

# **The Evolution of the Built Environment of Davidson, North Carolina**

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Old Chambers Building

## **Introduction**

To determine the historic significance of individual historic properties and collections of historic properties one must have an understanding and appreciation of the historic context within which they appear. This paper sets forth the principal forces that have shaped the evolution of the built or man-made environment of Davidson, North Carolina. The intent is to identify those individually significant properties that should be given some level of protection in order to safeguard the historic character of the town.

The principal investigator recognizes that some significant properties might have been inadvertently excluded and welcomes public input into this process. Also, the principal investigator understands that some individuals might come forward with

information that will supplement or correct information that is contained herein. The survey of historic resources in the built or man-made environment is a process, not a product.

## **Historical Context**

Davidson College, which was established in 1835 to educate young men according to the values of the school's Presbyterian founders, has provided the impetus for the evolution and development of the Town of Davidson. From 1835 to 1874, the town was a relatively isolated college community; and its growth was almost exclusively linked to the increasing number of students and faculty who attended or taught at Davidson College. Not only was the built environment of Davidson in this period characterized by faculty and student housing, but also by dwellings and commercial structures built for the fledgling merchant class that provided goods and services to the students and faculty.

Profound change came to Davidson in 1874, when the reactivation of the railroad linking Charlotte and Statesville removed Davidson from its relative isolation and introduced forces that made the town a commercial and industrial center for the rural environs of northern Mecklenburg County and southern Iredell County. The late 1800s and early 1900s witnessed the rise of textile manufacturing in Davidson through the construction of such notable structures as the Linden Mill and the Delburg Mill. The mills had a significant impact on the nature of the built environment of Davidson through the introduction of industrial buildings and mill housing. The College continued to be important to the growth of the town in the late 1800s and throughout the early and mid twentieth century and also occasioned significant changes in the built environment primarily through the introduction of faculty housing constructed in a variety of styles, but also through the creation of campus buildings such as the literary society halls and Jackson Court. In recent years, the pace of development in Davidson has increased exponentially; and suburban sprawl has overtaken much of the surrounding countryside.

The period of construction from 1835 until roughly 1910 in Davidson gave rise to dwellings for faculty and students, first along North Main Street and subsequently along Concord Road, as well as producing a variety of campus buildings. The products of this early growth were such locally distinctive structures as Eumenean Hall, Philanthropic Hall, and the [Holt-Henderson-Copeland House](#) on North Main Street and the [Martin-Henderson House](#) on Concord Road. The Holt-Henderson-Copeland House and the Martin-Henderson House are representative of the Folk Victorian style dwellings that were made possible in Davidson and throughout the United States by innovations in technology and transportation. The Folk Victorian style was also the choice of prosperous merchants who benefited from

the establishment and growth of the College, like [Holt Armour](#), who built his family's home on North Main Street. Some African-Americans in the town were also able to gain financial success by participating in the commercial enterprises that sprouted up along Main Street. The home of [Ralph Johnson](#) on Mock Circle bears testimony to these new circumstances.

The on-going development of Davidson College has left in its wake eclectic examples of many styles of architecture, including Colonial Revival, Arts and Crafts, and Modernist, all of which contribute to the variety of the built environment of Davidson. The [Hood House](#), a Colonial Revival style abode located on Concord Road, is the product of the expansion of College in the first three decades of the twentieth century and contains a fine local example of a Rustic Revival style log outbuilding. [Jackson Court](#), located on Concord Road, was also constructed in the Colonial Revival style and was innovative as an architectural type that addressed the needs of students and the administration as a fraternity row. The influence of the College over the built environment of the town in the middle of the twentieth century is strikingly evident on Hillside Road, where several faculty members, including [James Purcell](#), erected distinctive homes in the new Modernist fashion. All of these stylistic components of the built environment of Davidson, though very different aesthetically, serve in combination to illustrate the history of the town and its place in Mecklenburg County.

## **The Establishment and Early Growth of Davidson College**

Presbyterians in the western piedmont of North Carolina were adamant in their desire to bring opportunities for higher education to the sons of the white elite of the region. The establishment of Davidson College in 1835 by the Concord Presbytery was the culmination of this process and followed the failure of a similar project for Western College in nearby Lincoln County. Western College functioned as an alternative to the State University in Chapel Hill from 1821 to 1824 and brought higher education into the reach of students from the more geographically isolated western regions of North Carolina.<sup>[1]</sup> A decade after Western College's demise, the Concord Presbytery purchased from William Lee Davidson a tract of land containing 469 acres in northern Mecklenburg County with the intention of building a college to instill in its future students the Presbyterian values of its founders. Davidson, a staunch Presbyterian, facilitated the project by selling the land at the reduced price of about fifteen hundred dollars; and the Presbytery voted to name the new institution in honor of the "ardor of patriotism" of Davidson's father, William Davidson, a Revolutionary War hero who was killed at the Battle of Cowan's Ford.<sup>[2]</sup> The construction of the first College buildings followed; and when Davidson opened its doors in 1837, several edifices had been constructed for the purposes of housing, educating, and supporting student life. Twelve buildings had been erected on campus

by the close of the antebellum period, including the Chapel, five dormitory rows (of which [Elm Row and Oak Row](#) alone still stand), Tammany Hall ( a faculty residence destroyed in 1906), the Old Chambers Building (destroyed by fire in 1921), and the President's House.<sup>[3]</sup>



