

The Search for Jones Ferry Crossing Chatham County Landmark

Curiosity about where Jones Ferry might have crossed the Haw River drew a large audience to Chatham's Historic Courthouse on Sunday, September 17, 2017, for a presentation about this topic by Margaret Miller Growe and Richard Ellington.



Looking across Haw River to Rock Rest side of suspected Jones Ferry landing.

Margaret and her husband, Roger, moved to Chatham County from Chapel Hill in 2002, and often traveled to their new property on Jones Ferry Road. Where, Margaret wondered, was the ferry crossing to which that road must have led? She began what she describes as a 15-year hobby to discover and make public the answer to this question.

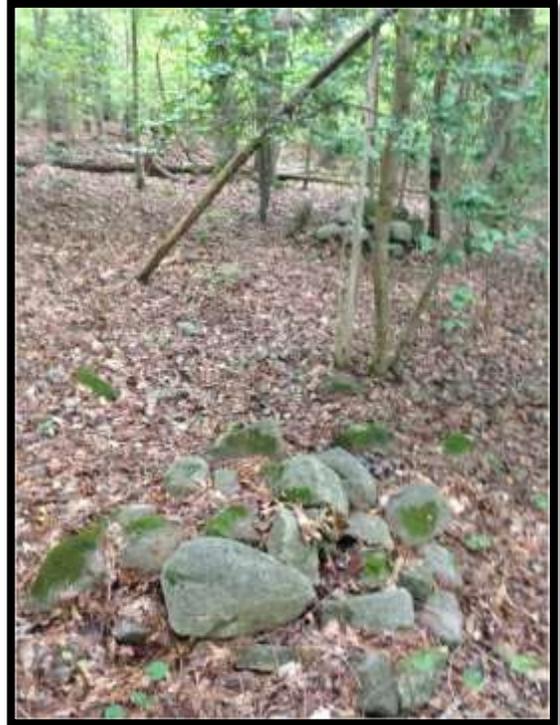
In addition to talking to anyone who might have information on the ferry's historical whereabouts, Margaret spent many hours exploring the banks of the Haw River. She readily found the ruins of an old mill that was well known to the community and included large brick abutments of an old bridge just at the bottom of Peoples Island. And, soon, in 2003, she discovered the isolated ruins of a large building and an old roadbed on the banks of the river at a spot above Peoples Island that she believed had all of the characteristics one would expect in a ferry crossing—gently sloping banks where the ferry could land on both sides of the river, a deep draft, a natural eddy created by a rock outcropping, and evidence of manmade alterations to some of the rocks.

The old road trace comes down to the river, right to Margaret's proposed ferry site. Back up that road on a bluff is where the remains of the large building are found—corner pillars and a large collapsed stone chimney—that could have been an inn for travelers to wait to cross the river on the ferry.

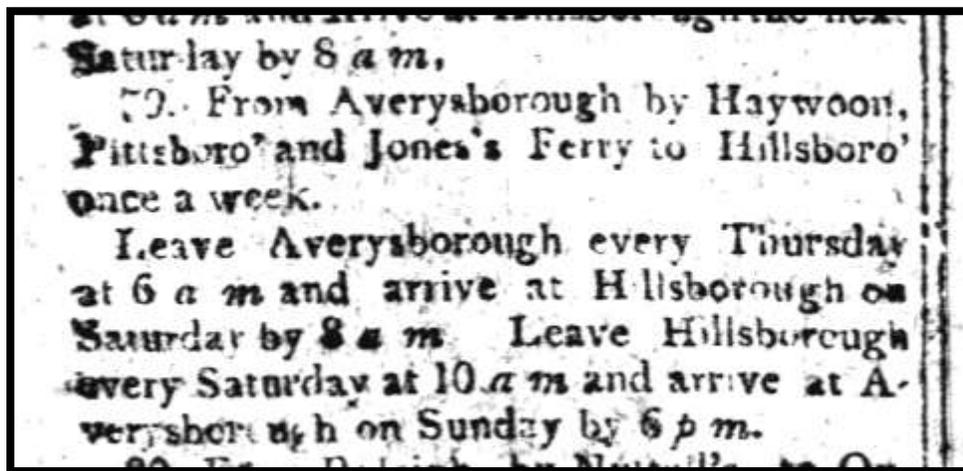
Margaret periodically attempted to raise interest in her finds with local entities and individuals that had to do with the Haw River, but they were skeptical of her theory – generally rebuffing her entreaties – and for many years the hobby took a back seat to her work and family life.

