

Route III: East and Northeast Mecklenburg

Route III is approximately 60 miles long. Allow three hours driving time, with extra time for a stop at the Hezekiah Alexander House or a picnic at Reedy Creek Park.

The eastern section of Mecklenburg County today is a varied patchwork of new residential developments and old communities. In the southeast, subdivisions have sprung up as an extension of the thrust of Charlotte's New South Neighborhoods of the early twentieth century. In the northeast, new housing has been built in response to the presence of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (formerly Charlotte College) that moved to its present site in 1961. Yet amid the suburban estates and new highways the story of the county's history can still be read.

Route III begins at the Hezekiah Alexander House on Shamrock Dr.

- **From I-77 take the exit for I-85 North. Exit at Sugar Creek Rd. and turn right. Continue on Sugar Creek Rd. until it merges with Eastway Dr. where you bear right. At the traffic lights, turn left onto Shamrock Dr. The Alexander homesite is about .5 miles on your right.**
- **From Charlotte, drive east on Trade St. Turn left onto Kings Rd. Kings Rd. becomes Central Ave. Turn left at Eastway Dr., and then right onto Shamrock Dr. The Alexander homesite is about .5 miles on your right.**
 1. [The Hezekiah Alexander House](#) is built of stone and is the oldest dwelling still standing in Mecklenburg County. Completed in 1774, this "Pennsylvania Style" house is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The house has been faithfully restored and carefully refurnished with authentic Piedmont Carolina antiques.



The Hezekiah Alexander House

Born in Maryland in 1728, Hezekiah apprenticed as a blacksmith and farmed property in Pennsylvania before moving his family to Mecklenburg in the 1760's. The Alexanders joined many other Scots-Irish Presbyterians in the North Carolina "back country."

Hezekiah Alexander was a signer of the legendary May 20, 1775 Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence. He helped draft the North Carolina State Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Hezekiah was an elder in the [Sugaw Creek Presbyterian Church](#); a co-founder of the original Queens College; a member of the Committee of Safety; a Magistrate and a Justice of the Peace. During the Revolutionary War he served as an officer and quartermaster of the local patriot militia.

Tours of the house, reconstructed log kitchen and spring house are offered Tuesday through Fridays at 1:15 & 3:15 and Saturdays and Sundays at 2:15 & 3:15. For more information please call (704) 568-1774.

Return to Shamrock Dr. and turn right. Drive 1.5 miles to the intersection with Sharon Amity. Notice the house to the left, across the intersection.

2. This was the [home of Hezekiah's grandson](#). It was built in 1903 by Neal Somers Alexander and his wife Ida Jane Caldwell to replace their earlier one-story dwelling. Like his grandfather, Alexander ran a large cotton farm, and his success is reflected in this imposing house. Notice its predominantly Queen Anne style, including features

such as the asymmetrical facade, the complex roof arrangement with its conical roof, the wooden shingles on the front gable, and the extensive porch. When it was built, this house was just like the grand merchants' mansions in Uptown Charlotte.



N. S. Alexander House

Continue straight across the intersection with Sharon Amity. Turn left at the stop sign onto Hickory Grove Rd. At the traffic light at E. Harris Blvd., turn right onto E. Harris Blvd. Continue on E. Harris Blvd., crossing Albemarle Rd. At the traffic light with Idlewild Rd. , (not Idlewild Rd N.) turn left onto Idewild Rd. In the next five miles you will leave the suburbs behind and enter a more rural landscape. After 4.8 miles look out for a white, weatherboard chapel on your right at a bend in the road.

3. The Morning Star Lutheran congregation, including many German members, was organized in this area as early as 1775, only twenty five years after the first Presbyterian church was organized in the county. For many years this was one of the strongest churches in the county.

Continue on Idlewild for another .7 miles (crossing the intersection with Hwy 51). Turn left onto Thompson Rd. and pause to view the one story house behind you across Idlewild Rd.

4. Note the emphasis on gables in this vernacular farmhouse. The house is said to be constructed of heart of pine cut on the property, probably by Bernum Sustare, who resided in the house in the 1890s.

Continue on Thompson Rd. Turn right at the intersection with Lawyers Rd., and then almost immediately left onto Bain School Rd. 1 mile down the road, notice a grand old farmhouse on your left.