*Philanthropic Hall, Davidson College*



*Eumenean Hall, Davidson College*

### *Literary Societies, Fraternities, and Boarding Houses*

Two of the most significant and recognizable extant structures that were constructed during the early history of Davidson College are [Philanthropic Hall](#) and [Eumenean Hall](#), which housed respectively the two debating societies around which much of student life revolved.<sup>[4]</sup> The societies served as more than the clubs that their formal purposes suggest; in fact, they were the regulating bodies of student behavior on campus. Almost all Davidson students belonged to one of the debating societies; and strict codes of behavior were imposed upon the members of the clubs. These strictures were enforced by “vigilance committees,” which were charged with reporting infractions of the student honor code.<sup>[5]</sup> When in 1848 the Eumenean and Philanthropic societies decided to construct halls to house their activities, they agreed that the structures should be “alike in size, material, and magnificence.”<sup>[6]</sup> The Greek Revival style in which these halls were erected was based on a reinterpretation of the power of classical Greek architecture and was highly popular in the United States following the War of 1812 as a means to differentiate American architecture from English architecture and, in so doing, to establish what could be seen as a “national style.”<sup>[7]</sup> The architecture of Eumenean and Philanthropic Halls cleverly uses “variation and repetition” to highlight the similarities and differences between the two buildings; and it is this dramatic interplay between the structures that has helped to make them two of the most recognizable landmarks for the College and the town.<sup>[8]</sup>

Although the literary societies were the focal point of social life on the campus well into the early twentieth century, a challenge to the dominance of these clubs arose in the 1850s due to the rising influence of the fraternity culture in Davidson. The literary societies and their events filled most of the free time that Davidson College students enjoyed early in the history of the school. However, by the middle of the nineteenth century students were forming new societies, the purposes of which were non-academic. The Sons of Temperance, a student club that was embraced by the faculty and the administration for its position of abstaining from drinking alcoholic beverages and fighting the sale of liquor within the vicinity of the College, provided one outlet for students; but many hoped for a student society that was “livelier than the temperance meetings and less academic than the literary societies.”<sup>[9]</sup> The students’ wishes were answered in 1857, when Beta Theta Pi became the first fraternity chapter on campus.<sup>[10]</sup>

By the turn of the twentieth century, close to one-half of the student population belonged to one of the fraternities, and their prominence on campus was overshadowing the membership rosters of the literary societies. The nature of fraternity life greatly contrasted with the vision of a strong moral and academic foundation on which the College was based. Thus, the question of how much control the administration should exert over the activities of the fraternities became a recurring theme, especially during the turbulent 1960s and arguably even to the present day. <sup>[11]</sup> The faculty and administration, concerned with the alleged dubious influence of the clubs on the student population, attempted to stunt the growth the fraternities twice before 1900 -- once in the 1860s when they temporarily forbade the addition of any new chapters on campus, and once in 1898, when the Trustees called for the abolishment of the fraternity societies altogether.<sup>[12]</sup> However, these calls for a return to the era of the literary societies failed; but the College could at least console itself that the fraternities, which were housed in the Old Chambers building, were under the close and watchful eye of the administration.<sup>[13]</sup>

Until the 1920s, the tenuous relationship between the College and the fraternities was based on the administration’s ability to control the behavior of the fraternities because of geographic proximity. However, the College and the Town both would experience a shift in the dynamics of this relationship after 1921, when the Old Chambers building burned. The fraternities had been asking for permission to move off campus with no success since 1901; and the unfortunate conflagration probably provided the College with little choice except to allow them to do so, because the temporary meeting quarters for the societies in Elm Row and Oak Row were not large enough to accommodate all of the members.<sup>[14]</sup> Thus, by 1923, the fraternities had been asked to move off campus, and the students readily complied, many merely “strengthening the relationships that they had” with local boarding

houses.<sup>[15]</sup> The College recognized the flaws in this system, however, including the loss of fifteen hundred dollars in revenue and the lessening of the degree of control it could exercise over the students. Consequently, the College set about formulating a plan that would reconcile the desire of the fraternities to have independent meeting spaces with the need of the College to impose behavioral controls over their members.

The result of this compromise was Jackson Court, the original fraternity row on campus. It was situated on Concord Road, built in 1928, and designed by by Martin Evans Boyer, Jr., a noted Charlotte revivalist architect, and named for Frank Lee Jackson, who served as College treasurer from 1913-1952 and as the Mayor of Davidson from 1951-1969.<sup>[16]</sup> Jackson Court provided a solution to the problem of how to bring about a compromise between the conflicting desires of the students and the administration by providing meeting houses for student activities that would foster “age-old traditions of democracy and friendliness,” but which were owned and controlled by the school.<sup>[17]</sup> The eleven, one-story buildings of Jackson Court are laid out on a semi-circular plan facing Concord Road and are designed in the Colonial Revival style that was highly influential until the middle of the twentieth century. While each of the buildings is individually symmetrical or asymmetrical, they all exhibit a symmetrical arrangement in relation to one another, meaning that an individually symmetrical building is flanked by two buildings which are individually asymmetrical, but which give the three buildings together a symmetrical appearance.<sup>[18]</sup> The construction of Jackson Court allowed the College to regulate the activities of the fraternities to a degree and also enriched the built environment of Davidson.







