

Survey and Research Report
on the
Bradford Farm and Store



Bradford House



Bradford Store

1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the Bradford Farm and Store is located at 15908 Davidson Concord Road in Huntersville, North Carolina.
2. Name, address, and telephone number of the current owner of the property:

The current owners of the property are:

House:

Elizabeth Bradford Milsaps

15908 Davidson-Concord Road

Huntersville, NC 28078

Telephone: (704) 875-2587

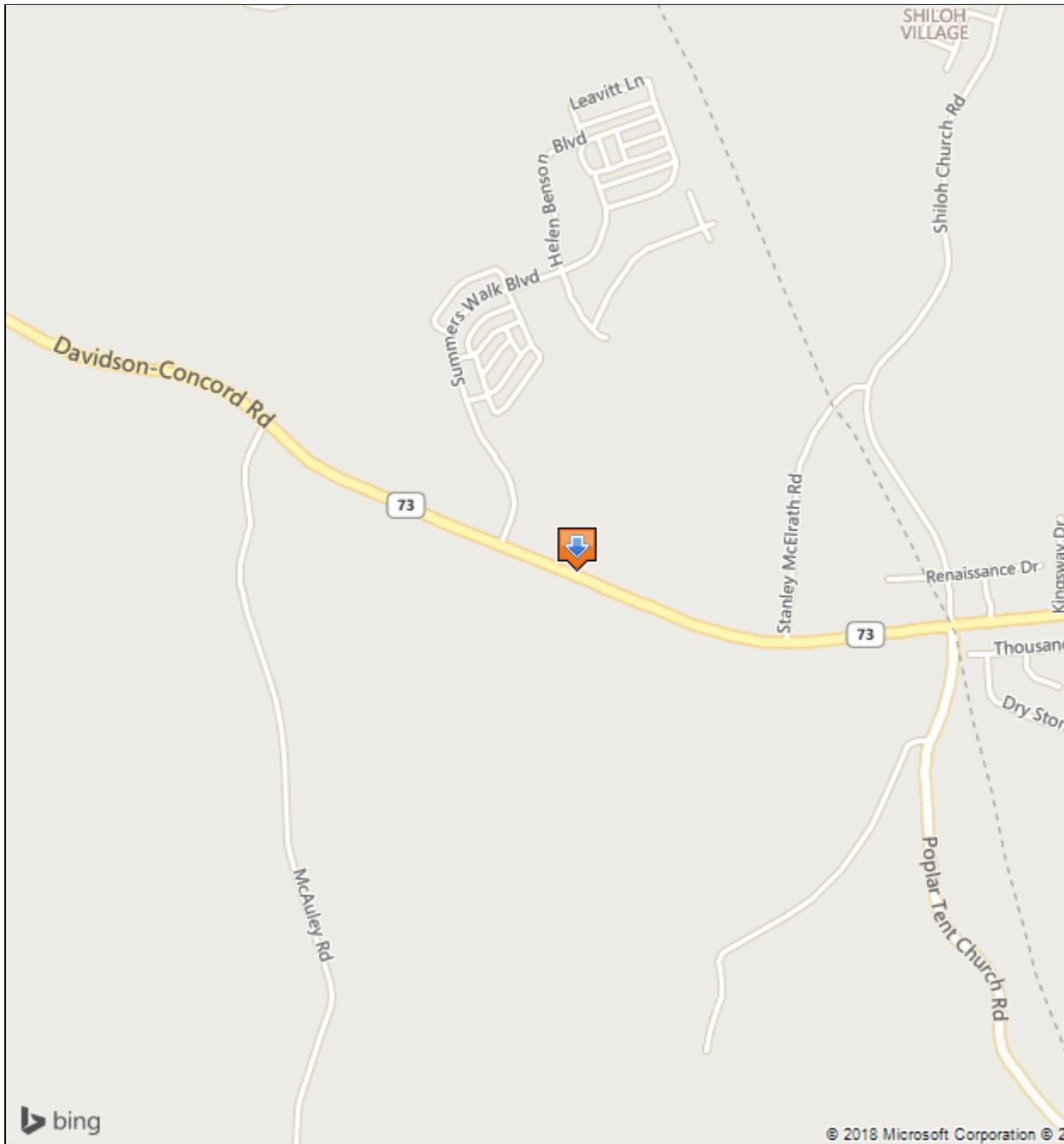
Store:

Mary Stewart Bost

P.O. Box 1245

Davidson, NC

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 depicting the location of the property.