5. The [house](#) was erected in the 1880s by John Calvin Wilson, whose descendants lived here for three generations. The high pitched front gable roof and two-story porch give the house rather grand proportions.



John C. Wilson House

Just ahead you will see the Philadelphia Presbyterian Church to your right and Bain School to your left.

6. The original part of this building was erected in 1825 to 1826. It was the Philadelphia Presbyterian Church's third meetinghouse in fifty-five years, making this one of the original seven Presbyterian churches to be established in the county before 1800. The building of a church was of course a community project. It is thought that the German settlers from the Morning Star congregation taught the locals here how to manufacture their own brick for their new sanctuary, and local tradition states that

each church member had to manufacture bricks in proportion to the size of his or her family. In 1915 extensive additions were made to the old sanctuary, but it can still be seen clearly as the central section of the expanded church.

The church was constructed in [Flemish bond](#)--alternating [headers](#) (the short end of the brick) with [stretchers](#) (the long side of the brick) in each row. Flemish bond was more costly in terms of bricks, but added stability and prestige to the building. If a building is constructed in this bond it usually indicates considerable age.

7. When Bain Academy was built across the road from the church in 1889 it was one of very few high schools in the county. From the beginning, Mecklenburg settlers placed a high premium on education. Initially the Presbyterian churches took on that function, and it was common for an old sanctuary to become the local schoolhouse or for ministers to teach classes in their own homes.

From as early as 1840 the state began to provide basic education, but these early public schools were simple one- and two-room schoolhouses, often with only one teacher. They did not include secondary education of any kind. Once again it was the Presbyterian churches that got involved in providing the education they felt was important. Privately owned academies, such as this one founded by the Philadelphia church, were extremely important as stepping stones to further education. The academy buildings are still being used today as Bain Elementary School. Try to determine which part of the building was the original school.

Turn left to continue on Bain School Rd. passing between the school and the graveyard. At the junction with Hwy 51, also the Matthews-Mint Hill Road, turn right, and then immediately left onto Hillside Rd. Just behind the new bank you will see a small frame building.



Dr. Whitley's Office

8. The doctor who practiced in this modest wooden office delivered 6,784 babies during his forty years as a country doctor--including twelve of his own. Dr. Ayer Whitley replaced Mint Hill's first doctor in 1908, and he and his wife Esther took up the old doctor's residence on Fairview Rd. (now demolished). He had this building erected as an office on the grounds of the old house, and it was moved here in 1986 by the Mint Hill Historical Society. Patients were received at the front of the building, and there were two examination rooms to the rear. Originally there was even a pharmacy attached to the front, where Dr. Whitley mixed his own medicines. Although the doctor's practice was a large one, with other offices in Concord and Monroe, and his hours long (he made house calls twenty-four hours a day) his family could not depend solely on his income. Many patients paid with livestock and produce, and none were ever refused treatment for lack of funds. Therefore, the Whitley household was always busy tending the garden, chickens, pigs, and cattle. It is interesting to note that in 1909, at the beginning of his career here, Dr. Whitley charged \$4.50 for delivering a baby. By the 1940s, towards the end of his long practice, the fee had risen to \$75.

Turn around and return to the Matthews-Mint Hill Rd. and turn left. Take the next right onto Fairview Rd.

9. Just past the intersection you will notice a small cluster of late-nineteenth-century homes, near where Dr. Whitley used to live. With the location of the academy nearby, a small community thrived here.

In about a mile, take the left turn onto Brief Rd. After a farther 1.5 miles turn left again onto Arlington Church Rd. After a mile, you will drive by a large house on your right with an old store opposite.

10. The house, store, and church for which the road is named were all connected with one man, Eli H. Hinson. He bought the house, built the store, and founded the Baptist Church down the road in the late nineteenth century. Extensive changes to the house in the 1940s have disguised one of the oldest houses in the county, built by Colonel Kerr, a Revolutionary War veteran, in 1786. What we see as the front of the house was originally the rear, and several wings have been added to the earlier Flemish bond structure, but with a little imagination one can imagine the traditional Mecklenburg farmhouse underneath: a one room deep, two story high house with side gables, external end chimneys, and a central entrance hall flanked by two rooms. Architectural historians call this an "I" house, and it is very common in the county.

