

W. T. Alexander House



This report was written on July 5, 1976.

1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the W. T. Alexander House is located to the northwest of the intersection of Mallard Creek Church Rd. and U. S. Highway 29 in the northeastern portion of Mecklenburg County.

2. Name, addresses, and telephone numbers of the present owners and occupants of the property:

The present owner of the property is:
Sarah Land Alexander, Trustee
Route 10, Box 362
Charlotte, NC 28213

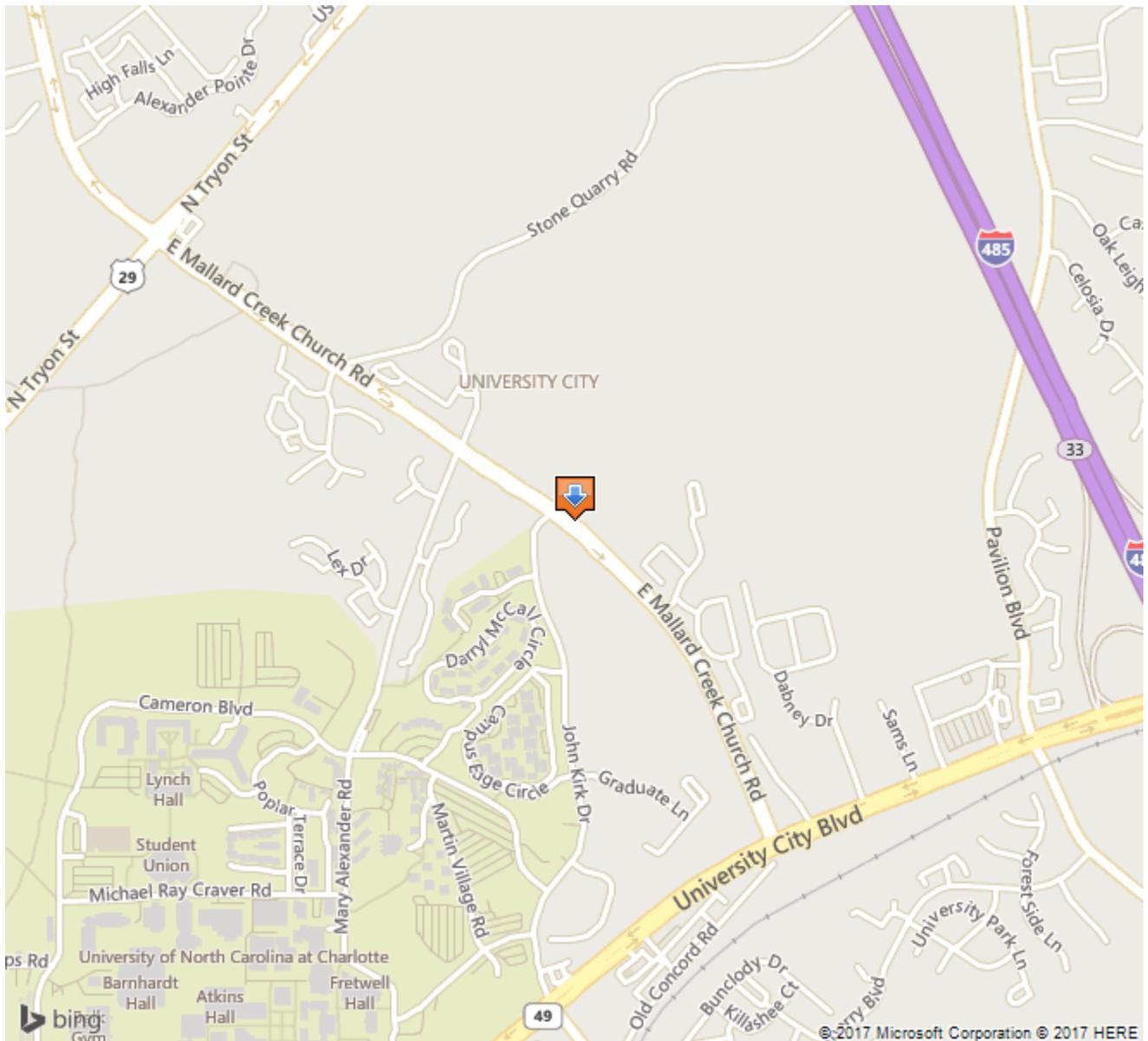
Telephone: 596-0187

The present occupants of the property are:
William Tasse Alexander III
Sarah Margaret Land Alexander
Sarah Land Alexander (daughter)
Address: Same as above

Telephone: Same as above

3. Representative photographs of the property: Representative photographs of the property are included in this report.

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 reference to this property is found in Mecklenburg County Deed Book Number 2126 at Page 254. The Parcel of the Property is 02903204.

