“NELLO L. TEER is a one-fisted, God fearing man. He can be as gentle as a new father or as unswerving as a guided missile. It’s not an act.... He simply has respect for the dignity of an individual and an old-fashioned conviction that excuses are not acceptable substitutes for performance.”

This is how America’s Builders described Nello Leguy Teer, Sr. in 1954. Nello’s employees, many of whom worked for him for 30, 40, even 50 years, would have said the same.

As we journey through Nello’s life, we witness unimaginable hardship and unbelievable success. We revisit events in history that we may have learned in school, yet now we see the very real impact they had on a Durham man, his family, and his employees.

The rapidly changing landscape of the times asks us to consider how we would have reacted amid the same circumstances. What can we learn from this story that applies to our world today?
1888 The fourth of seven children is born to George and Nancy Teer in Durham. They name him Nello, after a boy in the classic children’s book *A Dog of Flanders*.

1896 Nello quits school at age 8 or 9. Child laborers are not uncommon at this time as families move from farms into town to get jobs at local factories. Nello starts helping out his father George, a jack-of-all-trades. George holds a variety of jobs. He manages a local brickyard. He sells groceries. He even serves as deputy sheriff.

1906 Nello, age 18, loses his right hand while cleaning a grinding machine at a brick factory. Medical attention is summoned, but the hand cannot be saved.

1909 Nello watches his father George lead a small crew in the construction of a road between Durham and Chapel Hill. Once the road is complete, George decides that contracting is not the business for him. Nello sees an opportunity to leverage his own labors to greater effect. He rents mules, a wagon, and a drag pan from his father and gets to work.

Little by little, Nello makes enough profit to buy his own equipment. With a small labor force and a few mule teams, the 21-year-old forms the Nello L. Teer Company. He is still doing hard manual labor, but now he is his own boss.

The time is right to start a family. Nello marries Gertrude Adcock. She is the daughter of a carpenter who rents a house down the street. She is educated, having graduated from high school a few years earlier. Gertrude takes charge of the household while Nello focuses on the business. After losing their first child, they go on to raise a family of five children.

1911 Nello is hired by philanthropist and tobacco magnate Benjamin Duke to do the grading and landscape work for an expansive estate in Durham. Duke is impressed as he watches Nello shovel earth using the crook of his right elbow. Soon after, he provides Nello with an artificial hand designed as a hook that allows him to handle tools with greater ease.
The company grows steadily. Nello hires his brother Dwight to run the operations side of the business. Brother William (known as "Sokey") runs the job sites.

**1917** America enters World War I. More than 85,000 North Carolinians are sent to battle. Nello registers for the war. He is not called to serve, but his youngest brother Hubert sees heavy action and is decorated for his courage.

Hubert graduated from Durham High School, making him the only Teer brother with any substantial formal education. After the war, Hubert is sent by Nello to business school in New York and becomes the company’s business manager.

*Courtesy National Archives and Records Administration.*

Durham Morning Herald, November 30, 1918.
1920 The Nello L. Teer Company now owns over 300 mules and an extensive collection of equipment. It employs approximately 200 men, most of whom are African American. They are employed as laborers and foremen.

During the racially segregated Jim Crow era, constructing roads is considered a “Negro job.” Whites refuse to do certain jobs, which often are dangerous, low-paying, and require back-breaking work.

Racial tensions are high in the South, including in North Carolina. In July 1920, Edward Roach, one of Nello Teer’s laborers, is accused of assaulting a white girl in Roxboro and is put in jail. Ed Roach is abducted from the jail and lynched by a mob of 200 white vigilantes in Person County.

Nello knows that Ed Roach was innocent, because he was working for Nello when the assault reportedly took place.

Nello writes to the Durham Morning Herald denouncing the mob and the press for its support of the lynching. The mob subsequently threatens Nello if he comes to Person County.

News stories about Ed Roach’s lynching and the statement of his innocence appear in papers across the nation and even in Canada.
The Federal Highway Act directs over one billion dollars toward the development of nationwide truck lines. The entire country experiences a road-building boom.

Nello is committed to maintaining the best people and the best equipment. He owns one of the most well-regarded grading outfits in North Carolina. The Nello L. Teer Company is very busy with new road work.

*The Earth Mover*, a national road construction publication, runs a feature article about the company. After describing Nello's hardship as a child, it states: “Today that boy, only 32 years of age even now, has what is probably the largest grading outfit owned by any one individual in North Carolina.”
1927 In addition to roadwork across the state, the company takes a contract to provide excavation and embankment work for the football stadium at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. On Thanksgiving Day, Carolina hosts Virginia for its Kenan Memorial Stadium Dedication Game. Carolina beats Virginia 14-13.
1928 Nello’s company is hired to perform site preparation for much of Duke University, including what we know today as Sarah P. Duke Gardens, Duke Chapel, and Wallace Wade Stadium.

