**Early History**

The site where the now-defunct Virginia Mills textile mill sits in Swepsonville had been the site of one sort of mill since 1790. Its position close to the Haw River to provide power to a water wheel, combined with a short commute to Burlington made the site an optimal choice. These first mills were grist mills built to grind local corn/flour from the surrounding farmers. However, the first textile mill was founded in its first form by the unscrupulous businessman George William Swepson in 1868.

Throughout his life, Swepson was known as a rascal. In 1842, he as a 23-year-old man eloped with his 16-year old wife Virginia Yancey, daughter of a distinguished North Carolina Lawyer. As his business fortunes grew, Swepson moved from Haw River to Raleigh. In 1868, he successfully lobbied the North Carolina legislature for 4 million dollars’ worth (110 million today) of government bonds to expand the western Carolina railroad network. He then reportedly took the money and ran, causing immense economic damage, and delaying the western sections. It was at this point that the verb *swepsonize* entered the popular vocabulary in Raleigh, meaning to defraud, or to swindle. However, his swindling would finally end with his death in 1883.

While people in Raleigh view him as a rascal, there are some in Alamance County who viewed him in a slightly better light. A rascal he may be, he brought industry and jobs to the area, especially considering the Virginia Mills plant in 1868. Many people that he employed were farmers before, living a hard life, for some a life of mere subsistence. The chance to have a steady wage and a community was an offer that many took up gratefully, even though it was from a man with such a bad reputation. Though, their life would be inseparably tied to the company. Virginia Mills owned the entire community of Swepsonville; houses, stores, the mill, everything but the people. They would not even pay them in money, they were paid in company scrip.

**Turning Point**

After Swepson’s death, ownership of the mill passed to a business associate of his, Ashby Baker. This period is regarded as a turning point for the mill and the community’s history. In 1892, the mill was the site of a large fire, to which Baker responded by rebuilding the mill in brick and expanding. The mill prospered during World War I, and wages and bonuses reflected that success. Baker even started one of the earliest profit-sharing plans in the Southeast.

However, the mill suffered during the Great Depression, and closed for its duration. It was then reopened by his second wife, Minne Baker, who became president of the company, the first woman in North Carolina to head a million-dollar enterprise. The mill produced a high quality of goods, such as material for dresses and upholstery for fine furniture. Interestingly at this point, Swepsonville and the Virginia Mills plant became known for their baseball team.

Looking for a way to entertain employees off hours, Virginia Mills joined many other mills to create a baseball league in the area. The company built a baseball field where employees could play against other mills’ employees. Prospective hires were even offered a bonus if they could play well. Additionally, the mill opened a community center with a playground, and took the mill even took it upon themselves to rid the town of mosquitos (through the use of DDT). Alma Patterson, whose father was a machinist the mill, grew up in Swepsonville in the late 1940’s and through the 50’s and looks back fondly upon her childhood there, all things considered. “It was a good place to grow up, the mill took care of its people. We weren’t the richest people in the world, but we all did our best.”

**Decline**

However, like other textile mills in the area, Virginia Mills suffered the same decline in business as others did during the 70’s, and closed its doors early in the decade. The abandoned complex had its fate sealed when in 1989 it was the site of North Carolina’s largest structure fire, before or since. All 1 million square feet of the old mill burned furiously, and it took 5 hours to contain the blaze. By the end of the ordeal, there was little to be salvaged and the site was made into an empty field, as it sits today.

**Today**

The destruction of Virginia Mills could have been the final nail in the coffin for the community, doomed to a fate of decay and deterioration, like so many others, had it not been for the opening of a new manufacturing plant, and the work of one man to revitalize the community.

Though the area of Swepsonville was already experiencing a bit of new construction from the need for housing around quickly expanding Mebane, Honda Manufacturing opened a lawnmower assembly factory right up the road from the Virginia Mills plant, employing hundreds in the area. Opened in 1984, this plant still operates to this day, still building lawnmowers. Fortunately, it received a 46 million dollar investment to expand and upgrade production to the newest lawnmowers. Additionally, the work of Raymond Herring, a local construction businessman and helicopter engineer during the Vietnam War, helped incorporate the town of Swepsonville, and he became its first mayor in 1997. He even restored the old mill baseball field.

Though it may have had a crooked start, the Virginia Mills plant remains an integral part of Swepsonville history, and the history of North Carolina. By better understanding this small part of North Carolina history, we work towards an understanding of the state as a whole, and the people who live in it.





