

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions.

1. Name of Property

Historic name: Roberson Mill

Other names/site number: J. W. Epperly Mill, DHR ID 031-0001

Name of related multiple property listing:
N/A

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

2. Location

Street & number: 1367 Roberson Mill Road SE

City or town: Floyd State: VA County: Floyd

Not For Publication: N/A Vicinity: X

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,


I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

national statewide local

Applicable National Register Criteria:

A B C D

	<u>3/23/23</u>
Signature of certifying official/Title:	Date
<u>Virginia Department of Historic Resources</u>	
State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government	

In my opinion, the property <input type="checkbox"/> meets <input type="checkbox"/> does not meet the National Register criteria.	
Signature of commenting official:	Date
Title :	State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

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4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

- entered in the National Register
- determined eligible for the National Register
- determined not eligible for the National Register
- removed from the National Register
- other (explain:) _____

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply.)

- Private:
- Public – Local
- Public – State
- Public – Federal

Category of Property

(Check only **one** box.)

- Building(s)
- District
- Site
- Structure
- Object

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Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	buildings
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	sites
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	structures
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	objects
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

INDUSTRY/PROCESSING/EXTRACTION: Manufacturing Facility/Grain Mill

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

WORK IN PROGRESS

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7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

NO STYLE

Materials: (enter categories from instructions.)

Principal exterior materials of the property: WOOD; STONE, METAL

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance and condition of the property. Describe contributing and noncontributing resources if applicable. Begin with a **summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, type, style, method of construction, setting, size, and significant features. Indicate whether the property has historic integrity.)

Summary Paragraph

The Roberson Mill, located three- and one-half miles south of the small town of Floyd, in south central Floyd County, Virginia, is a two-story frame commercial grain mill with a footprint measuring 30 feet x 40 feet. It was built in the mid-1880s by miller and blacksmith John W. Epperly. The mill has a coursed stone foundation, heavy timber frame structural components, weatherboarded siding, six-over-six windows, a sheet-metal-clad gable-roof, two sets of millstones located on an elevated platform within the first-floor room, two rare surviving bolting chests, a buckwheat huller, a Cranson grain scourer, and various other pieces of milling machinery; all in restorable (or recently restored) condition. The mill has been undergoing a methodical, historically sensitive restoration that will restore water power and milling operation since fundraising began in 2019, and eventually will be opened and interpreted to the public. Surviving parts of the earthen mill race are now on separately owned parcels and are not included in this nomination. There are no other surviving historic secondary resources on the nominated parcel.

Narrative Description

Setting

The mill is sited on the south side of Roberson Mill Rd SE (Route 714) on the inside of a 90-degree bend in the road, one-quarter mile from Route 8. The location, near the southern edge of the Blue Ridge Plateau, lies at 2,483 feet above sea level. The West Fork of Dodd Creek, a small

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tributary of the Little River, meanders through a nearly flat, fertile meadow on the east and west sides of the mill running as close as 40 feet to the south of the mill. Before 1972 the creek was channeled to the mill race and a wooden flume that led to the mill's waterwheel. The flume then deteriorated, leaving only the waterwheel on the east side of the mill building. Circa 2020, an attempt was made to remove the wheel and have it restored, but it was too badly deteriorated to save. Until about 40 years ago, a spring house stood directly across the road from the mill. Parts of the earthen mill race remain intact but have been parceled off from the mill and are not on the nominated parcel. Additionally, the early 20th-century frame house occupied by Homer Roberson during the years he operated the mill still stands, albeit in a badly deteriorated state, 150 feet to the northwest, across the road from the mill. Although the house shares the same address as the mill, it too has been parceled off, and is not included in the nomination. Lastly, an occupied and well-maintained early 20th-century frame house stands 225 feet to the east-northeast, across the road from the mill. Despite its proximity, the house has no known association with the mill. It is on a separate parcel and is not included in the nomination. The surrounding landscape retains a rural quality with cleared pastures and stands of trees. Nearby are late 19th-century through mid-20th-century farmsteads and houses.

Mill

The Roberson Mill is a weatherboarded frame two-story commercial grain mill with a footprint measuring 30' x 40'. The long axis of the building is oriented roughly northeast-southwest. The building initially rested on a continuous foundation of coursed stone, but some sections have been replaced with poured concrete. A small number of the original oak and poplar weatherboards were heavily deteriorated and therefore recently replaced with new matching poplar weatherboards. A new application of dark gray-colored penetrating stain gives the patchwork a cohesive appearance. The narrow, vertical corner boards were also replaced. First-story vertical-plank Dutch doors on the west and north sides, constructed with machine-cut nails, are preserved in-place. None of the original, mostly 6-over-6 wooden window sashes survived intact but they have recently been replaced in-kind. The west elevation second story features two windows, and the north elevation has a window on the first story, two windows on the second story and one window lighting the garret. The east-side features two first-story windows and a four-panel door on the second story that provided access to the elevated wooden race and gate. The south elevation features two windows on each the first and second stories, and one window lighting the garret.

The waterwheel location is on the east side of the building. Historic photographs depict a small shed roof covered with wood shingles on the first-story of the east side. The shed sheltered the main drive shaft and gears located outside the building. The main drive shaft enters the building through a circular hole in the wall. The mill's 18-foot Fitz steel overshot waterwheel replaced a 16-foot wooden overshot wheel in 1956. The salvaged steel wheel was bought for \$90 from P.L. Shelor, Jr., about 1948 and had been previously installed at the Huffville Roller Miller/Ezra Wimmer Mill (031-5069) on Brush Creek in Floyd County. Although the mill and steel waterwheel were in overall poor condition in 2019, investigations confirmed that the mill building remained structurally sound, with the roof structure and many inner workings still intact.

