

MECKLENBURG COUNTY, VIRGINIA
PLACES OF GENEALOGICAL AND HISTORICAL INTEREST

By Cora V. St. John

Located in the South-Central portion of Virginia, Mecklenburg County shares a border with North Carolina. In 1764, the Virginia General Assembly passed legislation that would divide Lunenburg County into three counties. Thus in March 1765 Mecklenburg and Charlotte County joined the Commonwealth of Virginia.

There were thirteen members making up the first county government: Robert Munford, Richard Witton, John Speed, Henry Delony, Edmund Taylor, Benjamin Baird, John Camp, Thomas Erskine, John Potter, John Cox, Thomas Anderson, John Speed, Jr., and Samuel Hopkins. Benjamin Baird would act as the first mayor.

We continue with the history and genealogical information included in the applications to the National Historic Register of homes located in Mecklenburg County. Due to the number of applications, there will be multiple articles.

Averett School and Wharton Memorial Baptist Church and Cemetery are located in the rural community of Averett in the Clarksville Magisterial District of the county approximately 7 miles southwest of Clarksville at the intersection of Hwy. 49 and Route 735.

The 3.48 acre property consists of two parcels: one containing the church and school and associated resources, and another containing the cemetery.

The history of this property began with the vision of Reverend George Douglas Wharton (1862-1932). Having graduated from Hampton Institute in 1880, he came to Averett to preach to a small congregation in a two-room log dwelling. For 50 years, he saw to the growth of both the church and community. A school was founded in the log building, a country store was opened, and a land company was created to allow African Americans to purchase property. These efforts would help create a self-sufficient community.

In 1882 Wharton led construction of a new church for the congregation of the Beautiful Plain Baptist Church. The congregation replaced that building in 1897. Renamed "Wharton Memorial Baptist Church" in 1922, that church burned in 1940 and another church was built in its place in a similar Gothic Revival style.

The Averett School which was originally housed in the log building was replaced by another building in 1910 and served as a local primary school until 1940. In 1959, the building expanded and became a gathering place for the local community and home for the Averett Union Masonic Lodge.

The Wharton Cemetery lies to the southwest in view of the church and school. Organized in 1894, the 1.55 acre cemetery contains 240 marked graves and possibly many other unmarked graves. (Listed 2021)

The Boyd Tavern was erected ca. 1785 by Alexander Boyd, Sr. an area businessman and founder of the town of Boydton. The original size of the tavern was much smaller than the rambling structure seen today which has expanded to thirty-five rooms. Much of the ornamentation seen today can be attributed to regional builder and architect Jacob W. Holt.

Alexander Boyd, Sr. emigrated to America from Scotland in 1764, one year prior to the organization of Mecklenburg County. Boyd became a very prosperous merchant in the area and eventually became a justice on the County Court and died on the bench in 1801.

After his death, sons Richard and Alexander, Jr. (1773-1836) carried on the firm of Alexander Boyd and Sons, though the tavern was operated solely by Alexander Jr. It is believed this is when the tavern may have become the building seen today. Because of his influence, the first county courthouse was built on his land near the present site of Boydton and the second on his land near the present courthouse. However, Boyd's neighbors, including William Baskerville, the county clerk, protested Boyd's ownership of the land on which the courthouse stood, as well as the land around it, and complained it allowed him to stifle competition. So, in 1809, they asked the General Assembly to either move the courthouse or establish a town around it. In 1811, Boyd donated to the county the two acres of land on which the courthouse stood.

Boydton would continue to grow and by 1835 would consist of 80 houses, 400 people and Randolph-Macon College. Boyd sold the tavern in 1824.

In more recent years, the tavern fell into decay. The tavern closed in the late 19th century and was divided into apartments. To save the building from neglect, the Boyd Family Memorial Foundation purchased the property in 1974. In 1988, the tavern was deeded to the Boyd Tavern Foundation with goals to restore the tavern to its original use.

(Listed 1976)

Boydton Historic District is one of the best preserved small county seats in the Commonwealth of Virginia. The Historic District includes 215 contributing resources and 146 non-contributing resources. Other than the beautiful classical courthouse, the town also contains a variety of houses, commercial buildings and significant church and school buildings. The oldest building is the historic 18th century Boyd Tavern. Both the courthouse and tavern are already listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

As with other historic districts, there are far too many structures to cover in this article.

Please visit:

[173-5001 Boydton HD 2002 Final Nomination.pdf \(virginia.gov\)](#)

(Listed 2002)

Buffalo Springs Archaeological District is the location where the remains of a rare Southside springs resort known as Buffalo Lithia Springs once stood. These resorts were an important part of Virginia life in the early 19th century, but most of these resorts were located in mountainous regions of the western part of the state. Buffalo Lithia Springs had its beginnings in 1811 and provided bottled water. The resort survived until the 1930's. Between 1946 and 1953, it became incorporated into the development of John Kerr Dam and Buggs Island Lake. This district contains two notable buildings: the ca. 1800 Shelton House and an historic bottle storage building. (Listed 1998)

Cedar Grove archaeological site, is no longer in use, but was an antebellum farmstead site used for over 100 years for tobacco agriculture from the 1840's to 1940's. This site preserves archaeological data relating to rural life in the area. The site currently sits on top of a ridge that extends into the John H. Kerr Reservoir.

