

Site of Hill's Mill

by *Eli Stancel*

As Gwinnett county celebrates its 200th anniversary it serves as a reminder that setting is decisive as people and families interact with the land and each other to construct lives and legacies. The county's boundary makes an odd turn in the center of the Apalachee River at a place known as Freeman's Mill, old site. Trees, briars, and snakes are now the inhabitants of this forgotten corner, but once a flourishing community existed here supported by a mill on the edge of the frontier. William Crawford validated this former landmark on his War of 1812 pension papers, noting his service included a "fight at Hill's Mill on the Apalachee." One story led to another and the spark for information about the Mill site erupted into a wildfire of discovery. That fire was fueled with discarded deeds, railroad maps, a stone dam, and jury transcripts. When the smoke cleared there remained an old mill, a War of 1812 skirmish, murder, rape, and an investigation by United States congressmen. The story begins overlooking the waters of Mobile Bay.

Joshua Hill had probably never been that far from his home in what was then Jackson County, and neither would he venture that far again. The lowlands of the coast had broad rivers and few hills, a contrast to the old growth forests of the rolling Piedmont region of Georgia. He had been mustered into the Georgia Militia for the War of 1812, one of the thousands of citizens filling the ranks to meet the nation's demand for a ready army. He joined under the leadership of Captain David Gillespie in October of 1814 when the company was officially rostered at Fort Hawkins, what would become Macon, Georgia. After marching all the way to Mobile, the troops received word the war was over. They retraced their steps up the Alabama River to Fort Cleburne, across the Tallapoosa River to Fort Decatur, and the Chattahoochee River to Fort Mitchell. Wading streams and crossing swamps they traced the newly created federal road back to Fort Hawkins. Joshua Hill, with a land warrant in hand, was discharged and began the journey home to Jackson County.

The United States westward expansion continued at the conclusion of the 1812 war. Mr. Luckie, surveyor for the newly created county of Gwinnett, was traversing the territory with his chain bearers, Michael Hamby and William McBride, marking off the lots for the Land Lottery of 1820. Formerly Muscogee Creek territory, there were few landmarks to facilitate the survey process. The occasional shoal in a river or a path across a stream might break the monotony of oaks. On August 3, 1819, a maple, a post oak, and a sassafras tree completed the boundary lines on lot 336. Here the trio found relief and a

suitable reference point in the shade of Hill's mill which lay just across the Apalachee River. This was now part of Gwinnett County, a county that was less than one year old.

It was 2016 when I found the individual plat for Land lot 336 at the State Archives in Morrow, Georgia, the potential mill site along the Apalachee River. Though the majority of the lots were square, lot 336 was a partial lot and not eligible for inclusion in the lottery. Instead, like other partial lots, it was sold to fund the tax and registration payments for the widows and orphans of War veterans. By purchasing lot 336, Joshua Hill was able to obtain the land adjacent to his family's mill. Using the Gwinnett County geographic information system (GIS) website, one may superimpose the original land lots over current maps. And with this I could refine the search for Hill's Mill.

In 1844 Joshua Hill sold the mill in combination with land lot 336 for \$650 to Lovick Betts of Jackson County. He then reinvested the money in a part of lot 305 along the Apalachee River, where current day Old Fountain road crosses the stream. As a matter of fact, Joshua Hill owned and traded almost every piece of land on both sides of the river in Gwinnett County over a 50 year period. In 1866, Betts sold the mill and surrounding land to Dr. Samuel H. Freeman. Freeman's father ran the mill and at times employed Joshua's son, Isaac Hill, to assist him. When the Loveless family sold

Deriving the third tower under Capt Robert
Martin he was discharged in Clark Co
Georgia, he was in a fight at Hill's Mill on the
Apalachee,
Wm. H. Crawford

their mill on the Alcovy River to another Freeman, Gwinnett had two Freeman's Mills. The Hill Mill site became known as Old Freeman's Mill, with a road leading to that place which still bears the name.

Joshua Hill remained in the area and was able to collect his War of 1812 pension for three and a half years until his death in February of 1875. Despite a life without individual distinction, Joshua Hill's legacy is long. He was reared along the frontier's edge, survived the War of 1812, and outlived three wives. He witnessed the Civil War which divided his own household as sons fought and died on both sides of the conflict. On April 9, 1875, several of Joshua Hill's sons walked into the Ordinary's office in the Gwinnett County Courthouse and signed the orders that would allow them to administer their father's estate. Isaac, Edward, and John Hill began by reimbursing themselves the cost of feeding the estate's livestock. Next they paid a local storekeeper, B. E. Strickland, \$20.45 for the cost of burying Joshua Hill on February 19, 1875. Names of persons who purchased items from the estate, along with the 1870 census record suggests that Joshua Hill died somewhere near the Apalachee River between Auburn and Dacula. But where was he buried?