6. A brief historical sketch of the Property:

Family tradition holds that the house was built by John E. Orr in 1799 and that W. T. Alexander I acquired it in 1823 or 1824. This writer found no documentary confirmation of this contention. Admittedly, however, a definitive answer awaits a commitment to research which is beyond the scope and purposes of this report. But one thing is certain. The house became intimately associated with the life and times of William Tasse Alexander I (1802-1870).

Born the son of Moses Alexander and Elizabeth Orr Alexander on December 10, 1802, William purchased a 100 acre tract "lying on the headwaters of Mallard Creek" from Samuel C. Caldwell on October 12, 1819. This was the initial portion of what was to become a 935 acre plantation by the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861. Through the years Mr. Alexander demonstrated that he knew how to make money in the economic system of the Old South. This was the era of King Cotton. The invention of the cotton gin by Eli Whitney in 1792 had revolutionized the economy of the Southern hinterland. Until then, the removal of the seeds from the fiber of upland cotton had been prohibitively expensive. The cotton gin had solved that problem. Now the farmers in the interior, including those in Mecklenburg County, could gain access to the almost unlimited market for cotton provided by the British textile industry. William Tasse Alexander labored to do just that.

An essential ingredient for success was the securement of an adequate labor supply to work the fields and to administer the plantation. Planters attempted to solve this problem by having large families and by purchasing and encouraging the propagation of slaves. William Tasse Alexander used both methods. He was the father of thirteen children, six of whom survived his death. His first wife, Mary Hunter, whom he married on April 1, 1824, died on August 24, 1831. He married Margaret M. Harris on March 26, 1833. Four children were born to this union, two of whom survived their mother's death on April 3, 1839. On June 32, 1840, he married his third wife, Mary J. Orr. One child survived her death on September 15, 1842. His fourth and final wife, Margery Helen Cochran, whom he married on August 4, 1846, had three children who reached adulthood: James G. Alexander, Rebecca N. Alexander, and William Tasse Columbus Alexander. Their mother lived until January 10, 1910.

By 1861 Mr. Alexander had become the owner of more than thirty slaves, many of whom are buried in a cemetery now located in a wooded area off of Mallard Creek Church Rd. The public records of Mecklenburg County document the fact that

William Tasse Alexander participated in the local slave trade, Here is an indenture from old Deed Book 23 at Page 88.

State of North Carolina, Mecklenburg County. Know all men by these presents that I, Sam McComb, Executor of Jane Emerson, deceased, hath this day sold unto Wm. T. Alexander one negro named George about 22 years of age. What negro boy I do warrant to be sound and healthy and further warrant him against the claims of all persons in witness whereof I set my hand and seal the 15th day of November, 1833.

Among Mr. Alexander's slaves was a female named Violet. Apparently, her offspring contributed significantly to the economic success of the plantation. At least one can infer that William had a special regard for Violet, because her grave is the only one in the slave cemetery which has a marked tombstone. William Tasse Alexander wrote his Last Will and Testament on June 28, 1859. His father, who lived on 185 acres of land on Mallard Creek across from the mouth of Stony Creek, had died on March 31, 1859. This event had probably caused William to reflect upon his own mortality. In this document, Mr. Alexander made provisions for the upkeep of his wife and children. It called for the distribution of land, slaves, livestock, equipment and furniture. For example, each of his children was to receive one bed, one bureau, and one table. Mr. Alexander also stipulated that three of his slaves were to be granted their freedom upon his death -- a practice not uncommon among the planters of the Old South. His heirs were to make the selection. Interestingly, however, Violet and a man named Solomon were to "remain upon my plantation with my wife and be supported out of my Estate."

The last years were not kind to William Tasse Alexander, The Civil War destroyed his fortune. The emancipation of the slaves was particularly disastrous. During the 1850s it was not uncommon for a planter to pay \$2000 for a male slave, \$500 for a female, and up to \$7500 for a slave family. The defeat of the Confederacy voided this entire investment. The agony of this loss, the disruption of his way of life, the elimination of the very institutions around which he had structured his existence, this was more than Mr. Alexander's mind could accommodate. He began to partake of alcoholic beverages to an excessive degree. Indeed, he had always liked whiskey. In 1836 he had been excluded from Mallard Creek Presbyterian Church because of his refusal to sign an oath that he would desist from drinking. The newspaper account of his death described his mental condition during these final years.