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The remains of the wheel pit formed a roughly triangular depression about 1.5 feet deep that narrowed into the tail race, which extends eastward for about 40 feet before it re-enters Dodd Creek. The earthen head race ran along the edge of the ridge to within 100-150 feet of the wheel. The combined total length of the earthen race and wooden flume equaled 1/3 of a mile. The elevated wooden flume was among the longest and tallest in the county. The flume largely collapsed in the mid-1970s and remnants are no longer visible; yet parts of the earthen portions of the race, which extend from the west side of Route 8 and run along an adjacent ridge slope covered with trees, remain undisturbed. There is a heavy iron culvert under Route 8 where the race continues south to the point where the stream was diverted. Still in surprisingly good condition, the race could possibly function again with minimal cleanup.

Two sets of millstones with a chamfered wooden hoist, and a buckwheat huller are safely intact within the mill along with well-preserved machinery, power shafts, gears, belt wheels, pulleys, wooden hoppers and chutes through which elevator belts and buckets are pulled, and original building components such as flooring and stairs. On the second floor there is a grain cleaner, probably for corn, and two Bolting Chests that bolt or screen corn, wheat, or buckwheat products. Their interior framework was covered in silk, or later a similar material that sifted by centrifugal force, on an incline so that the meal or flour was graded in texture from fine to course.

Essentially built into the top (garret) floor is the Cranson scouring, polishing and separator machine with magnetic attachment, manufactured by Huntley, Cranson and Hammond Co. of Silver Creek, New York. This information is stenciled on a vaulted wooden housing on the top of the machine, which was powered by belts and pulleys connected to the vertical power shaft through transfer gears. The machine's fodder arrived from below through square wooden elevators and the finished product returned to the first floor through hollow spouts. The G. S. Cranson Grain Scourer, as it was patented on July 23, 1889, was invented by Giles S. Cranson of Silver Creek, Chautauqua County, New York. The patent states that the grains were cleaned by rubbing against each other and scoured by rubbing against metallic surfaces while passing through a horizontal scouring case under centrifugal force.

The building's framing—all of which is exposed on the interior—consists of common stud walls, the studs let into the squared-timber sill and plates of each floor level, which are mortised and pegged into squared corner posts, as are diagonal down-braces. The floors are supported by 2.5 x 10-inch joists with diagonal bridging between them. The garret joists extend well beyond the outer walls to create the eaves along the east and west rooflines. The joists carrying the second and third floors are supported in-part by squared summer beams, which are themselves supported by posts at the north and south ends of the building and at the center by an intermediate square chamfered post. All of the joinery is accomplished with traditional techniques, without the use of metal mechanical fasteners. The stairs at the center of the first- and second-floor rooms consist of treads, without risers, mortised into bare 4 x 10-inch stringers lacking balusters or railings. The 2 x 6-inch roof rafters have intermediate let-in purlins supported by posts for additional stability.

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The sheathing boards laid across the rafters, and the sheet metal roofing above them, are recent replacements.

Among Roberson Mill's notable or unusual features are the split-level main floor and absence of a basement. The main gearing is exposed to and accessible from the main floor. The millstones sit on an elevated platform built of heavy timbers. John W. Epperly's name is stamped in the forged steel arms of the millstone hoist. Additionally, the elevators have individual drive shafts, oriented at right angles to the peak of the roof; the fully floored third level; the two flights of stairs from the first floor to the garret are located in the center of the mill, rather than along a wall or in a corner; and compared to other local mills, Roberson Mill employed minimal shafts and belting.

Integrity Statement

Roberson Mill exhibits a high level of historic integrity in terms of overall character, design, materials, workmanship, association, and feeling. The interior remains undisturbed—only repaired, rebuilt only as needed, and preserved features are evident upon entering the interior. As previously noted, these features include the undivided spaces on each floor and items related to circulation patterns, e. g. the stairs connecting the floor levels, the flooring itself, the exposed timber framing of the mill structure including the roof rafters, the millstones set on a raised platform, the hand-forged steel arms with J. W. Epperly's name stamped on them, and numerous pieces of intact and in-place mechanical equipment. Parts of the foundation have been shored up and only specific, deteriorated pieces of exterior cladding have been replaced in-kind. A new waterwheel will be returned to the original location and functionality during restoration. The mill's integrity of location, immediate setting, and greater geographical context also remains well intact.

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8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A. Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B. Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C. Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D. Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

- A. Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes
- B. Removed from its original location
- C. A birthplace or grave
- D. A cemetery
- E. A reconstructed building, object, or structure
- F. A commemorative property
- G. Less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years

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Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

INDUSTRY

ARCHITECTURE

Period of Significance

Ca. 1885–1973

Significant Dates

1931

Significant Person

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

n/a

Cultural Affiliation

n/a

Architect/Builder

Epperly, John W.

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Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance, applicable criteria, justification for the period of significance, and any applicable criteria considerations.)