Then, in 2014, a friend referred Margaret to a brief online article written by then-president of the Chapel Hill Historical Society, Richard Ellington, in which he also wondered about the location of Jones Ferry. Richard came to the problem by tracing the original route of Jones Ferry Road. He had been scouring both Orange and Chatham County documents

looking for references to the ferry and had found only a few. Newspaper articles in the early 1800s mention Jones Ferry in descriptions of mail routes connecting Pittsboro and Hillsborough and one mention was found in an 1879 Orange County deed. Jones Ferry Road shows up on several early Orange and Chatham County maps. What is now Main Street in Carrboro was previously called Jones Ferry Road, and predated Carrboro by many decades.



Rock pillars -- Remains of large structure near suspected ferry landing site.



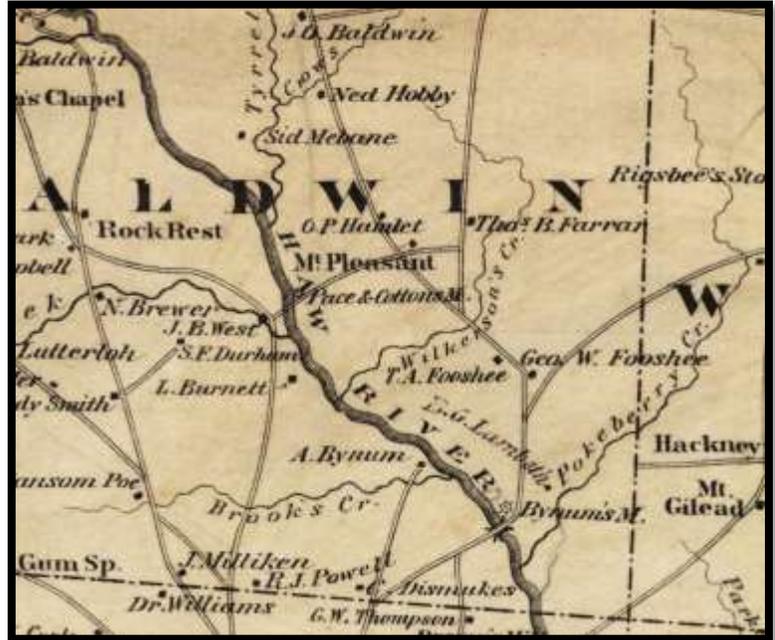
Weekly Raleigh Register, 12 Jan 1807. Excerpt from article describing mail routes.

When Margaret and Richard conferred, the two agreed that Richard's research on Jones Ferry Road substantiates Margaret's archeological finds along the riverbank, and that the results of their independent investigations dovetail to form a plausible theory about the location of Jones Ferry. The two researchers are quite confident that they have located the ferry site, but hope to find additional documentation to back up that finding.

Richard had some familiarity with the area of the river where he and Margaret agree the ferry might have been located. Downstream of the suspected ferry location, at the south end of the island, was Pace's Mill, which Margaret had stumbled on initially. County records indicate that this had been a mill site since the late 1700s--until it was destroyed by a tornado in 1924.

Richard's grandfather ran Pace's Mill until 1919, and his father was born on the mill property in 1904. Family reunions had been held there in the 1960s. Richard spent many hours walking the woods south from Carrboro, looking for and documenting traces of where the old Jones Ferry Road diverged from the current road, and hoping one day to locate the section of road that would have gone to the ferry. He essentially met Margaret coming north with information that connects the last few miles of the puzzle.

