

Cherry Hollow Farm

It began as a lark and one frivolous remark; “Well if we are going to put this much effort into it, why don’t we open the doors to everyone?” With that, the dye was cast and so began nearly eight years of inventing Cherry Hollow Farm. In many ways, she will never be complete but that’s ok. Faith in what she would become, steadfast commitment to the cause, pure adrenaline, blood, sweat and tears poured into these hallowed halls. It was an entirely organic experience, never lending itself to a planned, calculated arrangement. One nail, one board, one brick and one thought at a time. Honestly, we shot from the hip and it worked. Whether one person came to visit us or a million over time, we set upon that barren ground to build it anyway. We were determined to build “her” come hell or high water.

If turn of the century building materials and old relics could talk to each other, the place would be an absolute chatter box. It would never stop humming. There is too much “time” represented in the constitution of this place. Our project isn’t easy to describe or to assign a title. It doesn’t fit into any mold. Our grandfather once said, “the worst thing in life one can be is unoriginal”. Little did he know how his words would resonate here.

Having complete access to a smorgasbord of turn of the century textile mills, power plants, industrial complexes, old pre and post-civil war farmsteads lent itself to the design theory and architectural scheme behind what you see today. None of the facilities/mills that we plucked our bevy of artifacts from exist today, especially not within the context of their original function. What you see now represents the last tangible and authentic elements of twenty-one turn of the century structures. When they say “they don’t make them like they used to”, they are absolutely right. We are often asked, “what did this place produce, what did it manufacture?” Our answer always perplexes those that query us in that it never existed in its present form; that it is the culmination of many other places, producing hundreds of other things. All these parts just ended up finding a home, here. And we get asked where all of these materials came from and why were they placed into the structures the way they were. The latter question is a bit more difficult to answer except that it just felt right.

Obviously, our place took on the shapes and forms it did because of what we had access to and what we found along the way. If we lived on the West Coast, she would be entirely different. But for five years, weekend after weekend, we crawled through the South, in and around abandoned mills and old houses yielding what you see today and placed into its present configuration. Much rhyme, much reason and a whole lot of “hold on to the seats of our pants” brought her into reality. And we would be remiss to not point out that we had some serious talent helping us along the way. While it took a singular vision to bring it to reality, it took a village to pull it off. If anything, Cherry Hollow Farm demonstrates our intimate collaboration with our environment, our relationship with agriculture and to an industrial world that dominated our ancestors lives and that no longer exists.

As proprietors of this place, we are more than welcome to give tours of the various elements built into the venue. Just guessing, we most likely have the remnants of at least 40 structures represented including twenty-one industrial buildings/textile mills that no longer exist. A vast majority of the antiquities you see placed throughout the facility came from the Lanette, Fairfax, Opelika, Griffin, Arnco and Sargeant Textile Mills. We have also received all kinds of materials from the west and east coasts

where much of the old industrial buildings are falling victim to the wrecking ball. Many a time, we found ourselves trying to extricate items at the same moment that the excavators smashed the very brick walls down around us. We had to try and stay one step ahead of the salvage crews. It was no easy task. While they obviously saw value in the steel, the brick and the old heart of pine timbers, our focus was in the beauty that we found in and about and in the remote recesses of these structures; places where men and women toiled and raised their family's generation after generation. While at times we had competing interest with the owners of these massive facilities, we must recognize them for allowing us into their world and for their concern in helping us to preserve the legacy of these buildings. They were very gracious in giving us unfettered access to these structures. We could not have built our place without them and they are forever in our gratitude.

So, let's take that ten-cent tour!

The Promenade.

If you are standing looking up at the massive arches of the promenade, realize that those 9,000 bricks staring back at you came from one of the first buildings where the cotton gin inventor Eli Whitney first produced the cotton gin. And if you walk through the next arch and look right, you will see brick hand-made by slaves in the 1820's. Step back inside the promenade and look down at the dark black flooring. The only reason we were able to acquire this 400-year-old flooring is because of a fatal train derailment in Graniteville, SC that set-in motion the ultimate downfall of the Pell City/Allendale Mill. That's a long story. Better to tell it over a fire with a drink in hand. Moving on, the structural beams that hold up the promenade came from the Arncos Mill in Newnan, Georgia and of particular historical interest is the very large, burnt red steel-clad warehouse door that is placed against the eastern wall of the promenade. This very large wooden and steel-clad door is perhaps one of the most treasured elements of Cherry Hollow Farm for it represents a contentious time in American history. This door, extracted from one of the oldest cotton mill warehouses in Selma, Alabama was one of a few others that opened and revealed recently arrived slaves that had traveled up the Alabama River to be sold into bondage. That old mill, which has since been demolished is but an earshot from the Edmund Pettus Bridge, hallowed ground indeed for the civil rights movement. It was our desire for this historical element to grace Cherry Hollow Farm, to change its paradigm from representing the disunion of our country and the bondage of our people fast and instead to the union of families and the harmonious marital alliances of people from all nationalities, backgrounds and orientation.

