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Seafood, surfing, and memories of our **Carolina Coast**

*Fisherman Tony DiFranco,
Holden Beach Pier*

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*Remembering
Sunset Beach
Bridge*

*A lifetime
at the old
beach house*

*Lemon Pie at
Capt. Bill's
Morehead City*





After John Jordan (center) purchased the Saxapahaw Rivermill in 1994, he put his son, Mac (right), in charge of making something out of it. Mac asked his brother, Carter (left), to come home and help.



Saxapahaw

With the help of committed residents, a mill village along the banks of the Haw River flourishes again with renovated condominiums, quirky puppet-makers, delicious sandwiches at the General Store, and a healing atmosphere.

By Jeri Rowe • Illustration by Steven Noble

PHOTOGRAPHY BY WHITEBOX WEDDINGS

In lower Alamance County, where the Haw River runs, you'll find an old gym with puppets the size of pickup trucks and a concrete-floor basement where you can rent enough kayaks, canoes, and pirogues to create your own navy.

Then, up 41 stone steps across the street, you'll spy a bulletin board outside the post office that offers almost anything — from where to repair quilts and buy Pomeranian puppies to how to meditate like a Chinese monk.

You can read the fine print of 13 paragraphs and see how clean the local water is. Or you can simply listen, and you'll hear people sharing first names and good stories. And that's when you'll get it. This is Saxapahaw.

You'll hear about the Bird Lady or the goat burger guy. If you're lucky, you'll hear the one about Saxapahaw's squirrel hunter or moonshine maker who grew cabbages as big as basketballs.

John McLean Jordan Jr. knows them all. Everyone calls him Mac.

He's the father of three and the husband of a woman from Eli Whitney, the community next door. But really, he's the minivan-driving visionary behind this unincorporated community of about 2,500 people, two miles square.

He's the grandson of the late U.S. Senator B. Everett Jordan, the mill owner turned politician, and the oldest son of John Jordan, a farmer, mill worker,

developer, and philanthropist.

Mac has recruited endeavors he believes will keep the cotton-mill village of his memory vibrant for his three young children as well as for generations to come.

He renovated the Buddy Collins Community Center, the old mill-supported gym that was in danger of being torn down, and helped turn it into a place that now houses the Paperhand Puppet Intervention and Haw River Canoe & Kayak Company.

Meanwhile, Mac recruited to the upper mill the Saxapahaw General Store and Hawbridge School, an environmentally conscious charter school that relocated from Chapel Hill.

Mac knows the upper mill very well. It's the old dye house, where during his teenage summers he ate crackers and sardines for lunch and cleaned light fixtures for \$2.15 an hour.

But now he's 48, and ever since 1994, he has worked to put his degrees from Duke (bachelor's in public policy) and North Carolina State (master's in architecture) into practice. He wanted to save Saxapahaw.

The modern mill village

Like all mill towns hugging the rivers of North Carolina, Saxapahaw faced a tough future. After 150 years of spinning cotton into yarn, the mill closed in 1994. Dixie Yarns was the last owner.



The old rivermill area has been transformed into a place filled with vibrancy and fueled by creativity. Donovan Zimmerman (left) co-founded Paperhand Puppet Intervention in the old gym; Heather LaGarde (top right) agreed with Mac Jordan to renovate space for a new music venue and film festival location; and a pilates studio opened in the mill.

The reasons for the closure are all too familiar in North Carolina: rising costs, cheap labor overseas, and the changing tastes of a buying public.

Mac loved that mill. His grandfather, Sen. Jordan, bought the mill in 1927 with the help of his uncle and ran it for nearly 50 years. In 1994, Mac convinced his father, John Jordan, to buy back the 31 acres and the 250,000-square-foot mill after Dixie Yarns left.

John did, for \$385,000.

Prior to that, John had bought and renovated more than 60 mill-village homes, and established a foundation to help those locally in need. Yet still, John had another idea for this mill in need.

He placed his oldest son in charge.

Today, the Saxapahaw Rivermill is a cavernous maze of

apartments and condominiums, with a center for fitness and healing. There is a plan to open a coffee shop, a pub/restaurant, and an event center known as the Haw River Ballroom this summer.

At least \$11 million in private funds have been invested in the project. You see it everywhere, especially the polished, pock-marked maple floors that stretch farther than a football field.

Those pock-marks are from what Mac calls “travelers,” or the metal pieces the size of a clipped fingernail that flew off the spinning frames long ago and got embedded in the floor by the yarn-hauling carts.

They’re all pieces of North Carolina’s past, and Mac believes they’re in our future, too.

