



Beaver Dam



This report was written on May 30, 1976

1. Name and location of the property: The property known as Beaver Dam is located on N. C. Highway 73, east of Davidson, N.C., in the northern portion of Mecklenburg County.

2. Name, address, and telephone number of the present owners and occupants of the property: The present owner of the property are:

Dr. Chalmers Gaston Davidson
c/o Davidson College
Davidson, N.C. 28036

Telephone 892-8021 ext. 331

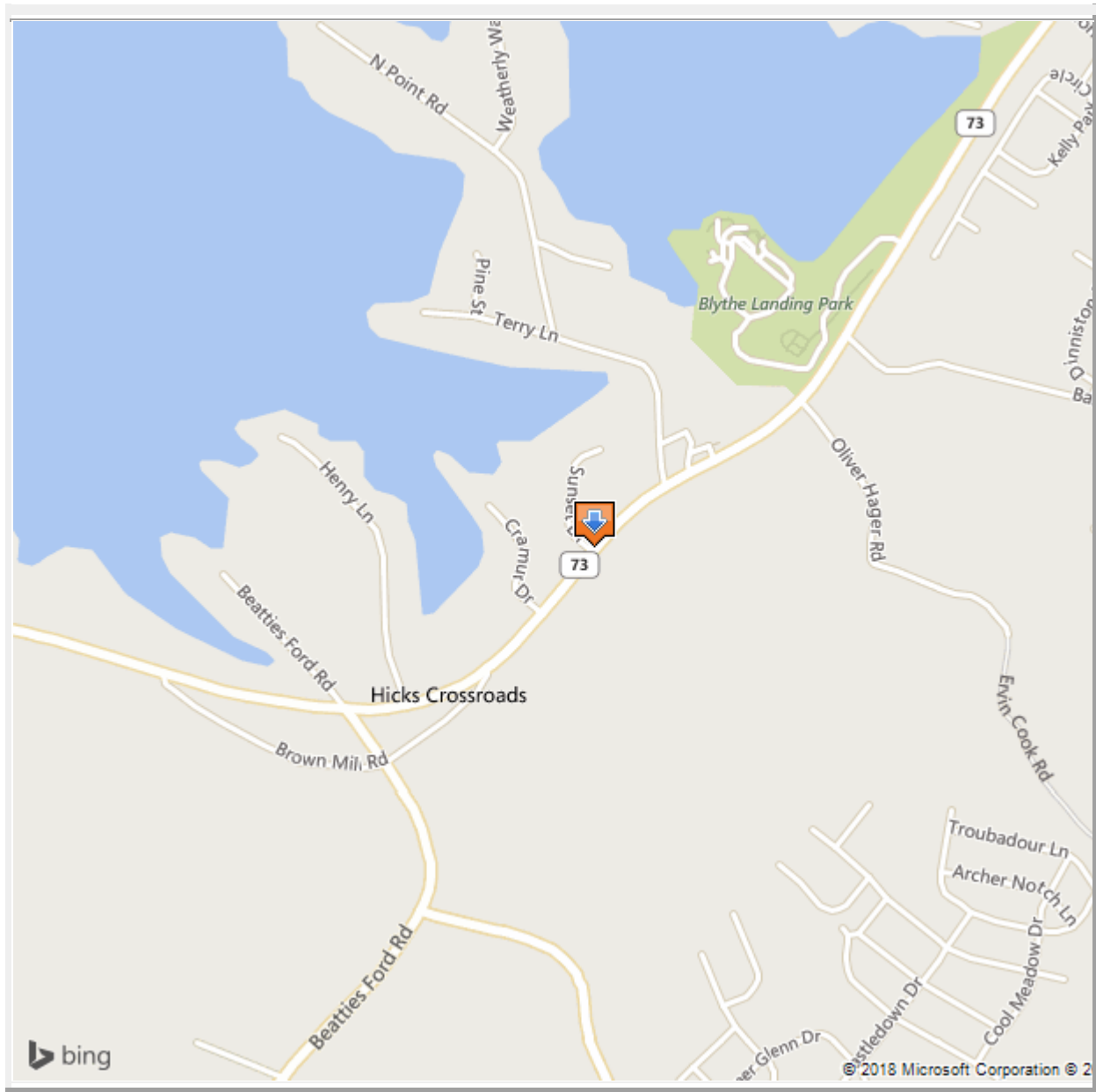
The present occupants of the property are:
Dr. and Mrs. Chalmers G. Davidson

Concord Rd.
Davidson, N.C. 28036

Telephone Unpublished

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

4. A map depicting the location of the location of the property: This report contains a map depicting the location of 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 9531 at Page 14. The Parcel Number of the property is 00727206.