The bricks for the store opposite, as for Arlington Baptist Church, were manufactured here under the guidance of Mr. Hinson. The store is said to have sold everything imaginable--from thimbles to coffins!

Continue on Arlington Church Rd. You will pass Arlington Baptist Church on your left.

11. In contrast with its success today, the Baptist faith had a slow start in Mecklenburg County. In 1880, when Hinson founded this church, the only other Baptist churches were in Charlotte, and even First Baptist Church on Tryon St. was so poor that it could not afford hymn books. You will notice that the brickwork here is different from the [Flemish bond](#) seen at the Philadelphia Church. This pattern is called [common bond](#): single rows of headers were divided by five or six rows of stretchers. This was a cheaper method of construction, but still gave the building stability. (Most brick buildings today are constructed in [running bond](#), where the rows are all stretchers. This is by far the most economic, but it is unstable and requires a supporting frame.)

Mr. Hinson is buried in the graveyard next to the church, perhaps in one of his own coffins.

Continue on Arlington Church Rd. Turn left at the stop sign onto Cabarrus Rd. Then turn left onto Albemarle Rd. (Hwy 24). At the first right, turn onto Rocky River Church Rd., and then after .8 miles, turn left onto Camp Stewart Rd. Look out for a house and farm on your right after .3 miles; the house is set back from the road behind the trees.

12. This house is another typical Mecklenburg farmhouse from the pre-Civil War period. Can you see the similarities between it and the Kerr-Hinson house on Arlington Church Rd.?

Continue on Camp Stewart Rd. At the junction with Harrisburg Rd. turn left and after about half a mile take the next major right turn onto Robinson Church Rd. After 1.5 miles, turn right onto Hood Rd. Look carefully for the White Oak Plantation house on your left and behind a curtain of trees .3 miles past the intersection.

13. The [White Oak Plantation house](#), the centerpiece of a major cotton plantation, was very much the exception to the rule when it was built in 1792. In turn-of-the-century Mecklenburg, most pioneer families in the county farmed a relatively small acreage, depending mainly on family labor. The majority of farmers owned very few slaves if any at all, and there was a good deal of anti-slavery sentiment in the area, especially among those of German descent.

The Federal style plantation house that you are looking at was one of only a handful of large plantations in the county at this time. Its builder, William Johnston, served in the colonial forces during the Revolutionary War and fought in the decisive battle of King's Mountain, which occurred in nearby York County, South Carolina, in October 1780. In 1784, he purchased a large tract of land here, but he did not build the house until eight years later.



White Oak

The location is a classic one, on a rise of land, facing south, and near a creek. The Federal style architecture of the house is simple but elegant, reflecting both the character of the area and the time, for it developed in reaction to the more ornate Georgian architecture associated with British rule. Little expense was spared--the walls are one-foot thick--but there is also little elaboration. Johnston's standing in Mecklenburg society is indicated by the fact that his daughter married Hezekiah Alexander Jr., whose father's house you saw at the beginning of **Route III**.

Continue on Hood Rd, crossing the intersection with Plaza Rd. extension. One mile after the intersection you will see the house on the left which gives the road its name.

14. John M. Hood built the first story of this frame house in the 1870s on the site of an earlier log house. It was common for those of more modest means than Johnston of White Oak to build gradually, adding to their original homes as the need arose or funds became available. Certainly in this house it is clear that nothing was wasted. A frame structure which was used as the boys bedroom was rolled to the back of the house to become the kitchen in the 1910s, and when Pinehill's one-room schoolhouse was vacated, the building was rolled onto the Hood's land for storage space. The school house can still be seen just to the rear of the old house. Until 1923 it

accommodated grades 1 to 7, with as many as thirty students from the local community at a time. Some one-room school houses continued to operate in the county until the 1940s. You will see one on **Route V**.

At the intersection with Rocky River Rd., turn left. After .4 miles you will pass the Hodges house to your left.

15. Family tradition holds that Eugene Wilson Hodges drew the plans for this house himself, and used lumber off the land to build it in 1908. You will notice that he used the traditional "I" house form, but embellished it with fashionable features--a large wrap-around porch with classical posts, and chimneys hidden in the rear.