*Examples of the individual Jackson Court fraternity houses*

Boarding houses were important to the fraternities at Davidson College during the interim period of 1921-1928, when they were forced to locate off-campus. However, the fraternities were not the only group that benefited from the existence of boarding houses. In fact, there was no dining hall on campus until 1946; and boarding houses where students took their meals were more than a convenience. They were a necessity.<sup>[19]</sup> Mary Beaty, a historian of the town and College, has noted that the rise of the boarding house culture was important to Davidson for three reasons. First, the boarding of students in private, off-campus housing encouraged the co-mingling of students and town residents. Second, the prospect of operating a boarding house was the cause of the construction of some of the more imposing domiciles in Davidson. Third, operating a boarding house gave families the opportunity to earn a good living while educating their sons at the school.<sup>[20]</sup>

One of the earliest dwellings that served as a boarding house was the Folk Victorian style [Holt-Henderson-Copeland House](#) located at 305 North Main Street. The central portion of the house was constructed prior to the 1860s and was located so that its occupants could take advantage of easy access to both the campus and the commercial district.<sup>[21]</sup> The original owner of the house was Jacob Coldiron, the local tailor; but by the Civil War the house had been sold to Dr. William Holt and his wife, Julia A. Holt, who promptly enlarged the building.<sup>[22]</sup> Mrs. Holt operated a

school for girls until the early part of the twentieth century but was also running what came to be known as “one of the most popular boarding houses in Davidson” out of her home in the 1880s.<sup>[23]</sup> After Mrs. Holt’s death in 1912, the new owner of the house, Mrs. Miles Henderson, continued the dwelling’s boarding house tradition through the 1940s; and that custom has been carried on by the subsequent owners of the house.<sup>[24]</sup>



*Holt-Henderson-Copeland House, 305 North Main Street*

Housing for the faculty, which had increased from three members in 1837 to seven in 1884, was the cause of much of the growth on North Main Street initially and on Concord Road after 1890.<sup>[25]</sup> As late as the 1870s, the Davidson College faculty was still easily accommodated in the six college-owned dwellings -- Louisiana, Danville, the [Blake House](#), the Grey House, the Oak, and the President’s House.<sup>[26]</sup> However, in 1900, the College had to admit that it had not built new faculty housing in over forty years; and the strengthening of the Davidson College curriculum and the continual growth of the student body created a need for more homes.<sup>[27]</sup> Many new faculty members in the early decades of the twentieth century chose to build their abodes along North Main Street, including Dr. William J. Martin, Archibald Currie, and William J. Wood.<sup>[28]</sup> The land along Concord Road also began to be occupied by both faculty members and faculty families soon after lots were offered for sale by the Trustees of the College around 1900.<sup>[29]</sup> Two of these faculty families, the Hoods and the family of Colonel William J. Martin, took advantage of the new properties and constructed distinctive homes in motifs that represented the influx of new architectural styles.



The family of Colonel William J. Martin was enticed to come to Davidson in 1869 as a result of the growth of the college after the Civil War. Colonel Martin accepted a professorship in chemistry, and he later served as the acting president of the college.<sup>[30]</sup> He and his wife, Letitia Costin Martin, reared their three children in town; and all three would make individual contributions that had lasting impacts on the community. One of the Martin's children, Dr. William J. Martin, served, like his father before him, as a professor and later president of Davidson College. Dr. Martin commissioned the construction in 1898 of the house at 310 Concord Road, known today as the [Martin-Henderson House](#), as a residence for his mother and two sisters, Mary and Lucy. Mary Turpin Martin doggedly pursued her medical education after her graduation from Davidson College. She and her husband, Dr. Eustace Sloop, established the [Crossnore School](#) in the North Carolina mountains, an educational facility that still operates as a charter school, and which has had an enormous impact on the lives of abused and neglected children from North Carolina and beyond.<sup>[31]</sup> Lucy Battle Martin married Archibald Currie, a political science professor at Davidson College; and the couple were lifelong residents of the town. The life of Lucy Battle Martin is reflective of the interconnectedness between the town and the school. She is remembered not only as the daughter of one of Davidson College's presidents, the sister of another, and the wife of the chair of the department of political science, but also as a teacher in her own right who helped to ensure that the children of the town were provided a quality education through her activities at the "free school" for the children of the town.<sup>[32]</sup>



*The Martin-Henderson House, 310 Concord Road*

The Martin-Henderson House also retains a connection with the boarding house culture of the town, a culture which in many ways defined the nature of the community. The house was sold to Josephine Worth after the death of Letitia Martin

in 1905.<sup>[33]</sup> Ms. Worth, who was recently widowed, used the home to earn a steady income while her son, David, was educated at the college.<sup>[34]</sup> By the opening decade of the twentieth century, boarding houses in Davidson had proliferated; and the Martin-Henderson House was one of twelve in town that were taking on boarders by the 1920s.<sup>[35]</sup> Even after the Worth family left Davidson, the dwelling continued to operate as a boarding house under the ownership of Mr. and Mrs. Walter and Florence Henderson.<sup>[36]</sup>

The Martin-Henderson House and the Holt-Henderson House are fine examples of the Folk Victorian style of architecture which was a product of innovations that brought more refined styles of housing into the reach of middle class citizens. The movement stemmed from the highly stylized Victorian forms, such as Queen Anne, that were popular in the last decades of the nineteenth century, in combination with the simple and widespread National or vernacular styles.<sup>[37]</sup> The increased levels of ornamentation that are seen in Folk Victorian structures such as the Martin-Henderson House and the Holt-Henderson House were made possible by innovations in technology and transportation. The advent of the railroads made lumber and machinery more accessible; the use of manufactured nails replaced the hewn joints which required skilled labor. The mechanical jigsaw and lathe were two of the most important innovations which aided the growth of this style, and Queen Anne-like scrollwork and brackets, as well as turned porch supports, which were previously only accessible to a few, were now within the realm of possibility for the masses.<sup>[38]</sup>