Four years before his death he was deprived of the use of his reason. So that instead of being, as he had been, the kind husband, the indulgent parent, the accommodating neighbor, he became a source of continual anxiety to his deeply afflicted family.

William Tasse Alexander I died on February 15, 1870. He is buried in the Mallard Creek Presbyterian Church Cemetery.

As noted earlier, only six of William Tasse Alexander's children were living at the time of his death. The youngest boy was William Tasse Columbus Alexander, born October 14, 1861. He was later to have his legal name changed to William Tasse Alexander II. By a settlement of his father's estate on April 10, 1872, he inherited approximately 190 acres of land, including the plantation house. His mother, Margery Cochran Alexander, lived with her son until her death on January 10, 1910. It is reasonable to assume that she and her older children managed the property during William's minority.

William Tasse Alexander II was a man of independent spirit, even to the extent of joining the Republican Party and thereby ostracizing himself from the majority of the residents in the Mallard Creek community. He also acquired some notoriety as a rider of fast horses. Indeed, it was this practice which brought him into contact with his wife, Mary Charlotte Watkins, whom he married on May 18, 1898. As a young teacher at the school in Newell, N.C., she saw William pass by on a fast-moving mount. She expressed an interest in meeting this gentleman and obviously succeeded. They had five children: Marjorie Alexander, Thomas W. Alexander, Robert F. Alexander, James M. Alexander, and William Tasse Alexander III. W. T. Alexander II resided in the house and farmed the surrounding property until his death on June 30, 1928.

Mary Charlotte Watkins Alexander was a truly remarkable human being. The daughter of a newspaper columnist in Wadesboro, N.C., she devoted much of her life to educational pursuits. She taught in the public schools in Union County and at Newell for over twenty years. She completed courses at Queens College, Montreat College, Peace College and Davidson College after she had turned 90. She was a member of the first graduation class at Woman's College in Greensboro, N. C. In September 1957 Mrs. Alexander donated five acres of land to Charlotte College for use as a road to the college site. The main thoroughfare on the UNCC Campus is named Mary Alexander Blvd. in her honor. She died at the age of 95 on June 15, 1964. She was an active member of the Mallard Creek Presbyterian Church, where she and her husband are buried.

On January 25, 1960, she granted the house and 77.06 acres of land to the three daughters of William Tasse Alexander III with their mother, Sarah Margaret Land

Alexander, acting as Trustee. William Tasse Alexander III, his wife, and his oldest daughter continue to reside in the house. Born the son of W. T. Alexander II on February 1, 1904, W. T. Alexander III married Sarah Margaret Land on July 10, 1943. He directs the activities of the Alexander Tank and Equipment Co. He been active in the affairs of the Republican Party of Mecklenburg County. Indeed, he ran unsuccessfully for the State Senate in 1958. Farming operations ended on the homeplace in 1952.

7. A brief architectural description of the property: This report contains an architectural description prepared by Jack O. Boyte, AIA.

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

a. Historical and cultural significance: The historical and cultural significance of the property known as the W. T. Alexander House rests upon two factors. First, it has strong associative ties with a family of considerable local prominence. Second, it architectural value as one of the finer Federal Style plantation houses extant in Mecklenburg County.

b. Suitability for preservation and restoration: The W. T. Alexander House retains much of its original integrity and therefore is suitable for preservation and restoration.

c. Educational value: The W. T. Alexander House has educational value as one of the finer older homes in Mecklenburg County.

d. Cost of acquisition, restoration, maintenance or repair: The Commission no intention of purchasing this property nor is it aware of any intention of the owner to sell. The Commission assumes that all costs associated with renovating and maintaining the property will be paid by the owner or subsequent owners of the property.

e. Possibilities for adaptive or alternative use of the property: The Commission concurs with the present owner's intention to maintain the house as a viable dwelling. The house could be transformed into a house museum.

f. Appraised value: The current tax appraisal value of the 77.06 acres and the house itself is \$189,280. The Commission is aware that designation of the property would allow the owner to apply for a special tax classification.

g. The administrative and financial responsibility of any person or organization willing to underwrite all or a portion of such costs: As indicated earlier, the Commission has no intention of purchasing this property. Furthermore, the Commission assumes that any costs associated with the property will be met by whatever party now owns or will subsequently own the property. Clearly, the present owner has demonstrated the capacity to meet the expenses associated with maintaining the structure.

9. Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets the criteria established for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places: The Commission judges that the property known as the W. T. Alexander House does meet the criteria of the National Register of Historic Places. Basic to the Commission's judgment is its knowledge of the fact that the National Register of Historic Places functions to identify properties of local and state historic significance. The Commission believes that the property known as the W. T. Alexander House is of local historic significance and thereby meets the criteria of the National Register of Historic Places.

10. Documentation of why and in what ways the property is of historical importance to Charlotte and/or Mecklenburg County: As noted earlier, the property known as the W. T. Alexander House is of local historical importance for two reasons. First, it has strong associative ties with a family of considerable local prominence. William Tasse Alexander I was a prominent planter of the antebellum era. His home served as the centerpiece of a major cotton plantation in the Mallard Creek community. Mary C. Alexander was a woman who made a lasting contribution to what is now the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Second, the house has architectural value as one of the finer Federal Style plantation houses extant in Mecklenburg County.

Bibliography:

An Inventory Of Older Buildings In Mecklenburg County And Charlotte For The Historic Properties Commission.

Interview with Mr. W. T. Alexander III (July 2, 1976).

Mecklenburg County Estate Records.

Records of the Mecklenburg Register of Deeds Office.

Records of the Mecklenburg County Tax Office.

Records supplied by Mr. W. T. Alexander III.

Charlotte Observer (July 1, 1928).

Charlotte Observer (June 16, 1964).

United States Census Records.

Unpublished Manuscripts in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Library.

Date of Preparation of this report: July 5, 1976

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Telephone: 332-2726

Architectural Description

by

Jack O. Boyte, A. I. A.

Among the finest houses remaining from the Federal period in Mecklenburg County, the William Tasse Alexander house in the Mallard Creek community is an extraordinary example of all brick construction. Two stories high, the house is a simple rectangular structure with all four outside walls built of handmade brick faced with Flemish bond. Here and there the brickwork exhibits minor irregularities in pattern which simply add to the charm of the house. The handmade brick in the walls and chimneys were likely made on the place. W. T. Alexander, who now lives in the house, and who is the third owner bearing the name of the original settler and builder, has a rare molding box for shaping the clay mix. This box has been handed down in the Alexander family. In the brickwork on the west side is a brick imprinted with the initials "H. S. " or "S. H." which do occur in the family history. The three bay wide front facade has a central transomed entrance door flanked by single nine light over nine light windows. Above this, the second floor front has three balancing bays of nine light over six light windows.

At each gabled end massive chimneys start on low stone bases and rise to single shoulders above the second floor windows. Over the shoulders narrower chimneys, in which simple stretcher courses occur, continue to plain corbeled caps high above the roof. Whereas one would expect these narrow high chimneys to set out from the gable walls in the event wood siding was used, in this house with its full brick exterior the chimneys are built integrally with the gable brickwork. At each side of the chimney on both floors are single windows similar in size to those at the front. In the gable walls at each end smaller nine light casement windows beside the narrow chimneys provide light and ventilation in the garret.

The rear facade is three bays wide like the front, and also has a transomed center door. At the rear there is a one story shed wing across the full width of the house which continues to the east some distance to include a new kitchen. This entire wing was reconstructed in recent years. The original house probably contained a shed wing at the rear with two small rooms opening from a central hall. This hall likely joined the main two story section at the transomed center door. It is said that there was a shed roofed porch across the front until recent times, an expected feature in this type of piedmont plantation architecture, although presently the front entrance is covered with a simple, small porch of recent vintage.

The exterior walls rest on ashlar stone foundations of cut granite. There was at least one nearby quarry in northern Mecklenburg County in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, and several contemporary places have granite features still remaining.

From the stone foundation the Flemish bond brickwork rises two stories to intricate cornices front and rear. At the front a wooden frieze starts just above brick soldier courses over second floor windows. This frieze flares out in a broad curved overhang form to a narrow fascia on which is applied a heavy shingle mold. There were no gutters. At the spring line of this curved overhang a small stylized rope molding runs continuously across the front. Below this is a pattern of flat scalloped pendant like elements added to the lower frieze surface creating a cornice pattern of rare design. At the rear the cornice configuration is more traditional with a wide molded frieze supporting a boxed overhang, which includes a narrow fascia and a wide shingle mold. Roof surfaces were originally riven oak or cypress shingles (shingling strips are still in place in the garret roof). Now, however, roofs are covered with modern shingles. The window heads on both floors have brick soldier courses above. Window sills are all heavy -square wooden members. All windows are original, and all have rebuilt three panel solid wood blinds on original strap hinges and drive pintles. The new blinds were fabricated to closely duplicate the original.