Continue on Rocky River Rd. After .8 miles you will see the entrance to Reedy Creek Park on your left. The park is an excellent site for a picnic and has bathroom facilities, playing fields, and woodland trails. Immediately past the park take the left fork onto Grier Rd. Cross the intersection with E. Harris Blvd. and at the next intersection, turn right onto Newell-Hickory Grove Rd. Just where you cross the railroad tracks, turn right onto Old Concord Rd. After .2 miles, turn left onto Torrence Grove Church Rd. At the end of the road, on your left, you will see a fine example of a [Rosenwald school](#).

16. This was one of twenty-six Rosenwald schools erected in the county during the 1920s and 1930s for the benefit of the rural black communities. By today's standards it may seem crude, but in comparison with the one-room school houses of the time it represented significant progress. Prior to the building of the Rosenwald schools, the educational opportunities available to rural blacks were meager: schools were only open for four months of the year; the teachers were not highly educated and were underpaid. The diary of Charles Chestnut, America's first black novelist, describes his experiences as a teacher in Mecklenburg County in 1875. After "climbing fences and crossing cotton fields" he arrived at the church where he was to teach. "The church itself was a very dilapidated log structure without a window but there was no need for one, for the cracks between the logs furnished plentiful supply."

The Rosenwald fund was incorporated in 1917 by philanthropist Julius Rosenwald, a director of Sears Roebuck and Co. It offered rural communities the opportunity to build substantial schools for black education by matching locally raised funds and providing specific plans for the buildings. Thus, Rosenwald schools were always one

story in height, with plentiful windows catching the east and west light. The fund even established specific color schemes and seating arrangements.

Return to Old Concord Rd. and pause.

17. Today Newell is considered by many as a wide spot in the road, but a local saying testifies to a finer past: "If God returned to earth to improve upon creation, He'd probably start at Newell, `cause He'd find it just about like He left it." Since its beginnings in 1882, the village has been proud of its strong resistance to change. For many years it was a prosperous community of farms clustered alongside the Richmond and Danville railroad (now the Norfolk Southern railroad), with a store, post office, school, and railroad depot.

Two influential brothers gave the village its name, J. A. Newell, known as "Squire John" and William Newell. With their brother-in-law, N.W. Wallace, they founded the community in 1882 and became a powerful trio in Mecklenburg politics. Wallace held the post of sheriff of Mecklenburg County for twenty-four years and was reputed to own more farmland than any other landowner in the county. John Newell became a justice of the peace at age 18 and was a county commissioner for fourteen years. He is vividly remembered in local stories as a tall, dignified man, with heavy jowls and a ruddy complexion. His character matched his appearance: when questioning a witness in the "courtroom" built off the back of his barn, his favorite phrase was "Now, boy, I want to hear the truth, by gum."

John's house, formerly at the intersection of Rocky River and Old Concord roads, is no longer standing, but his brother William's house is.

Turn left onto Old Concord Rd. After .7 miles, notice the old two-story house to your right across the railroad tracks. It's just past a nursery and garden center.

18. William B. Newell built this very traditional [house](#) for himself in 1887. He manufactured the bricks for the unusually sturdy farm house at Back Creek with the help of a laborer. Although the overall style of the house is traditional, the decorative details were fashionable for the time. Notice the front center gable and the fluting detail on the woodwork. Several years after the house was completed William went

into partnership with N.W. Wallace and opened a general store just across the railway tracks; it's now the Newell post office.



W. B. Newell House

Continue on Old Concord Rd. another .7 miles, and turn right onto McLean Rd. After 1 mile, turn left at the stop sign onto John Russell Rd. At the next intersection turn left again onto Back Creek Church Rd. You will pass Back Creek A.R.P. Church on your right, just before recrossing the railroad tracks.