Another distinctive dwelling on Concord Road that came about as a result of the expansion of Davidson College in the early decades of the twentieth century was the [Hood House](#), located at 829 Concord Road.<sup>[39]</sup> The growth of Concord Road in the 1920s was directly due to the period of rapid faculty expansion under Davidson College president Dr. William J. Martin, who recruited thirty-seven of the forty-six active faculty members in 1929.<sup>[40]</sup> Once solidly based on classical studies, the offerings of the school were extended into the arts and social sciences, a move which necessitated the recruitment of additional faculty. Psychology was also a new field of study at Davidson; and Dr. Frasier Hood, who was trained at Yale and abroad, became the head of the department of psychology.<sup>[41]</sup>



*The Hood House, 829 Concord Road*

Dr. Hood, his wife, and their daughter originally settled in town in a house on North Main Street known today as the Lloyd House; but by 1929 the family had purchased one of the lots on Concord Road that the Board of Trustees of Davidson College was selling.<sup>[42]</sup> They built their imposing Colonial Revival style home in a section of Concord Road that was relatively distant from other faculty housing, thus maintaining their access to the town while safeguarding their privacy. The family named their home “Restormel” after an English castle.<sup>[43]</sup> Dr. Hood was known around town for his lively and convivial nature; and the Rustic Revival log house which was built in the backyard may have been used to entertain guests, as remnants of what may be a shuffleboard are still intact near the structure.<sup>[44]</sup> The revival of log structures in North Carolina was perhaps influenced in part by the architecture of Henry Bacon in Linville, North Carolina, as well as a resurgence of log structures in popular culture and mass advertising. The log house on the Hood property is the “only identified example of a secondary log residential building” in Mecklenburg County.<sup>[45]</sup>

The Hood House was built in the Colonial Revival style, a broad category of architecture that was popular between approximately 1880 and 1955 and which persists to this day. Although the design of Colonial Revival houses varied widely, what they shared in common was a desire to reengage the early Dutch and English architecture and ideals of the American colonial period.<sup>[46]</sup> The movement was popularized by the Philadelphia Centennial celebration in 1876 and was based upon the traditions of the Adam and Georgian styles, in which broad facades with minimalist ornamentation clearly hearkened back to a colonial past.<sup>[47]</sup> The Hood

House is a good example of Colonial Revival ornamentation in which the focus of the detailing is placed on the entranceway, the cornice line, and the windows.<sup>[48]</sup>

To summarize, from its inception as a school for Presbyterian youth through the first century of its development, Davidson College has impacted the built environment of the town in a number of ways. Increasing numbers of students and faculty have led to the construction of houses and campus buildings in a range of styles; and the influence of the boarding house culture has helped to shape the community's view of itself, bringing together the residents of the town and those people associated with the college into a blend that has made Davidson unique among the small towns of Mecklenburg County.

## **Public Education in Davidson**

As has been shown, the opportunities that were afforded to Davidson College students came about because of the commitment of local Presbyterians to education. This desire to instruct the youth of the region did not end with efforts at the College; in fact, the Presbyterians were also a driving force in bringing education to the children of the white townspeople. Public instruction in Davidson from 1835 until the 1890s was initially reliant upon individual citizens who operated schools out of their homes or buildings provided by the community for the purpose of education. The earliest of these schools opened in the years following the Civil War and was taught by Julia Holt. Davidson College allowed Mrs. Holt to conduct the school out of Tammany Hall, a two-story brick faculty residence that stood between Philanthropic Hall and Elm Row.<sup>[49]</sup> Between 1875 and the mid-1880s, many Davidson children attended Lucy Journey's "School for Boys and Girls" in the building known as Lingle Manor on Glasgow Street, the same building that housed the Reverend Leonidas Glasgow's school between 1887 and 1892.<sup>[50]</sup> Private citizens continued to teach local children out of their homes into the 1900s, as was the case with Mary Lafferty on North Main Street.<sup>[51]</sup> However, by the turn of the twentieth century, a movement was well under way to provide a consistent public education to the white children of the town. The cause of public education was spearheaded by the trustees of Davidson College, who in 1892 established the Davidson Academy, which was initially located in the Masonic Hall near the intersection of South Street and South Main Street.<sup>[52]</sup> The new schoolhouse, which stood on the site of the present Davidson IB Middle School, was completed in 1893 and expanded in 1924.<sup>[53]</sup> Originally, the term of the Davidson Academy consisted of three sessions: one each in the fall and spring that were supported by tuition, and a third, winter term, "Free School," that proved to be popular with the townspeople.<sup>[54]</sup>



*The Davidson "Academy" in 1923, as the building was being expanded*<sup>[55]</sup>

By 1910, the graded school movement, which revolutionized the way in which children were instructed, had spread across the state. Prior to the new theory of graded education, children would attend school for as long or as short a period as their parents wished, and the town was responsible for funding the institution.<sup>[56]</sup> A statute passed by the North Carolina General Assembly in 1911 added Davidson to the list of North Carolina communities which had established graded schools that were supported by taxes.<sup>[57]</sup> The new graded school was popular and could boast of an enrollment nearing two hundred students in 1911; and by 1924, the school had grown enough to require a forty thousand dollar addition.<sup>[58]</sup> A gymnasium, which still stands to the rear of the lot, was added in 1936.<sup>[59]</sup> Unfortunately, in a pattern that was familiar to the older residents of Davidson, the expanded school was destroyed by fire in 1946, and classes were held in the gymnasium and in the basement of the Presbyterian Church.<sup>[60]</sup> Its replacement, which serves today as the Davidson IB Middle School, was completed in 1948.<sup>[61]</sup>