5. Current deed reference of the property: The most recent deed to the property found under Tax Parcel Number 007-47-107 is found in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 4887, page 809. The most recent deed to the property found under Tax Parcel Number 011-09-204 is found in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 5803, page 285.

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

7. A brief architectural description of the property: This report contains a brief architectural description of the property prepared by Emily and Lara 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:
 - a. Special significance in terms of its history, architecture, and/or cultural importance: The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission judges that the property known as the Bradford Farm and Store possesses special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations:
 - 1) The Bradford Farm and Store are tangible reminders of the robust cotton economy that characterized Mecklenburg County in the last half of the nineteenth century.
 - 2) The Bradford Farm and Store served as an integral part of the Ramah Community – in addition to his store, William Bradford ran a cotton gin, a blacksmith shop, and a sawmill on his property. William Bradford also served three terms as county commissioner during the 1910s.
 - 3) The Bradford Farm is a well-preserved example of a sprawling post-Civil War farmstead. The farmhouse itself is an excellent example of a gable-front-and-wing variation of Mecklenburg County’s most popular rural vernacular form—the I-house. The farm complex as a whole characterizes the diverse, self-sufficient nature of life in rural Mecklenburg County during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.
 - 4) The Bradford Farm contains three unusual examples of early twentieth century concrete construction—the Bradford Store, along with two outbuildings close to the house, all completed in the early to mid-1910s, are rare rural examples of this new building technology in Mecklenburg County.

- b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling, and/or association: The Commission judges that the architectural description included in this report demonstrates that the property known as the Bradford Farm and Store meets this criterion.

9. Ad Valorem Tax Appraisal: The Commission is aware that designation allows 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 a designated “historic landmark.” The total current appraised value of the house (\$99,600) and associated five acres of land (\$72,000) is \$171,600.00. The current appraised value of the store (\$4,550) and the associated sixteen and one-half acres (\$235,850) is \$240,400.

Date of Preparation of this Report:

April 18,2002

Prepared By:

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2436 N. Albany Ave., #1
Chicago, IL 60647

Statement of Significance

William Bradford Farm and Store

Huntersville, NC

Summary

The William Bradford Farm and Store, which flourished in the Ramah Community from the late-nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth century, possess local historic significance as tangible reminders of the robust cotton economy that characterized Mecklenburg County in the last half of the nineteenth century, and as integral parts of the rural farming community that centered around Ramah Presbyterian Church in northwest Mecklenburg County. Although the South's plantation system of agriculture was destroyed by defeat in the Civil War, Mecklenburg County's farming communities, made up primarily of small-scale farmers who did not own slaves, recovered quickly in the postwar period. The last half of the nineteenth century was one of the most prosperous times for farmers in the area—innovations in fertilizer and equipment made cotton easy to grow, and Charlotte's emergence as a regional cotton trading and textile hub made cotton easy to sell. Farmers like William Bradford were able to profit handsomely from this post-war cotton boom. Between 1890 and 1928, Bradford served as the head of a large farmstead situated prominently along the Davidson Concord Road. Although Bradford grew primarily cotton and corn as cash crops, he supplemented this income with several profitable side operations, providing the members of the Ramah Community with a country store, a cotton gin, a blacksmith shop, and a sawmill.

Architecturally, the Bradford farmstead is significant as an excellently preserved example of a turn-of-the-century farm complex. The farmhouse itself, a sprawling Queen Anne-inspired variation on the tradition vernacular I-house form, is a reflection of William Bradford's success as a farmer, businessman, and politician (he served three terms as a Mecklenburg County commissioner in the 1910s) and a tangible reminder of the family's prominent position within the Ramah Community. The house and the assortment of outbuildings that remain on the property—including a barn, a smokehouse, several storage and shed buildings, and the store across the street—form a comprehensive farm complex that characterizes the diverse and self-sufficient nature of life in rural Mecklenburg County during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

In addition to its significance as a social center and community store, the Bradford Store (completed in 1911) is also architecturally significant as an early example of hand cast concrete block construction in Mecklenburg County. Although concrete block was used as a cheap and durable alternative to wood in small communities throughout the United States between 1900 and 1930, relatively few examples of this early form of concrete block construction survive in rural Mecklenburg County. The unusual collection of cast concrete block outbuildings in the

Ramah Community can be attributed to the example set by William Bradford, who built his store and one of his farm outbuildings with the new material, and who most likely sold the blocks (or the machinery to make them) to other nearby farmers.

