

**Survey and Research Report  
on the  
Violet W. Currie House**



1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the Violet W. Currie House is located at 525 North Main St., Davidson, North Carolina.

2. Name and address of the present owner of the property:

Leon R. Adams and Nelle L. Adams  
1852 W Ehringhaus ST #140  
Elizabeth City, NC 27909

3. Representative photographs of the property: This report contains representative photographs of the property.

4. Maps depicting the location of the property: 525 North Main Street, Davidson, NC



5. Current deed book reference to the property: The most recent deed to this property is recorded in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 05247 on page 680. The tax parcel number of the property is 00326203.

6. A brief historical sketch of the property: This report contains a brief historical sketch of the property.

7. A brief architectural description of the property: This report contains a brief architectural description of the property.

8. Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets the criteria for designation set forth in N.C.G.S. 160A-399.4.:

Special significance in terms of its history, architecture, and/or cultural importance: The Commission judges that the property known as the Violet W. Currie House possesses special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations:

- 1) The Violet W. Currie House is associated with a family who became an important part of both the small town society of Davidson, and of the faculty of the College.
- 2) The Violet W. Currie House is the best example of a 19<sup>th</sup>-century I-house in the Town of Davidson.

3) The 19<sup>th</sup> century Violet W. Currie House is an important artifact of the social history of Davidson and is an important and singular architectural component of the North Main Street neighborhood.

9. Ad Valorem tax appraisal: The current assessed value of the property is \$323,900.

10. Portion of property recommended for designation: The interior and exterior of the house and the approximately .75 acres of land associated with the tax parcel.

11. Date of Preparation of this Report: August 7, 2013

Prepared by: Stewart Gray

## **A Brief History of the Violet W. Currie House**

### **Violet W. Currie**

In 1894, the recently widowed Violet Womack Currie moved from Burlington, North Carolina, to Davidson where her oldest son Archibald was enrolled in Davidson College. Accompanying Violet were her three younger sons: Edward, James, and Thomas. Violet was born Violet Womack in 1852 in Prince Edward County, Virginia. Her late husband, James L. Currie, was a Presbyterian minister who graduated from Hampton Sidney College in 1869.<sup>1</sup> James served as pastor at New Hope Presbyterian Church in Orange County from 1887 to 1889, and from 1889 until 1894 he served as pastor for the Burlington First Presbyterian Church, which had been founded by his father, Archibald Currie, in 1857.<sup>2</sup>

Soon after she arrived in Davidson, Violet Currie became the matron at the Student's House, a boarding house established by then Davidson College president John B. Shearer for students who could not afford one of the commercial boarding houses.<sup>3</sup> Boarding houses were a Davidson College institution. In the nineteenth century until the Second World War, Davidson College did not offer meals on campus. To accommodate this need boarding houses operated throughout the town. Mostly these were run by women who operated out of their homes, feeding the students three times a day. Evidence of this practice can be seen in the many large frame nineteenth and twentieth century houses that border the college campus. Career options for a widow with children in 1894 were generally limited, and for Violet Currie, running a boarding house in Davidson was a very respectable form of employment.

In 1897 Violet Currie purchased the property at 525 North Main Street in Davidson from Emma B. and J. S. Lafferty. According to Mary Beaty, who wrote *Davidson: A History of the Town from 1835 to 1937*, Violet Currie had constructed the existing two-story frame house soon after purchasing the property. Deeds show that the Laffertys purchased the "lot" in 1887 for \$1,400. That high a price would generally indicate that the lot contained a house. Ten years later Violet paid the Laffertys \$650 for the "lot," which was still a considerable sum. It is difficult to determine whether the current house was extant when Violet purchased the property.<sup>4</sup>

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was a fairly common practice for a family to move to Davidson when it came time for their sons to attend college. If Violet Currie's main purpose of moving to Davidson was to have her sons graduate from Davidson College, then she was successful. Archibald graduated from Davidson College in 1897, and attended Columbia, Cornell and the University of Virginia as a graduate student. He became an adjunct professor of classics and

mathematics at Davidson College in 1901, and became a full professor in 1913, and in 1920 received the Woodrow Wilson Chair of Economics and Political Science. Archibald married Lucy Martin, who was the daughter of Col. William J. Martin, a chemistry professor and distinguished faculty member.<sup>5</sup> In 1911 Archibald and Lucy built a house at 559 North Main Street, just four lots to the north from Violet. Edward W. Currie graduated in 1901 and went on to become a medical doctor.<sup>6</sup> James Wharley Currie graduated in 1904 and became a lawyer in Raeford, NC. Thomas K. Currie graduated in 1905 and became a minister in Virginia.<sup>7</sup>

