

Survey and Research Report on the William L. and Laura A. McConnell Farm



1. **Name and location of the property:** The property known as the William L. and Laura A. McConnell Farm is located 4009 Beatties Ford Road.

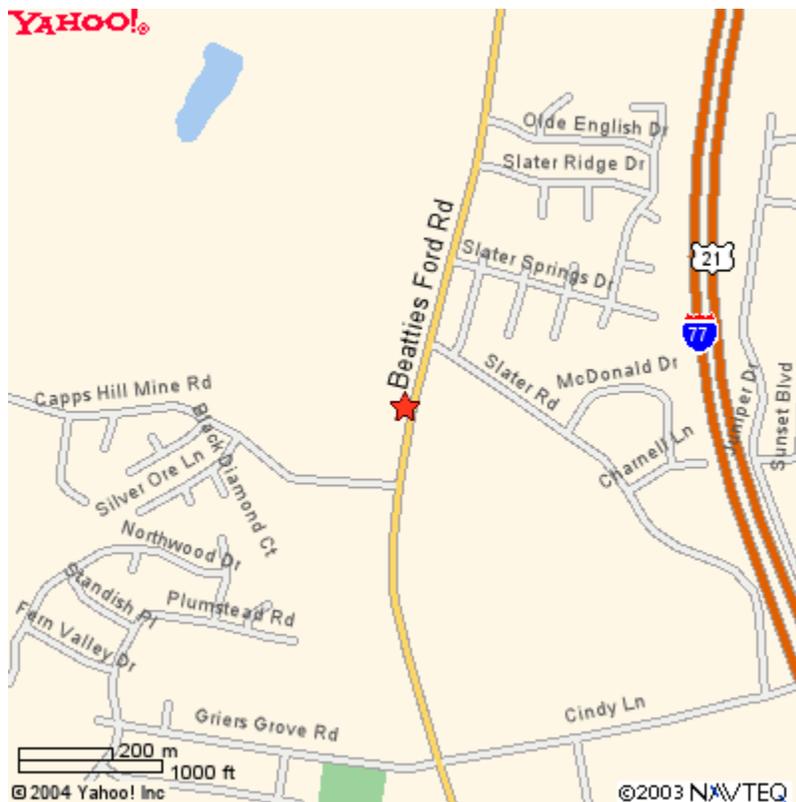
2. **Name and address of the current owner(s) of the property:**

The current owner of the William L. and Laura A. McConnell Farm is:

John C. and Marianne K. Walker
4009 Beatties Ford Road
Charlotte, NC 28216
704-488-6869

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

4. **A map depicting the location of the property:** This report contains a map depicting the location of the property.



5. **Current deed book reference to the property:** The most recent deed to the William L. and Laura A. McConnell Farm can be found in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 4355 Page 550. The Tax Identification Number for the property is 039-23-120. The property is zoned R-4.

6. **A brief historical sketch of the property:** This report contains a brief historical sketch of the property prepared by Lara Ramsey.

7. **A brief architectural description of the property:** This report contains a brief architectural description of the property prepared by Lara Ramsey.

8. **Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets the criteria for designation set forth in N.C.G.S. 160A-400.5.**

a. **Special significance in terms of its history, architecture, and/or cultural importance.** The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission judges that the William L. and Laura A. McConnell Farm possesses special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations:

1. The William L. and Laura A. McConnell Farm is a physical reminder of the rural landscape of Mecklenburg County in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. With its simple two-story farm house and modest collection of

outbuildings, the McConnell Farm represents the many small farmsteads that flourished in the county in the decades after the Civil War.

2. The William L. and Laura A. McConnell Farm is an excellent and well-preserved example of the Folk Victorian style used in many farm houses throughout Mecklenburg County in the late 1800s. Its traditional gable-front-and-wing form and Queen Anne spindlework along the porch columns and in the gables are typical of the combination of simple, folk building forms with elaborate decorative detailing that is the hallmark of the style.

