

# SMOOT TANNERY IN NORTH WILKESBORO, NC

## History

The Smoot Tannery in North Wilkesboro, North Carolina has a long history in the community. Created in the late 1800s, the tannery was an important part of the local economy until a flood and fire in 1940 destroyed most of the tannery. Years later, the Jenkins Wholesale Supply Company moved into the former location of the tannery to perform automobile restorations. Up until the past few decades, many did not know that the Smoot Tannery was producing and using harmful chemicals in their operations. Many of these chemicals have been found in the soil and water around the tannery, and they can be harmful to people and wildlife in the community. Despite the many problems surrounding the tannery, the Town of North Wilkesboro is hoping to clean up and improve the area to make it better for residents - this includes cleaning up the pollution and making public green spaces and parks.



A photo of the Smoot Tannery before the 1916 flood from the Wilkes Journal-Patriot.

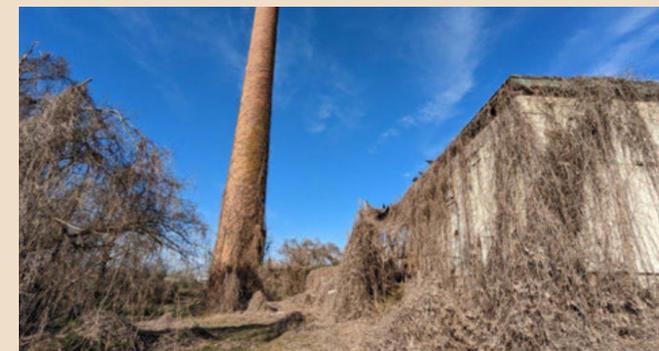
## Contamination

Several kinds of heavy metals of high concentrations were found in the soil and groundwater around the tannery. A few underground storage tanks (USTs) and aboveground storage tanks (ASTs) were found around the site, possibly containing hazardous substances and pollutants.



A photo of one of the hazardous waste bins found at the site, containing unknown and potentially harmful substances. It can be easy for waste to leak into the soil or water.

Several other kinds of containers with unknown contents and substances were found on the site. Heavy metals are substances that are harmful to humans and the environment. Some of the chemicals and metals found in soil and water were arsenic, volatile organic compounds (VOCs), barium, chromium, and hydrocarbons. These compounds and chemicals may not be visible to you, but they can cause long-lasting health and environmental problems.



Above is an image of a smokestack at one end of the tannery. Below is one of the hazardous waste bins found at the site. Both photos are from the Phase 1 ESA.



# Environmental and Social Justice

The North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality (NCDEQ) has recently identified North Wilkesboro as a Brownfield Site, which is an area or piece of land that has suffered from possible environmental damage or pollution. The NCDEQ has evaluated the risk of pollution to the town through a risk calculator - results show that residents near the site, construction workers, and travelers/trespassers are at risk of the hazards in the groundwater and soil in and around the site. Although the levels of many pollutants and hazardous substances weren't much above standards, residents of North Wilkesboro are more at risk due to a variety of factors, including a 23.9% poverty rate and the geography and topography of the town. Generally, impoverished communities are more at risk to the many environmental problems occurring over the past few decades.

## Endangered Species

Some of the endangered species near the tannery include the Bog Turtle, Monarch Butterfly, and several migratory bird species. These species and their habitats have been put at risk due to the environmental hazards.



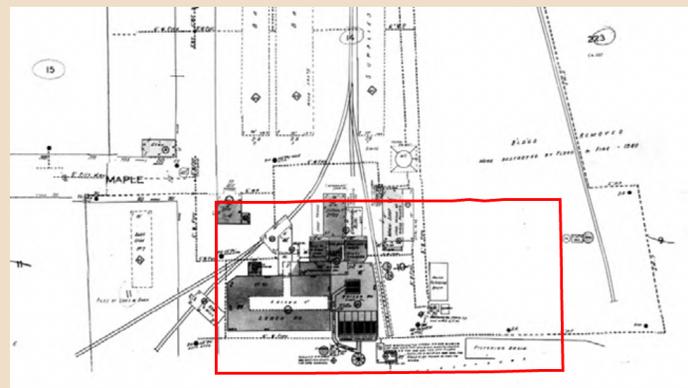
Bog Turtle, sourced from the Endangered Species Coalition.



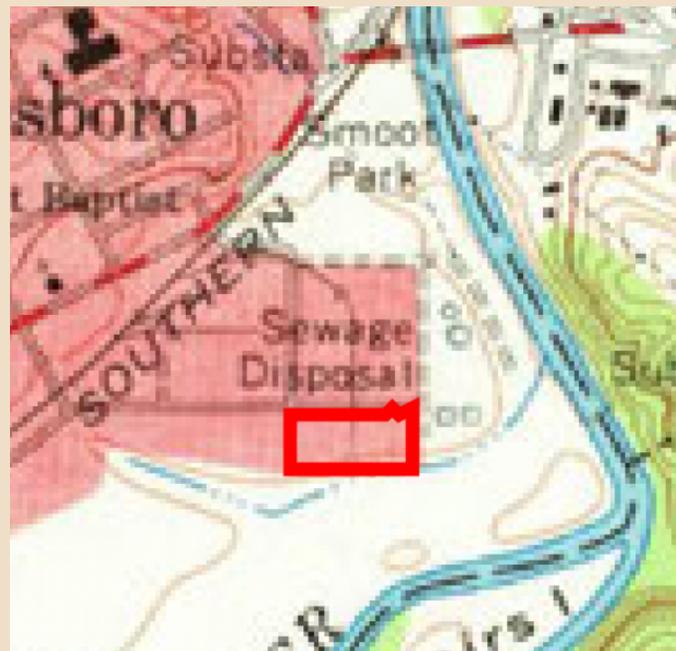
Monarch Butterfly, sourced from Texas A&M University.

## Additional Information and Resources

EPA Region 4 Office: (404) 562-9900  
<https://www.epa.gov/aboutepa/forms/contacting-epa-region-4-southeast>  
NCDEQ: Winston-Salem Regional Office: (336) 776-9800  
<https://www.deq.nc.gov/about/contact/regional-offices/winston-salem-regional-office>  
North Wilkesboro Planning Director, Meredith Detsch - [planning@northwilkesboro.gov](mailto:planning@northwilkesboro.gov)



Above is a Sanborn© Fire Insurance Map from 1945. These maps were used to not only display entire cities, but to assess hazardous areas in buildings for insurance and damage purposes. Several Sanborn© maps were created from 1904 to 1961 in North Wilkesboro and were included in the Phase 1 ESA. These maps were later used to determine environmental damage from parts of the tannery, the location of hazardous materials, and the extent of damage.



Above is a map of North Wilkesboro (1966) from the Phase 1 ESA that shows the location of the tannery. In the image, there is a sewage disposal nearby, along with the Yadkin River where lots of plant and animal species are found. Being close to a watershed makes the community more at risk of pollution and other hazards.