

# BELLEVUE MILL VILLAGE

— A Historical Overview —

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The Bellevue Mill Village, located just on the other side of Hillsborough's Historic District boundary at the western end of Margaret Lane, was designed and constructed by Belle-Vue Cotton Manufacturing Company during the early part of this century. The original mill building is on the National Register of Historic Places, and is currently being renovated into condominium units.

The mill village is quite typical of early industrial housing in the southeastern United States. It is unique in that it has remained "intact." The mill buildings, housing, and commercial district are all in their original locations with classic mill community orientation. Other than one missing water tower (damaged and subsequently removed in 2002), all of the true components still exist. According to a 1985 study, these factors make Bellevue one of the most important mill communities in the state. As such, it is an ideal candidate for protected status as a district on the National Register of Historic Places.

Catherine W. Bishir and Michael T. Southern describe West Hillsborough's mills and mill villages in *A Guide to the Historic Architecture of Piedmont North Carolina*, "Despite the proximity of the North Carolina Railroad, Hillsborough never shifted its focus toward the tracks, and industrial development remained minor. By the late 19th century there were a few tobacco factories, a carriage factory, and other small operations in the south and west sectors near the railroad and the river. The freight and passenger depots (lost) stood at the foot of Nash Street. Around the turn of the century, local investors climbed on the textile manufacturing bandwagon: Allen Ruffin and James Webb founded the Eno Cotton Mill in 1896 near the depot, and Shepperd Strudwick and others started the Bellevue Mfg. Company in 1904 on Nash Street north of the tracks. The companies erected several blocks of mill housing on both sides of the Eno River, chiefly one-story gable-sided frame dwellings. Most intact are the Bellevue Mill and its village near the southwest corner of Nash and W. King Streets..." (page 226).

Belle-Vue Cotton Manufacturing Company purchased the property for the mill buildings, housing, and commercial district in 1905. The original land deeds, as well as some other historical documents, list the mill's original legal name as "Belle-Vue Cotton

Manufacturing Company." Only the early documents use a hyphenated name with a capital "V" and extra "e" and contain the word "Cotton." Over the years, various shorthand variations of this name have been used, with the most common form being "Bellevue Mill."

Along with mill housing, the mill also developed a commercial district at the southern end of Nash Street for the mill community. It included a drug store, cafe, general store, barber shop, and a movie theater. The ideal 1920s mill community model provided workers with all of their needs, typically isolating them physically and psychologically from the outside world. The first mill workers did not own automobiles, although trips to Durham were possible by train for 25 cents. Social and commercial interactions between downtown Hillsborough and West Hillsborough were not very common. Mill worker social activities included watching the trains at the depot, hiking, swimming in the Eno, and going to the movies. The mill village wasn't even in Hillsborough's city limits until 1970.

The company began building the 29 mill houses in a neatly enclosed "village" around 1915. Other mill houses nearby could have been built by Belle-Vue at that time, but the actual "village" comprises of houses on Knight, Holt, and Webb Streets. The original streets, named by the mill, were called Axter, Aylmer, and Awse Streets, respectively. According to a Preservation North Carolina survey conducted in the 1990s, two of the first houses to be built were the hip roof house on the corner of Knight and Webb Streets and the larger "boarding house" on Knight Street. Both of these houses were most likely constructed before 1920. Other houses were built in approximately 1920 and 1922. All of the houses and the mill were present on the 1924 Sanborn Fire Insurance map.

According to an article in *The New Republic*, dated September 28, 1927, early mill houses were "architecturally undesirable"... "The composite Southern mill house is a flat wooden box, one story in height and lifted up from the ground by brick and wooden piles. Inside, the rooms are square. The older mill villages consisted of rows and rows of houses exactly alike—the same porch, the same paint, the same railing. In the newer villages, there is sufficient variety to satisfy the most befuddled person seeking to identify his home at night. One house will have a solid porch rail and the next a picket rail. One will have a flattened gable and another a peak. The first house in the row will be white, trimmed with green, the second green, trimmed with white, the third all white. And then back to the style of the first again."

New Bellevue mill houses generally fit this older mill house description. They were designed with either three or four square rooms around a central chimney. Each of those rooms have corner fireplaces. All of the porches have overhangs, and four houses typically shared an outside well and privy. Interestingly, they were all originally painted red.

*The New Republic* article goes on to quantify, "The esthetic agony of living in a community of that type may easily be overemphasized. What a tremendous psychological compensation the mill worker must get by not having to keep up with the Joneses! His house is as good as anybody's house, and his desire for individual esthetic expression can be satisfied in his garden."

In 1957, the mill sold the village property to the William L. Barrell Co. It was then split into individual deeds and sold. The average selling price for a mill house was then \$5000. By the early 1990s, many of the original retired mill workers and their families were still living in the mill village, including Homer & Geraldine Phillips, Rosetta Lane, Red & Ethel McCauley, Homer & Mattie Riley, Mrs. Martin, Dorothy Haislip, and others. Over the last decade, many of the retired workers have passed away or relocated. All but a few of the original families have sold the mill houses, which are now highly prized on the local real estate market.