

# THE ALEXANDER SLAVE CEMETERY



*This report was written on June 5, 1989*

**1. Name and location of the property:** The property known as the Alexander Slave Cemetery is located to the south side of Mallard Creek Church Road just west of its intersection with Highway US 29, in the Mallard Creek Community of Mecklenburg County, North Carolina.

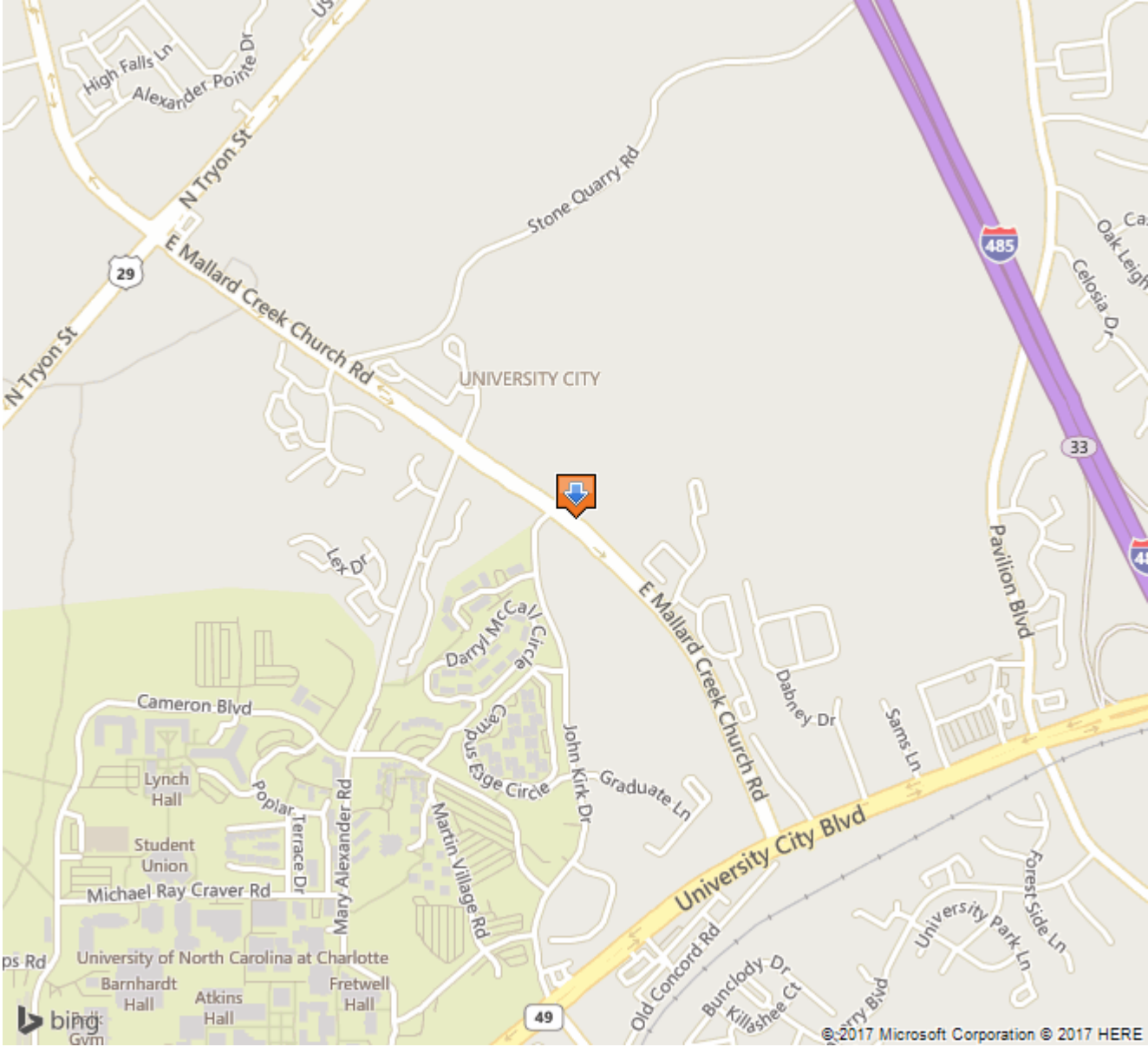
**2. Name, address and telephone number of the Present owner of the Property:** The owner of the property is:

Crescent Land & Timber Co.  
P. O. Box 30817  
Charlotte, N.C. 28230

Telephone: (704) 373-3012

**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 which depicts the location of the property.



**5. Current Deed Book Reference to the property:** The most recent deed to this property is recorded in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 5880, Page 849. The Tax Parcel Number of the property is: 047-191-07.