Less than a mile from the mill site Appalachee Baptist church stands. Dr. Montgomery, a long time church member, explains that the current building stands in its third location. Since the earliest tombstone is dated 1883, it is not likely that Joshua Hill is buried there. The founding location for the church was rumored to be near the mill where it was supposedly washed away. The church then rebuilt near Gooberville, but after discovering the quicksand like soil, the congregation moved to its current location. Joshua Hill's descendants are present throughout the current Appalachee Baptist graveyard, but most of the church records were lost or

destroyed according to James Flanigan's 1911 book, *Gwinnett County Churches*. Church records unavailable, a search of the public record revealed much more than a burial site.

In October of 1871 Joshua Hill's son, John Hill, appeared in an Atlanta courtroom. Across from him sat several Congressmen who examined him with questions concerning his residence and business. Did he keep liquor for sale? Had he ever heard of the Klan? Where was he when the Gwinnett County courthouse was burned? Where did he find the sheets that covered the perpetrators horses? Had he been accused of being a radical? Did he feel threatened by his neighbors by coming to Atlanta to testify? How did he vote in the last election? John replied that he voted "democrat with reservations." The senator leading the questioning leaned closer, "Am I to understand you are a republican in your sentiments?" "I am" John replied, explaining a rationale inherited from his father. "Vote for Grant for President, then democrats for every other office." Another of Joshua Hill's sons would soon find himself on the witness stand, but this time much closer to home.

In the summer of 1877, the bountiful oat crop forced the mill to restrict delivery. Isaac Hill was operating the mill for Dr. Freeman. Bud Maughon was driving his wagon down the steep road to the mill when his wagon jackknifed. Isaac answered calls for help and after some struggle they had the team and wagon safely down to the mill. Bud then began to recount the unfortunate events that led to the death of Tom Robinson. As Bud drove his team home he encountered a drunken Tom who demanded a ride so he could go shoot squirrels. Tom was a member of Appalachee church, but as one testified, he would stab anyone with a knife if he had been drinking. Tom Robinson and Bud got into an argument and the knife fight ensued. Being close to the Maughon home, other members joined in the fight. When the scuffle was over the Maughons

Remains of the rock dam of Hill's Mill on the Apalachee River discovered in 2017

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all had various levels of wounds and Tom Robinson lay in his home with a gunshot wound. As Dr. Freeman assessed Tom's injuries, he was inebriated, singing "River of Jordan" and loudly "cussing the Baptists" as the court records revealed. Isaac would be called to testify at the murder trial and Bud would later be exonerated. Isaac's sister in law, Mary Hill, would have a closer interaction with the justice system.

On September 10, 1883, in the humid room the Superior Court was called into session. The men were in suits or, if they could not afford one a borrowed jacket to wear over their overalls. Solicitor General A. L. Mitchell stood as court opened and began questioning the first witness in the Charge of Rape brought against George Maughon. The victim replied with her answers. Mary Hill, widowed, had possibly been raped by George Maughon near Freeman's Mill. Mary Hill's husband, Joshua Hill Junior, had fought and died for the Union and she was living alone with her young son surrounded by men that did not appreciate her husband's choice during the war. The trial went on to describe the act, her modest house and the odious fact that Maughon was also her niece's husband.

Maughon was convicted of the crime and some years later was killed in a robbery. Court records and witness testimony gave a detailed description of the paths and roads of the area. Although the main route across the river was one mile below the mill on the Lawrenceville Road, many of the witnesses

said it was quicker to take a footpath through the swamp near the mill, which ran through a grave yard. Could this have been the graveyard where Joshua Hill would be buried less than two years after the trial was over?

In early 2017 my father and I walked down a power line easement to an area that has seen little activity aside from deer and their hunters. Broom straw four to five feet tall and briar thickets continually redirected our path. The roadway bridge over the Apalachee River had been closed since the 1970s, but the roadbed leading down to the bridge site was visible with winter grasping the area. I crossed the river near the old bridge and my father and I stalked in tandem on opposing banks toward the probable mill site, looking also for any clues that suggested a burial site. The south side of the river had less growth than the north side and I progressed more quickly, finally penetrating the tree line. I walked about fifty yards, then turned and called to my father. "Keep walking, however you can get through" I shouted. Soon, he too emerged into the canopy of old hard woods and we both smiled. In front of us was a rock dam. On my side it was about 80 feet long, three feet thick and two to five feet tall. On the north side its span was shorter, but thicker and taller with a gap that must have been the sluice gate. Though we never found the cemetery, we walked the area for an hour or so happy in our discovery. We had found Hill's Mill.

Epilogue

The site of Hill's Mill continues to evolve. The agrarian lifestyle diminished and the mill closed allowing the trees and wild growth to take over. Eventually, the railroad came through and now tracks and transmission lines bisect the property. The land was eventually gifted to Georgia Medical College then sold to a developer in Atlanta. The property changed hands once more with the new owner being Gwinnett County's Department of Transportation. The Gwinnett Research and Archaeological Society is working to finalize the details that will allow for a full survey of the site.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elijah W. "Eli" Stancel is a native of Gwinnett County and a 4th generation graduate of Dacula High School with a BA from Piedmont College and an MA from Arkansas State University. Although he has written on a variety of topics, his research and published works have focused on early American history and local topics. Eli serves on the Board of Directors for the

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