“My Grandmother Jordan, she didn’t believe in



It's hard to pass up lunch at the Saxapahaw General Store, run by Jeff Barney and Cameron Ratliff (top right). When placing an order, few people ever regret asking for the Goat Burger (bottom right), which Barney created himself.

wasting anything, even a piece of pound cake," Mac says. "But her way of appreciating what you have and what's around you was not [limited to] just natural things, but also [included] people and ideals.

"And when I see things of value that are allowed to fall down or be thrown away, it doesn't make sense to me, especially when I see something that took a lot of hard work to build.

"It hurts my heart," he says. "So why waste that? I love cool new stuff, but not at the expense of having the cool old stuff get destroyed. I just believe people need to appreciate what life was like to appreciate what life is like."

All in a name

Although it's difficult to say "Saxapahaw," the name is as old as North Carolina itself.

In 1569, a Spanish explorer visited the early settlers of the lower Alamance, the Sissipahaw Indians, and described this land beside the Haw as "Sauxpa."

Around 1700, an English explorer gave the area a description a little easier to pronounce: the "flower of

Carolina." But during the past few decades, this crossroads has been saddled with another name: UCLA.

Or Upper Chatham, Lower Alamance.

There was a time when folks made fun of UCLA. Not anymore. Today, UCLA is coveted for its affordable real estate, its laid-back lifestyle, and its proximity to places like Chapel Hill, Elon, and Research Triangle Park.

Every Saturday from May through August, a hillside beside the post office turns into an old-school example of social networking — a farmers market of food, art, and homegrown music.

"You know, all roads lead to Saxapahaw," people will tell you.

You'll hear that at the Saxapahaw General Store. It's true. Saxapahaw has all sorts of names now: "west Chapel Hill," "mini-Asheville," and of course, UCLA.

This community well off Interstate 40, with no stoplight, is a place where new merges with old, organically creating a community all its own.

The Saxapahaw General Store is a three-aisle spot that can seat 35 on the inside. Two gas pumps are out



Joe Jacob (above) opened the Haw River Canoe and Kayak Company in the old gym, not far from the area of the mill that has been turned into condominiums (below).

“It’s a new world. But Saxapahaw is so lucky. We didn’t die.”

front, an armload of firewood props open the front door, and a flier near the counter advertises a class for barefoot ballroom dancing.

On this particular Saturday, two kids poke at each other while their dad orders the store’s specialty on a house-made English muffin, with Manchego cheese, roasted tomatoes, lemon garlic aioli, and an olive tapenade. It’s the Saxapahaw Goat Burger.

It’s the creation of Jeff Barney. He’s the guy behind the counter in the “Feel Me, I’m Organic” T-shirt.

He runs Saxapahaw General Store with his partner, Cameron Ratliff. They have replaced milk crates with patio furniture and assist people interested in buying what Barney calls “peasant food from around the world.”

Together, they have turned an old convenience store into a culinary magnet.

“I like this place because there is not a lot of stuff,” a customer told Barney once. “It’s not stuffy.”

And that is Saxapahaw. It exudes this aw-shucks earnestness where everyone here will turn a parking lot, an aisle, or even the bulletin board beside the post office into a conversation spot.

Local character

Sometimes, instead of talking to people, the people here will talk to birds. Or, really, a peacock named Prince.

Jane Cairnes did that. In 2005, she had just moved to Saxapahaw from Fuquay-Varina, and she was walking the roads when she saw the peacock and starting talking to it.

It was John Jordan’s peacock. She and Jordan struck up a conversation. At the time, Cairnes had no idea who Jordan was. But they met again later.

“You’re the gentleman with the peacock,” she said to him.

“I call you the Bird Lady,” John responded. “You talk to the birds.”

Today, Cairnes is helping John put together a tourist attraction for Saxapahaw, which will include a cultural history museum, a mill house, a Boy Scout hut, a Native American trail, an archeological dig site, and a one-room schoolhouse where local blacks got an education during

the Jim Crow years.

The archeological dig site, an old mill house overlooking the Haw, is being carried out by students at Hawbridge School, with the help of Elon University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

“This is truly a special place,” Cairnes says. “I guess because it’s a village. But it’s like a little place time sort of forgot.”

That’s the draw.

Monique de Latour, a textile designer, was teaching black history and textiles three years ago at a school in Harlem when she Googled “cotton and the South” and found the Saxapahaw Rivermill.

She saw the landscape online and rented an apartment over the phone that very day. At first, she commuted between New York and Saxapahaw, living in both places. Today, she’s in Saxapahaw full time and teaches art at Hawbridge School.

Heather Leigh Wallace, a medical writer, was tired of living outside Philadelphia, surrounded by a lifestyle defined by how soon, how fast.