The main house is represented by a thirty-five-foot-square fieldstone pier foundation, a stone and brick cellar divided by a load-bearing wall, and two brick chimney falls. Nearby are sites of a well, a double-flue tobacco barn, ordering rooms, and various other outbuildings. Large oaks, ornamental vegetation, piles of fieldstone, and an old road trace are also present on the site. (Listed 1996, VLR only)

Cedar Grove is located on the north side of Grassy Creek about five miles south of Clarksville. The original 1600 acres was purchased by John Taylor Lewis in 1782 for 80,000 pounds of tobacco. He bequeathed the property to his son John Taylor Lewis II (1794-1866) who built the Greek Revival-style house ca. 1838. Though Lewis had no formal architect to design the elegant brick house, it was said to be influenced by visits to a similar house in Alabama and to Thomas Jefferson's Monticello. The builder is said to have been Dabney Cosby, a workman for Thomas Jefferson during the construction of the University of Virginia, and "Old Jim" the head carpenter. Other interior traits are associated with Thomas Day, an African American craftsman from nearby Milton, NC. This historic home is unusual in form as a large one-story block on raised basement with a hipped roof capped with a smaller clerestory with a hipped roof.

The south entrance, which looks all the way to Grassy Creek, provided both power and river transport to the plantation which in the 19th century was a very successful farming operation. It contained tobacco, apple and corn crops, a grist mill, cooperage and a distillery. Also on the property were an ice house and smoke house dating to 1838 as well as a number of other secondary structures.

Originally, the property was comprised of 2,500 acres until the creation of Bugg's Island Lake and the John H. Kerr Reservoir in 1953 which reduced the acreage to 770.

Ben Robert Lewis was the patriarch of the family who arrived in Virginia in 1635 on a ship named "Blessing". Marriages between the Lewis and Meriwether families were frequent with Meriwether Lewis being the most prominent, as an aide to President Jefferson and co-leader of the Lewis and Clark expedition.

John Taylor Lewis, II moved into the house in 1838 accompanied by his second wife, Frances. Their first son, John Taylor Lewis III, was born in 1840, followed by Richard, Fanny and Leonard. All the children grew up on the plantation with the boys attending Hampden-Sydney College. In 1852 Frances died. When the War Between the States began in 1861, Richard and John joined the Clarksville Blues. John achieved the rank of Lieutenant and was captured at Gettysburg and became a prisoner of war in Ohio. Richard was badly wounded at Bull Run, fought at Gettysburg and was wounded three more times, but was eventually sent home.

At the end of the war, there was much misery at Cedar Grove. Mr. Lewis lost his wealth, his labor supply and his future. One son returned home badly wounded and another returned from prison in poor health. Upon his death in 1866, the property was divided among John, Leonard, Richard and Fanny. Leonard received the house and 1,163 acres. However, in 1877 a note that Mr. Lewis had cosigned for \$360 and that his family believed had long since been paid was ruled otherwise by a court. In 1880, with money scarce and property values low, the land went up for auction and the Cedar Grove plantation would be divided up into various parcels.

Though the house saw at least fifty years of neglect, it never suffered substantial damage. From 1880 to 1929 the property only changed hands twice. After those many years of neglect and decay, Mr. Lewis' great grandson, also named John Taylor Lewis (called Jack), began buying

and reassembling the property and bringing it back to the Lewis family's ownership. On January 29, 1929 Jack bought the house and 2500 acres and was able to begin restoration of Cedar Grove and repaired most of the damage done through the years.

Prior to the War Between the States, Cedar Grove had been home to approximately 100 slaves, many of whom were listed in the 1843 will of John Taylor Lewis. This aspect of the history of Cedar Grove is represented by its remaining slave quarters and slave cemetery and in the vestiges of a vast agricultural operation visible today. A building thought to have been slave quarters was built ca. 1850. There is a slave cemetery located on the property about a mile north of Lewis Mill Road. Fourteen discernable depressions are marked with fieldstones at the head and foot with no inscriptions. The slave cemetery is believed to have been used since the Lewis family purchased the land in 1790. Like the family cemetery, the slave cemetery is meticulously maintained.

After Jack Lewis' death in 1990, the property was bought from his daughters, Hilda Williams and Louise Toms by James and Mary Kinnear. Once again the home would be restored to its original grandeur. Mr. & Mrs. Kinnear have given the house and property to the National Trust for Historic Preservation, retaining lifetime tenancy and ensuring Cedar Grove's preservation. (Listed 2010)

Chase City High School was designed by architect H.H. Huggins and was built in two phases. The first was built circa 1908 and the second in 1917. The school is a two-story, 25,000 square foot structure. It is an example of Georgian Revival architecture and has an impressive brick façade that features lighter brick quoins, keystones and jack arches. It was built with a low-interest loan made available from the State Literary Fund.