**6. A brief historical sketch of the property:** This report contains a brief historical sketch of the property prepared by Paula M. Stathakis.

**7. A brief architectural description of the property:** This report contains a brief architectural description of the property prepared by Mary Beth Gatza.

**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:**

**a. Special significance in terms of its history, architecture, and/or cultural importance:** The Commission judges that the property known as the Alexander Slave Cemetery does possess special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations: 1) the Alexander Slave Cemetery is the most extensive, best preserved, and most imposing slave burial site in Mecklenburg County; and 2) the Alexander Slave Cemetery retains its essential setting.

**b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling, and/or association:** The Commission contends that the architectural description by Mary Beth Gatza which is included in this report demonstrates that the Alexander Slave Cemetery 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 which becomes "historic property." The current appraised value of the 10.040 acres of land is \$50,200. The total appraised value of the property is \$50,200. The property is zoned R15.

**Date of Preparation of this Report:** June 5, 1989

**Prepared by:** Dr. Dan L. Morrill  
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Properties Commission  
1225 S. Caldwell St.  
Charlotte, N.C., 28203

Telephone: 704/376-9115

*Special Note:* Crescent Land & Timber Co. was not the owner of the Alexander Slave Cemetery when the historical essay by Ms. Paula Stathakis was prepared.

### ***Historical Overview***

*Paula M. Stathakis*  
*April, 1988*

This cemetery is located on property which was originally part of the plantation purchased by William Tasse Alexander I in the early nineteenth century. <sup>1</sup> This [plantation](#) grew in size from 100 acres to 935 acres during Alexander's lifetime. Like many plantation owners of his time, Alexander used slave labor to maintain a profitable economic enterprise. According to United States Census records of the Slave population in Mecklenburg County, Alexander owned 33 slaves in 1860.<sup>2</sup> Because of the nature

of the census records, and the inaccessibility of more accurate family records, it is not possible to know exactly how many slaves were buried in this cemetery. Estimates have ranged as high as 50 persons, and from the available data, it is not liberal to assume that there may be 25-30 persons interred there. <sup>3</sup>

An on-site inspection of this cemetery was not permitted by the owner of the property; however, recent photographs of the area taken by *Charlotte Observer* photographer Tom Franklin indicate that the cemetery is falling quickly into disrepair. <sup>4</sup> Only two headstones have been placed in this cemetery, and the most legible one has been broken by a fallen tree. The owner of this property, Mrs. Lewis Fisher, said in a telephone conversation in March 15, 1988, that the cemetery is located in a glade and is covered with periwinkle in the summer. She believes that there are 30 graves in the cemetery, although only two grave markers have been erected. <sup>5</sup> One tombstone marks the resting place of a slave named Violet, who must have enjoyed a close relationship with the family to merit a memorial. Violet and another slave, Solomon are mentioned in Alexander's will. It was Alexander's wish that Violet and Solomon remain on the plantation to care for his widow. <sup>6</sup>

One descendant of slaves buried in this cemetery, Alton Caldwell, recalled that he was told by his great grandparents that Alexander was a kind slave owner, and that he fostered close-knit slave-non-slave relationships. According to Caldwell, Alexander bought shoes for his slaves, allowed them to travel off of the plantation, and did not discourage marriage to slaves on other plantations. Another gesture of the generosity of Alexander the slaveowner, was to provide a space for the formal burial of his slaves. <sup>7</sup> Although relationships with slaves varied from owner to owner, life on the Alexander plantation appears, on the surface, to have been reasonable by the slaves' standards. Slave population schedules of the United States Census for 1850 and 1860 do not indicate any fugitive slaves from the Alexander plantation, nor do these schedules indicate that Alexander freed any of his slaves during this period. <sup>8</sup>

The extant knowledge of this cemetery is sparse. Certainties include its location, the condition of the site, and the identities of a few of the slaves buried there (i.e. Violet and the Caldwell ancestors). Very little information exists about slave cemeteries generally. The most important and respected works on slavery and the ante-bellum south barely address this subject, and the information they do contain is meager. <sup>9</sup>