6. A brief historical sketch of the property: This report contains an historical sketch prepared by Dr. Chalmers G. Davidson.

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

8. Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets the criteria set forth in NCGS 160A-399.4:

a. Historical and cultural significance:

The historical and cultural significance of the property known as Beaver Dam rests upon two factors. First, the house has strong associative ties with events and individuals of local and regional historical importance. It was erected by William Lee Davidson, II, the son of General William Lee Davidson who was killed in the battle of Cowan's Ford on the Catawba on February 1, 1780. Major John Davidson, a signer of the controversial Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence, lived in the house for several years. It served as the location for the meeting of the committee of the Concord Presbytery on May 13, 1835, which decided to locate nearby what later became known as Davidson College. Second, the house has architectural significance as one of the finer Federal Style plantation houses extant in Mecklenburg County.

b. Suitability for preservation and restoration: The house is in a state of excellent repair, having been restored to serve as the residence of the present owner.

c. Educational value: The house has educational value as an example of restoration, as an architecturally significant structure, and as a site of substantial associative historical value.

d. Cost of acquisition, restoration, maintenance or repair: The Commission has no intention of purchasing this property. Nor is it aware of any intention of the present owner to sell. It assumes that all costs associated with renovating and maintaining the structure 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 use of the property as a residence.

f. Appraised Value: The current tax appraisal value of the structure is \$41,750. The tax appraisal value of the land is \$7,380. 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 all costs associated with the structure will be met by whatever party now owns or will subsequently own the property. Clearly, the present owner has demonstrated the capacity to met the expenses associated with restoring the structure.

9. Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets the criteria for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places: The Commission judges that the property known as Beaver Dam 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 Beaver Dam is of local and regional 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 Beaver Dam is of local historic importance for two reasons. First, the house has strong associative ties with events and individuals of local and regional historic importance. Second, the house has architectural significance 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.

Records of the Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office.

Records of the Mecklenburg County Tax Office.

Date of Preparation of this report: May 30, 1976

Prepared by: Dr. Dan L. Morrill, Director
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Properties Commission
139 Middleton Dr.
Charlotte, N.C. 28207

Telephone: 332-2726

Historical Overview

Dr. Chalmers G. Davidson

The historical significance of the 1829 house on Beaver Dam plantation derives from its connection with the Revolutionary War and Davidson College. The house was built by William Lee Davidson, II, the son of General William Lee Davidson who was killed in the battle of Cowan's Ford on the Catawba on February 1, 1780, attempting to slow the progress northward of Lord Cornwallis. William Lee, II, was only one month old at the time of his father's death. He acquired the original acreage (451 acres) by purchase in 1808 (Mecklenburg Deed Book 19, p. 538) a part of which had been a grant from the King to his mother's uncle Robert Brevard. The plantation was later expanded to 785 acres. Davidson's first home at this location was an unclapboarded log house, traditionally three stories high. In September of 1829, according to markings on the east chimney, he built the present house. On October 30, 1805, he had married Elizabeth Davidson, the youngest daughter of Major John Davidson of Rural Hill plantation in Mecklenburg County. No children were born from this union. Major John Davidson made his final home with his daughter Betsy and son-in-law William Lee Davidson. He was the last surviving "signer" of the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence. When further evidence of this controversial event was being collected in 1830, Major Davidson was called upon for testimony. Then in his 95th year, Major Davidson dictated and signed a lucid account of the events of fifty-five years previous stating that "I am confident that the Declaration of Independence by the people of Mecklenburg was made public at least twelve months before that of the Congress of the United States." The letter was dated "Beaver Dam, October 5, 1830" and the original is now in the Mecklenburg Declaration MSS. in the Library of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Major John Davidson died at Beaver Dam on January 10, 1832, and was taken back to the family burying-ground at Rural Hill for interment beside his wife.

