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Rocky Mount Mills Historical Resource Guide

This resource guides provides information on where to seek information on the history of Rocky Mount Mills, of which there is not an updated comprehensive historical narrative. The archival collections, published works, images, and newspapers come from a variety of sources, including UNC's Southern Historical Collection, UNC's North Carolina Collection, the Braswell Memorial Library, Newspapers.com, community members, and the North Carolina State Archives. The guide includes resources that the CHW team utilized to examine the history of the mill therefore, there may be other sources out there that researchers may utilize. Here, links are provided where available for ease of access.

The guide also provides resources on where to find information about specific individuals. If researchers are looking into slaves and African American genealogy, CHW has a separate resource guide for that type of research, which requires a more roundabout way of researching because named slaves are often missing from historical documents. Additionally, interviewing those with connections to the mill can provide insight into the mill and/or mill village experience.

Archival Collections:

1. Southern Historical Collection, UNC-Chapel Hill
 - a. [Rocky Mount Mills Records](#)

The Southern Historical Collection has around 34,800 items from Rocky Mount Mills from 1804-2007. This collection includes blueprints, contracts, land surveys, river surveys, financial reports, demographic reports, correspondences, employee records, and photographs to name a few. They are all processed. The collection also includes digital

files from the [Rocky Mount Mills Awards](#) (1970s-1990s) and the [Rocky Mount Mills Photo Archive](#), both of which are already in the digital archive.

Some folders are restricted for 72 years after the last date of materials inside the folder. Examples include employee records, wills, pension reports, and any other material containing personal information.

Collection number: 05211

b. [Battle Family Papers](#)

Not only is the Battle Family prominent in North Carolina industry (including Rocky Mount Mills) and politics, they are intertwined in the history of UNC-Chapel Hill. William Horn Battle (1802-1879) was legislator and judge as well as a professor of law at the university. Kemp Plummer Battle (1831-1919) was a lawyer and president of the Chatham Railroad in addition to university president 1876-1891. William James Battle was president 1893-1907. The Southern Historical Collection possesses this collection of approximately 10,000 items.

Collection number: 03223

2. North Carolina Collection

a. [Charles S. Killebrew Photographic Collection](#), 1948-2001

Charles Killebrew was a professional photographer from Tarboro, NC who worked for the *Rocky Mount Evening & Sunday Telegram* for 50 years. Later, he owned his own photography studio and Carolina Aerial Mapping. The collection contains about 470,000 images dating from 1948-1997 and is housed at UNC-Chapel Hill's North Carolina Collection. The images capture people, places, and events in and around Rocky Mount. Those that depict Rocky Mount Mills in any capacity are in the digital archive; approximately 20 images are included.

Collection number: P0091

3. Braswell Memorial Library

Braswell Memorial Library in Rocky Mount has accumulated a collection of materials pertaining to the history of Rocky Mount, Nash County, and, to some extent, Edgecombe County. The library is also able to assist with genealogical research as they have qualified staff to help patrons and some access to documentation that may be utilized in genealogical research. Braswell was the initial possessor of the Killebrew Collection, which they then transferred to UNC-Chapel Hill for preservation and digitization.

4. State Archives of North Carolina (SANC)

The State Archives has a very special item: a [home movie](#) shot in 1939 by previous mill superintendent M.G. Frye. He films various people and places outside the mill and around the mill village. It is possible to identify particular buildings and individuals. It is viewable on the [CHW website](#), the State Archives' [YouTube channel](#), and Digital Rocky Mount Mills.

Secondary Source Publications:

1. Daly, Christopher B, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, Lu Ann Jones, Robert Rodgers Korstad, James L Leloudis, and Mary Murphy. 1989. *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.

Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World (1989,) compiled by some of the most notable historians like Jacqueline Dowd Hall and Robert Korstad, documents where mill workers came from, what mill villages were like, the obstacles mill workers faced, the stigmas attached to them, the hierarchies at the mill, etc. The book provides a broad overview of experiences.

2. Minchin, Timothy. 1999. *Hiring the Black Worker: the Racial Integration of the Southern Textile Industry, 1960-1980*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Minchin focuses on the black experience in *Hiring the Black Worker: the Racial Integration of the Southern Textile Industry, 1960-1980* (1999). He focuses on the 1960s and 1970s when textile mills in the South witness radical demographic transformation owing to the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Although African Americans did work in textile mills before this, they were mostly confined to menial positions. Integration opened up doors to other mill jobs. However, African Americans were still subject to discrimination when it came to hiring practices and promotions; lawsuits were brought against mills such as J.P. Stevens and Milliken.