19. [Back Creek A.R.P. Church](#) is named for the nearby creek, where bricks used to build the sanctuary were manufactured, using local clay and wood molds, between 1869 and 1871. According to locals it was "a name not welcomed but which stuck fast." The history of the congregation is older than its church, and dates back to 1801. When the original Bethany congregation, located to the south of here, split in 1841, the northern members chose Back Creek as their new location. By 1847, the community was recorded as having thirty-five families and ninety communicants. Long time member and church elder John McLaughlin (postmaster of Newell) remembers when the church was heated by two wood stoves and lit by hand-pumped gas lights. The old sanctuary now serves as a Sabbath school and is closest to the road. Look for the scars of the Charleston earthquake of 1886 which severely cracked the

walls. An iron bolt now ties the building together and can be seen if you look carefully; it is located at the south end of the church, just under the eaves.

Cross the railroad tracks and pause at the junction with Hwy 49.

20. What appears to be a shack in the field opposite you is in fact an early-twentieth-century schoolhouse. It used to be located behind Back Creek Church.

Turn left onto Hwy 49 (University Blvd.) After about 1.8 miles on Hwy 49 (University Blvd.), turn right onto Mallard Creek Church Rd. at the traffic light. You will pass by the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Continue on Mallard Creek Church Rd., and cross Hwy 29. Just past this intersection, catch a glimpse of the brick house to your right and up a long drive.

21. [The house](#) is one of the oldest in the county, and dates from 1799 when John Orr had it constructed. However, it is best remembered for its later residents, the Alexander family. William Tasse Alexander started buying land in the area when he was just seventeen years old, and acquired the house in the 1820s. He populated it with four successive wives and thirteen children. Alexander was no ordinary Mecklenburg farmer, but one of the thirty or so planters in the county with over thirty slaves to work his 1,000 acres. By this time, the success of cotton farming had encouraged smaller farmers to purchase slaves also, but usually only ones or twos. Alexander, then, was among those whites who felt the aftermath of the Civil War most keenly, since much of his capital was invested in slaves (up to \$2,000 for male slaves and \$500 for female slaves). To escape the reality of the late 1860s, Alexander took to the bottle and died in 1870, leaving the house to his son.



The W. T. Alexander House

When William Alexander II went riding he often passed Newell School where his future wife, Mary, happened to be teaching. Education formed a large part of her life, and in 1957 she donated five acres of land to Charlotte College for a road. The main thoroughfare on the UNCC campus is named in her honor. This extraordinary woman completed courses at four different colleges after she turned ninety!

Continue on Mallard Creek Church Rd. to Mallard Creek Presbyterian Church.

22. The congregation here dates to about 1824. The brick sanctuary replaced a log structure in 1856 and its side elevations can still be seen amid later additions--note the long windows typical of early meetinghouses. Locally, Mallard Creek Presbyterian Church is famous for its popular autumn barbecue. The tradition began in 1929 to help defray the costs of recent remodeling, but for years it has provided an opportunity for political pamphleteering, making it an important event in the local political calendar. Try it.

At the traffic signal turn right onto Mallard Creek Rd. After one mile, you will pass the old Mallard Creek School on your right.

23. This is the site of the **Mallard Creek barbecue**, an important community social gathering site. It also served the community as a school for much of the twentieth century. It was constructed in the 1920s and follows the model of a Rosenwald school,

though it never received a Rosenwald grant and was always a white school. The high hipped roof of standing seam metal and the numerous windows are typical features copied from the Rosenwald blueprints.

After .4 miles, turn left onto Johnston-Oehler Rd. Enjoy the winding country drive between here and Prosperity Church Rd. When you reach the junction, turn left onto Prosperity Church Rd. After .5 miles, look out for an imposing barn and fine old farm house to your right.

24. This was the home of one of Mallard Creek's first pastors, the Reverend Pharr. Pharr was also the pastor of Ramah Church to the north. The house pre-dates the 1850s and follows the traditional Mecklenburg style. It is supported on stone piers, a clue to its great age. Considerable alterations have been made to the house, however, to update it over the years.

Turn right at the junction with Mallard Creek Rd. and follow it for about 3.5 miles into the village of Derita. Just before you get to the village, notice the house on your left behind a row of pine trees.

25. This elegant house dates from 1910. Notice the [sawtooth shingles](#) decorating the front facing [gables](#), and the generous porch, both [Queen Anne-style](#) features which were still popular at the time.

At the stop sign turn left onto Sugar Creek Rd. and pass through the village of Derita on your way towards Charlotte.