Wallace and her partner, Nicholas Macaulay, wanted to get closer to Research Triangle Park. They found Saxapahaw two years ago and bought a 3,000-square-foot house, less than two minutes from the Haw.

And there, beside the river, Wallace and Macaulay picnic, watch the beavers, and walk their Doberman they named Jordan.

She’s been so captivated by the village she wrote *Images of America: Saxapahaw*. Her next book in the Images of America series is expected to come out this spring. It’ll be about Jordan Lake, a drinking reservoir on the Haw.

“I’m desperately trying to learn patience because it’s a way of life here,” Wallace says. “You see it in how everyone hugs you and greets you. They look you in the eye, say hello, and it’s like, ‘Let’s start talking.’”

“There are some good people here. Their family values are still intact.”

Like old times

In Saxapahaw, the village’s small-business owners have created partnerships to lure anyone off the interstate, and those partnerships have helped keep themselves and Saxapahaw alive.

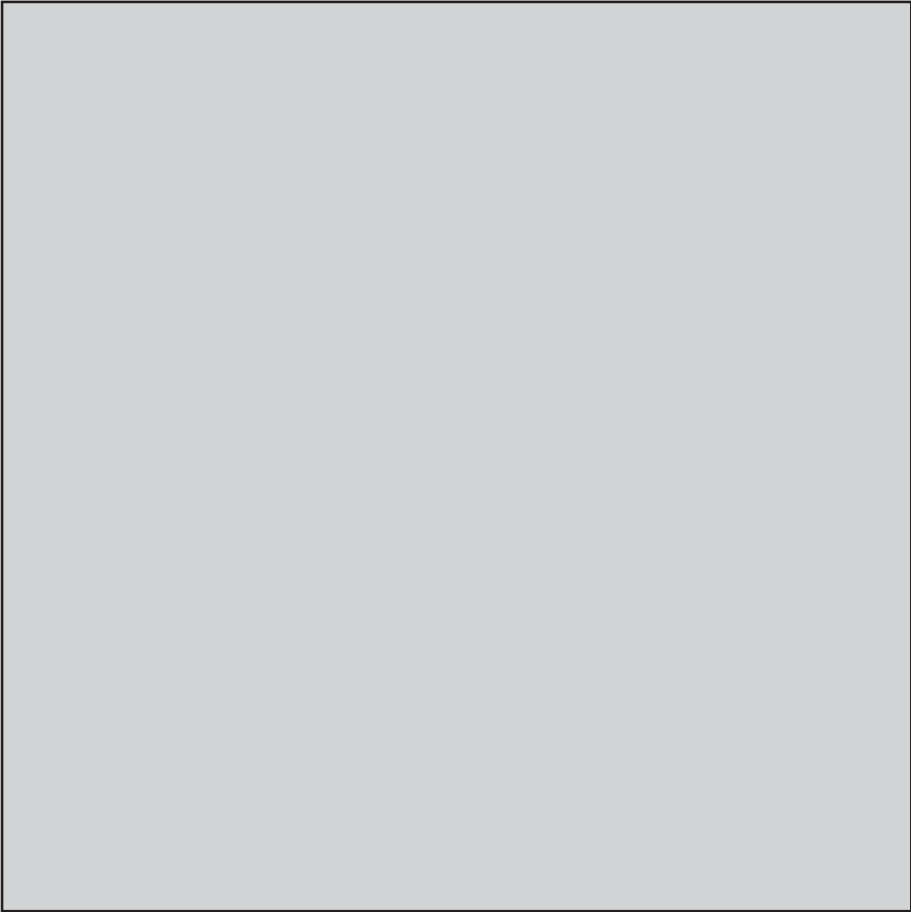
Hoover Dixon sees that, and embraces it.

He started working at the cotton mill at age 15. He made 45 cents an hour packing yarn. Dixon worked there on and off for 35 years. He made it up to manager of the dye house. He left in 1984.

Today, when mill workers tour their old workplace, they say things like “Do you remember?” or “Those



Textile designer Monique de Latour stumbled upon the Saxapahaw Rivermill on a random web search. She liked what she saw so much, she rented an apartment that day and moved south from New York. She now teaches art at Hawbridge School.



beams are beautiful!” Or they simply say nothing and hold hands to stop themselves from crying over what they see.

Like Dixon, they love what they see. “It’s a new world,” says Dixon, who is now 81. “You go anywhere in the South and you’ll pass cotton mill towns covered up in vines. But Saxapahaw is so lucky. We didn’t die.”

Today, Saxapahaw has the feel of an Old World village, compact and self-sustaining. But it also has the Haw River. Mac and his younger brother, Carter, will show you that.