3. The alterations made to the William L. and Laura A. McConnell Farm—first around 1897 and again in 1936—serve as a record of the McConnell Family's changing circumstances during their time in the house. From its construction in the late 1880s as a modest, one-story cottage for a newly-married couple, the McConnell House evolved into a more impressive homestead with the addition of a second story built to accommodate the growing family. After serving as the anchor of a 200-acre farm for over 50 years, the house and approximately 8 acres of land surrounding it were deeded to William and Laura's son Edgar McConnell in 1934. The alterations made to the house two years later—including the construction of a sun room and screened back porch, as well as the installation of two brick fireplaces and several sets of French doors—were meant to update and modernize the farm house.

b. Integrity of design, workmanship, materials, feeling, and association.

The Commission contends that the architectural description prepared by Lara Ramsey demonstrates that the William L. and Laura A. McConnell Farm meets this criterion.

9. Ad Valorem Tax Appraisal: The Commission is aware that designation would allow the owner to apply for an automatic deferral of 50% of the Ad Valorem taxes on all or any portion of the property that becomes a designated "historic landmark." The current appraised value of the William L. and Laura A. McConnell Farm is \$145,600—\$113,700 for the building, \$7500 for other features, and \$24,400 for the land.

Date of preparation of this report:

June 1, 2004

Prepared by:

Lara Ramsey

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Statement of Significance

William L. and Laura A. McConnell Farm

Summary

The William L. and Laura A. McConnell Farm, located at 4009 Beatties Ford Road in Mecklenburg County, NC, is a property that possesses local historic significance as a physical reminder of the rural landscape of Mecklenburg County in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The decades following the Civil War were marked by rapid growth and prosperity in Mecklenburg County. The discovery of Peruvian guano as a fertilizer allowed farmers in the county to greatly increase the amount of cotton they could grow, and the ever-expanding number of rail lines converging in Charlotte insured a large trading center nearby. By the end of the nineteenth century, modest farmsteads dotted the countryside of Mecklenburg County. The McConnell Farm was among these rural homesteads. The house was constructed by W. L. McConnell shortly after his marriage to Laura Angeline Auten in 1886. Laura's mother, Esther Louisa Auten, allowed the couple to build the house on the 78-acre plot that she had inherited along Beatties Ford Road. William also rented a portion of the land surrounding the house from his mother-and-law to farm.

The William L. and Laura A. McConnell Farm is also significant as an excellent example of the Folk Victorian style of architecture that became popular in the post-bellum South. Essentially a merging of the simple shapes and layouts of folk houses with the ornate decorative detailing of the Queen Anne and other Victorian styles, Folk Victorian houses were seen as a vast improvement over the rough-hewn log dwellings and plain I-houses common in antebellum Mecklenburg County. The McConnell Farm, with delicate spindlework ornamenting its traditional gable-front-and-wing form, is typical of the kinds of Folk Victorian houses being built in Mecklenburg County in the late nineteenth century.

Like many rural properties, the McConnell Farm was altered—first around 1897 and again in 1936—to accommodate the changing circumstances of the family. The house that William and Laura built around 1886 was a modest, one-story cottage with a simple front porch. This small house initially suited the newly married couple; however, as their family began to grow and their farm became more established, they decided to add a second story to the house. Built around 1897, this addition not only provided much needed space for the four McConnell children and the aging Esther Louisa, but also created a more impressive homestead. A second series of alterations occurred decades later, after the farm ceased operation. William and Laura's son Edgar, who inherited the house and approximately eight acres of land surrounding it, implemented several changes to the house in order to modernize it. Some of the changes included replacing the wood shingles with composition shingles on the roof, installing several pairs of French doors inside the house, adding a sun porch and a screened back porch,

and updating the wiring and plumbing. These changes to the McConnell Farm are a physical reflection of the evolution of the farm and of the family living on the property.
Historical Background Statement

Rural Mecklenburg County

The William L. and Laura A. McConnell Farm was built during a time of growth and prosperity for Mecklenburg County's farmers. Before the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, the county's economy, which was dominated by agriculture, was thriving. In 1850, Mecklenburg County ranked third in the state in cotton production, eleventh in corn production, and twelfth in wheat production. With the building of the Charlotte & South Carolina Railroad in 1852, movement of these goods became much easier and faster. By 1860 four railways converged in Charlotte, which quickly evolved into a major trading center for cotton and other goods.