26. Like Newell, Derita grew up as a railway community alongside the Atlantic, Tennessee and Ohio line which opened in 1860. The line was sacrificed almost immediately for the Confederate war effort, and was not re-opened until 1874. Derita was the site of a rural post office and was named for Derita Lewis the friend of the first postmaster, Amos Ruple. During the 1920s the village built one of the county's Rosenwald schools, and locals still feel a pride in the old building, even though it has not been used in years. (If you wish to see another example of a Rosenwald school, the Derita school is to your right, about .25 miles north along Sugar Creek Rd.)

Continue on Sugar Creek Rd. crossing I-85. At the major intersection with Tryon St. (Hwy 49) look at the Sugaw Creek Church and old school house on your right.

27. Two hundred years ago Sugaw Creek Presbyterian Church was a principal gathering place in the county for the zealous Scots-Irish settlers. As early as 1755, people traveled miles to worship here in brush arbors, crude canopies made from fresh-cut pine branches. Hezekiah Alexander, for instance, was an elder of the church. The name of the church was derived from the Indian word, "Sugaw," meaning a group of huts. The new settlers, however, appropriated it for themselves, and it came to represent the essence of Presbyterianism on the frontier. The congregation received its first pastor in 1758, the fiery Rev. **Alexander Craighead**. Craighead was the only official pastor in the county between 1758 and his death in 1766, but this did not seem to daunt his impassioned spirit as he traveled on horseback between his seven congregations. His influence covered a wide area, and he is remembered as the "Father of Independence in Mecklenburg County." He was buried in the first Sugaw Creek graveyard and for years tall sassafras trees were the only adornments on his grave.

The 150-year old school house to the front of the church attests to a commitment to education among the early Presbyterian settlers. Promising boys were given classical instruction here at the [Sugaw Creek Academy](#) from the 1760s. This plain Federal-style brick school house was constructed in 1837 to house fifteen students, replacing an earlier log building.



Sugaw Creek Academy

In 1765, three years after the county was officially recognized, there was a conflict here between Lord Selwyn's surveyor, Henry McCulloh, and the local population. Lord Selwyn had been granted title to all of the land in the county by King George II and had instructed McCulloh to survey it and settle it with one person per 200 acres. Local settlers felt differently. They had already claimed their land with their sweat and toil. A group of about 100 men met McCulloh "with guns in their hands" and threatened to "tie him neck and heels and carry him over the Yadkin" river. The situation was saved by McCulloh's good sense to bargain with the leader of the group, Tom Polk. McCulloh granted Polk a tract of land one mile square for 90 pounds sterling, and instructed him to build a town with a courthouse, prison, and stocks. It was a historic moment for the county, since it secured Polk's own home at the crossing of two Indian trails (now Trade and Tryon streets) as the future county seat and city of Charlotte.

Tom Polk and his fellows must have been trying to curry favor when they chose "Mecklenburg" for the county name, "Charlotte" for the county seat, and "Tryon" for the principal road. King George III's new bride was the German princess Charlotte of Mecklenburg, and Tryon was the British governor of the colony of North Carolina.

Turn right past the school onto Tryon St. After the traffic light at Craighead St. look carefully for a house on your right, partially hidden by trees. Turn right into the drive to view "Rosedale."

28. This elegant plantation house was called "Frew's Folly" when it was built in circa 1815, possibly because of its grand interior woodwork. Archibald Frew was a tax collector, which may explain why he built so lavishly by backcountry standards. The house had been associated with several of the county's notable families: the Caldwells and the Davidsons. It was locally noted for its fine gardens and a horse riding tournament that featured a rather dangerous lance throwing competition! For tour information for Historic [Rosedale](#), call (704) 335-0325.



Rosedale

This concludes the Eastern Mecklenburg loop. To return to Charlotte, turn right onto Tryon St., and follow it into the center of town. As you pass under the second railway bridge after about 2 miles, keep to the left to continue on Tryon St. To return to I-77, turn right onto Tryon St. After about 2 miles, as you pass under the second railway bridge, bear to the right. At the next junction, make a shallow right turn to get on to the freeway entrance ramp. Shortly after joining the Brookshire Freeway (I-277), you will reach I-77.