Roberson Mill is nominated at the local level of significance under Criterion A (Industry) and Criterion C (Architecture) with a period of significance of ca. 1885–1973, beginning with construction of the mill and ending with the traditional fifty-year end date for properties where historic activities continued into the more recent past but did not meet Criteria Consideration G, as milling continued on-site well into the 1980s. The mill was built by John W. Epperly in the mid-1880s and purchased by miller Homer Roberson in 1931. Epperly is noted as having been “one of Floyd County’s most accomplished millwrights.” Cleve Smith bought “John Epperly’s old mill” from J. W. Brammer in 1922 and sold it to John Smith in 1926. Smith sold it to Homer Roberson in 1931. His son Harry Roberson operated the mill at varying capacities until 1988, when he purchased the mill, and retains ownership currently. The mill was one of the last two commercial mills to operate under water power in the county and one of only two existing flour mills that was neither designed to incorporate a roller mill nor modified afterward to accommodate one. The Roberson mill represents, therefore, the county’s most authentic picture of flour milling as it was done through most of the 19th century with minimal adaptations to continue milling through much of the 20th century. At the same time, it is the most distinctive among Floyd County's few documented mills (that were still standing in 2010) in design and machine layout, and also demonstrated some of the finest craftsmanship in wood and metal components. The pride Epperly took in what he built, evidenced by the stamping of his name on the forged steel arms of the stone hoist, was well justified.¹

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the following individuals for their assistance with or support of the nomination: Jeff Rainey, Randy DeHart, Regina Cox, Al Anderson, Rebecca Moses, and the late Franklin Webb, without whose study of Floyd County mills much historical information would surely have been lost to the ages.

Narrative Statement of Significance (Provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance.)

Portions of the following originally appeared in a discussion of Roberson Mill on pages 111-14 of *The Water Powered Mills of Floyd County: Illustrated Histories, 1770-2010* by Franklin F. Webb and Ricky L. Cox, published by McFarland Publishers, 2012.

John W. Epperly, one of Floyd County's most accomplished millwrights, built what is now known as the Roberson Mill in the 1880s on land that may already have been previously developed as a water power site. Epperly was also a skilled blacksmith and gunsmith, and according to his great-grandson Jim Altizer, had a blacksmith shop across the road from the mill.² Stuart Cannaday is said to have worked as a miller for Epperly and for the mill's third owner, Rufus Abraham "Abe" DeHart, who bought the mill from Harrison Scott in 1910. DeHart ran the store while Cannaday looked after the mill, but was himself a miller, having learned the

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trade from his father, Stephen DeHart, on Rock Castle Creek in nearby Patrick County, Virginia. Abe DeHart later owned the second John W. Epperly Mill (DHR 031-5073) and, at some point, McDonald's Mill (DHR 060-0357) on the North Fork of the Roanoke River in Montgomery County, Virginia.

Cleve Smith bought what was by then known as John Epperly's Old Mill from J. W. Brammer in 1922 and stayed on as miller after selling the property to John Smith in 1926. The Mill has been in the Roberson family since John Smith sold it to Homer Roberson in 1931. Current owner Harry Roberson operated the mill under water power until the wooden race or flume collapsed in the 1970s. Electric power was used to grind buckwheat flour on a part-time basis until 1984.

The Roberson Mill was one of the last two commercial mills to operate under water power in Floyd County and one of only two existing Floyd County flour mills that was neither designed to incorporate a roller mill nor modified afterward to accommodate one. The other is the William Allen Simpson Mill, which is older but far less complete, having been used for other purposes since closing its doors around 1941. The Roberson mill represents, therefore, the county's most authentic picture of flour milling as it was done in the United States through most of the 19th century. At the same time, it is the most distinctive among mills (that were still standing in 2010) in design and machine layout, and also demonstrated some of the finest craftsmanship in wood and metal components. The pride Epperly took in what he built, evidenced by the stamping of his name on the forged steel arms of the stone hoist, was well justified. Phillip Gettel noted in a 1985 survey of Floyd area mills that a single poplar tree provided the weatherboard siding for one side and both ends of the Roberson mill.³

Power is carried to upper floors by a vertical shaft extending upward from the main drive gear. This last may be characteristic of mills that pre-dated the arrival of roller mills and their attendant line shafts, drive belts, and pulleys; a similar system was used in the William Allen Simpson Mill, the only other remaining flour mill that was never converted to the roller system. Why a mill whose owners resisted a powerful trend toward modernization outlasted many newer mills both as a structure and a business may have as much to do with personalities as it does technology, but nonetheless invites speculation about the impact of two interesting circumstances in the history of this and other Floyd County mills.

The first of these circumstances is that the mill was built in the 1880s, during which decade the flour milling industry in the United States was undergoing the most significant technological change in its entire history—the transition from the time honored method of crushing and cutting grain between two millstones, one revolving and the other stationary, to the rolling mill process, which abrades grain between as many as eight separate pairs of corrugated steel rollers rotating in the same direction, like the rollers in a clothes wringer, but at much higher and slightly different speeds. Had John Epperly built a roller mill on this site in the 1880s, it would have been the very first in the county. As it turned out, his was among the very last Floyd County flour mills to incorporate the old Oliver Evans system of flour milling, the chief components of which (in Floyd County flour mills) are one set of conventional millstones specially dressed for grinding wheat and a simple reel-type sifter. Additional needs include shafting with pulleys and

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belts or gears to transmit power, elevators and spouts for moving wheat and flour between levels, and one or more machines for removing foreign matter from the wheat before it is ground. But even in its most complex form, the Evans system is simpler and less expensive than the roller mill system that replaced it. It is also slower and less efficient at producing the highest return per bushel of the ultra-white, ultra-fine flour Americans had been persuaded to prefer over the slightly coarser, slightly darker flour produced by buhr-stone flour mills. Had he waited even ten years, John Epperly probably would have planned from the outset to install a roller mill system, and having made that choice, may not have built a mill here at all since the relatively low volume of water probably couldn't have reliably generated enough power to run a high-speed roller mill. He was, in effect, correcting both shortcomings—an obsolete flour milling system and an inadequate source of power—when he built a large, modern roller mill several miles downstream, and below the confluence of Dodd Creek's two main branches, fifteen years later.