Violet Currie died in Davidson in 1926, having resided for twenty-nine years in her home on North Main Street. She was buried in the Davidson College Cemetery, which is located on North Main Street, just one house-lot to the north of her home. An article published about her death in the *Davidsonian*, the college's weekly newspaper, made it quite clear that Violet had ensconced herself firmly in the life of the town and the college.<sup>8</sup>

The Currie family sold the house in 1933 to the family of A. B. Kuhn, who was the manager of the Carolina Asbestos Company factory located along Depot Street.<sup>9</sup> The house was sold several times until it was purchased by R. W. Adams in the 1950s. It is owned by his son, Leon Adams, who lives in Elizabeth City, N.C.<sup>10</sup>

### **Architectural Significance**

The Violet W. Currie House is an I-house. Two vernacular house types dominated the built environment of rural Mecklenburg County from the colonial era until the first decades of the twentieth century, the hall-and-parlor and the I-house. The hall-and-parlor is a single-pile, or one room deep, side-gabled house plan. The plan is composed of two primary rooms. The plan traces its roots to England, and was a common plan in colonial tidewater region of Virginia.

<sup>11</sup> The log 1780 Torrence House in Huntersville was configured as a hall-and-parlor house before a two story addition was added in 1796.<sup>12</sup> Early on in Mecklenburg County the form was used by landowners for their farmhouses, and in the county's towns and villages. In Davidson a good example is the 1850 Wib Thompson House, 532 North Main Street.<sup>13</sup> The plan was later extensively used for tenant housing and also used extensively for mill village housing. The two-room plan evolved to sometimes include a central hall, and additional rooms on the rear of the house, sometimes under a shed roof and sometime in the form of a rear el.

The I-house is essentially a two-story version of the hall-and-parlor form. Being more substantial than the hall-and-parlor form, the I-house became the dominant choice as the residences of prosperous farmers and plantation owners in North Carolina (and much of the South and the Ohio Valley) during the nineteenth century. I-houses typically are one room deep and side-gabled, with exterior chimneys located on each side elevation. Frame construction is most common, and most feature a full-width one-story front porch. The form was not limited to rural landscapes and was widely adopted in small towns, and to some extent in North Carolina cities where lots were sufficiently wide.

The I-house form does not in itself represent an architectural style. From the earliest years of the nineteenth century, builders have applied elements of architectural styles to the I-House form. From the Federal Style of the early Republic, the Greek Revival, the Gothic, and up through the Italianate Style of the late nineteenth century, the I-house form proved to be an appropriate medium for applying the architectural elements of the various styles. The form began to lose

favor in the 1890s with the rise in popularity of the Queen Anne Style, which favored irregular massing. <sup>14</sup>

The earliest example of the I-house associated with Davidson is the 1829 Beaver Dam plantation house, located to the east of the town. The house is a retarded example of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Federal Style, and its irregular fenestration puts it in contrast with later examples which typically feature a symmetrical fenestration. Two 19<sup>th</sup>-century examples of the I-house have survived in the historic residential sections of Davidson. The Dr. Woods Office on South Street, and the Violet W. Currie House on North Main Street. The Dr. Woods Office, originally a residence that was moved early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century from South Main Street, may date from the 1870s. The house features Italianate-style eave brackets and a transom and sidelights around the front door.

The Violet W. Currie House features the most common defining-elements of the I-house form. The house is three bays wide, and the bays are symmetrical with the front door centered in the facade. The front porch nearly extends across the full width of the façade. The roof is side-gabled, and exterior chimneys are centered on the side gables. If the house was indeed built late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, then in terms of style the house is more than anything else a reflection of the town's classically inspired college buildings, as opposed to any contemporary popular residential architectural styles. The house's simple Doric columns and the deep trim forming pediments on the side gables echo the Greek Revival elements found on the nearby Eumenean and Philanthropic halls. Davidson was very likely a place where this architectural vocabulary was widely understood and where the classical elements of the house could be seen as an endorsement of classically inspired higher learning. In North Carolina Greek Revival houses were rarely built after the Civil War, and the Greek Revival elements found on the Violet W. Currie House may be a testament to the owner's commitment to higher education, a reflection of its environment, and the provincial nature of the small southern college town.

### **North Main Street**

Historically, houses at the south end of the residential section of North Main Street were overwhelmingly the homes of college faculty. The block between Griffith Street and Delburg Street contains many mid-to-late 19<sup>th</sup>-century homes built by the college for faculty. The earliest is the 1836 (though greatly altered) President's House.

