Carnes Mill Site

Carnes Mill has been gone for longer than anyone alive today can remember, yet the remnants have intrigued people for a century. So, when Angie Doyle, archaeologist on the Hoosier National Forest, had funds available to evaluate an historic site, she chose Carnes Mill. Archaeologists from Southern Illinois University's Center for Archaeological Investigations are here this summer unraveling some of the mysteries surrounding the Carnes Mill story. This work coincides with the 50th anniversary of the National Historic Preservation Act.

Carnes Mill was a 19th century grist mill, possibly also a sawmill, on a natural bend in the Little Blue River. There are cut stone remnants, a dam, and part of a cellar where the mill operator may have lived. It isn't the traditional mill-site, so there was mystery and speculation of how the mechanics of this mill may have worked. There was also little known about the mill's owner, John Carnes.

Doyle noted the Brooks Cabin, relocated close to the Charles C. Deam Wilderness, was originally located near Carnes Mill. The land where John Brooks built his cabin was first owned by Marcus Benham, a contemporary of John Carnes. Benham built flatboats and took them down the Little Blue River loaded with goods to the Ohio River and on to the Mississippi River. The story was that he would sell his goods and boat in New Orleans and walk back home. Doyle marvels at how the stories all weave together the Brooks, Benhams, and Carnes families.



She was contacted in 2015 by David Carnes, from Virginia. David is John Carnes' great-great-great nephew. He

was interested in visiting the site and had his great grandfather's journals. The Carnes Mill site is difficult to access, but Doyle went to the site with him and caught his enthusiasm. She then enlisted the Southern Illinois University (SIU) Center for Archaeological Investigations. "I've worked with Mark Wagner, Ryan Campbell and their students before," said Doyle. "We have a partnership agreement, and they do amazing work. They were finishing up some work at Lick Creek African American Settlement and came down and spent time working at the Carnes Mill site."



Doyle explained her task for the group was to find out more about John Carnes and his mill, how the mill worked, approximately when it was built and operated, any features remaining and any artifacts they might uncover. Results may be used in future interpretive efforts.

Private ownership complicated access and evaluation on the dam, mill site and other features. The Hoosier owns only a portion of the peninsula where the dam and mill are located. The mill site, dam, and former mill pond are on private land. A log cabin, thought to have belonged to the mill operator, burned down a few years ago on private land near the mill site, though the cellar remains. However other cultural features related to the mill are on federal land.

Since the Little Blue River is shallow, to back up enough water to operate a mill, Carnes built a dam across the river. The dam held the water back to a level sufficient to turn the mill wheel which was likely an under-turn wheel.

Ryan Campbell, Researcher with the Center from SIU, believes the mill was a two-story structure on the bank that extended over the river on piers. The point in the dam where the water was funneled through a drain to turn the wheel is still visible. No sign of the wheel remains although there are still large wooden beams in the river.



Carnes utilized a natural cave under the narrow peninsula upstream from where he built his mill. He built a system with cut rock to control the water entering the cave. When he wanted to back up the water in the mill pond, essentially damming up the Little Blue River, he would close the cave. The water backed up forming a deep pond in the river, and he could operate his mill. When the mill was not in operation, he opened the structure and let part of the water run through the cave as it naturally would. He also built a rock retaining wall along the base of the structure to keep water from escaping into the cave when it was needed for the pond.

The control structure was a two-story deep structure, and Campbell speculates it had an iron door to regulate the water. There may have been a building over the stone structure as well. Campbell believes the gate would have been heavy so it would have been lifted with a wheel. The water would have flowed through the structure and into the cave.

The students also excavated around a cabin site near this water structure where presumably someone lived whose job was to regulate the water levels. They discovered several artifacts consistent with the mid to late 1800s.

A deep cistern next to the cabin site was made of cut stacked sandstone with a cement plaster coating. The same cut stacked sandstone was noted at the cabin on private land in the ruins of the old cellar doorway and cistern.

Campbell said John Carnes had a grist mill on the Big Blue River at Milltown in the 1840s on a bend in the river very similar to this. He then went to California during the Gold Rush but came back and started this mill. Whether he, or someone else, ran the mill is not known.

The Carnes Mill Site is only partly owned by the federal government but is managed as a special area. The 280-acre Carnes Mill Special Area was designated due to the geology of the subterranean cutoff, as well as the dry upland forest community and sandstone cliffs. The vegetation communities on the sandstone cliffs and the American beech, sugar maple and yellow poplar forests are considered special.



Campbell also found where the sandstone used in the water control structure and in the foundation, stones were quarried. The rock faces along the bend in the river have clear indications of being quarried with chisels and drills. He said gunpowder was also often used.

The land yields clues to those who know how to read them. Campbell indicated the scars of an old roadbed on either side of the Little Blue River and said the Carnes Mill Road once ran down the hill, and forded the river. It is impassable today but with some imagination you can see wagons bringing grain or logs to the mill. This now remote and quiet bend in the river may have once been a busy place of commerce.

The old cut sandstone dam was partially deconstructed by the Civilian Conservation Corps so that the Little Blue River could flow more easily around the bend and wouldn't flood, but most of the dam is still visible. Campbell speculates the dam was built higher at one time with earth and now only the sandstone base remains. Graffiti at one end of the dam is carved into a sandstone rock: "J.B. May 1918."

For more information on the cultural resource program on the Hoosier National Forest call 812-275-5987.