The second circumstance that helps explain why the Roberson Mill better represents 19th-century flour milling than 20th century is the fact that the men who owned it between 1900 and 1930 chose not to refit the interior and modify the water power to accommodate a roller mill system, although they no doubt knew this was happening at other older flour mills, like the Spangler Mill on Pine Creek and the Harman Mill on West Fork Creek (both in Floyd County). The owners of still other flour mills decided it was impractical to rework an existing mill and water power, and chose instead to tear down an obsolete building build a new one. While they were at it, several replaced (with a turbine or a factory-made waterwheel) or upgraded (with a new or raised dam) the power system. This was the case with the flour mills then or later known as Greasy Creek, Vaughn's, Ed Strong, and Thompson-Akers, among others in Floyd County. Only about thirty years old at the 1915 peak of the roller mill mania, the "J. W. Epperly Old Mill" may have seemed too new for its owners to consider razing and replacing it, considering, especially, how well constructed it has in the meantime proven itself to be.

When it came to refitting the mill for a roller system, they may have perceived, as some of their counterparts on the headwaters of other streams did not, that there simply wasn't enough power to be had from the available water. Whether the men who owned the mill during these decades consciously chose not to remodel or rebuild for practical (lack of water), personal (lack of energy), or financial (lack of money) reasons, by the time Homer Roberson bought the mill in 1931, the opportunity had passed, along with the thirty-five-year flurry of mill building and refitting that would be the high-water mark of Floyd County grain milling. By the late 1920s, forward-looking Floyd County investors may have been deterred from putting money into a small-scale, agriculture-based business by the economic trends of the teens and twenties, which predicted an economic future more and more dependent on a centralized, industrialized national economy. They would certainly have been demoralized by the cash-poor reality of the 1930s. As a result of either or both circumstances, no new roller mills were built, and no old mills refitted to accept the roller system after 1930 in Floyd County. Roberson either decided, or was left with no choice, to specialize in the grinding of buckwheat, a process that was either too difficult to adapt to the roller process, or that was thought too exotic to be worth the trouble. Roberson also occasionally ground rye flour for customers who had acquired a taste for rye biscuits, which

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Harry Roberson described as the color of brown sugar and good right out of the oven, but not so good after they got cold.⁴

According to Harry Roberson, Homer Roberson's son, the only major change made by Homer was the replacement of the 16-foot wooden wheel with Fitz steel overshot wheel. The salvaged 18-foot wheel was bought for \$90 from P.L. Shelor, Jr., about 1948 and came from the Huffville Roller Miller/Ezra Wimmer Mill on Brush Creek. It was not installed until 1956 by which time the ½ mile long wooden race or flume was also in need of repair. The steel wheel was an improvement, but the extra two feet of diameter sometimes interfered with the tailwater, thereby wasting some of the wheel's power.⁵

Considering the number and variety of exposed gears, shafts, pulleys, and belts in a water-powered mill-or any pre-OSHA industrial plant in which every machine and mechanism was driven by a single power source - accidents were inevitable. In the last fatal accident at a Floyd County mill, Homer Roberson was caught and dragged beneath the wheel on October 30, 1966, while removing a prop from the water wheel which had partially filled due to a leaking flume. Roberson was able to pull himself out of the water but died before he could be gotten to a hospital. During the 1940s Roberson's mill had been the scene of a funeral after a procession of mourners passing by the mill on its way to the cemetery was caught in a downpour. The funeral was conducted inside the mill and the casket kept there until it could be hauled over the muddy roads and to the cemetery on the back of a flat bed truck.⁶

John William Epperly (1856–1931) was the son of Eden (1814–1876) and Leah Gilham Epperly (1822–1901).⁷ John was not quite 24 years old on 5 May, 1880, when “the land on which Eden Epperly resided” and on which the Roberson/Old John Epperly mill now stands” was transferred to him by a deed recorded on 5 May 1880. It is only a supposition, but a reasonable one, to think that the terms would have been favorable to a son, which could have encouraged a young and apparently resourceful and ambitious John Epperly to build on a less than ideal site.

The reference to a “Mill race” in the property bounds of the 1880 deed could either support or undermine that supposition. As support, it could refer to a race that John Epperly had already started digging in anticipation of acquiring the land. Some deeds were recorded months after the deal was actually done. Similarly, among millers who bothered to ask for legal permission to build a dam, several built the dam before applying for a Writ of Ad Quo Damnum, which was apparently a mere formality in that pro-business, pro-development era.

On the other hand, it is conceivable that a millrace and mill were there already, although there are no records of one. If there was or had been a mill there already, Epperly could have been following the common practice of reusing established and, presumably, proven sites. This seems unlikely to me since sites more topographically favorable would have been available in the mid-nineteenth century. That said, there are cases where men who probably could have afforded better sites, went ahead and did the best they could with the land they had or could more easily obtain.

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Another interesting dilemma is that a “Johnny Epperly” bought 18 acres and a mill on Brush Creek, miles from either of the John Epperly Mills, in April 1877 and sold it before 1882. Our John Epperly would have been only 20 years old in April 1877, but it’s conceivable that a self-confident, energetic young man would have bought an existing mill to run or perhaps “flip” while waiting for the estate of his father, who had died in February 1876, to be settled. The fact that a “special commissioner” was involved suggests complications, due perhaps to the absence of a will, contending claims among heirs, or debts outstanding at the time of the elder Epperly’s death.