The universals known about the burial customs of slaves are that the dead were usually buried at night, and the ceremony of the funeral and the act of burial were not performed on the same day. Slaves were buried at night because labor on the plantation took precedence over the interment. The funeral service was often held after the burial, on a date approved by the plantation owner. The slaves also preferred to hold the funeral service at a later date, and the delay of this rite allowed others to attend. The funeral was an elaborate service, and was full of much pageantry. Slave funeral customs were strongly linked to African customs. The purpose of the funeral was to assist the dead in their voyage "home", and a large part of this assistance was provided through funeral revelry. Graves were often decorated with crockery or the last article used by the deceased. <sup>10</sup>

Tombstones for slaves are rare, and the two grave markers at the Alexander cemetery are the exception rather than the rule. J. G. Clinkscales, a South Carolinian who grew up on an ante-bellum plantation, wrote about a particular slave, Unc' Essick, in his memoirs. Unc' Essick was a faithful and well liked

slave according to Clinkscates's account. However, when Unc' Essick, the "faithful slave, the patient teacher, the colored gentleman" drowned, he was buried in an unmarked grave.<sup>11</sup> Apparently, not all slaves were fortunate enough to receive a proper burial. Jacob Strayer, an emancipated slave who also grew up in South Carolina recalled that sometimes unruly slaves were killed in the fields by cruel overseers who would bury them where they fell.<sup>12</sup> This too must have been exceptional. However, the existence of a formal slave cemetery, on property specially set aside for the proper burial of the dead is also an exception.

The Alexander slave cemetery is a valuable resource to the Charlotte-Mecklenburg community. It is also an especially significant part of the black history of this area. At present it lies on private property, but the site is not actively protected from anything except trespassers. The photographs taken by *Charlotte Observer* photographer Tom Franklin, January 26, 1988, show the site under a covering of fallen leaves. It is also quite clear from these photographs that the site is very poorly maintained. Individuals who have visited the cemetery (on separate occasions), *Charlotte Observer* reporter Steve Snow and Alton Caldwell, describe the site as overgrown and poorly kept. There are many fallen trees in the area, one of them ruined the most legible marker, the one previously mentioned. Snow, who visited the site in January 1988, noticed that logging was done recently in the area.<sup>13</sup> A site of this significance requires and deserves more care than the present owner is able to give it. In a region of the country where the natives are obsessed with their ancestry and their heritage, it seems incongruous that this burial place of the kindred ancestors of the black community is not recognized for its proper historical significance.

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## END NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Dan L. Morrill, [Historic Properties Commission Report on the W T Alexander House](#), July 5, 1976. The first segment(100 acres)of what would result in a 935 acre plantation was purchased by William Tasse Alexander I in 1819 on the "headwaters of Mallard Creek".

<sup>2</sup> *Eighth Census of the United States: Slave Schedule, Vol. 3, 1860 North Carolina, Mecklenburg County.*

<sup>3</sup> D. L. Morrill, Historic Properties Commission Report; *Seventh Census of the United States, Second Series: Slave Population, 1850. North Carolina, Mecklenburg County; Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Slave Schedule, Mecklenburg County.*

<sup>4</sup> Photographs, property of the *Charlotte Observer* taken by staff photographer Tom Franklin, January 26, 1988.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Mrs. Lewis Fisher, owner of property, Lynchburg, Virginia, March 15, 1988.

<sup>6</sup> D. L. Morrill, Historic Properties Commission Report.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Alton Caldwell, descendant of Alexander Plantation slaves, Charlotte, North Carolina, April 16, 1988.

<sup>8</sup> *Seventh Census of the United States: Slave Population, 1850, Mecklenburg County; Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Slave Schedule, Mecklenburg County*. The rest of Mecklenburg County enjoyed similar distinctions of calm and order. D. L. Morrill, Historic Properties Commission Report. According to this report, Alexander did specify in his will, dated June 28, 1859, that three slaves were to receive their freedom upon his death.

<sup>9</sup> See: John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community. Plantation Life in The Ante-Bellum South*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans*, 5th ed.,(New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980); Eugene D. Genovese, *The World the Slaveholders Made*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1971); Joyner, Charles, *Down By The Riverside. A South Carolina Slave Community*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984); Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution. Slavers in the Ante-Bellum South*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1956).

<sup>10</sup> Information for this paragraph taken from Joyner, *Down By The Riverside*, and Blassingame, *The Slave Community*.

