

Alley's Mills: A 19th Century Mill Town

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The Alley's Mills town site was discovered while examining a timber tract on Alley's Creek for a harvest cut by International Paper. A deep, rock-lined well, and a profusion of handmade bricks was discovered on a small knoll overlooking Alley's Creek, a tributary of Big Cypress Creek (Figure 1). Also found on the knoll were pieces of whiteware pottery, English blue transfer china, square nails, and glass fragments.

I contacted a local historian, Mr. Fred McKenzie, about the site. We walked over the site, which he had discovered several years ago. In the creek bottom, he pointed out an earthen structure that had been built around 1838 as a mill race to divert water to a grist mill wheel. The mill race is a levee-like structure, about one meter wide and two meters high, and runs in a NW-SE direction for about 800 meters. A wooden sluice was built on top of the race to direct the water flow. At the end of the mill race, under the surface of the water, is a large hand cut beam about one meter long with regularly spaced hand-hewn notches. The old roadbed of the Jefferson-Pittsburg road is visible across the tract, running directly past the knoll on which the brickwork was found and crossing the creek at the end of the mill race where the mill is located (see Figure 1).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

According to McKenzie (1981), James Alley and his son, Daniel N. Alley, came to East Texas before 1840. The father of James, Thomas J. Alley, by 1820 had built a mill on the banks of the Clinch River in Virginia. James and his wife Catherine Nelson had one child, Daniel N. Alley, born on July 4, 1810, in Russell County, Virginia.

The Alley's moved from Virginia to Kentucky and then to Indiana, and then finally travelled south by river barge to Helena, Arkansas. From there they went by wagon overland through the present site of the city of Texarkana. Continuing along this same road brought them through the then existing Texan settlements of Linden and Hickory Hill (now known as Avinger) [McKenzie 1988] to the banks of a noticeably swift and appealing stream that later came to bear their name.

Here they built their first cabins, mill race, and a mill similar to the one built by their ancestor Thomas J. Alley in Virginia. The settlement that grew up around the mill was known as Alley's Mills. Alley's Mills rapidly became the trade center of the area as it was situated on the Jefferson-Pittsburg Road, and was also only three miles from the Jefferson-Daingerfield Road and its intersection with Trammels Trace (Figure 2). Trammels Trace was