According to Homer Roberson’s grandson Randy DeHart, Homer and wife Lena lived in the house across from the mill for around 25 years before moving up to a house facing Route 8 while still operating the mill. The brick house at the corner of Roberson Mill Road and Route 8 was built later by Homer's older son Harry, who continued to operate the mill after Homer's death.⁸

The setting, longevity, and rustic appearance of the Homer Roberson mill, combined with its nearness to a major county highway (Route 8) and to the Blue Ridge Parkway, place it among the county's most frequently photographed mills. A series of photographs taken by Roanoke Photographer W.H. Bratton around 1945 is but one proof of its appeal.

Recent History of the Mill

The mill was last in operation around 1988. After the wooden sluice began to collapse in 1972, milling continued using electric power instead of water power. Before 2019, the last work on the building was done in the mid 1990s, when the foundation and roof were repaired. In 2018, when Homer Roberson’s granddaughter Regina Cox first considered organizing an effort to restore the mill, there were serious questions as to whether it could still be saved before it totally collapsed. Consultants determined that not only was it still salvageable, but considered by milling enthusiasts and others to be a historic treasure too significant to lose. As the group called Friends of Roberson Mill was organized, initial work on the building involved repairing and strengthening the foundation, jacking the frame structure back into position, and improving the exterior drainage. After the building was stabilized, it needed new weatherboard siding, new windows, and a new side door to replace those that were missing or badly deteriorated. With this accomplished, the next step was to remove the old leaky roof, replace some of the rafters and the old, heavily deteriorated roof sheathing, and install a new metal roof.⁹

During the height of the Covid epidemic in 2020, however, work temporarily halted. Planned fundraising events were canceled and the roof work was put on hold. Yet even with reduced funding and no progress on the roof, good things started to happen: Jeff Rainey, who not only had a deep interest in the history of milling but was heavily involved in the renovation of the Colvin Run Mill (DHR 029-00008, NR 1977) in Fairfax County, Virginia, volunteered his help and expertise at Roberson Mill. After removing and cleaning the millstones and other much needed maintenance, Jeff began fabricating and installing period-appropriate handrailing on the existing interior stairs. Finally, in July, 2022, workmen were able to complete the replacement of the old roof with a much needed and anticipated new metal roof. The prospect of installing a new water wheel, constructing a new elevated wooden race, and redirecting the water has created a

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renewed level of excitement beyond expectations.¹⁰ More recently, Friends of Roberson Mill were granted 501: 3C non-profit status and fundraising continues.

Criteria Justifications

Criterion A – Industry

Roberson Mill is significant at the local level under Criterion A in the area of Industry. Milling, in tandem with local agriculture, was one of the most important industries in Floyd County during the late eighteenth century through the first half of the twentieth century. At least 140 grain mills are known to have existed in the county during the period, all of them operating with water power until well into the twentieth century, when other types of power began to be employed. By 1940, the very last water-powered corn and flour mills had been built and many old ones were closing their doors. Rather than producing grain for human consumption, larger and larger quantities of dairy, horse, and hog feeds ground with powerful electric and diesel engines became the primary products of a shrinking number of mills. Today there are only 11 known water-power mills still standing in Floyd County, including Roberson Mill and Mabry, the Blue Ridge Parkway tourist attraction dating to 1930.

Mills producing cornmeal, wheat flour, and livestock feed were distributed throughout the county, on nearly every creek that was four or more feet wide. In some cases multiple mills were found along a single stream, such as Dodd Creek, on which the Roberson Mill is located. Industrious men like the well-established miller J. W. Epperly, who built Roberson Mill, became proficient in employing the engineering sciences related to milling and the use of water power, building construction methods, dam and mill race construction and maintenance, and skills such as blacksmithing, as well as in commerce and trade. Epperly built and ran two of the ten water-powered mills that still stand in Floyd County. Small, locally owned grain mills are emblematic of the rural self-sufficiency for which southwestern Virginia was known. Many grain mills, including Roberson Mill, coexisted with sawmills that ran on power from the same source, typically an overshot waterwheel fed by excavated earthen mill races and often elevated wooden race extensions known as flumes or sluices. With the vast majority of Floyd County buildings being constructed of sawn lumber by the last quarter of the nineteenth century, sawmilling was indeed another important part of Roberson Mill's operations.

The well-preserved machinery within the mill is important to understanding the industrial historical context. The type of bolting chest on the mill's second floor is a very special and specific machine found in Merchant class mills, and the Cranson grain scourer or "buckwheat scrubber" is a patented and now very rare machine.¹¹ However, Roberson Mill, by maintaining the burr stone operations popularized by Oliver Evans, and never converting to a roller mill system like so many other mills did, better represents 19th-century flour milling than that of 20th century, and thus informs the historical contexts of both eras.

Criterion C – Architecture/Craftsmanship

Roberson Mill is significant at the local level under Criterion C in the area of Architecture/Craftsmanship. The mill is an excellent, well-preserved example of a small water-

Roberson Mill

Name of Property

Floyd County, Virginia

County and State

powered grain mill, built with several notably unusual or unique features identified in the Section 7 narrative description above. The mill building itself, with its stonemasonry foundation and heavy timbers mortised and pegged together, and its doors, windows, and varied interior features—most hand-fashioned from wood—represent a high level of utilitarian craftsmanship. As a representative of mills in the region, few of which survive, Roberson Mill has the appropriate appearance and character: a tall weatherboarded timber-frame structure with limited fenestration and a pitched roof, not unlike many of the mills that once existed. Because the building has not been appended or modified in any substantial way, it has special potential for observation and study; and due to its location just off of Route 8, the county's primary north-south highway, it is a highly visible historic architectural landmark known to generations of Floyd County residents. As a still-rural county where agriculture remains a pervasive land use, Floyd County has just nine individually-listed properties, of which five are churches, three are farmsteads with architecturally significant primary dwellings, and one is the remains of an iron furnace. A former mill-turned-mercantile is in the Floyd Historic District (NRHP 20005), The Roberson Mill today stands as one of the best-preserved mills in the county and still conveys its architectural significance as a water-powered grain mill.

