

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

**Graves Mill
Madison County, Virginia**

Section 7 Page 1

Summary Description

The Graves Mill complex is situated on a gently terraced, 4-acre land parcel surrounded by the Blue Ridge Mountains. The property is located approximately five miles north of the village of Wolftown and twelve miles northwest of the town of Madison. The boundaries of the land parcel are partially defined by Kinsey Run to the south and the Rapidan River¹ to the east. The tributaries run roughly parallel to State Route 615 on the south and State Route 662 on the east. The complex is composed of a three-story, heavy timber frame gristmill; a two-story, log, frame, and weatherboard miller's house; and a one-story heavy timber frame barn. The gristmill, constructed circa 1798, probably on the foundation of a circa 1745 gristmill, was owned and operated by members of the Thomas Graves family for more than a century.

The mill is built into the side of a low hill at the foot of Jones Mountain. Traces of the mill race are apparent at the north end. A pond, situated immediately to the east of the mill near what was once the confluence of Jones's Run and the Stanton River, was created by runoff from the overshot water wheel. Rectangular in form, 36 feet by 40 feet in plan, the mill has a post-and-beam frame with mortise-and-tenon joints secured with wooden drawbore pins. The exterior is sheathed with riven horizontal clapboards. The mill exhibits a 5/12-pitch gable roof with exposed rafter ends. Limited areas of the wood roof deck and standing-seam metal roof sheathing survive. The foundation, which is more than eight feet in height along the east elevation, is mostly dry-laid coursed rubble stone. Some of the stonework is in-filled with soil, small stones, and lime-based mortar. Parts of the original mill wheel and related machinery are visible at ground level at the north end, underneath the massive sawn and hewn beam, 14 inches by 28 inches by 21 feet, which previously supported the mechanical equipment. The mill displays irregularly placed bays on each elevation. The central bay at ground level on the east elevation serves as the entrance. Door and window frames at ground level are constructed of hand-planed, beaded, and molded locust timbers, 5 inches by 8 inches, with mortise-and-tenon joints. On the interior, the post-and-beam construction is mostly exposed at all three levels. Two straight runs of historic stairs and a compact voting booth in the southeast corner of the second level define the interior plan.

Two contributing support buildings are sited to the west of the mill: a frame barn, constructed early in the twentieth century, and the circa 1850 miller's house. The one-and-one-half-story, two-bay barn features a heavy timber internal frame, vertical plank siding, and a double-pitched flared roof. The miller's house incorporates the circa 1792 Thomas Graves School, constructed of logs, that was re-located circa 1850 to its current site from its original setting on the property near the original Thomas Graves mansion. The miller's house is a wood frame and weatherboard structure, composed of five distinct building blocks. Even though the dwelling has been enlarged and remodeled through the years, the form and detail of the earlier school are discernible within the house. The surviving buildings that constitute the Graves Mill complex retain a high degree of historic fabric and architectural integrity.

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Architectural Description

Graves Mill

Graves Mill, a three-story, heavy timber frame structure, is built into the side of a gently sloping terrace. Traces of the mill race are apparent at the north end. A pond situated to the east of the mill was once connected by a narrow creek to the Rapidan River, providing water power to the mill. Rectangular in form, 36 feet by 40 feet in plan, the mill has a post-and-beam frame with mortise-and-tenon joints, secured with wooden drawbore pins. The exterior is sheathed with riven horizontal clapboards. The mill exhibits a 5/12-pitch gable roof with exposed rafter ends. Rafters are hand hewn. The roof deck is constructed of inch-thick tongue-and-groove wood planks, covered with standing-seam metal.