The first use of any Duke West Campus facility is on October 5, 1929, when the Blue Devils play the Pittsburgh Panthers in the new football stadium. Pitt beats Duke 52-7. Duke takes the defeat to heart and goes on to beat Pitt in subsequent matchups.
1928  Nello rightly predicts that machine power will soon transform the road contracting industry. He secures a loan from Durham Loan and Trust Company and takes one full year to mechanize the company’s equipment.

The Nello L. Teer Company buys one of the first bulldozers in North Carolina. Nello is pictured here on the far right with his new purchase.
1930 The Great Depression sweeps the nation. Road building contracts are few and far between. The company manages to secure enough business to survive.

Unemployment is so high that white workers grow willing to do “Negro jobs” just to have a paycheck. Across the South, whites displace African Americans in many types of jobs.

Nello is one of the few Southern employers to retain his African American workforce. For Nello, the best employee is one that he himself has trained. These men have learned from Nello for years.

1935 Nello Teer, Jr., the oldest son of Nello and Gertrude, joins the company. The same year, the company is awarded the first construction contract for the Blue Ridge Parkway, a scenic highway through the Appalachian Mountains of North Carolina and Virginia. It is one of the many New Deal projects implemented by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to stimulate the economy and put Americans back to work.

The Parkway project is divided into many sections to give several different contractors the opportunity to bid for work. By now, Nello’s company has the size and reputation to attract 17 of the Blue Ridge Parkway contracts.

The company follows federal guidelines and draws its labor force from the Appalachian population. The work is hard and dangerous. But the federal wage rate is generous. A week’s pay is $16.50, or about $300.00 in today’s dollars. This is more money than most of these mountainers have ever seen. The work is divided into six-hour shifts to give more men a chance to earn a paycheck.

1937 The rugged Appalachian mountain range proves dangerous and even deadly. Page Teer, the youngest of Nello and Gertrude’s three sons, is killed when the truck he is driving overturns.

Two years later, several company laborers are injured and three are killed when a stockpile of dynamite explodes unexpectedly.
With memory of Page’s death ever present, Nello and Gertrude’s son Dillard joins the company.

While working on the Gillespie Gap section of the Blue Ridge Parkway, Dillard lodges in Little Switzerland. Like most western North Carolina families, he lives in a simple wooden structure without electricity or running water. Walls are often insulated with old newspaper.

Dillard and the Teer employees work on grading and paving the Blue Ridge Parkway, while Civilian Conservation Corps enrollees work nearby planting trees, building parks, stringing phone lines, and clearing fire roads.

The Civilian Conservation Corps is one of President Roosevelt’s New Deal programs to provide education and employment to young men. CCC enrollees get to keep a small portion of their pay. The rest is sent home to assist their families.

From 1933-1942, over three million young men enroll, including 250,000 African Americans who are assigned to all-black CCC companies.
1941 The United States joins the Allied Powers in World War II after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Federal funding shifts to expand our nation’s military capacity. The Blue Ridge Parkway is halted as North Carolina becomes a leading state in the expansion of military efforts. The Nello L. Teer Company enters a joint venture with several North Carolina contracting companies to bid for defense contracts, which are immense. All of the company’s work is focused on defense construction for the U.S. Armed Forces.

Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point is commissioned, and the Nello L. Teer Company wins a contract to prepare the site for construction. Deadlines are so tight that Nello, his sons, and the work force regularly work seven days a week.

Nello’s crew excavates thousands of cubic yards of dense swamp and forest — and encounters more than 300 rattlesnakes — to prepare the Cherry Point site for construction.

1942 As part of the World War II effort, the Army Corps of Engineers commissions the Nello L. Teer Company to pave two perpendicular runways on a rural stretch of land just east of Durham. The Raleigh-Durham Airport is finished in the spring of 1942.

WWII shifts the gender and racial mix of the nation’s workforce. Women take jobs in defense plants and factories around the country, inspiring the iconic “Rosie the Riveter.” Nello’s crew would have seen women working on airplanes at Cherry Point.

In response to pressure from civil rights activists led by black labor leader A. Philip Randolph, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issues Executive Order 8802. The order bans discrimination against African Americans and other minorities in defense industries.
Regardless of race, men born February 1897 through December 1921 must register for the war. Nello Teer’s sons Nello Jr. and Dillard, and Nello L. Teer Company foremen Dorsey Holman and Walter Clark are no exception.

Ultimately, these men are not drafted. Defense construction is considered a valuable contribution to the war effort.

In addition to Cherry Point and RDU, WWII defense contracts take the Nello L. Teer Company to Camp Butner, N.C.; Fort Lee, Va.; an airfield in Beaufort, S.C.; and an air station in Edenton, N.C.