Endnotes

1. Webb and Cox, *The Water-powered Mills of Floyd County*, 2012: 111-114.
2. Jim Alitizer, telephone interview by Ricky Cox, July 4, 2008.
3. Philip E. Gettel, "Roberson's Mill (Epperly)," in "Floyd County Mills and Mill Sites" unpublished manuscript, 1985. Montgomery-Floyd Regional Library, Floyd Branch, Floyd Va.
4. Harry Roberson, telephone interview by Ricky Cox, October 17, 2008.
5. Ibid.
6. Harry Roberson, telephone interview by Ricky Cox, October 11, 2009.
7. Findagrave website: <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/182377097/john-william-epperly> Accessed 11 August, 2022,
8. Randy DeHart, personal communication with Mike Pulice, August 23, 2022.
9. Friends of Roberson Mill Newsletter July, 2022.
10. Ibid.
11. Jeff Rainey, personal communication with Mike Pulice, 1/18/2023.

Roberson Mill
Name of Property

Floyd County, Virginia
County and State

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography (Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form.)

Webb, Franklin F. and Ricky L. Cox, *The Water-powered Mills of Floyd County, Virginia: Illustrated Histories, 1770-2010*; Contributions to Southern Appalachian Studies, 30. North Carolina, McFarland Press, 2012.

Deeds Referenced

Floyd County Deed Book "P," page 524, 5 May 1880. John Merritt, Special Commissioner to John W. Epperly, 55³/₄ acres of "the land on which Eden Epperly resided." South fork of Little River. "Balance of tract to John T. Agee at request of John W. Epperly." Bounds include "white oak, on north side of the Mill race."

D. B. "R," page 318, 9 February 1884. John T. Agee to J. W. Epperly, rights for race and to spill water from same.

D. B. "U," page 258, 13 December 1889. Sarah E. Epperly to J. W. Epperly, land on which mill race now exists.

D. B. 30, page 82, 30 September 1903. John Epperly to Harrison F. Scott, mill and all rights.

D. B. 37, page 536, 29 August 1910. H.F. Scott to Rufus Abraham "Abe" DeHart. 2 November 1921 (no deed), J. W. Brammer purchased mill, land, and water rights.

D. B. 45, page 37, 3 April 1922. J. W. Brammer to G. C. "Cleve" Smith and wife, mill, land, and water rights.

D. B. 46, page 30, 3 July 1926. G. C. Smith to John S. Smith, mill.

D. B. 49, page 463, 31 August 1931. J. S. Smith to Homer A. Roberson, mill, land and rights.

D. B. 164, page 166, 10 June 1988. Dale Profitt, Gino W. Williams, and Kendall O. Clay, Special Commissioners, to Harry A. and Mary F. Roberson, three tract- including the same conveyed by J.S. Smith to H. A. and Annie Roberson, 31 August 1931.

Wood, Amos D. *Floyd County: A History of Its People and Places*. 1942 manuscript published 1981: 285, 288.

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested

previously listed in the National Register

previously determined eligible by the National Register

designated a National Historic Landmark

recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____

recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # _____

Roberson Mill
Name of Property

Floyd County, Virginia
County and State

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
 Other State agency
 Federal agency
 Local government
 University
 Other
Name of repository: Virginia Department of Historic Resources, Richmond

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): DHR #031-0001

10. Geographical Data

Acreege of Property Less than 1.0

Use either the UTM system or latitude/longitude coordinates

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: _____

(enter coordinates to 6 decimal places)

- Latitude: 36.862035 Longitude: -80.320105
- Latitude: Longitude:
- Latitude: Longitude:
- Latitude: Longitude:

Or

UTM References

Datum (indicated on USGS map):

NAD 1927 or NAD 1983

- Zone: Easting: Northing:
- Zone: Easting: Northing:
- Zone: Easting: Northing:
- Zone: Easting : Northing:

Roberson Mill
Name of Property

Floyd County, Virginia
County and State

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

The nominated parcel consists of that part of county tax parcel ID# 66-12 lying south of Roberson Mill Road, an area of less than one acre, which encompasses the mill building. The true and correct historic boundary is shown on the attached Sketch Map, which has a bar scale of 1"=125'.

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

The nominated parcel includes Roberson Mill and land around the mill which has been transferred into the ownership of Friends of Roberson Mill. All lands surrounding the nominated parcel remain in private hands and are not included in the nomination. All known associated resources and the property's historic setting are encompassed by the historic boundary.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title: Michael J. Pulice, DHR architectural historian, and Professor Ricky L. Cox
organization: _____
street & number: _____
city or town: _____ state: _____ zip code: _____
e-mail: michael.pulice@dhr.virginia.gov; rcox@radford.edu
telephone: 540-387-5443
date: January 2023

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A **USGS map** or equivalent (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
- **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.
- **Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO, TPO, or FPO for any additional items.)

Photographs

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels (minimum), 3000x2000 preferred, at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map. Each photograph must be numbered and that number must correspond to the photograph number on the photo log. For simplicity, the name of the photographer, photo date, etc. may be listed once on the photograph log and doesn't need to be labeled on every photograph.

