

RURAL HILL HOMESTEAD

THEN AND NOW

Built in 1788, Rural Hill was the post Revolutionary War home of Major John and Violet (Wilson) Davidson. Although it stood as hub of family activities for 98 years, there are no known photographs of the home before it burned. This view is an undated watercolor painting, one of at least two, by cousin Clara Lawton Smith. Rural Hill was referred to as one of the “Jewels of the Catawba River Valley”.

BUILDING RURAL HILL

The story of Rural Hill is a story of people and place. The story is made personal through the continuity of six generations of the extended family of John and Violet Wilson Davidson as well as the families of enslaved African Americans such as: Tomas, Adam, Logan, Alexander, Phill, Hampton, Umphrey, George, Alfred, Jennie, Joe, Harrison, Moses, David, John, Bill, Rufus, Jim, Ann, Julia, Tina, Sarah, Hanah, Nancy, Celia, Poly, Jinncy, Susan, Amy, and Dilsie.

But the story of Rural Hill would not be complete without a look at the buildings and features, historical or currently existing that defined the lifestyle of the people who lived and worked in and around them.

Rural Hill’s gardens and historic structures provide a setting for a fascinating narrative that includes the sites of five homes, and two schoolhouses. The variety of construction techniques, agricultural and landscaping practices offer an orderly timeline for presentation of a way of life in the American South that developed, evolved, and consistently changed over more than 230 years.

The construction techniques employed and type of materials in the buildings have significance in terms of history, architecture, and cultural importance. These buildings are examples of virtually every construction material and technique used in the Piedmont Carolinas in the last 200+ years. There are constructions using skinned log poles, hand-hewn logs, sawn logs, sawn lumber, rock and handmade brick. They are sided with rough and finished lumber in slab, board and batten as well as rough or finished lapped siding. There are joined log, post and beam, wood frame, pole and brick buildings with roofs of wood, metal and asphalt shingle. Existing outbuildings include a granary, a smokehouse, a well house and a unique ash house.

RURAL RETREAT

John Davidson, and his sister Mary, arrived in Mecklenburg County about 1760. We do not know where or how they lived soon after they arrived. Frequently clearing land for gardens, crops and livestock took priority over permanent housing. Log cabins were small, often hastily constructed and considered temporary shelter. There are no known photographs of the log cabin that John Davidson eventually built for his bride, Violet. But a sketch by a family member indicates that it was probably a story and a half two room home. The home was called “Rural Retreat”, probably within the lifetime of its builder. Over

time, the home grew to have eight rooms with improvements that included “paneling with wide boards within and clapboard siding without.” Unfortunately, after serving the family for more than 130 years, it burned in 1896.

With generous donations of logs and construction materials from Alcoa Yadkin and Culp Lumber, Bill Bigham, Roy Pickett and Danny Patterson have led a crew of volunteers to hand hew the logs and construct a cabin to represent the Rural Retreat back country homestead. This cabin, with a blacksmith shop, corn crib, root cellar, garden and livestock shed, is used for living history programs and costumed interpretation of the early American settlers.

Before arriving in Mecklenburg, John had apprenticed as a blacksmith. The family has passed down the story that John and his sister Mary were on their way to the iron mining region in Lincoln County when high water in the Catawba River forced them to stay in Mecklenburg County for awhile. After meeting Violet Springs he decided to stay. He was aware of the opportunity to be found in iron mining and would continue his trade in the future. It was said that he was seen putting the iron on a set of wagon wheels on his wedding day, an indication of his ambition.

In 1788 the North Carolina General Assembly passed an act "to encourage the building of Iron Works in the State." In 1795, the partnerships of Peter Forney, John Davidson, and John's sons-in-law Joseph Graham and Alexander Brevard were responsible for the construction of Vesuvius Furnace. Major John Davidson would later sell his interests in Mt Tirzah Forge and Vesuvius Furnace to both Joseph Graham and Alexander Brevard.

RURAL HILL

John Davidson prospered both through hard work and his business investments. The 1790 census lists 26 African slaves in the estate of Major John Davidson, second in number only to Thomas Polk. This number could be explained in part by the construction of the Rural Hill mansion in 1788. Rural Hill was a brown brick Georgian style mansion constructed on the top of a hill just south of Rural Retreat. It was considered one of the finest of the Catawba River plantation homes.

In his book "Major John Davidson of Rural Hill," Chalmers Davidson describes the home. The dining room filled the entire east end of the basement with a warming kitchen, pantry, storeroom and hall on the west. The first floor was divided by a central hall about 10 feet wide. To the west the great parlor with a smaller room at the north which was separated by a folding partition. Two bed chambers were on the east of the central hall. The second floor was divided in two by a hall similar to the one on the first floor, with two bed rooms on either side. Ceilings on both main floors were about ten feet high. The garret was one great room with windows only in the gable ends.

Adam Brevard and Mary Laura remodeled Rural Hill extensively in the 1850s. The Georgian style hip roof was replaced with one with gable ends and the back porch and columns were added.

Following the Civil War, Adam Brevard turned Rural Hill over to his son, John Springs. They focused on the saw mill operations and A. B. remade the family fortune in real estate and construction.

The mansion burned in 1886, just short of being 100 years old, while the family was away in Charlotte at a fall fair. It was considered a community disaster. John Springs Davidson and his family moved into Rural Retreat until former kitchen house of the mansion could be refashioned into a suitable home.

WELL HOUSE

The well house covers a hand dug 60 foot deep x three foot wide well that was used by the family until it was closed in 1992. The brick structure behind the well may have stored ice at some times of the year and used for cooling fresh meat and dairy products.