*Davidson IB Middle School, right front elevation (2005)*



*Front Entrance of School (2005)*

Although the movement to provide education to Davidson's white children was successful, it was not inclusive of all of the town's youth. Efforts to educate the African-American children, who were denied public education at the "academy" as a result of institutionalized segregation, were undertaken in some instances by private citizens before the construction of the Davidson Colored School. Dr. Howard Arbuckle, a chemistry teacher at Davidson College for twenty-four years, sponsored a local school for African-American children.<sup>[62]</sup> In 1936, the town submitted an application to the Public Works Administration for funds to construct a more formal school.<sup>[63]</sup> The Davidson Colored School opened in 1938, and originally consisted of a six-room school house in which grades one through nine were taught.<sup>[64]</sup> The importance of the school to the African-American residents of Davidson is evident in the degree to which the school became a part of the community; it often served as a meeting place, the site of fundraisers for local projects, and as an entertainment

venue.<sup>[65]</sup> Ada Jenkins is remembered by many as the reason for this incorporation of the school into the community. Jenkins was a well-loved Davidson resident and worked at the school in a number of capacities, including history teacher and guidance counselor.<sup>[66]</sup> In 1955, the school was renamed in her honor, and retains that distinction in its current use as a community center that houses local charitable and community organizations.<sup>[67]</sup> From its initial, private efforts at primary and secondary education, to the construction of the [Ada Jenkins School](#), the Town of Davidson illustrated its desire to extend the principles of quality instruction on which the College was based to all residents of the town.



*The Ada Jenkins Center, 2005*



*Picture of Ada Jenkins displayed in the Ada Jenkins Center*

## **The Commercialization and Industrialization of Davidson**

Davidson is anomalous among the small towns of Mecklenburg County. Whereas the county's other outlying towns, such as Pineville, Huntersville, Cornelius, and Matthews, were mostly the result of the establishment of the railroads and the growth of the textile industry, Davidson clearly owes its existence to more than being a railroad turnout. The commercial sector emerged in direct response to the expansion of the College; and while the mills of the other small towns in Mecklenburg County were the driving force behind their growth, the arrival of mills in Davidson served to make the town and its built environment more diverse rather than acting as the fundamental reason for the town's existence.



*North Main Street commercial core in the mid-twentieth century*



*Main Street Books, South Main Street*



*Detail of brick corbelling on the front facade of Main Street Books*





*M and M Soda Shop, South Main Street*

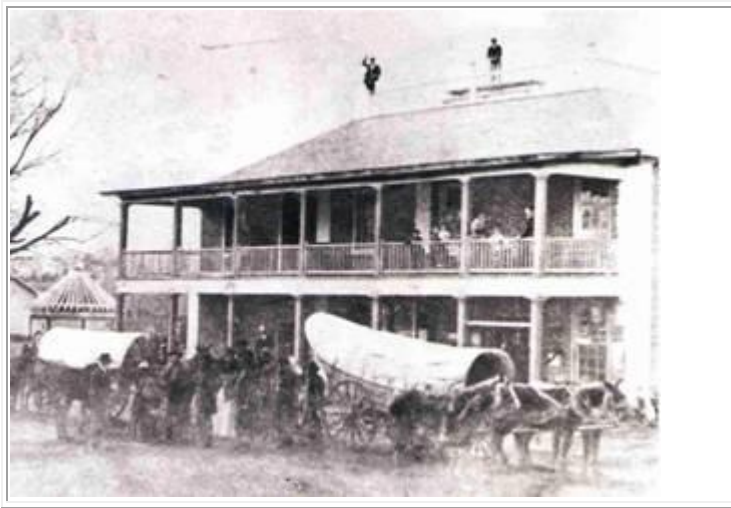


*Detail of brick corbelling on M and M Soda Shop*

The commercialization of Davidson had several effects upon the town. First, it created a new merchant class in the town whose fortunes, while dependent upon the success of the College in order to draw customers, was not directly related to the daily operation of the school. In addition, it led to the establishment of the commercial sector of Davidson along Main Street. Town and College historian Mary Beaty has noted that the boundaries of the commercial sector of Davison were defined early in the town's history because of the district's reliance on and proximity to the College. The initial stores in Davidson, built in the 1830s, were grouped near the new campus in order to serve the student and faculty population. [The Helper Hotel](#), or



Carolina Inn, as it is alternatively known, is one of the oldest commercial structures in the downtown district and was created as a direct result of the establishment of the College. The core of the hotel was constructed in 1848 as a store under the ownership of Lewis Dinkins which catered to the students at Davidson College.<sup>[68]</sup> The building was enlarged and re-established as a hotel in 1855 by Hanson Pinkney Helper, but continued to house small stores on the first floor throughout its history.<sup>[69]</sup> From the very earliest days of its history, the “downtown” district was hemmed in by the campus on the east, residential development to the north and south, and eventually by the railroad to the west.<sup>[70]</sup> Thus, today’s downtown Davidson retains many of the same qualities as it did in 1920s.



*Helper Hotel, circa 1880*



*Helper Hotel, 2006*

Lewis Dinkins proved to be an entrepreneur who saw the value of providing goods and services to the College population, and around 1850 he constructed a tailor shop on Main Street.<sup>[71]</sup> The shop not only specialized in alterations and the like but also offered a variety of groceries and “stationery of every kind.”<sup>[72]</sup> Soon, new businesses were competing for customers; and a variety of enterprises, including five and dime stores and drug stores, had, by 1914, filled out the northern portion of Main Street. However, many of the brick commercial buildings which dominate the built environment of downtown Davidson are later additions to the area. The central business district was originally dominated by wooden frame buildings which have been lost to a series of fires. Home and business owners along Main Street learned from these conflagrations and adjusted their building methods. This reality is nowhere more evident than in the B. C. Deal House on North Main Street, which counts among its many utilitarian features thick firewalls that divide and protect the house from the buildings which surround it. By 1920, Main Street was lined with brick commercial buildings which constituted its business district.<sup>[73]</sup> The Sloan buildings and the M and M Soda Shop building are reminders of this period of growth.