<sup>11</sup> J. G. Clinkscales, *On The Old Plantation. Reminiscences of his Childhood*,(New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969, originally published: South Carolina: Bland and White, 1916), p. 36.

<sup>12</sup> Jacob Strayer, *My Life in the South*, (Salem: Salem Observer Book and Job print, 1885), p. 58.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Steve Snow, Reporter, Charlotte Observer, Charlotte, North Carolina, April 4, 1988.

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## SOURCES

### Interviews

Caldwell, Alton. Descendant of Alexander Plantation Slaves, Charlotte, North Carolina. Interview, April 16, 1988.

Fisher, Mrs. Lewis. Owner of cemetery site, 2704 Hurdle Hill Road, Lynchburg, Virginia. Interview, March 15, 1988.

Snow, Steve. Reporter, Charlotte Observer, Charlotte, North Carolina. Interview, April 4, 1988.

### Newspapers

"A Driving Tour of Black Charlotte." *Charlotte Observer*, 31 January 1988, Mecklenburg Neighbors.

## Government Documents

*Seventh Census of the United States, 2nd Series: Slave Population. June 30, 1850. North Carolina, Vol. 5 Mecklenburg County.*

*Eighth Census of the United States: Slave Schedule, 1860. North Carolina, Vol. 3, Mecklenburg County.*

## Secondary Sources

Bassett, John Spencer. *Slavery in the State of North Carolina*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1899.

Blassingame, John W. *The Slave Community. Plantation Life in the Ante-Bellum South*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.

Clinkscales, J. G. *On The Old Plantation. Reminiscences of his Childhood*. New York: Negro University Press, 1969.

(Originally published: *South Carolina: Bland and White*, 1916.)

Franklin, John Hope. *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans*. 5th ed. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980.

Genovese, Eugene D. *The World the Slaveholders Made*. New York: Vintage Books, 1971.

Hilliard, Samuel Bowers. *Atlas of Ante-Bellum Southern Agriculture*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984.

Joyner, Charles. *Down By The Riverside. A South Carolina Slave Community*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984.

Rose, Jerome C. ed. *Gone To A Better Land. A Biohistory of a Rural Black Cemetery in the Post-Reconstruction South*. Arkansas Archeological Survey Research Series Number 25, 1985.

Singleton, Teresa A. ed. *The Archeology of Slavery and Plantation Life*. Orlando: Academic Press, 1985.

Stamp, Kenneth. *The Peculiar Institution. Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South*. New York: Vintage Books, 1956.

Strayer, Jacob. *My Life in the South*. Salem: Salem Observer Book and Job Print, 1885.

White, John and Wilbert, Ralph. *Slavery in the American South*. New York: Harper and Row, 1970.

## *Architectural Description*

*M. B. Gatza*  
*May 1989*

Set way back in the woods, the Alexander Slave Cemetery could be easily overlooked by the uninitiated passerby. Located on a slightly-sloping site and covered with periwinkle, the historic burying ground contains only one carved marker. The headstone has broken and fallen and is propped up against an old rock. The footstone, incised with the departed's initials, is nearby. The marker was placed in memory of W. T. Alexander's first slaves by their children, and reads:

"Our father and Mother  
Soloman Alexander  
died  
May 18, 1864  
aged  
64 years

Violet Alexander  
died  
August 16, 1888  
aged  
83 years"

A second cut stone, possibly also carved, lies nearby, face down, in the dirt. About two dozen common fieldstones stand upright, embedded into the ground, scattered around the two cut markers, and mark the locations of the other graves. The stones are of types that are indigenous to the area, and are not shaped or marked in any way. They were probably picked up off the ground on the day of the funeral, and simply placed at the head of the grave. Probably many more have fallen or sunken into the ground and are no longer visible. No one really knows how many slaves rest beneath the periwinkle amongst the trees.

The slave cemetery is deep in the woods, and probably always was. Mixed hardwoods; hickory, ash, oaks, maples and cedar trees, surround the site. A few pines have grown up in and around the burying ground, but were subsequently cut down, leaving a few stumps among the stones.

Despite its isolated and overgrown condition, the Alexander Slave Cemetery is the best-kept of the handful of remaining slave burial sites in Mecklenburg County. It is the only one known with a carved marker, and the only one known with as many surviving stones.



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For more information...

[Survey & Research Report: W. T. Alexander House](#)