While the Civil War took the lives of many soldiers from the county and completely disrupted the lives of those who stayed behind, the economic effects of the war were less severe than in many other areas of the South. In their survey of rural resources in Mecklenburg County, Sherry Joines and Dr. Dan Morrill explain the reason for the county's relatively good position: "Because large plantations were few and small farms plentiful in Mecklenburg, reduction of capital due to the loss of slaves was minimal. The average farm size after the Civil War was one hundred acres. These smaller farms had not been dependent upon slave labor, giving the owners an opportunity to replant and recover quickly." The number of railroads that survived the war were also crucial to helping rebuild the county, and the system of rail lines that crisscrossed the county (always passing through Charlotte) continued to expand in the years after the conflict ended.

In the decades following the war, agricultural production—especially production of cotton—in Mecklenburg County increased dramatically. This was mainly due to the discovery of Peruvian guano as a fertilizer in 1860. Between 1860 and 1880, cotton production in Mecklenburg county went from 6,112 bales to 19,129 bales. The number of individual farms in the county also grew substantially during these decades. In 1860, Mecklenburg contained 1182 farms; by 1880, the county had 2645, over twice as many. Most of these were modest farms of less than 100 acres, on which were grown a variety of crops, including wheat, corn, and cotton.

The William L. and Laura A. McConnell Farm

The McConnell Farm was one of the many farmsteads established during these prosperous years in the late nineteenth century. The house was built by William Latta McConnell soon after his marriage to Laura Angeline Auten in 1886. William was born in western Mecklenburg County, and spent his early twenties as a farm hand for his step-father, J.K. Hunter. Laura, the daughter of Esther Louisa and William Narcissus

Auten, was also from Mecklenburg. Laura was the only child to come from the short marriage—William Auten died soon after she was born. Esther Louisa had another daughter and two sons from her first marriage to William Hutchison, a carpenter.

Although she had been married and widowed twice by 1870, Esther Louisa had a certain amount of financial security in her landholdings. She had inherited approximately 80 acres of land along Beatties Ford Road from her parents David Cyrus and Nancy Jackson McClure. Ownership of the tract stretched back to Esther Louisa's grandfather Alexander McClure, who purchased it in the mid-1700s. According to great-great-grandson Edgar Porter McConnell, Esther Louisa lived most of her life on that land. Although she moved to Paw Creek Township with her first husband William Hutchison, she returned to Beatties Ford Road after his death, and stayed.

It was on this plot that William McConnell built a home for his new family. With Esther's permission, he erected the modest, one-story, Folk Victorian cottage "practically in the middle of Esther Louisa's property." The house stood near Beatties Ford Road, and William constructed several outbuildings, including a chicken coop, small barn, and well-house behind it. Esther Louisa retained ownership of the land, and McConnell rented the acreage surrounding their house to farm.



ca. 1895

Through the last decade of the nineteenth century, the farm and the family both flourished. By 1895, Laura and William had four sons—Floyd Lourin (b. 1887), James Kennedy (b. 1889), Edgar Latta (b. 1891), and Murray Caldwell (b. 1895). Two other children had died in infancy. Approaching 70, Esther Louisa moved into the

house. With the small cottage filled with people, William and Laura decided to add a second story to the dwelling. Although the exact date of this addition is not known, the present owners of the house have found bricks within the upper sections of the north chimney stamped with the date "1897." The much-needed story added three bedrooms to the home, and the two-story house also reflected the growing prosperity of the farm.

Esther Louisa, who was in all respects the matriarch of the McConnell Farm, spent her last years in the newly expanded house. Upon her death in 1906, the land and house were given to Laura, with the stipulation that after her death the property would be divided equally among the grandchildren. With the land legally theirs, the McConnell's sought to increase the size of their farm. The couple purchased tracts bordering Esther Louisa's parcel, bringing their total landholdings to approximately 200 acres.