ASH HOUSE

This unique building was used for storage of wood ashes to make soap.

THE SMOKEHOUSE

Adam Brevard Davidson said he finished the smokehouse along with the kitchen & hen house on March 8th, 1834 at the cost of about \$98. Recent family called it a smoke house and there was evidence of smoke on the undersides of the roof tin when it was replaced. Volunteers of Historic Rural Hill led by Will Foster and Gary Lewis organized the preservation and repairs. The grinding stones found outside the smokehouse are from the grist mill built by A. B. Davidson that stood long side a man-made dam on McDowell Creek. The site is now under Mountain Island Lake.

MARY LAURA (SPRINGS) DAVIDSON'S GARDENS

Mary Davidson and four African American women planted the boxwood border and flower gardens. In addition to the boxwood garden many of the surrounding trees of the plantation's foundations are original to the site, including Water Oak, Cedar, Magnolia, and Hollies.

The ruins of Rural Hill stood for 15 years. All that could be salvaged was removed before the walls were pushed into the basement level and covered over. A lot of handmade brick, two faux painted front doors, two back doors, bead board, a few exterior shutters, brick porch columns and pieces of the decorative iron porch balustrade are all that remain of the Rural Hill mansion.

E.L. Baxter Davidson, A.B. Davidson's son, and the great - grandson of Major John Davidson, made plans to rebuild Rural Hill. He worked with local architect, Louis H. Asbury, and had complete blueprints drawn. Unfortunately, he passed away before reconstruction could begin. (The plans are in J. Murrey Atkins Library at UNC - Charlotte)

THE 1890S SCHOOL HOUSES

The Davidson family had a long history of support for education. Family records mention the Rural Hill Academy in session in 1842. In the 1890s there were two public school houses at Rural Hill, one for white children and one for black children.

The Davidson Schoolhouse served white children from 1890-1912 when the children moved into a larger two room structure built on the same site. They went to the larger school until the Long Creek Consolidated School opened in 1923. The original Davidson school house survived as a tenant house but has been preserved as it was originally used through funds provided by the Davidson family and by the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission (CMHLC). With funding from the Knight Foundation and the Historic Landmarks Commission, an Educational Facility in the size and scale of the larger two room structure has been built to provide an educational space and restrooms.

Bethesda School, ca. 1898, is the oldest identified rural school house for black children in Mecklenburg County. The Bethesda Schoolhouse stands as a memorial to the African American educational system in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. Currently it is one of only two known existing rural one room schoolhouses for black children still standing in Mecklenburg County. (The other school discovered in February 2006 is Siloam Schoolhouse, located in the northern University area of Charlotte, which is also under development threat.) This wooden one room schoolhouse is said to have been built by a popular local black farmer, named John Young.

In 2005 the old schoolhouse, dilapidated after having served as a dwelling and community center for numerous families throughout the years, was in jeopardy of being torn down due to development in southern end of Huntersville along Alexanderana Road where the school originally stood (13129 Alexanderana Road). The CMHLC saw fit to preserve the historic structure by moving it to a more protected site.

In June 2005 an agreement was reached with Historic Rural Hill and the CMHLC to move the Bethesda Schoolhouse to Rural Hill as its permanent home. Both entities agreed to work together

in preserving the structure through grants, donations, and volunteers. On February 16, 2006 Bethesda School was sited on its permanent location and restoration began. Since then this historic schoolhouse has been going through restoration and preservation to take it back to its original appearance. When restoration is complete the schoolhouse will serve as an interpretive center for teaching visitors about the early educational practices for both young African American and white children in the 1890's to early 1900's.

THE TENANT HOUSE - CA.1900

The existing tenant house, one of four, is a unique artifact of Southern heritage, black and white. Its construction is typical of simple home building techniques of the early 20th century. Not much is known of its history. Due to safety hazards, the building is closed to the public.

THE FARMHOUSE

Built in 1834 as a kitchen house to the Rural Hill mansion (the finest homes of the time had separate kitchen houses) the structure was repurposed in 1896 as a residence after the Rural Retreat cabin burned. A comfortable and spacious home, the family used the doors, molding and other pieces from the mansion house and other family properties to remodel the two story structure. It was repurposed again in 1946-1947 by the Davidson Family. The addition that was added in 1896 was torn off and moved behind the site, closed in and used as a tenant house. The current kitchen, dining room, and two upstairs bedrooms were then added. Today it houses a small museum, offices, and the May Davidson Room, provided with assistance from the Daughters of the American Revolution.

THE GRANARY - CA. 1900

In 2001 the granary had fallen into disrepair. Volunteers, with brothers Eddie and Eric Ferguson taking the lead, rebuilt the granary and it is today used to store livestock feed, tools, and machinery.

CHICKEN SHED - CA. 1950 -1960

Originally built as a shed for machinery, the building was also once used to house chickens from time to time. Volunteers of Historic Rural Hill, Eddie Ferguson, Freddie Brown, Gary Lewis, Bill Bigham and Roy Pickett, restored the shed in 2005. Today this building houses antique tools, farm equipment and custom seating to be used during demonstrations.

THE NEW BARN - 2005

John Springs Davidson told about a terrible fire in 1905 that destroyed the "big barn" along with the horses. His father, Jo Graham Davidson, replaced it with a "small barn" 30 x 60 pole barn but by 2003 it had fallen into complete disrepair. For livestock management, the small barn has been replaced by a structure on the same site of the 1905 barn. This new barn was built in 2005 by an Amish construction company with funding in part through a grant from the Richard J. and Marie Mallouk Reynolds III Foundation and matched with fundraising projects by members of Historic Rural Hill and proceeds from the Amazing Maize Maze.