The identity of Mr. Jones remains a mystery, although Richard has several candidates that he continues to research. The ferry appears to have been in operation from the early 1800s—when it is included in descriptions of postal routes. An 1854 article about a horse theft references "Jones' Ferry on Haw River." Richard believes that the ferry would have ceased operation by the late 1800s – after bridges were built in that location.



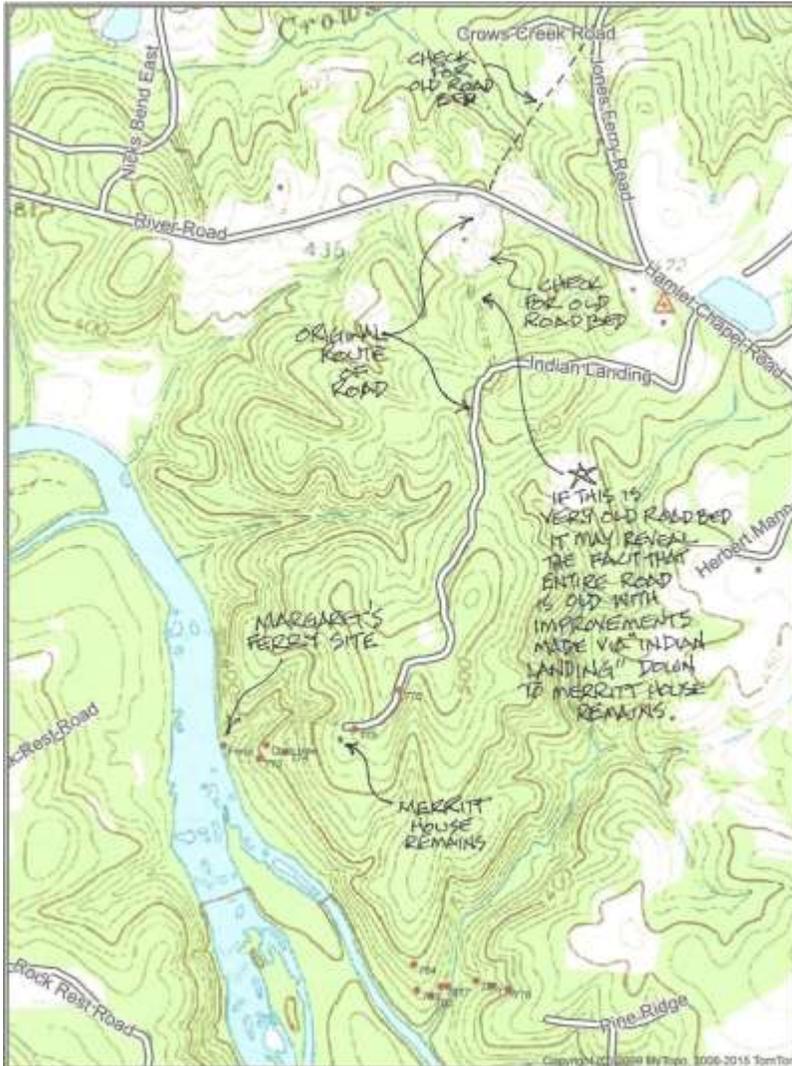
Portion of Chatham County map by Nathan Ramsey, 1870, showing location of Pace and Cotton's Mill just south of suspected ferry site.



Trace of "old" Jones Ferry Road near Orange/Chatham border.

The map below suggests where the original road to Jones Ferry might have been located, and shows the site of the ferry crossing. This map was prepared for Margaret by Joe Liles and Ken Hearmey, GIS mapping specialists of old roads. As the director of art at the North Carolina School of Science & Math, Liles had famously led his classes to locate and document the ancient Native American trail, Fish Dam Road, in the Eno River area north of Durham.

After visiting the Jones Ferry site on the Haw with Margaret, Liles and Hearmey created the map to illustrate their findings and recommendations. It shows a) the old road Margaret believes is the



final stretch of Jones Ferry Road from its modern terminus to the river, b) points of interest Liles and Hearmey marked with their instruments during the survey, and c) their suggestions regarding how the old road could be better understood for connecting it with the existing Jones Ferry Road. With the guarded optimism of seasoned history detectives, they agreed with Margaret that her spot along the riverside may hold something of important historical interest.