Beaver Dam is also intimately connected with the founding of Davidson College. William Lee Davidson, II, was a Presbyterian elder and a member of the committee of Concord Presbytery whose purpose it was to select a site for the "Manual Labour School" to be founded by the Presbytery. At the meeting of this committee on May 13, 1835, at the home of "William Lee Davidson, Esq., in north Mecklenburg ... at candlelight after solemn and special prayer to Almighty God for the aid of his grace" they decided to purchase 469 acres from Mr. Davidson for \$1521. This tract was not a part of his Beaver Dam plantation but some two miles east of it, lying partly in Mecklenburg and partly in Iredell County. As yet the "Manual Labour School" had no name. At a later meeting of Presbytery, August 26, 1835, it was decided to name the institution "Davidson College"

... as a tribute to the memory of that distinguished and excellent man, General William Davidson, who in the ardor of patriotism, fearlessly contending for the liberty of his country, fell (universally lamented) in the Battle of Cowan's Ford.

There is no recording of a deed of sale in the Mecklenburg or Iredell courthouses, and the tradition is that the land was given by William Lee Davidson after the college was named for his father. Whether true or not, there is a record of the gift of \$2000 by William Lee Davidson for the endowment of a professorship at Davidson College in 1839, so if he took the money originally it is obvious that he later gave it back. Davidson was much interested in the infant institution and served as one of the vice-presidents of its first Board of Trustees and as treasurer of the college. There are many references to his activities in the minutes of the Board of Trustees now preserved at the College. In his old age, he removed to the state of Alabama selling his North Carolina property. He died in Alabama on November 13, 1862, and in his will left the College eight thousand dollars, one thousand each, in addition, to the two literary societies, and one fourth interest in his estate after the special legacies were paid. The Board of Trustees adopted a testimonial of thanks for "his liberal pecuniary contributions and for many years of personal service rendered to the institution while he resided in its vicinity and now for the munificent bequest of which the board has just received official information."

William Lee Davidson invested heavily in the production of silk while operating his Beaver Dam plantation. He planted mulberry trees and built silk houses. But the experiment was not a financial success and he abandoned it when he removed from North Carolina to Alabama. According to the Census of 1830, he was the owner of 25 slaves in Mecklenburg County. He owned 65 in Alabama in 1860. In politics, he was an old line Whig and served as state senator for Mecklenburg in 1818 but did not pursue a political career.

The most interesting account of the domestic life at Beaver Dam during the antebellum period comes from the pen of Mrs. "Stonewall" Jackson who was a great niece of Elizabeth (Mrs. Wm. Lee) Davidson and a frequent visitor. Mrs. Jackson's father was President Robert Hall Morrison of the College.

Architectural Description

by Jack O. Boyte, A.I.A.

During the middle years of the Eighteenth Century an early North Mecklenburg settler, Robert Brevard, received a land grant from the King of some 800 acres at the headwaters of Rocky River and lying along the Salisbury Post Road just north of the present Cornelius. In 1808 a large section of this land along Beaver Dam Creek was purchased by William Lee Davidson, II. Here this son and namesake of the renowned Revolutionary hero built a homestead for his bride of three years, Betsy Davidson (his second cousin). The young couple's first house was a simple log structure said to be three stories high but probably two with a finished garret. For some twenty years they lived in this log house as their fortunes improved. Finally, in 1829, they built a new two story plantation manor house. This house stands today on a knoll beside the Concord

Road just outside the village of Davidson essentially as it was when first erected and still called 'Beaver Dam' after 150 years.

The main body of the house is a two story rectangular log structure facing south. Interior and exterior finishes were smooth wood paneling and clapboard siding nailed to wood strips applied to the log surfaces.

A reconstructed one story lean-to wing covers the full width at the rear and a balancing porch with a shed roof spans the width of front. The front facade includes four bays on each floor. The front entrance door occurs in the right center first floor bay. Original strap hinges have been retained. The rear facade original balanced four windows on the second floor. At each gabled end original hand made brick chimneys rise from stone bases to single shoulders over second floor fireplaces. Above these shoulders the chimneys set out from the gable siding and extend to corbelled caps high above the ridge. Brickwork in both chimneys is remarkably well preserved. Laid in Flemish bond, the coursing shows typical queen closures at each corner. High in the brickwork of the east chimney the date of original construction, Sept. 1829, is cast in clear relief in one brick.

Exterior surfaces of the house were originally water sawn clapboard featuring fine hand beaded lower edges. This siding has been replaced with new work, fabricated to precisely match the original. Under the front porch roof, wall surfaces are covered with flush, tongue and grooved siding all of which is original.