The merchant class to which Dinkins belonged built more than the one and two story brick commercial buildings which make up the commercial streetscapes of North and South Main Street. It also erected homes in a variety of styles in Davidson. The [Armour-Adams House](#), located at 626 North Main Street, was constructed in 1900 by Holt Armour, the son of wealthy local farmer Robert Armour.<sup>[74]</sup> Robert Armour owned “everything along Main Street as far south as the cemetery,” and gave four lots cut out of this land to his children.<sup>[75]</sup> Holt Armour erected his home in the same Folk Victorian style used by the Holts and the Martins. He soon broke away from the agrarian tradition of his parents, however; and by 1915 he seized the opportunity provided by the growth of Davidson’s commercial sector to open Armour Brothers and Thompson, a dry goods store that operated out of the brick building on the north corner of Brady’s Alley.<sup>[76]</sup>



*Armour-Adams House, 626 North Main Street*

Some African-Americans in Davidson were also presented with new opportunities as a result of the increasing growth of Davidson College and the resultant commercialization of the downtown district. One of the most prominent African-American businessmen, Ralph Johnson, owned a successful barbershop on Main Street from 1921 to 1971. Johnson was able to use the profits from his business to invest in real estate in the African-American section of racially segregated Davidson; and he provided housing to black families built to a standard commonly found only in the “white” areas of town.<sup>[77]</sup> His house on Mock Circle stands as a symbol of his success and activism within the community.

The [Ralph Johnson House](#) was built by Ralph Johnson’s uncle, Otho “Tobe” Johnson in 1924, and local tradition holds that the dwelling was constructed with bricks salvaged from the Old Chambers Building on the Davidson College campus after it burned in 1921. Tobe, like his nephew, was a successful businessman in Davidson; he was the proprietor of the first pressing club (a precursor to dry cleaning) in Davidson.<sup>[78]</sup> Ralph Johnson got his start in business by running his first barber shop out of the corner of his uncle’s pressing club; and he probably received early training in the barbershop business from his father, who was the best known barber in Davidson before his death in 1912.<sup>[79]</sup> Ralph Johnson opened his first independent barbershop in 1921 and continued his trade on Main Street until 1971.<sup>[80]</sup> The town has benefited greatly from Ralph Johnson’s success as a man of commerce. Not only did the standards of living in the African-American section of town increase through the renovations that he made to the dwellings in that area, but Johnson also provided

for the educational future of African-Americans at Davidson College through the endowment of a scholarship for deserving students.<sup>[81]</sup>



*The Ralph Johnson House, 115 Mock Circle*

The commercialization of Davidson, although based on the foundation of the College, was one step in the diversification of the economy and population of the town. Increasing numbers of rural families from the surrounding countryside sought the regular income and financial security that careers as merchants, landlords, and the like, could provide. The growth of the population in Davidson that was unassociated with the College was so great in the late nineteenth century that the town changed its name in 1891 from Davidson College to Davidson.



*Davidson Cotton Mill, Delburg Street*



The industrialization of Davidson expanded both the economy and the built environment of the town. The impetus for the coming of factories was the reactivation of the railroad in 1874. The circumstance of relative isolation was thereby lifted, and Davidson became a center of commerce for the outlying areas of northern Mecklenburg County and southern Iredell County. Concurrent with the success of the textile industry across the North Carolina piedmont, and especially in Charlotte, Davidson's first mill, the Linden Mill, opened in 1890, and was soon followed by the construction of the Delburg Cotton Mill (later the [Davidson Cotton Mill](#)) in 1908.<sup>[82]</sup> The mills radically transformed the nature of the town from a college community to a village with multiple economic bases. Farm families were lured to town in search of stable incomes in a period that was characterized by a failing agricultural economy. The introduction of the mills also increased the social stratification among the residents of the town and caused further variation in the built environment. The employees of the Linden Cotton Mill seem to have initially taken up residence in the existing houses of the town; and within a year of the opening of the first mill "not a vacant house was to be found in the town."<sup>[83]</sup> However, company housing was soon built for the employees of the Delburg Cotton Mill in a manner which was typical of mill villages. The houses on Delburg Street had similar plans and were arranged in a regular grid with each house having a small yard where the residents kept farm animals and tended vegetable gardens. These neighborhoods arose not only to provide housing for the mill workers close to the workplace but also to increase the degree of control that the mill owners exercised over their employees.<sup>[84]</sup>

To summarize, by the first decade of the twentieth century the built environment of Davidson had evolved from the early smattering of College buildings, to one that included grand boarding houses and faculty residences, to one that varied even more because of the emergence of a commercial sector and industrial sector.





## **Continued Growth of Davidson College in the 1950s and the Introduction of Modernism**

In the post-World War II era, Davidson College grew substantially and continued to be a driving force behind the evolution of the built environment of the town. The student population more than doubled from its pre-war numbers.<sup>[85]</sup> As a result, forty-nine faculty members were hired between 1946 and 1949; and housing for the new professors and their families became a priority.<sup>[86]</sup> The influx of faculty also brought Modernist architecture to Davidson; and the extant examples of this Modernism are important, because they illustrate the optimistic visions of the future that characterized progressive intellectual thought in the years immediately following World War II.

