



John Milton Alexander House



This report was written on April 1, 2000

1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the John Milton Alexander House is located at 14915 Beatties Ford Road in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina.

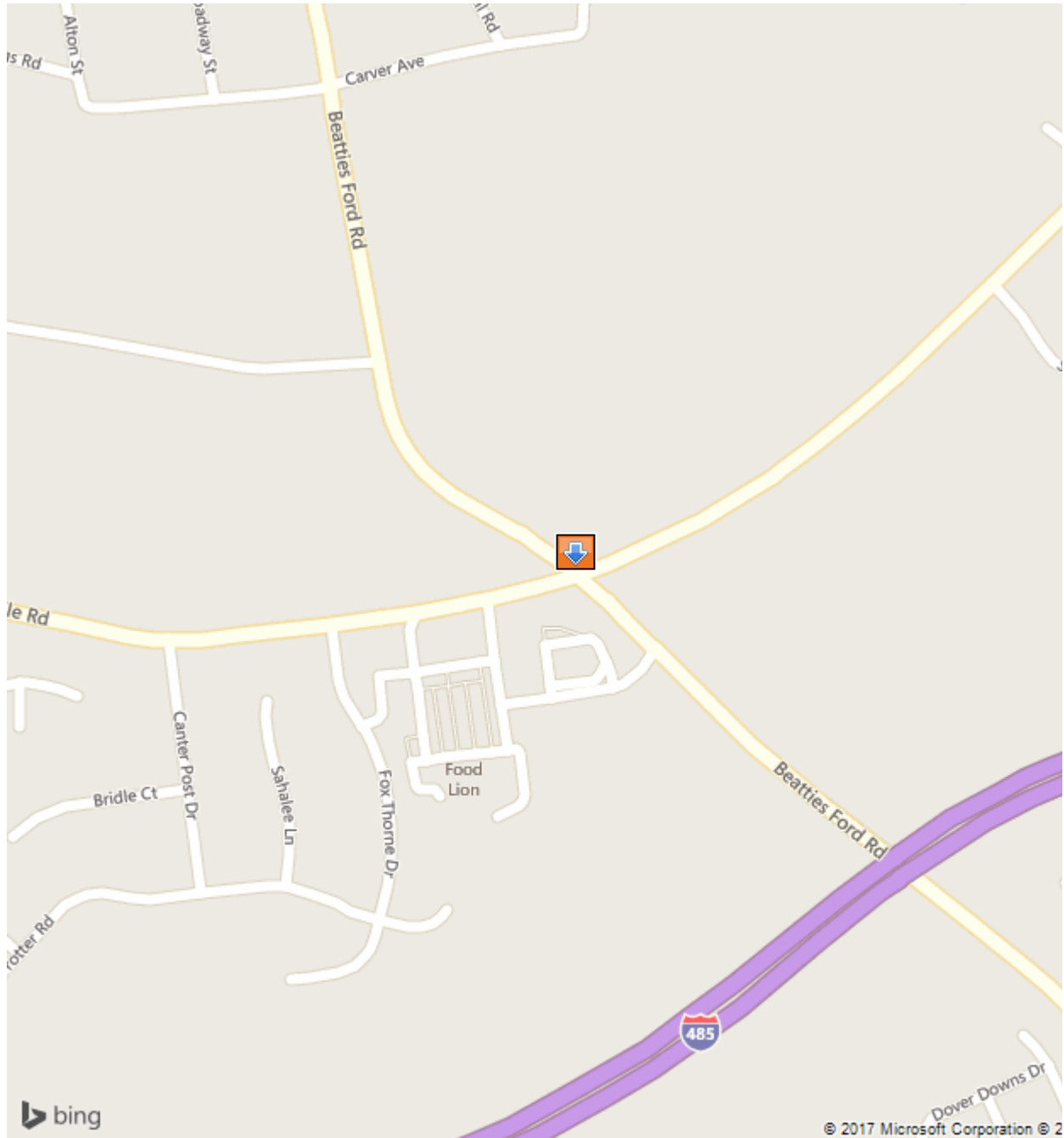
2. Name, owner, and telephone number of the present owner of the property: The owner is:

Ralph Regans, Jr.
6416 Potter Street
Matthews, NC 28105

Telephone Number: (704) 821-8556

3. Representative photographs of the property: This report contains interior and exterior photographs of the property.

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



5. Current deed book references to the property: The most recent deed to the John Milton Alexander House is listed in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 4465, at page 762. The Tax Parcel Number of the property is 013-122-20.