1946 In recognition of contributions to the war effort, the Nello L. Teer Company receives the Navy’s Civilian Meritorious Service Award.
1950 starts a decade of remarkable expansion for the Nello L. Teer Company. A quarry division is launched. Dam construction is added to the scope of work. A controlling interest in the Durham and Southern Railway is acquired.

1952 Nello Sr. transitions out of the role as president of the Nello L. Teer Company. This is not retirement. In his new role as chairman, Nello still holds the reins of power. Nello Jr. steps into the role of president. Dillard assumes dual positions as vice president and secretary-treasurer. Nello Sr.'s wife Gertrude, a pillar of strength at home and in the church, dies this same year.

1954 The Nello L. Teer company acquires Durham and Southern Railroad, which still uses old steam engines like the one shown here. Within two years, the company upgrades to four Baldwin 1200 horsepower diesel-electric locomotives.

The short 59-mile rail between Durham and Dunn connects three major railroads. It facilitates the transport of building materials to work sites across the Southeast.
1955 The company expands beyond the U.S. and develops a Central America division. This division draws labor from the local population to build hundreds of miles of roads in previously untouched parts of Guatemala.

The company builds major sections of the Pan American Highway in Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and Honduras. It builds major pieces of the Rama Road in Nicaragua.

1956 The company experiences an influx of road projects when President Dwight D. Eisenhower champions a national system of highways.

The Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956 authorizes the construction of nearly 41,000 miles of limited access highways. Contracts for sections of the West Virginia Turnpike, the Maine Turnpike extension, the Massachusetts Turnpike, and other federal projects take Teer employees across the country.

1962 Nello Sr. receives the distinguished Civic Honor Award from the Durham Chamber of Commerce.

1963 Nello Sr. drives back to work after lunch. A utility bus rams his vehicle, causing severe injuries that keep Nello hospitalized for weeks.

Nello Leguy Teer, Sr. dies from his injuries five days after his 75th birthday. He is laid to rest at Maplewood Cemetery in Durham, where his wife Gertrude and two of their children preceded him.

In the newspapers, Nello Sr. is described as “a man who started business with a few mules and established a multi-million-dollar construction company.” To those who really know him, Nello Sr. is remembered by a favorite poem called Don’t Quit.

DON’T QUIT
(author unknown)

When things go wrong as they sometimes will,
When the road you’re trudging seems all uphill,
When the funds are low and the debts are high,
And you want to smile, but have to sigh,
When care is pressing you down a bit,
Rest if you must, but don’t you quit.

Life is queer with its twists and turns,
As everyone of us sometimes learns,
And many a failure turns about
When they might have won, had they stuck it out
Don’t give up though the pace seems slow,
You may succeed with another blow.

Success is failure turned inside out
The silver tint of the clouds of doubt
And you never can tell how close you are,
It may be near when it seems afar;
So stick to the fight when you’re hardest hit —
It’s when things seem worst that you must not quit.
1964-1979

Nello Teer, Jr. and Dillard Teer lead the company through significant diversification and expansion initiatives.

1966 The company establishes a lightweight aggregate manufacturing subsidiary.

1968 The company opens an Africa office in Tanzania. The laborers, drawn mostly from the local population, work long shifts in the African bush country to complete the Great North Road.

1969 The Nello L. Teer Company creates a real estate development division and begins work in Research Triangle Park. Over the course of ten years, the company completes the Governors Inn Hotel, five banks, a post office, and several of the major RTP offices.

1972 A Heavy Industrial Division is established to oversee construction projects such as dams, rapid transit facilities, and hydroelectric plants.

1973 The company completes the construction of the North Carolina Blue Cross Blue Shield Building in Chapel Hill. It is an innovative feat of engineering.

1974 The company starts work on a section of the Washington D.C. Metrorail System.

1976 The Ramada Inn International Hotel is started in Doha, Qatar.

1979 In a multi-company effort, the Nello L. Teer Company contributes to the construction of the Negev Desert Israeli Air Bases, which are part of the 1978 Camp David Peace Agreement between Israel and Egypt.


This marks the end of a 70-year Durham icon, but a legacy remains. We drive on roads and work in buildings that Nello Sr., his family, and his employees built. They faced major challenges. But they persisted with a key conviction — Don’t Quit.
The Museum of Durham History gratefully acknowledges the following contributors for the content and creation of this exhibit.

Renee Snyderman, Lead Curator & Exhibit Designer

Jerry Gershenhorn  Dillard Teer
Thomas S. Peirce   Robert D. Teer, Jr.
Gaylene Hancock Piper  The Nello L. Teer Archives

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World War I  Interstate Highway System
The Great Depression  Durham & Southern Railroad