The success of the McConnell farm mirrored almost exactly the rise of agriculture in Mecklenburg County. In 1910, the number of farms in the county peaked at 4,439, and the production of cotton alone reached over 27,000 bales. However, this peak signaled the beginning of the end for many of Mecklenburg's farmers. The rapid growth of Charlotte's textile mills, along with other industries in the city, began to lure families away from the farm. The effects of this shift from rural to urban were soon apparent:

Mecklenburg had been 32.7 percent urban and 62.3 percent rural. By 1910, the urban population was 50.7 percent, exceeding for the first time the number of residents in the rural areas. And in 1920, Mecklenburg's urban population had grown to 57.4 percent, and farm production declined for the first time. This trend continued with the onset of the Great Depression in October 1929.

By 1930, the number of farms in Mecklenburg County dropped to 2,773, and the number continued to decline through the next ten years. Like many other farmers in the county, William McConnell began to feel the pinch. In the 1930 census, farming is not listed as McConnell's occupation for the first time in 40 years. No doubt this was partly due to William's advanced age—at the time of the census he was 70. The value of William and Laura's farm was listed in 1930 as approximately \$10,000; however, none of their children expressed much interest in carrying on the business of the farm. The sons, all of whom had families of their own, had chosen other professions. Floyd worked as a clerk in a dry goods store, Murray was a truck driver, and Edgar had a job as a mail carrier. However, all three remained on William McConnell's land James Kennedy McConnell, the only son to actually leave the McConnell property, joined the clergy and moved to Rockingham County.

Although it is likely that work on the farm was winding down by the late 1920s, the official dismantling of the property occurred after the death of Laura McConnell in 1933. Wishing to honor the terms of Esther Louisa's will, William McConnell hired surveyor I. B. Faires to divide the original lot given to Laura into six parcels of various acreage. Two lots (one containing .92 acres, the other 20.28) went to Floyd McConnell and his wife, and a one-acre parcel was deeded to William; the remaining three parcels were divided between James, Edgar, and Murray McConnell. Edgar McConnell, who

had been sharing the farm house with his parents, his wife Jettie and son Edgar Porter, acquired the house and the surrounding 8.4 acres. William McConnell remained in the house with Edgar and his family until his death in April 1936.

With the farm house no longer attached to a working farm, Edgar set out to make improvements to the house. McConnell hired the Dulin Hardware Company in Charlotte to make a number of changes to the house, including: the construction of a sun room on the south side of the house and a new screened back porch; the rebuilding of the front porch; the installation of French doors in several rooms on the first floor of the house; the removal of the walls between the kitchen and dining room and the front hall and front room; the installation of new oak flooring over the existing floor; the replacement of wood roofing shingles with composition shingles; the building of two brick mantles; and the installation of plumbing and wiring. The sum of the work cost \$2400.

With these changes, the McConnell Farm evolved from the anchor of a thriving farmstead to a modernized home. Edgar McConnell and Jettie McConnell continued to live in the house until their deaths in 1974. Edgar Porter inherited the property from his parents, but chose not to live in it. The McConnell house stood vacant until 1980, when Porter sold it (along with a small parcel containing approximately .6 acre of land) to John and Marianne Walker, the current owners.

Architectural Context Statement

The William L. and Laura A. McConnell Farm also possesses local significance as an excellent example of the Folk Victorian style of architecture popular with farmers in the late nineteenth century. The Folk Victorian style grew out of the desire for modestly successful planters to build houses with the finely detailed ornamentation seen in popular Victorian styles like Queen Anne or Italianate. As Virginia and Lee McAlester explain in *A Field Guide to American Houses*, the expansion of railroads helped to meet this demand for ornate but economical decoration: “The growth of the railroad system made heavy woodworking machinery widely accessible at local trade centers, where they produced inexpensive Victorian detailing. The railroads also provided local lumber yards with abundant supplies of pre-cut detailing from distant mills.”



2nd Floor Bedroom Mantle

Folk Victorian houses combined simple, traditional folk house forms like the I-house and the hall and parlor—which were familiar to builders and to homeowners—with easily applied decorative detailing. Usually this ornamentation took the form of spindlework around porch columns or verge board underneath gables. While the effect was a far cry from that achieved by the multiple textures, delicately integrated detailing, and irregular form of a true Queen Anne house, Folk Victorian dwellings allowed farmers and rural families to have the familiarity of a traditional, symmetrical form with detailing similar to that seen on more expensive, high-style houses.