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

7. A brief architectural description of the property: This report contains an architectural description of the property prepared by Emily D. 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:

Special significance in terms of history, architecture, and cultural importance: The Commission judges that the property known as the John Milton Alexander House does possess special significance in terms of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations:

The John Milton Alexander House is an excellent and unusual example of Folk Victorian architecture, popular in the post-railroad period of the last half of the nineteenth century;

The John Milton Alexander House is a tangible reminder of the importance of farming to Mecklenburg County's post-bellum economy;

a. John Milton Alexander was a prominent member of the Gilead community. In addition to farming, he ran a cotton gin, blacksmith shop, and sawmill for the community, and was a senior elder at Gilead A.R.P. Church.

b. Integrity of design, workmanship, materials, feeling, and association: The Commission contends that the architectural description by Emily D. Ramsey demonstrates that the John Milton Alexander House meets this criterion.

9. Ad Valorem Tax Appraisal: The current Ad Valorem tax appraisal for the improvements is \$12, 400. The current Ad Valorem tax appraisal for the 1.25 acres of land is \$22, 500. The property is zoned R-3.

10. Date of Preparation of this Report: April 1, 2000

11. Prepared by: Emily D. Ramsey
745 Georgia Trail
Lincolnton, NC 28092

Statement of Significance

The John Milton Alexander House, completed in 1874, is a structure that possesses local historic significance as a tangible reminder of the importance of cotton farming and rural life in Mecklenburg County during the post-bellum period and for its association with John Milton Alexander, farmer and active member of the Gilead community in Charlotte and its environs. The last half of the nineteenth century saw tremendous opportunity for farming communities around Charlotte. Charlotte had escaped relatively unscathed from the effects of the Civil War and the continually high demand for cotton, coupled with the development of the fertilizer Peruvian guano in 1860, made the post-bellum period a prosperous time for farming in Mecklenburg County. One such farmer was John Milton Alexander, who completed construction

of a Folk Victorian farmhouse shortly after his marriage to Nancy Jane Fullwood. The eight-room house formed the center of a 49-acre farm (smaller than the approximately 100-acre average after the Civil War) where John Milton Alexander, with the help of his brother-in-law, Francis Beard, ran a cotton gin, blacksmith shop and sawmill in addition to the care of his staple crops of cotton and corn.

The John Milton Alexander House, built by Alexander and his brother-in-law, W. T. Cashion, also possesses local historic significance as an unusually elaborate example of the Folk Victorian style of architecture "common in the post-railroad years between approximately 1850 to 1890." The house, a two-story structure built on a modified I-house plan, contains uncommon interior and exterior decorative features such as paired windows, sunburst motif detailing, and elaborately carved wooden mantels, which make the John Milton Alexander House an exceptional example of what would otherwise have been considered a rather common vernacular building type.

Historical Overview

The last half of the nineteenth century proved to be a time of prosperity for many small farmers in Mecklenburg County. Cotton, an important crop to the area's economy before the Civil War, became even more vital in the post-bellum period. The introduction of the fertilizer Peruvian guano in 1860 made cotton easy to grow even in the most inhospitable soil, and the arrival of the railroad in 1852 and its tremendous growth both before and after the war gave even the average smaller farmer a way to get his cotton to market. More importantly, the Civil War itself had relatively little impact on the economy of Mecklenburg County. The vast majority of farmers in the area held only about 100 acres and did not rely on the assistance of slave labor before and during the Civil War. This, coupled with a railroad system that had survived the war intact, gave most landowners "the opportunity to replant and recover quickly." Mecklenburg County did more than simply "recover" after the Civil War -it prospered. The 1875 Charlotte City Directory proudly reported that cotton production in the area had "increased annually until for the fiscal year ending August 31st, 1874, the actual sales reaching forty thousand bales."

It was during this period of prosperity that John Milton Alexander, then 23 years old, began work on his own farm. The John Milton Alexander House was built in 1873-1874 in the small farming community of Gilead, in northwest Mecklenburg County. Alexander began building the house in preparation for his marriage to Nancy Jane Fullwood. On January 2, 1873, John and Nancy were wed at the Gilead A.R.P. Church in a double ceremony with Alexander's sister Betty and her husband, W.T. Cashion. Since the house was not completed at the time of their marriage, the newlyweds moved into a small house constructed on the property while Alexander and his new brother-in-law completed work on the house. The couple and their first child, Josephine (born in 1873), finally moved into their new home in 1874. Although the house, "five rooms downstairs and three upstairs" seemed very large in the beginning for such a small family, John Milton and Nancy wasted no time in filling the house with children. By the time of her death in 1893, Nancy Fullwood Alexander had given birth to eight children, two boys and six girls. All but one (Grier Caldwell, 1881-1884) survived to adulthood.