The foundation, which is twenty inches thick and more than eight feet in height along the east elevation, is mostly dry-laid coursed rubble stone. Some of the stonework is in-filled with soil, small stones, and lime-based mortar. The stone portion of the foundation at the northwest corner has collapsed. The first-floor joists are sawn 5-inch by 8-inch oak. The joists, grouped in three sets across the long side of the building, are supported in the center by two beams, each 12-inches by 16-inches by 24 feet. Oak posts support the second and third beams. The 11-inch by 15-inch by 38-foot beams are chamfered. Some of the interior walls are finished with 18-inch-wide poplar boards. The wood panels have an angled horizontal joint, designed to keep dust out of the room below.

The carpentry techniques, the styles of the nails found in the mill, the detail and placement of the sill plates, and the unusual styling of the door and window frames at ground level of the east elevation suggest that the current mill may have incorporated the fabric of the earlier Jones Mill that was constructed and operated by David Jones on the site. A variety of hand-forged and hooked stamped nails suggest a mid-to-late-eighteenth-century construction period. Analysis of the differences between the types of nails used to construct the first story and the nails found on the upper stories suggest the possibility of two different periods of construction.²

Although in a state of dis-assembly, the original mill stones and some of the mechanicals are visible at ground level of the north end. Still solidly in place is the massive sawn and hewn beam, 14 inches by 28 inches by 21 feet, which previously supported the mechanical equipment. The placement of the mill wheels at the north end was apparently intentional. Originally of wood, the wheels were saturated by water from the millrace. If exposed to sunlight, the wood elements tended to dry out and warp, damaging the function of the wheel.³ The original wooden overshot wheel was removed and replaced with a steel wheel circa 1891.⁴

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Historical Background

Graves Mill lies in the shadow of Jones Mountain, now at the heart of the great Shenandoah National Park. The Blue Ridge Mountains and the surrounding ridges and valleys, previously occupied by Native Americans for more than 12,000 years, attracted colonists in the early 1700s. The story of Graves Mill tells part of the earliest history of Madison County and of the pioneering families who emigrated from the coastal regions of Virginia to seek prosperity in the fertile valleys and to enjoy the natural beauty of the Blue Ridge. Modern development has not spoiled the pristine beauty of the region surrounding the Graves Mill complex.

To understand the economic importance of Graves Mill to the surrounding community, it is useful to examine the prominent role played by water-driven grist mills in eighteen-and-nineteenth-century America. Bread is the staff of life, and growing populations require efficient and productive means for grinding grains. To meet the demand for flour and meal products in colonial America, the water-powered mill became the most important industry within the local community. When Graves Mill was constructed in the 1790s, there were approximately 7,500 small mills in the United States.⁸ By 1850, there were more than 60,000 grist and sawmills dotting the rural landscape.⁹ Mills such as Graves Mill were part of a far-reaching industry that supplied flour products not only to the local community but also to the nation and to other parts of the world well into the twentieth century. It was not until after World War II that country mills began to disappear from the American landscape.

Although there are no surviving ledgers that prove the pivotal economic role of Graves Mill in the local community, the economic importance of the mill can be derived from land record books on file in the Madison County Courthouse record room. Representative nineteenth-century tax records record the value per acre for all taxed properties within Madison County. The county did not levy a specific tax on the production of any local agricultural operation or industry. But the land record books do show the taxes paid based upon the value of the land and buildings. The vast majority of land within Madison County was, and still is today, undeveloped farm land or standing timber with relatively low tax rates per acre. The comparison of the value per acre of the Graves Mill property with the average value per acre of land throughout all of Madison County shows a significant disparity. For most of the nineteenth century, the average value per acre in all of Madison County, including buildings, ranged between \$7.85 and \$10.01 while the average value per acre for the Graves Mill lot ranged between \$300.00 and \$365.00 per acre. By 1890, the relative economic value of Graves Mill began to decline, presumably with the advent of the modern roller mill. Between 1890 and 1900, the average value per acre in all of Madison County, including buildings, ranged between \$6.05 and \$8.40 while the average value per acre for the Graves Mill lot ranged between \$100.00 and \$114.28 per acre.¹⁰

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