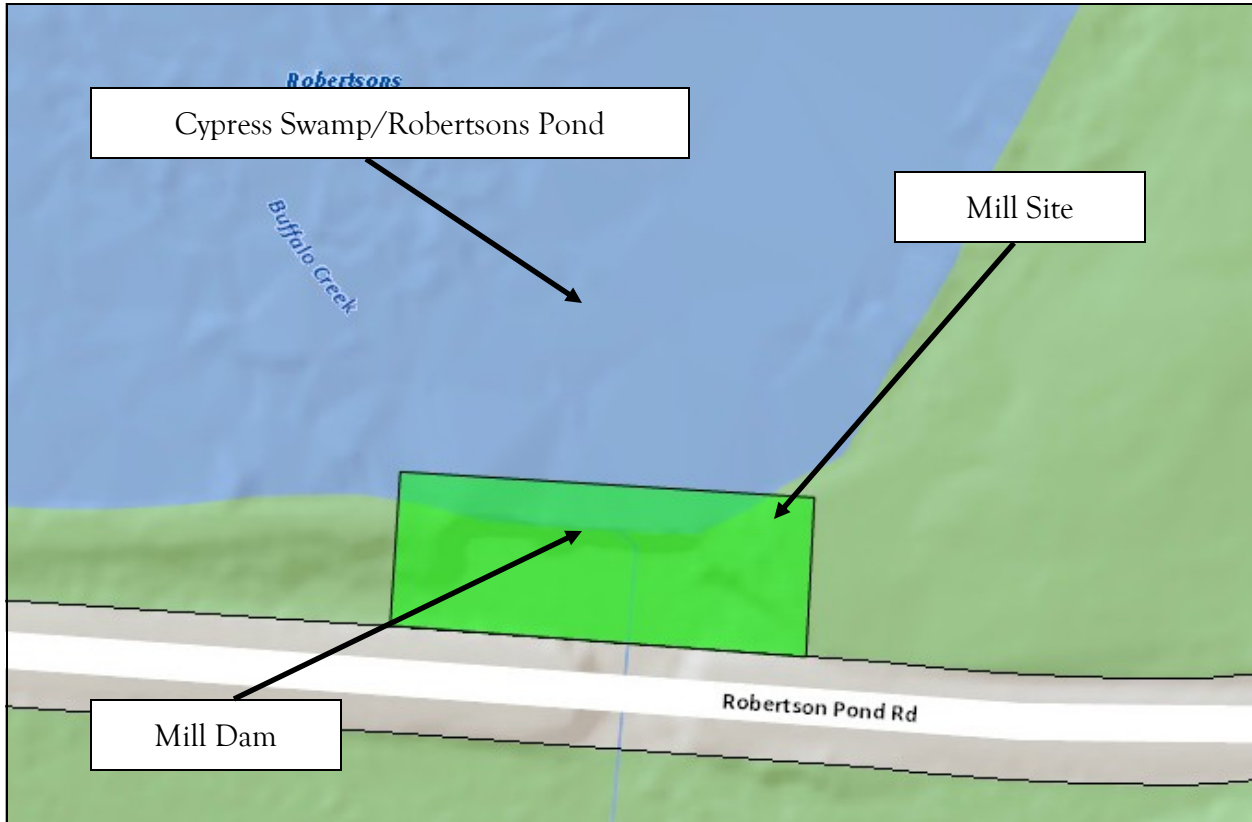
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Proposed Landmark Boundary



ROBERTSON'S MILL SITE WAKE COUNTY LANDMARK APPLICATION

Proposed Landmark Boundary





F I R E F L Y
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Wake County Landmark Application

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