3. Glass, Brent D. 1992. *The Textile Industry in North Carolina*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

Glass guides readers through the history of the textile industry in North Carolina, from the small-scale endeavors in the colonial period to the widespread mill closures in the late-20th century. He provides context for the birth of textile mills, their growth, and their subsequent decline.

4. Rocky Mount Chamber of Commerce. *A Brief History of Rocky Mount*. Rocky Mount: Rocky Mount Chamber of Commerce. 1958.

This 1950s work provides a short overview of how the mill came to be, from the original grist mill to its development as a textile mill. It is helpful in documenting the earliest years of the mill's history and detailing how instrumental the mill was in Rocky Mount's growth as a city.

5. Rocky Mount Mills. *Rocky Mount Mills: A Case History of Industrial Development, 1818-1943*. Rocky Mount: Rocky Mount Mills. 1943.

Rocky Mount Mills published its own history of the mill in 1943. It covers the beginning of the textile industry in North Carolina, the pre-Civil War era, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the era of the New South up to the year of publication. It also describes various institutional policies. The book provides interesting historical illustrations and images to help contextualize and

visualize the narrative including the cotton spinning process. It is important for readers to remember that since it was published by the mill, it is selective in what it includes and does not mention the grittier aspects of its history.

National Register of Historic Places Application:

The Rocky Mount Mills Village [was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1999](#). National Register forms are comprehensive surveys of the properties that should be included in a historic district along with a brief history. According to the form, the mill village is significant for architecture, industry, and social history with a period of importance from 1835 to 1948. There are 103 contributing and 33 non-contributing structures in the historic district. The form notes the build date, the architecture of each structure, and any changes made over its lifetime.

Archaeology Surveys and Reports:

Phelps, David Sutton. 1980. *Archaeological salvage of the Thorpe site and other investigations along the U.S. 64 Bypass, Rocky Mount, North Carolina*. Greenville, N.C.:
Archaeological Laboratory, Dept. of Sociology and Anthropology, East Carolina University.

The site of Rocky Mount Mills was not professionally excavated. However, the land directly opposite the property on the Tar River has been because of the construction of the US-64 Bypass in the 1980s. The salvage excavation took place in 1979 with the report published in 1980. ECU's David Sutton Phelps led the investigation, which unearthed significant Native American activity for thousands of years. The focus site called the "Thorpe Site" was the home to two major Native American villages (9000BCE-historic period) with smaller satellite settlements along the Tar River and its tributaries. The project site was presumed to lie in Tuscarora territory.

Websites:

1. [Digital Rocky Mount Mills](#)

Digital Rocky Mount Mills is CHW's contribution to presenting the history and stories of Rocky Mount Mills in one convenient place. On the site are historical narratives covering different time periods of the mill's life, oral histories with former mill employees, maps, K-12 resources, a digital archive, family trees of Battle slaves, and historical resource guides.

2. [DigitalNC](#)

The North Carolina Digital Heritage Center is located on the UNC campus and works with 501(c)(3)'s across the state to digitize and publish historical materials online. The goal is to make the material more accessible to more people. Some examples of items researchers can find are city directories, yearbooks, newspapers, and images.

DigitalNC also contains oral interviews, including one with [Kermit and Doris Paris](#), longtime Rocky Mount Mills employees who have since passed.

3. [Newspapers.com](#)

Newspapers.com has been extremely helpful in quickly scanning publications that mention Rocky Mount Mills. *The Rocky Mount Telegram*, for example, as the local newspaper for Rocky Mount, has written extensively on the mill for decades. As such, articles follow the highs and lows of the mill and sometimes mention individual names of floor employees. It is also possible to track the history of the textile industry in North Carolina. *The News and Observer* (Raleigh, NC) and the *Tarborough Southerner* (Tarboro, NC) also describe legislative bills that impact the social and economic landscapes at different points in the mill's history.

FINDING INDIVIDUALS

1. [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com)

Ancestry.com is a wonderful resource to piece together an individual's life history and social/familial network. The website pulls from census records, obituaries, FindAGrave, military records, city directories, yearbooks, and more. Ancestry.com also allows users to build family trees and to connect with each other to assist in each other's research efforts.

2. Living Former Employees and Mill Villagers

Many former employees of the mill and occupants of the mill village are still living. They are an excellent resource to get a sense of work and home life. Some still live in Rocky Mount, which is a small city. Therefore, asking around town for those with mill connections will usually produce results.

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