Walk with them alongside the Haw, and they laugh often. They talk about growing up with their grandfather’s friends. Rack Robinson, for instance, always pushed them to eat squirrel, and Ernest Cagle always tried to convince their granddad to drink his moonshine and pass it on to his political friends in Washington.

In 1996, Mac asked Carter to come home to help rebuild the mill. At the time, Carter was single and working in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. By day, he built log cabins by hand-peeling the logs with a draw knife, and at night, he worked as a night auditor and food and beverage manager at an exclusive ski resort.

Every chance he got, Carter skied, hunted, and kayaked. He was there for seven years.

When Mac asked him to come back, Carter flipped a coin. Best two out of three. Heads he left. Tails he stayed. It came back heads. Carter skied one more time, came back down the mountain, and gave away his skis at a bar called The Moose.

He’s now 43, a married father of two and a skilled carpenter who doesn’t mind standing knee-deep in mud or seeing a beam way above him and thinking, “Needs

painting. Again.”

There’s a reason for that.

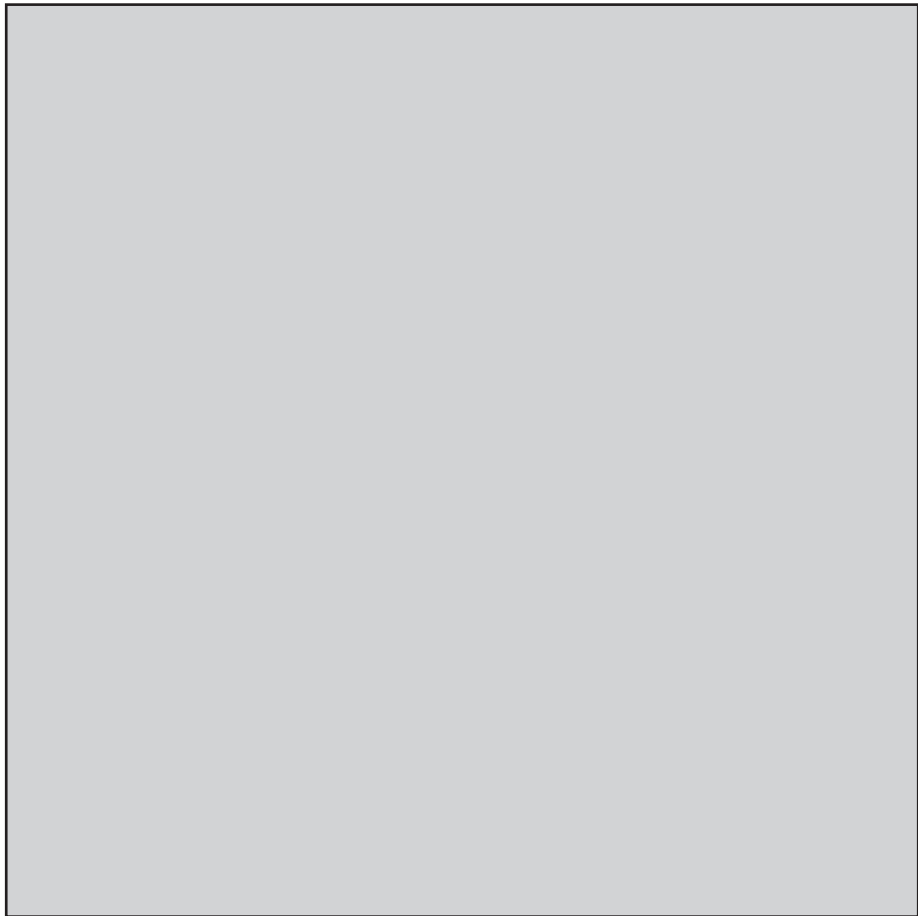
“People like pretty things no matter if you’re out West or up in the North Carolina mountains or on the banks of the Haw,” he says. “It’s beautiful, and you have to maintain that.”

“Rack Robinson,” Mac says, “revealed to us as children the beauty of this environment and that gets in our blood.”

“’Course,” Carter says, keeping in stride along the Haw, “you have to stay in hollerin’ distance for your mom. And with our mom, that was a two-mile distance.”

They laugh. But they never stop walking. They have places to go in UCLA. 🏞️

Jeri Rowe, a Greensboro resident, is a columnist with the News & Record.



if you’re going

Saxapahaw Rivermill

1616 Jordan Drive
Saxapahaw, N.C. 27340
(336) 376-3122

Saxapahaw General Store

1735 Saxapahaw-Bethlehem
Church Road
Graham, N.C. 27253
(336) 376-5332

Hawbridge School

1735 Saxapahaw-Bethlehem
Church Road
Graham, N.C. 27253
(336) 376-1122

*For links to the websites of these local attractions, go to **ourstate.com**, and click on “This Month’s Issue.”*