Roberson Mill
Name of Property

Floyd County, Virginia
County and State

Photo Log

Name of Property: Roberson Mill

City or Vicinity: Town of Floyd vicinity

County: Floyd State: Virginia

Photographer: Michael J. Pulice

Date Photographed: July 26, 2022

Description of Photograph(s) and number, include description of view indicating direction of camera:

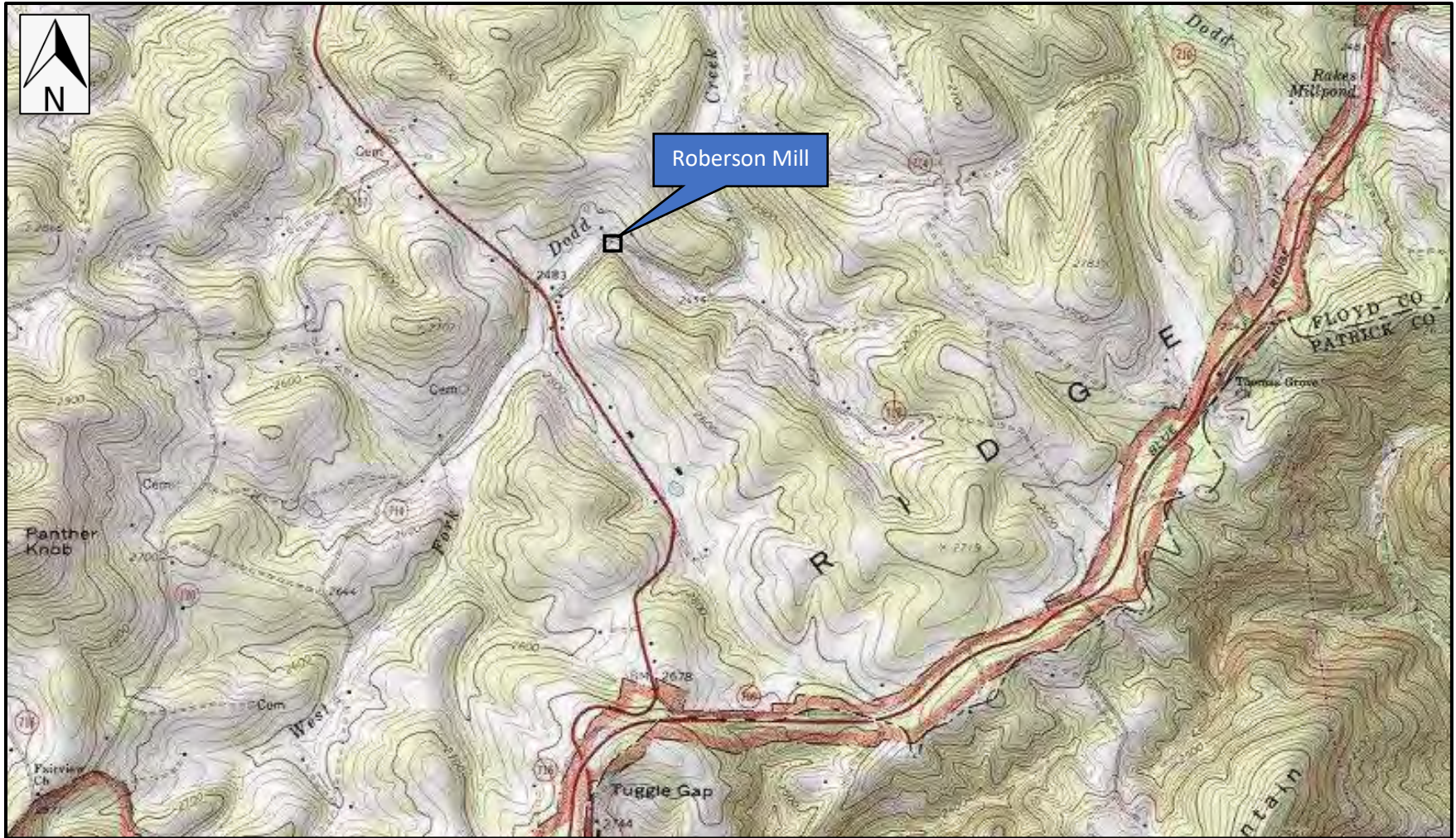
1. Mill exterior, looking west
2. Mill exterior, looking southeast
3. Mill exterior, looking north
4. Mill interior, first floor northeast corner
5. Mill interior, first floor, millstone platform
6. Mill interior, first floor, millstones
7. Mill interior, first floor, main driveshaft gears
8. Mill interior, second floor, stairs
9. Mill interior, second floor corner framing
10. Mill interior, second floor, bolting chests
11. Mill interior, second floor, flywheel and vertical driveshaft
12. Mill interior, second floor, grain cleaner
13. Mill interior, third floor, looking southeast
14. Mill interior, third floor, looking northeast
15. Mill interior, third floor, Cranson Buckwheat Scrubber
16. Mill restoration project sign

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for nominations to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.). We may not conduct or sponsor and you are not required to respond to a collection of information unless it displays a currently valid OMB control number.

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for each response using this form is estimated to be between the Tier 1 and Tier 4 levels with the estimate of the time for each tier as follows:

- Tier 1 – 60-100 hours
- Tier 2 – 120 hours
- Tier 3 – 230 hours
- Tier 4 – 280 hours

The above estimates include time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and preparing and transmitting nominations. Send comments regarding these estimates or any other aspect of the requirement(s) to the Service Information Collection Clearance Officer, National Park Service, 1201 Oakridge Drive Fort Collins, CO 80525.