Davidson had been a community rooted in its traditions; and thus Modernism might have shocked the older residents of the town. However, the majority of the professors who built their houses on Hillside Road, where a spate of Modernist-inspired buildings was erected, were not deeply rooted in the Davidson community and had become familiar with Modernist architecture elsewhere. Harold Cooler, a prominent Charlotte architect who designed several residences in Davidson, including the Modernist [Purcell House](#) on Hillside Drive, recalls that most of his clients shied away from modern styles, favoring instead the traditional homes built in such familiar motifs as Colonial Revival or Arts and Crafts, because they wanted to make sure that their houses would be marketable.<sup>[87]</sup> This disdain for modern architecture was not unique to Davidson or even to the United States. In Europe, where Modernist architecture was conceived and developed in the offices of architects such as Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, and Mies van der Rohe, the avant garde school was also a small minority; and Europeans as a whole preferred to rely on the continuance of classical traditions.<sup>[88]</sup>

James Purcell, an English professor who came to Davidson in 1948 and subsequently became the dean of the English department, first saw “flat-roofed,” modernist houses in Florida and determined that he would build one for his family when the opportunity arose.<sup>[89]</sup> His chance came when the Board of Trustees of the College purchased the land that is now Lorimer Road and Hillside Drive as lots for faculty residences.<sup>[90]</sup> The College allowed the faculty to choose the styles of their homes. Some chose Modernism, and several houses of that architectural motif survive on Hillside Drive.



*102 Hillside Drive*



*103 Hillside Drive*

The Purcell House is a representative example of the Modernist residences on Hillside Drive. Of particular interest is how the architects, Harold Cooler and Marshall McDowell, took into account the setting of the house, including the topography of the landscape.<sup>[91]</sup> The broad, one-story front facade of the Purcell House reflects the sweeping landscape that was once a pasture; and the rear elevation also reflects the geographical setting of the dwelling, which recedes in response to the undulating terrain. The distinctiveness of structures like the Purcell House puts them at risk, because the populace in general is not fond of Modernism. Communities such as Davidson are in danger of losing these irreplaceable examples of this highly significant but under appreciated phase of the evolution of the built environment of the town.



*The Purcell House, 206 Hillside Drive*

From its inception as a village that existed for and because of Davidson College to a bustling town with a multifaceted economic foundation, Davidson, North Carolina, has been mirrored in the diversity of its built environment. As noted above, Davidson's history is locally unique because, even though it shares some themes in common with other small towns in Mecklenburg County and the North Carolina piedmont, its connection to Davidson College provided for an early built environment that allowed for the construction of numerous grand residences; and there was later a freedom to experiment with progressive, modern styles. For these reasons, there exists within the Town of Davidson a distinct local mixture of architectural examples that runs the gamut of nineteenth and twentieth century architecture and which bears testimony to the town's history.

**Potential and Existing Historic Landmarks in Davidson, North Carolina, listed in alphabetical order:**

Ada Jenkins School/ Davidson Colored School (212 Gamble Street)

[Armour-Adams House](#) (626 North Main Street)

Bell-Martin House (3513 Grey Road)

[Cashion and Moore Family Cemetery](#) (Near the intersection of McAuley Road and

Hwy 73)

[Davidson Cotton Mill/ Delburg Cotton Mill](#) (209 Delburg Street)

Davidson IB Middle School and Gymnasium (251 South Street)

BC Deal House (107 North Main Street)

Fulcher House (215 Woodland Street)

Helper House (603 North Main Street)

[Holt-Henderson House](#) (305 North Main Street)

Hood House (829 Concord Road)

FL Jackson Court (Davidson College Campus between Concord Road and Faculty Drive)

[Ralph Johnson House](#) (115 Mock Circle)

[Martin-Henderson House](#) (310 Concord Road)

Metrolina Warehouse/ Linden Cotton Mill (201 Depot Street)

[Purcell House](#) (206 Hillside Drive)

Shearer-Alexander House (252 South Main Street)

Summers-Potts House (544 Potts Street)

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<sup>[1]</sup> Cornelia Rebekah Shaw, *Davidson College* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Press, 1923), 7-12. Students in a Fall 2005 graduate course in the [Public History Program at UNCC](#) generated much of the information on the history of individual structures included in this report.

<sup>[2]</sup> Ibid., 14, 16.

<sup>[3]</sup> Mary D. Beaty, *Davidson: A History of the Town from 1835 until 1937* (Davidson, NC: Warren Publishing, 1979), 181.

<sup>[4]</sup> “National Register of Historic Places Inventory-Nomination Form: Eumenean Hall,” on file with the North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office; also available online at <http://www.cmhpf.org/surveys&reumeneanhall.htm>.

<sup>[5]</sup> Ibid.

[6] Mary D. Beaty, *A History of Davidson College* (Davidson, NC: Briarpatch Press, 1988), 45.

[7] Virginia and Lee McAlester, *A Field Guide to American Houses* ( New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 182-184.

[8] “National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form: Philanthropic Hall,” December, 1971, available online at <http://www.cmhpf.org/surveys&rphilanthropichall.htm>.

[9] Some of the information on the fraternities and Jackson Court is taken from Abby Coker, “Survey and Research Report on Jackson Court,” December, 2005; Beaty, *A History of Davidson College*, 74.

[10] Beaty, *A History of Davidson College*, 80.

[11] *Ibid.*, 197.

[12] *Ibid.*, 80, 197.

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] *Ibid.*, 266; Beaty, *A History of the Town*, 162.

[15] Beaty, *A History of Davidson College*, 266.

[16] Coker.