Upon entering the house, one finds an astonishing array of original hand fabricated wood trim. This work shows much of the delicacy of the Adam style popular in the Federal period. Yet there is obvious intermix of solid Georgian influence. The interior has extraordinary sophistication for the early nineteenth century in these parts. All first floor walls are finished with elaborate wooden wainscoting below molded chair rails. The wainscot material is wide, hand planed boards divided into panels by repeated molded stiles. Walls above are plaster applied to the interior of the thick exterior brick walls. At the ceiling a heavy Georgian cornice abuts a surface of broad tongue and grooved boards. Windows and exterior doors are set in flared coves which traverse the wall thickness with clean simplicity. These coves are all plastered. At the windows, flared wooden stools occur at chair rail height.

In the original house the front and rear doors opened to a great room, or parlor, at the left or west side, which encompassed a large part of the first floor and included a single run interior stair. In this room a large fireplace dominates the side wall. This fireplace is surrounded by a wide and high Federal mantel featuring simple pilasters on plinths rising to a narrow molded mantel shelf. There is no overmantel.

At the right of the entrance door, a thick interior plastered brick wall, which supports second floor joists, creates a long narrow dining room along the east side of the first floor. This room is said to have been divided into two equal small rooms until relatively recent times. There is an original door with original hardware leading to the rear from this room. This probably led from a warming room or pantry to the original summer kitchen in the yard. Now this door connects to the new abutting kitchen. There is no fireplace in the right side room now, but it is said that when the interior dividing partition was in place, the two rooms had small corner fireplaces. The configuration of these fireplaces appears in the floor and ceiling surfaces.

An interior partition, which was probably added in the late nineteenth century, creates a wide center stair hall from a segment of the large parlor. The stair finish and trim are exceptionally fine. On the open string there are delicate mahogany double scroll brackets at each riser. The stair balustrade consists of small square tapered balusters supporting a simple round rail. The single run of the stair rises some eleven feet-along the interior brick wall toward the rear to a wide second floor hall. The stair wall is plastered and has no chair rail or wainscot. Under the rear of the stair a partition of single thickness vertical tongue and grooved boards forms a closet. From the second floor hall original six panel doors, with original iron box lock and strap hinges, lead to two bed chambers on the west side. There are no fireplaces in these rooms; however in its original construction there were fireplaces in the high shouldered chimney. These were likely small, corner fireplaces centered in the partition which separates the two rooms.

On the opposite side of the stair hall there have been extensive revisions which changed the east side plan and also eliminated the fireplaces which were obviously there originally.

The finish work and decorative trim on the second floor is exceptionally fine. Most walls throughout the upstairs have fine wainscot paneling and well formed chair rails. At the wide board ceilings all rooms have elaborate crown molding. Window and door casing is equally elaborate. Interior non-bearing partitions are single boards joined with tongue and grooved edges and invariably finished with a fine half round beads. Noticeable on all these vertical plane partitions are the characteristic elongated plane marks left by the early craftsmen as they smoothed the surfaces.

Along the west side of the second floor stair hall is a narrow enclosure in which a steep stair rises to the garret. In the garret one finds the delightful details which illustrate so vividly the skill and pride of the early craftsmen. Rafters are carefully mortise and tenoned at the ridge and secured with tight fitting trenails. Roman numbers are imprinted in numerical succession on the joists and rafters. Extremely wide hand planed boards floor the entire garret, and original rough shingling strips remain in place across the rafters. In these strips one can see many of the original cut iron sprigs used for nailing the shingles.

On the exterior none of the dependencies remain. However the summer kitchen, smoke house, and at least one shed stood until recent times and are recalled in detail by the family. Hand made brick and some stone from these buildings were salvaged and are stored nearby. At the proper time these materials would be well suited for reconstructing these essential structures.

The history of Mecklenburg County is intimately woven into the fabric of its architectural heritage. The most vivid illustrations of the life and times of Scotch-Irish settlers in piedmont Carolina are their remarkable houses which dot the countryside. Here, in the W. T. Alexander house, is the story of one family whose local history begins with the log house of Moses Alexander before the Revolutionary War and continues with impressive continuity to the present. This house is an architectural treasure as well as an essential segment of county history.