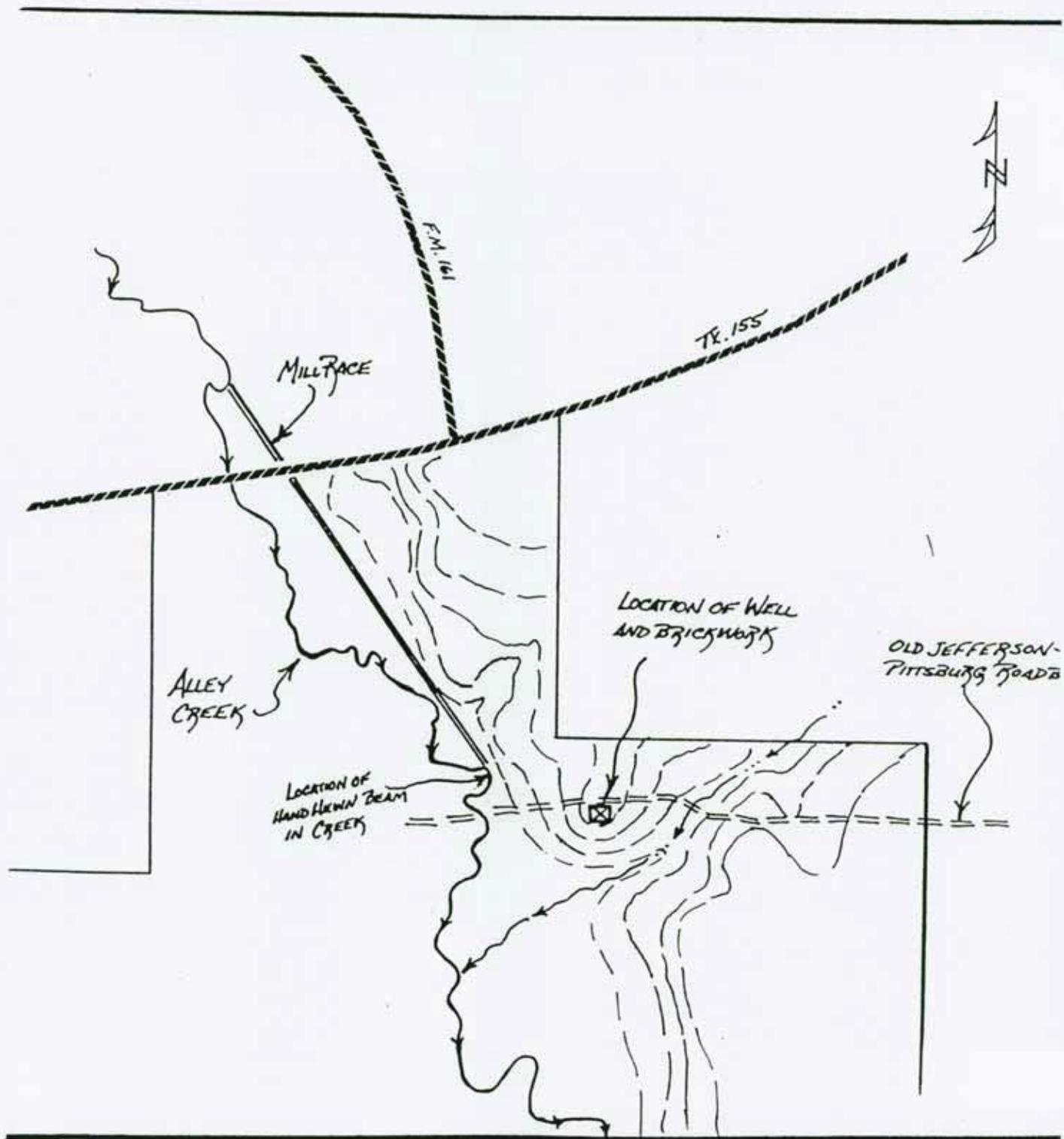


Figure 1. The Site of Alley's Mills, Marion County, Texas.