Looking up through the center of the promenade, one can see a mortise and tenon beam that forms the ridge of our main structure. This beam, one of only three in existence, came from The Huntingdon Plantation (circa 1821) built in Autauga County, Alabama by John Archer Elmore (1762-1834), a distinguished military officer and politician who fought in the Continental Army in the American Revolution. John Archer Elmore fought alongside Nathaniel Greene, considered to be George Washington's most dependable and gifted officer and was present at the surrender in 1781 of the British under command of Charles Cornwallis, 1st Marquess Cornwallis to French and American forces at the Siege of Yorktown. This battle effectively ended hostilities in North America. We found it most fitting that this beam become the backbone, so to speak of Cherry Hollow Farm as its history was engrained in the very fabric and foundation of our country.

Venturing back down the stairs of the promenade, you come upon a round steel ball that sits in the center of our water feature. This heavy steel ball was the lightning rod for a titanic steel water tank for

the Sargeant Mill in Newnan, Georgia. For those who know your history, the Sargeant Mill was one of the first mills in America to hold a strike over workplace conditions, wages and child labor. This uprising and the violence that ensued was the catalyst that led many other textile mills in the country to strike and propelled organized labor and unions throughout the country to action.

The old Carmichael House (circa 1860)

The two very old structures that straddle the promenade are actually two sections of the old Carmichael estate built in 1860 that was donated to us from a very respected landowner near our farm. The first owner of this house fought in the civil war and was involved in the relocation of the Creek Indians to reservations out west. This old farmstead was moved in two pieces from its previous location three miles down the road to where they rest now. It was a massive undertaking but absolutely necessary in that we saved one of the most historic structures in Chattahoochee Hills. What we now use as the chapel and dressing rooms was once the front of the house and the dining room, kitchen and a meat smoking/salt curing room.

The Reception Hall

Enter the western end of the Reception Hall and look left at the old lighted panel that forms the backdrop for the control room bar. This control panel came from the Fairfax Mill, found almost by accident in the very bottom of that large building. Located only 12 hours before it was slated to be crushed by an excavator, it took us 4 hours to extract it and many, many more hours to reinstall and bring it back to life. I'm sure the engineers who worked that panel never thought it would ultimately find its way here. There are a variety of other gauges and electrical panels in the bar that herald from the Opelika, Griffin and Lanette Mills and even a control panel from a Huey helicopter that flew in Vietnam. This panel, while not exactly in context with the others has sentimental value. It just had to go there.

Turn around behind you and you will see the old Babcock and Wilcox (B&W) boiler doors which came from the Opelika and Griffin Textile Mill's boiler buildings. The main boiler door covers the fireplace that vents up through the old poultry feed silo outside that we found near Wedowee, Alabama. How many people can say they have vented their fireplace out through a poultry silo?! The rack holding the firemen's uniforms is a testament to the sacrifice of our fireman and in particular to our friend and consummate master electrician who helped us bring this place to fruition. The very small lit room right behind the bar holds a Level A emergency responder suit and other equipment as a testament to emergency responders everywhere and to the sacrifice of our family who have dedicated our lives to the environment and to the United States Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA). Laura's mother was actually one of the first 50 staff members of the USEPA. Cool.

Back to the venue. All of the wood floors that you are standing on in the bar, along the left hand side of the reception hall and the loading dock stage came from the mills and the wood is at least 500 years old. The loading dock stage is actually a combination of three separate loading docks found at the mills. The VIP room beside the dance floor houses the only two wooden push linen carts from the Lanette Mill known to exist. The belts, chains and sprockets that line the walls once hung in the engineer's room down in the darkest and deepest parts of the old mills. In a way, these small objects hanging on the wall are art just by themselves. There a million stories alone in this one building but let's head upstairs into the dining room.

The Grand Dining Hall

We actually think this space has become one of our favorite locations in the venue. It was an afterthought as was the caterer's kitchen and the upper bar. Good thing for afterthoughts. In the dining hall, components from the Arnco and Sargeant Mills located in Newnan, Georgia figure prominently. All of the beams came from the Arnco Mill while the tin on the walls and ceiling came from the Sargeant Mill. The wooden floor came from one of the oldest poultry houses in Carrollton, Georgia and of particular interest is the large, steel boiler door at the end of the dining hall. One of only two in existence, this boiler assembly formed the face of one of the old steam boilers that powered the Arnco Mill from 1929 until the 50's. To tally up the hours that it took to find, dismantle, extract and reconstitute this boiler door into its present location would be gargantuan to say the least. It was by far one of the most arduous projects we undertook. Hopefully you feel it was worth it.

Everything else

The tour could expand all over the venue and there would always be a story to tell about each and every element. Please bear in mind that the creation of Cherry Hollow Farm is not just a narrative of sheer determination and a "no guts, no glory" run at something. It's much, much more than that. It's about salvaging and displaying the very elements of what our country is all about so they are not lost to antiquity forever. And it's about repurposing materials destined for the smelters and landfills and redefining space while recognizing the slightest contraptions as being artistic in their own right. Our place is a myriad of backdrops, unconstrained by a need to fit into a theme. It is what it is. Honestly, Cherry Hollow Farm is what it means to YOU.

We earnestly hope you will "dig this place", that you will feel at home while you are here, and as time goes on, we get to visit with you again.

With warm regards,

The Williamson's