North Main Street experienced significant development in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This development reflected the growth of the college and the commercial expansion of the town. Before the 1870s, Davidson College faculty was a "transient lot." <sup>15</sup> That changed in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the arrival of faculty like Col. William J. Martin and William Daniel Vinson. These professors settled into the town and reared families who stayed in Davidson. And these families made significant contributions to both the college and the social development of the town. Faculty members built houses close to campus. This phenomenon is evident on North Main Street with the aforementioned Archibald Currie House and the Vinson House at 519 North Main Street.

With the opening of the Linden Cotton Factory in 1890, the Southern Cotton Oil Mill, and the Davidson Milling Company (a flour mill) by 1900, and the Delburg Cotton Mill in 1908, Davidson became more than just a college town. Businesses and institutions sprang up to serve the growing town. Consequently many new houses were built, and North Main Street saw its share of the growth. North of Delburg Street, in addition to college faculty, professions included ice plant manager, cabinet maker, station agent, school teacher, and several store owners. <sup>16</sup>

The well preserved houses along North Main Street are among the most important and most public artifacts of the history of Davidson. In her book *Davidson: A History of the Town from 1835 until 1937*, Mary Beaty summed up the importance of North Main Street:

North Main defies narrow classification. It is the nineteenth century and the twentieth mixed. It is antebellum and Victorian and modern, frame and brick, town and gown, boarding house and private home. It is Davidson's history at a glance.<sup>17</sup>

As the only example of an intact I-house on North Main Street, the Violet Currie House is an irreplaceable component in the North Main Street landscape.

### **Architectural Description of the Violet W. Currie House**



The Violet W. Currie House faces roughly east on a relatively flat .75 acre lot on North Main Street, a neighborhood of late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century houses. The lot is approximately 100' wide, and is neighbored to the south by the Queen Anne style ca. 1897 Vinson House, and to the north by a 1920 bungalow. The rear of the lot is bordered by a railroad bed, originally part of the Atlantic, Tennessee & Ohio Railroad. The site features mature hardwood trees and thick foliage at the rear of the lot. The House sits back approximately 60' from the road. A concrete sidewalk is located adjacent to the road. A gravel driveway lies to the north of the house.

The Violet W. Currie House is a two-story, side-gabled I-house. The house is three bays wide and features a nearly full-width hipped-roof porch. The porch roof is covered with modern metal roofing panels and is supported by four simple classical columns, set on simple bases. The wooden-farmed porch floor features a relatively new tongue and groove board floor. Simple trim boards cover the band joists which rest on brick foundation walls. Brick steps are bordered by stepped brick cheek walls topped with concrete caps. A concrete sidewalk leads to the steps from the street. On the façade, fenestration is symmetrical. The porch shelters a replacement ca. 1905 two-horizontal-panel door, glazed with diamond lights. The door is centered on the façade and is surrounded by simple wide trim. On either side of the door, the façade is pierced by original two-over-two double-hung windows. The window sills are wrapped in metal, and modern louvered shutters have been added. On the second story, fenestration is composed of three original two-over-two double-hung windows aligned with the first-story bays. These windows are slightly shorter than those on the first story. Their sills are wrapped with metal, and they are bordered by modern louvered shutters. The original siding is covered with vinyl siding. The moderately pitched roof is covered with the same modern metal panels used on the porch roof. The overhang features a vinyl soffit.



The south elevation of the principal section of the house features a shouldered exterior chimney topped with a single course of corbelled brick. The chimney is centered on the elevation and bisects a simple pedimented gable. The gable is covered with vinyl siding. On the first and second story, two-over-two double-hung windows flank the chimney. There is very little reveal between the grade and the siding, but it appears that the house sits on a continuous brick foundation. Significant settling has occurred at the corners of the principal section of the house.



The north elevation of the principal section of the house is essentially the same as the south elevation, except that a gabled, two-story rear ell is set flush with the north elevation. The rear ell is one bay deep, with a prominent hip-roofed projecting bay. The bay contains two narrow two-over-two double-hung windows facing north, and a single two-over-two double-hung window in both the east and west walls of the projecting bay. Above the projecting bay, the rear ell is pierced by a single two-over-two double-hung window. A gabled, one-story rear wing projects from the ell. The north elevation of the wing is pierced by a single two-over-two double-hung window. The roof pitch of the rear wing is noticeably steeper than the other roof sections, indicating that the rear wing may have been added at a later date. Rough-sawn framing, and wide skip-sheathing in the roof would indicate early 20<sup>th</sup> century (or earlier) construction.