The McConnell Farm exhibits all of the distinctive features of the Folk Victorian farmhouse. The form of the house is a traditional, gable-front-and-wing configuration (with several rear ells making the footprint slightly more complex than the average Folk Victorian house) with a one-story front porch that runs across the façade. The simple, squared porch columns, unadorned wood window surrounds, and plain wood clapboard exterior are all elements that could be found on the common I-house. The spindlework topping the porch columns and framing the gables help to differentiate the house from the more common, unadorned folk forms, and reflect the prosperity of the McConnell Family in the decades following the Civil War.

Physical Description

Site Description

The William L. and Laura A. McConnell Farm is located at 4009 Beatties Ford Road, just outside the Charlotte city limits in northwestern Mecklenburg County. The house sits on a .61-acre site that borders the west side of Beatties Ford Road, and faces east (approximately) onto the road. Located on the eastern end of the lot, near the road, the house is accessed by a narrow gravel drive that curves around to a small gravel lot in the rear of the house. The lot is relatively flat, sloping down slightly from east to west. The house is surrounded by four outbuildings, most probably built around the turn of the twentieth century. A small brick well house stands just off the southwest corner of the house, and a wood chicken coop (which has been updated with windows and a new door covered with a shed roof) is located almost directly behind the house. Two other outbuildings, a wood barn and shed located south of the house, are on the portion of the original 8.4-acre lot that is still owned by Faye McConnell. Both the barn and shed are in a state of disrepair.

Architectural Description

The McConnell House is a two story, gable-front-and-wing residence approximately three bays wide. A single-story porch runs along the façade (east elevation) of the house. The porch, rebuilt in 1936, features thin, square columns decorated with spindlework, and a simple railing added by the present owners. The north end of the porch has been taken out to create a small patio, which is not visible from the street. A one-story sun porch extends from the south elevation of the house. A series of rear ells extends from the back (west elevation) of the house, creating a more box-like plan and complex roofline than is seen on the typical gable-front-and-wing form. The one-story gabled ell at the north end of the elevation contains the kitchen. At the south end of the elevation two-story rear ell with west and north facing gables houses the rear bedrooms on the first and second floor. In the corner created by the two ells is a small shed-roof addition from 1936. A one-story, hipped-roof porch runs along the back of this addition and the kitchen ell. Once screened, the porch is now enclosed with a series of casement windows filling the top half of its west and south walls.

The multiple roofline of the house is punctuated by two brick chimneys, one of which has been stuccoed. Another, smaller chimney rises along the gable wall of the kitchen ell. The entire roof is covered with green asphalt shingles. The exterior of the house is covered with wood clapboards painted white. Like many Folk Victorian houses, the McConnell Farm is ornamented only with applied decorative details along the top of the porch columns and underneath the second story gables. Six-over-six, double hung wood windows regularly punctuate the walls of the house. All of the windows feature simple, unadorned wood surrounds, and only one window on the first floor of the façade is flanked by green wood shutters. The front door of the house is centered along the façade, and is surrounded by two sidelights and a transom, each divided into three lights.

The front entrance of the house leads into a small entry hall. The oak flooring, white plaster walls, and simple baseboards in the entryway are seen throughout the house. A five-sided opening pierces the ceiling of the room just above the front door—the current owners made this change to allow light from the second floor. A small fixture hangs in the center of the opening, which is surrounded by a railing at the second floor. A wide archway on the south wall of the hall leads into the front sitting room. From this room, one can access the sun room through a set of French doors along the south wall. Another set of French doors along the north wall of the entry hall leads into the dining room. The common brick fireplace centered along the west wall of this room, installed in the 1936 remodeling, replaced the original wood surround and mantle. An identical fireplace was built in the living room, but has been replaced by the current owners with a wood surround.

A third set of double French doors in the entry leads to the stair hall. A half-pace staircase begins just inside the doors, running along the north wall of the hallway. A door centered along the south wall of the stair leads into a back room, originally used as a bedroom. The wood mantle on the east wall of the room was put in by the owners. A single French door south of the fireplace (a 1936 alteration) links the room with the front living room. The back portion of the stair hall is part of the rear addition, and also contains a small bathroom. A door at the back wall of the hallway leads to the back porch.