During the September 17 presentation at the courthouse, a Chatham County resident with lifelong familiarity with this area, confirmed that remnants of the old road exist exactly where the map suggests they might be found ... snapping one of the last important puzzle pieces into place.

Margaret and Richard illustrated their talk with numerous maps and photographs. In addition to questions following the talk, several other audience members

offered information that might contribute clues to the ongoing effort to document the ferry site.

Anyone with information that might prove helpful is invited to contact Richard Ellington at Richard_Ellington@unc.edu or Margaret Growe at mmgrowe@gmail.com.

For more on Richard Ellington's explorations of Orange and Chatham Counties in search of the former location of Jones Ferry Road, see [his article for the Chapel Hill Historical Society](#).

[In 2020, CCHA volunteer Doug Berg proposed an alternate location for Jones Ferry, based largely on deed research. His article can be seen here:

<https://chathamhistory.org/pdfs/SearchingforJonesFerryDougBerg.pdf>]

Margaret Miller Growe is the Executive Director of The Tamassee Group, a newly-formed North Carolina nonprofit that is dedicated to ecological education, and to the conservation and preservation of significant natural and historical resources.

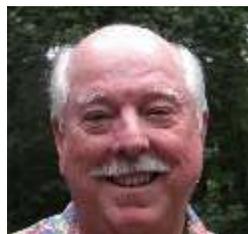


Margaret hails from a long line of Southern statesmen and activists, including the Revolutionary War general, Andrew Pickens, and his grandson, Francis Pickens, the South Carolina governor who seceded from the Union, and initiated the order of the shot on Sumter to begin the Civil War. Margaret's parents spent their careers as civil rights activists in the Deep South, and she continues her family's ethic of community involvement through her human rights and ecological commitments.

Following 20 years serving the healthcare community nationally and internationally, Margaret has turned her attention to local efforts that foster wellbeing for the Earth and its inhabitants. She does this via The Tamassee Group, whose mission is to create initiatives that promote an environmentally- and historically-aware and engaged populace. One of the projects they are working on is verification of Margaret's research regarding where Jones Ferry might have crossed the Haw River.

Margaret continues her international development efforts serving the world's poorest people, through a separate nonprofit she has with her husband, in their partnership with a self-sufficient healthcare training program in rural India. She is a lifelong seeker of adventure and knowledge, and considers animals and the outdoors her greatest mentors. Margaret was educated at Bryn Mawr College, Emory University and North Carolina State University. She and her husband live on a small farm in Pittsboro with their dogs, chickens and rescued horses.

Richard Ellington is a local history "nut" with deep roots in Chatham County. His father's family lived here since the very early 1800s and they married into several other long-time area families (Cheeks, Coles, Browns, Clarks, Crutchfields and many more). He has done much and continues to do more extensive research into his families' histories.



Richard was born and raised in Carrboro. Richard and Dave Otto co-authored an annotated photo history of Carrboro for the town's 2011 centennial. The book was a big success. In 2014 they co-authored another book on the Carrboro community.

As a teenager in the early 1960s, he worked in a UNC-CH data processing facility during the summer and became fascinated with the concept of information technology (IT). After attending Campbell College, he attended a data processing school in Raleigh in 1967, went to work for UNC-CH and was employed there for 43-plus years in several different IT locations and capacities. He retired in 2011 and was awarded the Order of the Long Leaf Pine for Outstanding and Meritorious Service to the State of North Carolina.

Richard's passion is local history. He is the immediate past president of the Chapel Hill Historical Society and continues to serve on their board of directors. He is a student of NC history and drags his wife and family to anything having to do with history, a museum or historic preservation. He loves the outdoors and spends as much time as he can fishing, walking in the woods, looking for waterways and just enjoying nature. He believes that when you stop wanting to learn about the world around you, you start dying.