In addition to all of John Milton and Nancy's children, a large number of relatives drifted into and out of the home during Alexander's life there. The house, daughters Minnie and Janet remembered, "proved a haven for relatives", and it was always full of lively characters. John Milton's mother, Mary Alexander, came to care for the children after their mother's death. She smoked a corn cob pipe, wore black clothes every Sunday, and related her favorite Civil War stories to anyone who would sit still long enough to listen. Aunt Huldah, Mary's half-sister and a favorite of the children, lived in one upstairs bedroom of the house for a time, and John Milton's Uncle Moses was a transient resident. Life on the small farm was always exciting for the Alexander children, thanks in large part to their father. Minnie and Janet Alexander wrote in their family album:

When we were smaller, on rainy days [our father] would saddle Simon and put all three kids on him. Simon was broad, and our legs stuck straight out. When we reached the schoolhouse, the big boys would help us off, tie the reins to the saddle, and turn him towards home.

The kinds of work on Alexander's farm were as many and varied as the people in his house. He was, his daughters recall, a "Jack-of-all-trades." Along with the heavy load of tending his crops of cotton and corn, Alexander (together with his brother-in-law, Francis Beard) ran a cotton mill, a blacksmith shop, and a sawmill to service the Gilead community. He also kept bees for honey and cows for dairy products and meat, and "many men in the community brought their young horses to him to break in." The family's garden plot and fruit trees provided food for the family. Minnie and Janet fondly remembered roasting apples on the hearth in the winter, "cooking corn or sweet potatoes in the ashes -and another delight was popping corn." The diverse nature of Alexander's work may have been an attempt to ward off the effects of a nationwide depression that hit the South in 1893. The 1890s were hard times for the Alexanders. Although Alexander managed to "provide well for his family," his generosity and tendency to "sign notes for friends who wanted to borrow money" put him in debt. Fortunately, Alexander's second wife, Lura Gillespie, was very thrifty, and "after several years, the family was debt free."

Religion was central to the John Milton Alexander family. Alexander was, like his mother and father, a devout member of the Gilead A. R. P. Church. He taught the adult women's Sunday school class at the church, while Nancy headed the children's Sunday school. He became a senior elder of the church later in his life. Two of Alexander's daughters, Minnie and Janet, carried the tradition of religious devotion even further, choosing to forgo the traditional route of marriage and family for missionary work. Both women became missionaries to Pakistan in the 1920s, and both were lauded for their work there. Janet Alexander, who was also a doctor, received the Kaiser I Hinde medal from George V of England for her medical work, and the efforts of both daughters resulted in a hospital for women and children in Pakistan, which they named after their mother, Nancy Fullwood Alexander.

When in his seventies, John Milton Alexander decided to move his family closer to the center of the Gilead community, so that when he was no longer able to drive, he could walk to the Gilead A.R.P. Church and to the store across the street. In May of 1904, the family moved into a small, two-bedroom cottage (now under the waters of Lake Norman) approximately three miles from the family's farmhouse. The farmhouse stayed empty only until October, when Alexander's

brother, Houston, died from kidney disease, leaving "a widow, Annie, and several young children." Alexander promptly sold the farmhouse and adjoining land to his brother's family and deeded the property to William E. Alexander, Houston and Annie's eldest son, who stayed there with his wife, mother and young siblings for several years before returning to Huntersville "so that the children could attend school."

John Milton Alexander suffered acute angina during his last years, and died at home at the age of 86. The house and land passed out of family ownership in 1909, when William sold the property to W.A. Cashion. After Cashion's death, the property became the subject of a lawsuit, which concluded with the purchase of the property by J.M. Hubbard. In 1933, Hubbard sold the house and land to Powell Regans, who farmed the land and bequeathed it to his heirs. Presently, the house, the 1.25-acre lot, and ten acres directly behind the house, are owned by Ralph Regans, Jr., Powell Regans's grandson.

Architectural Description

Site Description

The John Milton Alexander House is located in the Gilead community of northwest Mecklenburg County. It is set very close to and faces eastward toward Beatties Ford Road on a 1.25-acre lot that slopes gently downward towards woods located behind the house. To the left of the house is a ranch-style brick house, with a small mobile home behind. Another mobile home sits to the right of the house. The right front corner of the house is obscured by an overgrow holly tree and various shrubs surround the perimeter of the house.

Architectural Description and Context Statement

The John Milton Alexander House, in its form, its style, and its detailing, is a reflection of the fundamental changes that occurred in building practices during the last half of the nineteenth century. Architectural historian Carl R. Lounsbury writes that "innovation in the manufacture and distribution of building materials" during this time "transformed the way North Carolinians built their houses, factories, barns and public buildings." Driven by the overwhelming demand for new construction after the Civil War, lumberyards, brick makers, and builders began to look for faster, more efficient production methods. By 1900, labor saving steam-powered machinery, new methods of mass-producing building materials, and an extensive railroad network gave even the most remote areas access to good quality, inexpensive building materials. Wooden structures with light balloon or braced framing quickly replaced more labor-intensive log construction and heavy hewn brace framing. In Mecklenburg County, the post-war cotton boom and continually expanding railroad system also meant that farmers could afford dwellings that were more ornate and elaborate than the simple I-house. Folk Victorian farmhouses "inspired by the exuberant Queen Anne style" began to appear across the county. Irregular plans, wrap-around porches, and a host of surface ornamentation such as "sawnwork, vergeboards, and spindlework," which indicated "the farmer's wealth and status," characterized this new building type.