Just behind the staircase on the north wall of the hallway is an entrance to the kitchen. This large room was originally two rooms, the kitchen and dining room. The wall that separated the two rooms was removed in 1936, and the northeast corner room became the new dining room. A partition wall that stops a few feet below the ceiling has been built where the original wall once stood—the west half of the room, where the first dining room was located, is now used as a breakfast room. Centered along the west

wall of the kitchen is a door leading onto the back porch. This door, which was originally a window, was put in during the 1936 remodeling.

The second floor of the McConnell House was built around 1897, and contains three bedrooms. The second run of the stair leads up to a narrow hallway that runs the length of the floor. At the east end of the hallway, two railings meeting at point enclose the opening above the entryway. A single window, its lower sash having been replaced with green stain glass, takes up the narrow east wall of the hallway. The rear bedroom is located in the southwest corner of the floor. Almost all of the east wall of the room is taken up with a built-in closet with two louvered doors. The current owners closed the fireplace that was once along this wall in order to create this closet. The southeast corner bedroom retains its original fireplace surround and mantle. In the northeast room, the mantle along the west wall has been placed at the top of the wall, and the vertical lines of the surround have been lengthened to fill the entire height of the wall, creating a sort of headboard for the bed that is centered along the wall.

Despite some recent alterations, the William and Laura McConnell Farm remains as a reminder of Mecklenburg County's period of agricultural prosperity in the decades following the Civil War, and of the proliferation of modest but successful farmsteads during these years. The evolution of the Folk Victorian house from a simple one-story cottage to a more impressive farmstead, and finally to a slightly more modern, rural home reflects the changes in circumstance of farming families as the county shifted from rural and agricultural to urban and industrial.

Sherry J. Joines and Dr. Dan L. Morrill, "Historic Rural Resources in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina" <<http://www.cmhpf.org/surveyruralcontext.htm>> (2 June 2004), Ante-bellum Period.

LeGette Blythe and Charles R. Brockman, *Hornet's Nest: The Story of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County* (Charlotte: McNally of Charlotte, 1961), 259-262.

Sherry J. Joines and Dr. Dan L. Morrill. "Historic Rural Resources in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina" <<http://www.cmhpf.org/surveyruralcontext.htm>> (2 June 2004), Reconstruction.

Thomas Hanchett, "Growth of Charlotte: A History" <<http://www.cmhpf.org/educargrowth.htm>> (2 June 2004).

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1880 United States Federal Population Schedules, Mecklenburg County; Roll T9_972 Page 392.

Edgar Porter McConnell, "History of the Home and Property of Will McConnell" (written for John and Marianne Walker, August 1981), 1; 1850 United States Federal Population Schedule, Mecklenburg County, Roll M432_637, Page 26; 1870 United States Federal Population Schedule, Mecklenburg County, Roll M593_1148, Page 187.

McConnell, 1.

1850 United States Federal Population Schedule, Mecklenburg County, Roll M432_637; 1860 United

States Federal Population Schedule, Mecklenburg County, Roll M653_906, Page 89; 1870 United States Federal Population Schedule, Mecklenburg County, Roll M593_1148, Page 187.

McConnell, 2.

1900 United States Federal Population Schedule, Mecklenburg County, E.D. 42, Sheet 25, Line 39.

McConnell, 2.

Mecklenburg County Will Book "O" Page 368.

McConnell, 2.

Joines and Morrill, Modern Era.

Ibid.

University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center. *United States Historical Census Data Browser*. ONLINE. 1998. University of Virginia. Available: <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census/> (2 June 2004).

1930 United States Federal Population Schedule, Mecklenburg County, Roll T626_1706, Page 30.

Ibid.

1930 United States Federal Population Schedule, Rockingham County, Roll T626_1717, Page 3.

Register of Deeds, Mecklenburg County Courthouse, Deed Book 848, Page 276-281.

Deed Book 848, Page 280.

McConnell, 2; *Charlotte News*, 28 April 1936, page 6.

Dulin Hardware, letter to E. L. McConnell, June 27, 1936.

Virginia and Lee McAlester, *A Field Guide to American Houses* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 310.