The school served the community until it was closed in 1980 due to consolidation. In 1991, a rehabilitation converted it into 26 one and two bedroom apartments and continues to serve the community today. (Listed 2000)

Chase City Warehouse and Commercial Historic District encompasses the downtown area of Chase City, an area of nearly 27 acres. Chase City is located in the northwest area of Mecklenburg County. The history of Chase City traces back to mid-1700's. The rapid development of this area coincided with the arrival in 1883 of the Atlantic, Richmond and Danville Railroad to the city. It served the Piedmont area's tobacco trade, lumber mills, and other agricultural activities.

Buildings reflect development of the area after a 1903 fire that devastated the town and resulted in a mandate for the use of masonry construction. The earliest commercial building dates to 1905. The area contains the Southside Roller Mills (ca. 1912) and the Banner Tobacco Warehouse (ca. 1915).

The only antebellum building in the district is Shadow Lawn (ca. 1834), a residence that is individually listed on the register. It was built by Richard Puryear, an early landowner in the area. In the 1860's, one of Chase City's founders, George Endly moved into the Italianate house and hired architect-builder Jacob W. Holt to enlarge the house. More information on this house will be included in a later edition of the newsletter. As with all Historic Districts, more information can be found at: [DHR – Virginia Department of Historic Resources » 186-5005 Chase City Warehouse and Commercial Historic District](#) (Listed 2020)

Clarksville Historic District constitutes the core of a small river-oriented town which was founded in 1818 and is located at the Dan and Roanoke Rivers. The main thoroughfare is named Virginia Avenue and contains both a large number of commercial buildings and many impressive houses in a variety of styles. Beyond Virginia Avenue are tree-shaded streets lined with homes built over the last 175 years and several churches. In total, there are 195 buildings within the district. Of these, approximately 150 are dwellings (two of which are individually listed on the National Historic Register) and the rest are commercial. There are also two archaeological sites.

More information on this district and the buildings within can be found at: [192-0121 Clarksville HD 2002 Final Nomination.pdf \(virginia.gov\)](#) (Listed 2002)

The Colonial Theatre is located in South Hill and is in the Historic Commercial District. This impressive three-story brick building was constructed by Gilbert A Saunders in 1925 to house live entertainment to include vaudeville and musical productions and later, silent movies and modern motion pictures.

In 2001, after many years of standing vacant, the South Hill Civic Center donated the Colonial Theatre to the South Hill Community Development Association, Inc. Earl Horne and the CDA worked to obtain the means to recognize and rehabilitate the theatre and bring it back to its original splendor. Working with grants, local industry, local businesses and other organizations, they were able to see their vision brought to life. (Listed 2002)

Elm Hill was an early plantation house built ca. 1800 and located on the Roanoke River basin as the residence of Peyton Skipwith. However, the title to the property was held by his father, Sir Peyton Skipwith of Prestwould.

The house set on a rise which would today give a view overlooking Lake Gaston and Buggs Island. It was originally part of the holdings of Hugh Miller. Hugh Miller was a resident of Prince George County and the father-in-law of Sir Peyton. Upon his death in England in 1763, his property passed to his daughters Ann and Jean, respectively, Skipwith's first and second wives. It appears that Miller built the house on the property prior to his death and the Skipwiths lived there when they first moved to Mecklenburg in 1769. By 1772, they had moved to "Westland". Skipwith's wife, Anne died in 1779 and by 1788, Skipwith was living at Prestwould and courting his sister-in-law who was now living at Elm Hill. They would marry soon after. Records show that Elm Hill belonged to Anne Miller Skipwith and descended from her not to Sir Peyton, but to his son Peyton, Jr. In 1801, Peyton, Jr. deeded the land to his father, but no earlier deed appears for that tract from father to son. A 1799 deed refers to the Elm Hill tract, while the 1801 document speaks of Elm Hill Plantation. This difference, along with the architectural evidence implies the younger Skipwith replaced the original with the present house between 1799 and 1801.

After Sir Peyton's death, the widow, Lady Jean Skipwith gave Elm Hill to her son Humbertson Skipwith in 1812 who would later leave the property to his daughter, Selina S. Coles when he died in 1865. Elm Hill remained in the family into the late 19th century.

The property was owned by the Commission of Game and Inland Fisheries and the house was unused and deteriorating. Despite its condition, nearly all the original fabric remained preserved. Title to the house and a small parcel of land was transferred to the Historical Society

of Mecklenburg which intended to undertake a long-term restoration. Unfortunately, the house was destroyed by a fire that is believed to have been sparked by a lightning strike on June 25, 2014. (Listed 1979)

Elm Hill Archaeological Site is located in a bottomland field of Elm Hill Plantation. This site dates from the Late Archaic through Late Woodland periods (2500 B.C.- A.D. 1600). A scientific study of this area would significantly contribute to the limited data currently available regarding this portion of the Roanoke River. Woodland-period occupation is denoted in pit features, hearths, and human burials along with well-preserved animal bones and shellfish remains. This site may be the last intact bottomland site since other potential sites have been covered over by Buggs Island Lake and Lake Gaston.