The John Milton Alexander House exhibits all of the distinctive properties of a Folk Victorian farmhouse, and it is one of the more unusual examples in Mecklenburg County. The house, a two-story gable-front-and-wing modification of the typical I-house plan, is of [wood frame](#) construction sheathed in wooden clapboards. The gable, one-bay wide and two-bays deep, is joined to the two-bay wide and one-bay deep wing by a [shed-roofed](#) porch, which runs along the facade and protects the main entrance to the house. An early one-story addition (one-bay wide by two-bays deep) projects from the rear of the main building. A second porch (in a very deteriorated state) is located on the rear of the house and is affixed to the L-shape formed by the wing and projecting addition. The house has regularly punctuated fenestration, alternating between single [six-over-six windows](#) and paired windows with a [four-over-four](#) configuration. Each window is topped with a decorative pediment. Two brick corbelled chimneys support the house's seven fireplaces. Although the front porch of the John Milton Alexander House has been stripped of most of its original Victorian spindlework, the house as a whole still retains many original (and unusual) decorative details, including delicate pendant brackets, pedimented, paired windows, and a simple sunburst motif on the front gable. The house was originally painted, but almost all of the exposed woodwork is now bare. The roof has been replaced with modern roofing material, but otherwise the exterior of the house is as it was in 1874. The interior of the house has remained equally unchanged. The two rooms in the rear addition were altered sometime in the mid-nineteen hundreds. Electric lighting was installed, wallpaper was put up in some of the rooms, and the original wood floors were covered in some places with deteriorating linoleum. Otherwise, the interior has suffered little alteration. The interior is also surprisingly elaborate. The entrance hall contains dark wooden moldings and baseboards, and the side of the staircase is decorated with scrolled wooden brackets. Paneled, inlaid wooden doors mark the entrance to almost every room and every closet in the house. However, by far the most impressive interior features are the fireplace mantels. Each of the house's seven fireplaces is framed by a wooden mantel, and each mantel is decorated in a different style, ranging from elaborate and whimsical to restrained and formal.

The John Milton Alexander House is no longer set among tenant houses, barns and open fields, but it still serves as a tangible reminder of rural life in Mecklenburg County and the importance of farming to the post-bellum cotton economy. John Milton Alexander was a prominent member of the Gilead community, and his carefully detailed house was a reflection of his position among the people of Gilead. Although the house is deteriorating and has been compromised by modern houses set close to it, it is an excellent and exceptional example of the exuberant Folk Victorian style of building so popular in the Post-Railroad years of 1850 to 1890.

Notes

¹ Nora M. Black, [Survey and Research Report on the Charles and Laura Alexander House - Architectural Description](#) (Charlotte Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission. 1990), p. 1.

² Thomas W. Hanchett, "The Growth of Charlotte: A History" (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, 1985), p. 4-6. Sherry J. Joines and Dr. Dan L. Morrill, "[Historic Rural Resources in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina](#)" (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, 1997).

³ Sherry J. Joines and Dr. Dan L. Morrill, "Historic Rural Resources in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina" (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, 1997)

⁴ *Beasley and Emerson's Charlotte Directory for 1875-76* (Beasley and Emerson, publishers, Observer Job Office, printers), p. 139.

⁵ Mary Janet Alexander and Minnie Rebecca Alexander, *The Family Album of John Milton Alexander and Nancy Jane Fullwood* (Brooks Litho Publishing, Charlotte, NC), p. 38-42.

⁶ Alexander, p. 42.

⁷ Alexander, p.43.

⁸ Alexander, p.42.

⁹ Alexander, p. 43.

¹⁰ Alexander, p.48.

¹¹ Alexander, p. 39. Mary Beth Gatza, "[The John Milton Alexander Home](#)" (Charlotte Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, 1989), p.1.

¹² Gatza, p.2.

¹³ Gatza, p.2.

¹⁴ Gatza, p.2. *Charlotte Observer*, 5 February 1936, p.46.

¹⁵ Catherine W. Bisher, Charlotte V. Brown, Carl R. Lounsbury and Ernest H. Wood III, *Architects and Builders in North Carolina: A History of the Practice of Building* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1990) p.193.

¹⁶ Virginia and Lee McAlester, *A Field Guide to American Houses* (Alfred A. Knopf, Inc, 1984) p. 89-90.

¹⁷ Joines and Morrill, p. 5.