Roberson Mill

Floyd County, Virginia

Lat/Long: 36.862035; -80.320105



Legend

 County Boundaries

AERIAL VIEW - VICINITY

Roberson Mill

Floyd County, VA

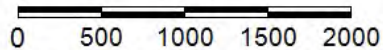
DHR No. 031-0001



Historic Boundary



Feet



1:18,056 / 1"=1,505 Feet

Title:

Date: 2/13/2023

DISCLAIMER: Records of the Virginia Department of Historic Resources (DHR) have been gathered over many years from a variety of sources and the representation depicted is a cumulative view of field observations over time and may not reflect current ground conditions. The map is for general information purposes and is not intended for engineering, legal or other site-specific uses. Map may contain errors and is provided "as-is". More information is available in the DHR Archives located at DHR's Richmond office.

Notice if AE sites: Locations of archaeological sites may be sensitive the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), and the Archaeological Resources Protection Act (ARPA) and Code of Virginia §2.2-3705.7 (10). Release of precise locations may threaten archaeological sites and historic resources.



Legend

 County Boundaries

ROAD MAP

Roberson Mill

Floyd County, VA

DHR No. 031-0001

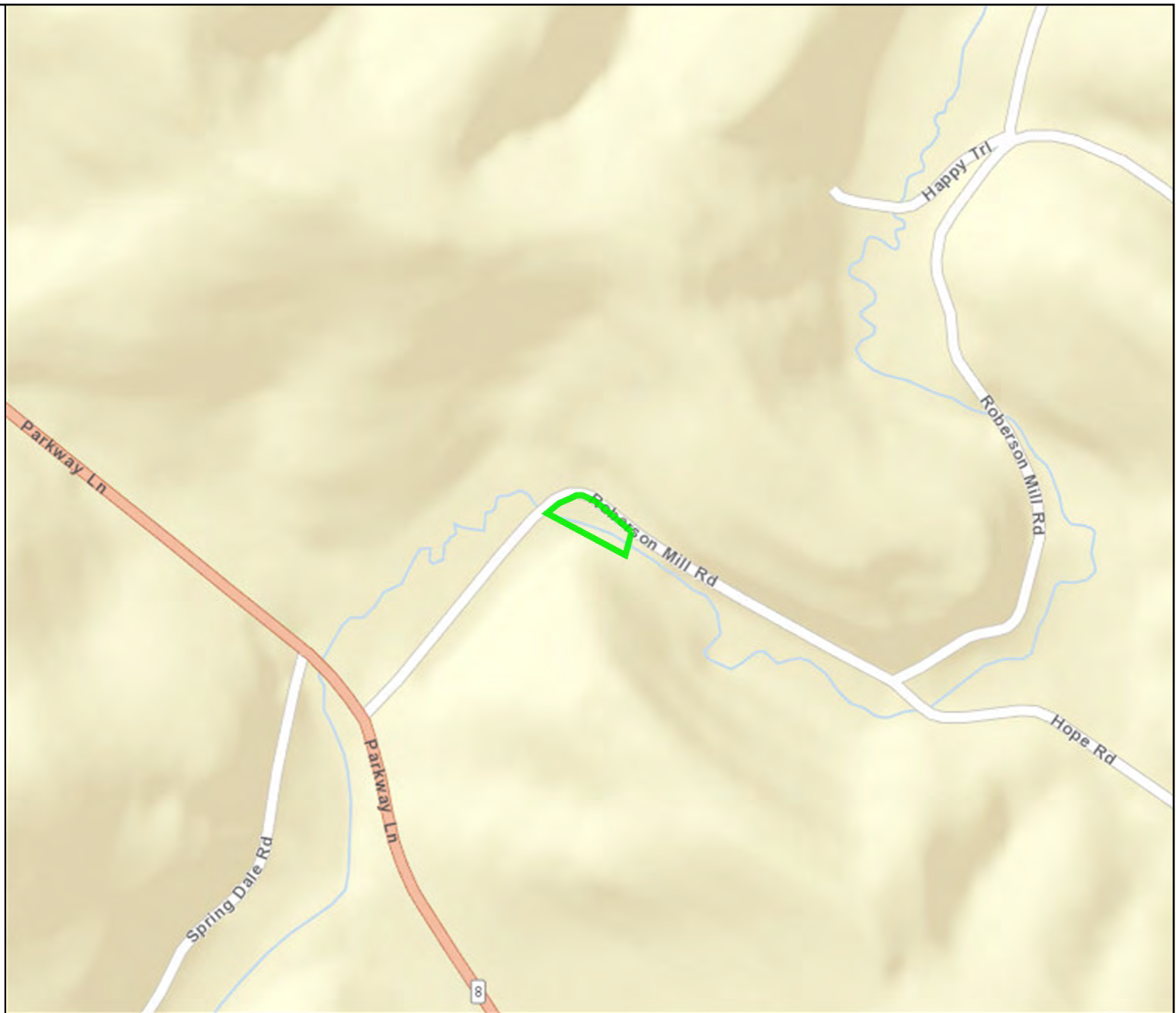
 **Historic Boundary**



Feet



1:9,028 / 1"=752 Feet



Title:

Date: 2/13/2023

DISCLAIMER: Records of the Virginia Department of Historic Resources (DHR) have been gathered over many years from a variety of sources and the representation depicted is a cumulative view of field observations over time and may not reflect current ground conditions. The map is for general information purposes and is not intended for engineering, legal or other site-specific uses. Map may contain errors and is provided "as-is". More information is available in the DHR Archives located at DHR's Richmond office.

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Roberson Mill

Floyd County, Virginia

Lat/Long: 36.862035; -80.320105



Roberson Mill

Floyd County, Virginia

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Site Plan with Exterior Photo Points