The house rests on large corner foundation stones 12 to 18 inches above the ground. Originally open, the foundation walls have in recent years been filled in solidly with additional field stone, original massive hand hewn joists supported both floors and the second floor ceiling.

Initially the roof covering was probably hand split shingles smoothed with a draw knife. These have been replaced with new hand split cedar shakes. Windows on both floors were originally 9 over 9 light. These units have all been replaced with new sash closely matching the original. All windows now have louvered wood blinds.

While the exterior of the house has been carefully reconditioned with close attention to original materials, it is on the interior where one finds relatively undisturbed original construction with remarkably preserved and restored hand crafted wood finish work.

Inside the six panel front entrance door a wide hall connects all first floor rooms and features a carefully crafted open stair. The hall forms a wide foyer at the front with an original six panel pine door at the rear. This door has recessed flat panels on the hall side and beaded panel edges opposite. The hall a fine chair rail, molded crown mold and base. Wall and ceiling surfaces are wide, flush pine boards.

From the foyer one enters a large parlor on the left through a reproduced six panel pine door with original strap hinges. The parlor is dominated by simple yet skillfully detailed mantle.

Narrow paneled pilasters rise at each side to a shallow multi-mitered mantle shelf, with a molded lip. A flat panel insert with beaded edges is centered over the fireplace opening.

Walls are all wide, smooth, tongue and grooved boards. At window stool height a molded chair rail surrounds the room. Below this rail removal of later paint revealed original stenciling on all four walls. Above a small crown mold the ceiling is wide boards, matching the walls. Door and window trim consists of planted three inch casing edged with a molded back bank. Floors are original six inch wide pine planks carefully cleaned and waxed. Molded base boards are applied to lower wall surfaces. To the right (east side) of the entrance hall another six panel door opens to a smaller dining room. This room also features a fine mantle similar to that in the parlor, but with fluted pilasters and center panel. Elsewhere, this room is trimmed in a manner like the parlor. To the left rear of the entrance hall the simply detailed stair rises in three runs to a wide second floor landing at the front. This stair has four inch square chamfered newel posts and two delicate, angular balusters on each tread.

A simple rounded rail with molded edges completes the balustrade. Under the stair an original closet with a small two panel door retains many of the early interior characteristics including aged pine surfaces, mortised and pegged shelving and exposed cut nail heads. At the rear of the stair hall and the dining room doors open to the lean-to wing. This wing has been reconstructed. However, records and tradition tell us that this wing contained two rooms opening from the rear hall. There is evidence that each room had a side wall fireplace and secondary chimneys occurred at the sides of the wing.

From the second floor stair landing an original low six panel door opens to the west into a large bed chamber. As with the first floor rooms, the chamber is dominated by a large carefully proportioned mantle. Chair rails and other trim are similar to those below. In this room two windows face the front, two flank the fireplace on the side wall, and two face the rear. A smaller bed chamber opens from the east side of the second floor hall. In this room the original fireplace has been closed. Trim and finishes are later additions. One window to the front, two at the side, and one at the rear provide light and ventilation here.

Beaver Dam is a vivid reminder of the earliest plantation days of Piedmont Carolina. The house exhibits little sophistication if compared to coastal towns of the Federal Period. But, in the context of place and time it was a fine house and represented a successful effort on the part of William and Betsy Davidson to add elegance to their lives.

The site for Davidson College, 469 acres belonging to William Lee Davidson two miles west of his resident plantation, was chosen by a committee of Concord Presbytery meeting in the living room of the Beaver Dam place in 1835. The 469 acres, according to family tradition, was given to the college by Davidson when the institution was named for his father.

During the years when the plantation flourished, William Lee and Betsy Davidson had a brick walled garden to the rear ornamented with rows of boxwood which "exceeds anything of the kind" to be seen according to the *Charlotte Democrat* of July 11, 1871. A rare feature of the

plantation was an attempt by Davidson to grow and market silk. Even now there are mulberry trees here and there on the place to remind us of those days.

Title to the property passed through many hands over the years and finally in 1936 it was acquired by collateral descendants of the first owners. In recent years the house and grounds have been carefully restored and adapted for contemporary use. It represents an exceptional example of adaptive use for a significant part of Mecklenburg architectural heritage.