



Wilson's Mills Recollections

The Wilson Family

Interviewed on July 15, 2025

In the Beginning

The story of Wilson's Mills truly begins with John Marshall Wilson, a determined businessman who moved from Warren County, NC to what would become Wilson's Mills sometime around the start of the Civil War (1860–1865).

"John Marshall was born in 1815... he was 45 years old when he left [Warren County]," Trudy shared. "His obituary says about the beginning of the Civil War he moved his mills to Johnston County."

Originally a merchant and farmer, John Marshall saw opportunity in the vast pine forests and new railroad line being built nearby. With his business partner, Mr. Waddell, he established a lumber mill that would shape both the land and the future identity of the town. Pattie explained:

"He bought the land before... shortly after 1860 the couple moved south to Smithfield Township, which is now Wilson's Mills. Their last child was born here."

Over time, the Wilson family came to own nearly 1,000 acres on both sides of what became Wilson's Mills Road. Generations of Wilsons were raised on this land, creating a "family compound" of homes that still remain today.

Farming in Wilson's Mills

Life on the Wilson land was first and foremost built on farming. Pattie recalled: "Our daddy was a farmer — that's basically all we knew."

The Wilson children grew up surrounded by cotton fields, tractors, barns, sheep, and tobacco rows. They remembered trips to the cotton gin, where blown cotton would drift and collect along the roadside:

"When people were hauling cotton... the side of the road started turning white," Charles said. "We boys would get out there and play on the cotton bales until Jimmy Mitchener chased us off!"

They also remembered their father's haystacks, homemade tools, and long days working outside together. It was hard work, but it built a strong family and community work ethic.

The Tram Line

One of the most unique pieces of Wilson family history lies along what is now Tram Lane, where Trudy still lives. “On our farm on Tram Lane, iron ore was transported by the tram on Strickland Road,” she said.

In the early 1900s, a small tram railroad once carried iron ore from a mine near Whitley Heights to the main rail line for shipment to Greensboro. “It was a small gauge train... about 3 miles long,” Charles explained. “After about a year, the plant closed, moved out West, and it wasn’t profitable anymore. They ceased operation.”

Over time, the track and tram were abandoned, and rumors spread that the tram engine was buried on Wilson land. Trudy smiled remembering: “Granddaddy got a metal detector... he couldn’t ever find it.”

The road became known locally as “Tram Road”, though the state required they name it Tram Lane instead.

Town Life

Growing up in Wilson’s Mills in the 1950s and ’60s meant knowing everyone — and being known. “You knew everybody,” Charles said. “I could ride a bicycle through Wilson’s Mills and never meet a car.”

Local businesses dotted the railroad tracks: Joe Jones’s fish market, where Charles remembered buying chipped ice; Uzzel’s Store, with a small barbershop run by Luke Capps; and general stores with feed sacks stacked high in the back.

“I remember going in one store to get penny candy,” Charles said. “I was jumping on the feed bags!” There were also connections to other early Wilson families like the Joneses and Uzzells, who helped shape the town alongside the Wilsons. Pattie added proudly: “Our great-grandparents were charter members of Wilson’s Mills Baptist Church.”

Even their grandfather had a role in town life: “He was a pharmacist known to be a ‘dealer of drugs’,” Trudy laughed, “because that’s what was written on his stationery!”

Train Derailed

Like many in Wilson’s Mills, the Wilsons remember train derailments, but one in particular became family legend: “We had a train derailment at the back of our farm,” Pattie recalled. “It dumped coal... they just gave it to Daddy and he sold it.”

Charles described the scene: “The train had 21 carloads of coal... they told him they’d probably just bury it. So he asked for it — and they gave him 90 or 120 days to get all he wanted!”

With the help of hired hands and a trailer, their father hauled and sold coal until a mountain of it covered the yard. “He chased people off with his gun,” Charles laughed. “But he finally sold a few dump truck loads.”

The Wilsons also remembered something sad but unforgettable: “He had sheep back there... and the train hit some of the sheep and killed them,” Pattie said. “I think we ate sheep for a while.”

Looking Ahead

Today, the Wilson family continues to live on the historic land their ancestors settled over 160 years ago. Though much has changed, their pride in their heritage remains strong.

Their property also holds deeper history—beyond the family name. They spoke about a Carolina Bay hidden deep behind their homes, possibly used by Powhatan tribes centuries ago. They’ve found arrowheads and stone tools in their fields—reminders that their story is part of something even bigger.