



Frank Harmon Designs for Visitors at Merchants Millpond

Description

Thirty miles from Elizabeth City, near Gatesville in northeastern [North Carolina](#), lies a state park known as Merchants Millpond.

At its core is a 190-year-old body of water, its 760 acres filled with bald cypress, Spanish Moss, along with egrets, turkeys and owls – and two primitive species of fish, the gar and bowfin. At one time a stopping-off point for 18th and 19th century travelers between Virginia and Carolina, it served also as a place for merchants to have their corn milled – and to trade. These days, about 225,000 visitors come through every year, seeking to trade civilization's stress for fishing, canoeing and camping.

"It's truly a magical place," said architect Erin Sterling AIA of Frank Harmon Architect PA in Raleigh, who designed the park's new 7,500 square foot visitors' center. "The mill pond is incredible."

The design team sited the visitors' center on top of a ridge near where a house once stood, minimizing the need to take trees down for road and driveway. "From a canoe, you can see the building. Very few old growth trees were taken down at all at all."

Its exterior skin is native cypress harvested from nearby Dismal Swamp, and heart pine flooring, both milled at Gates Custom Milling. Some structural steel was also used, along with storefront glass windows on the pond side of the building, where a twelve-foot porch is also featured. About half of the interior is one large open space, with a reception area and lobby that open to exhibits. Each space inside the building enjoys a view of the millpond.

The architect spent every Friday for a year there while construction was underway. "The best part of the project was getting to go visit the site," Erin said. "It was the perfect way to end the week."

For more on Merchants Millpond State Park, go to: <http://www.ncparks.gov/Visit/parks/memi/main.php>

For more go [here](#).

Photo by Richard Leo Johnson

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Date Created

April 5, 2010

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