[17] *Ibid.*

[18] *Ibid.*

[19] Beaty, *A History of the Town*, 162.

[20] Shaw., 11.

[21] Neil Cottrell and Dr. Dan Morrill, “Survey and Research Report on the Holt-Henderson-Copeland House,” December, 2005, retrieved online from <http://www.cmhpf.org/surveys&rcopelandhouse.htm> on March 16, 2006; MB Gatza, “Holt-Henderson-Copeland House,” 1988 survey on file with the North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office, survey site number MK 1583.

[22] Gatza, “Holt-Henderson-Copeland House.”



<sup>[23]</sup> Beaty, *A History of the Town*, 40.

<sup>[24]</sup> Cottrell and Morrill.

<sup>[25]</sup> Beaty, *A History of the Town*, 106.

<sup>[26]</sup> Beaty, *A History of the Town*, 37. The Blake House, the Grey House, and the President's House still stand.

<sup>[27]</sup> Beaty, *A History of Davidson College*, 177-181,188.

<sup>[28]</sup> Beaty, *A History of the Town*, 78.

<sup>[29]</sup> Ibid., 48, 106.

<sup>[30]</sup> Jennifer Payne and Dr. Dan L. Morrill, "Survey and Research Report on the Martin-Worth-Henderson House," December, 2005, retrieved from <http://www.cmhpf.org/surveys&rmartinworthhen.htm> on 6 March, 2006.

<sup>[31]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[32]</sup> Beaty, *A History of the Town*, 64.

<sup>[33]</sup> Payne and Morrill.

<sup>[34]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[35]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[36]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[37]</sup> McAlester, 310.

<sup>[38]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[39]</sup> Some of the information contained in this report regarding the Hood House was taken from: Kimberly Tweedy, "Survey and Research Report on the Hood-Lore House," December, 2005.

<sup>[40]</sup> Ibid., 255.

<sup>[41]</sup> Ibid., 251.

<sup>[42]</sup> Ibid., 281; Beaty, *A History of the Town*, 90.

<sup>[43]</sup> Beaty, *A History of the Town*, 120. To see the original Restormel, visit <http://www.cornwall-online.co.uk/english-heritage/restormel.htm>.

<sup>[44]</sup> Beaty, *A History of the College*, 334.

<sup>[45]</sup> Stewart Gray, “Log Building Construction in Mecklenburg County from 1920 to 1945,” retrieved from

<http://www.cmhpf.org/SurveyLogHouses.htm> on 6 March, 2006.

<sup>[46]</sup> McAlester, 323-324.

<sup>[47]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[48]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[49]</sup> Beaty, *A History of the Town*, 40.

<sup>[50]</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>[51]</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>[52]</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>[53]</sup> Ibid., 64, 171.

<sup>[54]</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>[55]</sup> Picture taken from Beaty, *A History of the Town*, 172.

<sup>[56]</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>[57]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[58]</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>[59]</sup> Kristin Stakel and Dr. Dan L. Morrill, “Survey and Research Report on the Davidson IB Middle School,” December, 2005.

<sup>[60]</sup> Ibid.; Beaty, 171.

<sup>[61]</sup> Stakel and Morrill.

<sup>[62]</sup> Beaty, *A History of the Town*, 113.

<sup>[63]</sup> Laura Dameron and Dr. Dan L. Morrill, "Survey and Research Report on the Davidson Colored School/ Ada Jenkins School," December, 2005.

<sup>[64]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[65]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[66]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[67]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[68]</sup> Dr. Dan L. Morrill, "Survey and Research Report on the Helper Hotel," October, 1976, on file with the State Historic Preservation Office, survey site number MK 1663, also available online at <http://www.cmhpf.org/surveys&rhelpherhotel.htm>.

<sup>[69]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[70]</sup> Beaty, *A History of the Town*, 134.

<sup>[71]</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>[72]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[73]</sup> Ibid., 135-140.

<sup>[74]</sup> Jane Starnes and Dr. Dan L. Morrill, "Survey and Research Report on the Armour-Adams House," December, 2005, retrieved from <http://www.cmhpf.org/surveys&rarmouradams.htm> on 6 March, 2006.

<sup>[75]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[76]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[77]</sup> Gwen Gill and Dr. Dan L. Morrill, "Survey and Research Report on the Ralph Johnson House," retrieved from <http://www.cmhpf.org/surveys&rralphjohnson.htm> on 6 March, 2006.

<sup>[78]</sup> Ibid., Beaty, *A History of the Town*, 140.

[79] Gill and Morrill.

[80] Ibid.

[81] Ibid.

[82] Stewart Gray and Paula Stathakis, "Survey and Research Report on The Davidson Cotton Mill," February, 2004, retrieved from <http://www.cmhpf.org/surveys&rDavidsonCotton.htm> on 17 March, 2006.

[83] Ibid.

[84] Catherine W. Bishir, *North Carolina Architecture* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 433-436; Thomas W. Hanchett, *Sorting Out the New South City: Race, Class, and Urban Development in Charlotte, 1875-1975* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 52-53.

[85] Beaty, *A History of Davidson College*, 331.

[86] Ibid.

[87] Harold Cooler, interview with Jennifer Payne, 16 February, 2006.

[88] William JR Curtis, *Modern Architecture Since 1900*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. (London: Phaidon Press, Ltd., 2005), 287.

[89] Jason Nichols, "Survey and Research Report on the James and Elizabeth Purcell House," December, 2005 retrieved from <http://www.cmhpf.org/survey&rpurcellhouse.htm> on 20 March, 2006.

[90] Ibid.

[91] Ibid.