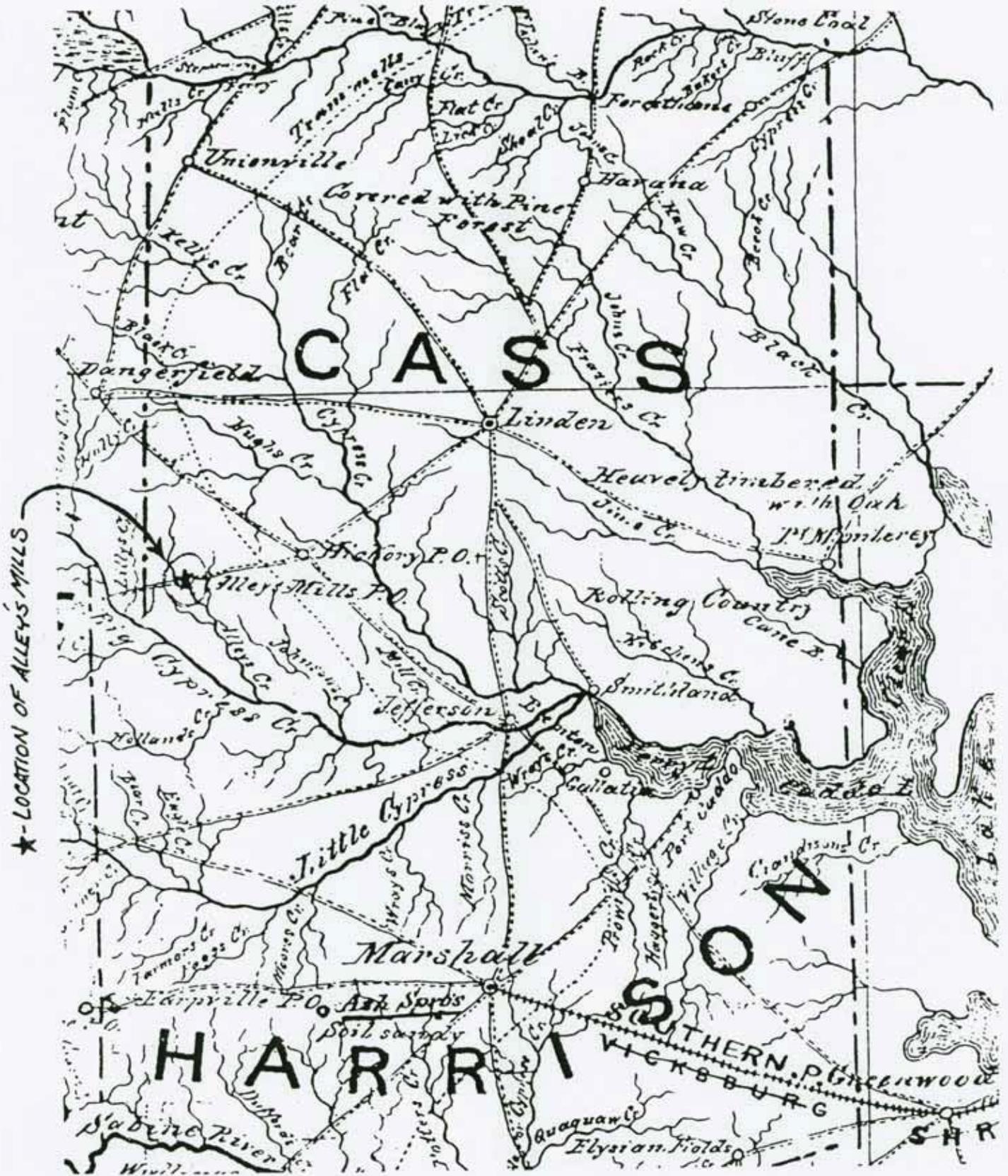


Figure 2. Civil War era map of the Hickory Hill area, dated 1865.

the first road established by white settlers in the area and it was a major route in the early days from Arkansas to Nacogdoches, Texas.

A Post Office was established in Alley's Mill on March 31, 1852 (Patman 1968). This Alley's Mills Post Office was in operation until August 10, 1861, when the name was changed to Nash Foundry Post Office (and presumably moved to the site of the Nash Foundry, about five miles to the south).

Daniel Alley, in the 1840s, turned his attention to the new and thriving riverboat town of Jefferson, 18 miles to the east. He soon became "a man of wealth and a pillar of the community and town which he helped lay out in the 1840's along with Allen Urquhart" (McKenzie 1981). He deeded one entire city block to the County Commissioners of Marion County, and the County courthouse and jail were built there in 1874.

The land survey where the town site was located, and the creek that fed the mill, still bears the Alley name. International Paper now owns the surface rights for the timber interests on this tract.

PRESERVATION: ACTIONS AND FUTURE PLANS

In preparing the timber sale, a sale boundary was painted around the knoll and around the creek bottom where the mill race is located. The buyer of the timber was notified of the significance of the site, and the desire of International Paper to have it protected as much as possible. He communicated this to his employees, and they took particular care not to disturb the site.

On June 2, 1992, the author and Tom and Vicky Speir recorded the site at the behest of the Texas Historical Commission. We completed a surface survey of the site, collected a sample of artifacts, mapped the features that were visible, and completed an archeological site data form for submission to the Texas Archeological Research Laboratory. The site has been assigned a permanent number and recorded in their database as 41MR85.

Following the recording of the site, and with the hearty approval of my Timberlands Manager, Bill Hughes, a letter was sent to our Regional Manager with the background information on the site and our recommendation that the site be placed on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP), and be designated a State Archeological Landmark (SAL). The response was very positive, with the Regional Manager agreeing to set this area aside as part of International Paper's Unique Areas program, and to proceed with the designation of the site as a SAL and registration on the NRHP. The author is presently working on the necessary paperwork to accomplish these designations.

We are working on a plan to burn the brush from this area so that a more extensive surface survey of the site can be made. All heavy equipment has been excluded from the area so as to avoid the possibility of any further damage to the site.

With the support of International Paper, the author plans to record several other sites of historical significance on my Timber Unit. This includes Bowie, Cass, Marion, Harrison, and Upshur counties in Northeast Texas.

References

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