The rear of the principal section of the house is pierced on the second story by a single two-over-two double-hung window set near the rear ell, and to the south a single two-light window is set high in the wall. The south elevation of the rear ell is pierced by a single two-over-two double-hung window. A small enclosed shed porch obscures the first story of the rear ell and the south elevation of the rear wing.



The rear elevation of the rear ell is largely obscured by the rear wing and is blank on the second story. An interior chimney is located near the rear of the ell and is centered on the ridge. The chimney is capped with tapered metal cap. The rear wing is one bay wide and is pierced by a single two-light window. An original wooden louvered vent is set in the gable.

## Interior



The interior of the Violet Currie House has retained a good degree of integrity, with much of the historic woodwork in place. Significant changes to the interior include narrow-strip flooring over the original first story flooring and wallboard panels set over original wall finishes.

The house features a center hall containing a staircase. The staircase features an impressively carved and turned newel post. A rounded handrail is supported by simple, narrow balusters. The handrail terminates at the newel in a scroll. Stair treads are wide pine boards. Extensive moulding along the baseboards, door jams, and stairway woodwork appear to have been added to the original woodwork.



The front two rooms each feature simple elegant mantles topped with a substantial shelf. The south room feature simple flat window trim, with projecting stools and moulded cap trim. The north room features bevel-shaped vertical window trim along the jams. Extant interior doors feature six horizontal panels.



The rear ell features a tall and narrow early-20<sup>th</sup>-century mantle, with shallow brackets supporting a shallow shelf. Adjacent to the fireplace is a built-in corner cupboard with double four-light doors set above a pair of single panel doors. Wainscoting, char rail, and tall baseboard appear to have been added later.



On the second story some original six-inch-wide-pine-board floors remain exposed and are mixed with sections of newer narrow pine flooring. The stairwell is bordered by a handrail supported by simple narrow balusters and square newel posts topped with simply moulded caps. Some of the door jams feature the beveled trim found in the first-story front north room.



The second story of the rear ell features an unpainted, tall and narrow early-20<sup>th</sup>-century mantle, similar to the mantle on the first story. The rear wing has been remodeled and contains a modern kitchen and no exposed historic features.

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- 1 *Grand Catalogue of the Phi Kappa Psi Fraternity, 1922*, (Phi Kappa Psi and Hilburn & West, 1922).
  - 2 “Histories of Presbyterian Churches – Alamance County,” (Burlington-Alamance County Chamber of Commerce In Cooperation With The Participating Churches, July, 1963).
  - 3 *The Davidsonian*, (November, 1894)
  - 4 “Mecklenburg County Deed Book 121,” (August 9, 1897) 48.
  - 5 Jennifer Payne, “Survey and Research Report on the Archibald Curry House,” (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, 2006)
  - 6 “Transactions of the Medical Society of the State of North Carolina: Volume 67” (1920), 42.
  - 7 “Miss Currie Passes Away at Davidson” *The Davidsonian*, December 16, 1926.  
<http://library.davidson.edu/archives/davidsonian/PDFs/19261216.pdf>
  - 8 “Miss Currie Passes Away at Davidson” *The Davidsonian*, December 16, 1926.  
<http://library.davidson.edu/archives/davidsonian/PDFs/19261216.pdf>
  - 9 “General Index to Real Estate Conveyances, Mecklenburg County, 1919-1936”
  - 10 “General Index to Real Estate Conveyances, Mecklenburg County, 1919-1936”
  - 11 Gerald L. Foster, *American Houses: A Field Guide to the Architecture of the Home* (Houghton Mifflin, 2004)
  - 12 Dan L. Morrill, “Survey and Research Report on Cedar Grove and Torrence House and Store,” (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, 1993).
  - 13 Mary D. Beaty, *Davidson: A History of the Town from 1835 to 1937* (Davidson, North Carolina: Briarpatch Press, 1979), 79.
  - 14 Michael Southern, “The I-House as a Carrier of Style in Three Counties of the Northeastern Piedmont.” In *Carolina Dwelling: Towards Preservation of Place: In Celebration of the North Carolina Vernacular Landscape*. Edited by Doug Swaim. (North Carolina State University, 1978)
  - 15 Mary D. Beaty, *Davidson: A History of the Town from 1835 to 1937* (Davidson, North Carolina: Briarpatch Press, 1979), 36.
  - 16 Mary D. Beaty, *Davidson: A History of the Town from 1835 to 1937* (Davidson, North Carolina: Briarpatch Press, 1979), 89-95.
  - 17 Mary D. Beaty, *Davidson: A History of the Town from 1835 to 1937* (Davidson, North Carolina: Briarpatch Press, 1979), 95.