Agricultural Context and Historical Background Statement

The last half of the nineteenth century was a time of unprecedented development and prosperity for some farmers in Charlotte and Mecklenburg County. Emerging relatively unscathed from years of war, with railroads intact and a strong agrarian population of small farmers who had never relied on slave labor, the city and surrounding farming communities of Mecklenburg County entered a prolonged period of growth spurred by the a postwar boom in cotton prices.¹ Notoriously difficult to grow in Mecklenburg County, cotton had never been a particularly profitable crop for the area's farmers before the war. However, with the introduction of the fertilizer Peruvian guano in 1860, Mecklenburg County farmers were able to grow cotton in unprecedented amounts in the postwar period, just in time to take advantage of skyrocketing prices, especially after the Panic of 1893. Mecklenburg farmers also took advantage of their close proximity to Charlotte, which had emerged by the turn of the century as a vital cotton trading hub and the center of one of the country's most profitable textile regions.² These favorable economic and geographical conditions helped to make the period between 1860 and 1910 one of tremendous growth and expansion for successful farmers like William Bradford.

William Bradford was thirty-four when he purchased a parcel of farmland along the Davidson-Concord Road near Ramah Presbyterian Church from S. L. W. Johnson in 1890. He moved, along with his wife Mary and their children, into the modest one-story house already standing on the property and began farming cotton.³ It did not take long for the family to outgrow the house; to accommodate his six small children, William Bradford began work on a major addition to the small farmhouse in the late 1890s. By the turn of the century, the four-room building had been transformed into a spacious two-story farmhouse, which served both as a visible reflection of Bradford's economic success and as a more fitting centerpiece for what was quickly becoming one of the largest and most prosperous farmsteads in the Ramah Community.

During the early decades of the twentieth century, William Bradford began several business ventures that would make his farm a community center. In 1911, he constructed a one-story general store across the road from his home. Bradford's Store carried farming equipment, groceries, cloth, livestock, and a host of other provisions. "You could get almost anything at the Bradford Store," Joe Washam, a lifelong resident of the Ramah Community and owner of the nearby Washam Farm, recalled. "And if they didn't have, it, they could order it for you."⁴ By 1913, Bradford had constructed a cotton gin just behind the store; inspired by its success, he added a blacksmith shop. Farmers could now get their cotton ginned and their horses shod while they bought feed and other supplies; in winter months, they drove in to sit by the big pot bellied stove in the center of store and swap stories.⁵ William Bradford's popularity among his peers

extended beyond the walls of his store – he was elected and served as county commissioner from 1912 to 1914, and again from 1916 to 1920.⁶

Although William Bradford and his son, Hurd Grier Bradford, continued to grow cotton, corn, and grain as cash crops along with the rest of the farmers in the Ramah Community, they were constantly undertaking new projects to increase the profitability of their growing farmstead. The Bradfords took up chicken farming (an operation that included more than 10,000 chickens at its peak), built a large, two-story smokehouse that served the community, and started a sawmill in the glen behind the main house (an operation that eventually grew so large that Hurd Grier Bradford had to hire an overseer, John Overcash, to manage it). The Bradford House continued to grow and expand along with the farmstead; by 1928, the year William Bradford sold the farm to his son, Hurd, the farmhouse included two large, gabled rear additions and a wrap-around front porch. Hurd Bradford added a shed-roofed addition to the side of the house in the 1930s.⁷

Hurd Bradford continued to run the family farmstead, including the store, the cotton gin, the blacksmith shop, and the sawmill, after his father's death. In the late 1930s, the Works Progress Administration widened and paved Davidson-Concord Road. Hurd Bradford was forced to shorten the front of the store, but he still had room to put in a new gas pump—an amenity that would keep the store in business until the late 1950s.⁸ The cotton gin, not as important after the Great Depression, burned to the ground in 1945, was rebuilt, and burned again in 1953. Cotton prices continued to fall in the 1930s and 1940s, but the Bradford family, along with several of their neighbors, continued cotton farming until 1965, when the combined effects of the boll weevil and a “killing frost” ruined almost every farmer's crop. After that, Joe Washam recalled, “most people around here just didn't plant cotton the next year. You couldn't make money off it unless you had a cotton picker and at least couple of hundred acres.”⁹ Hurd Grier Bradford had died several years earlier, in 1959. After the last crop of cotton, his widow moved into Huntersville.¹⁰ The house was rented to a series of occupants until the 1970s, when Elizabeth Bradford Milsaps and Hurd Grier Bradford III, great grandchildren of William Bradford, inherited the property. Elizabeth Milsaps moved into the house in 1975, where she continues to reside.

Architectural Significance and Background Statement

Architecturally, the Bradford Farmstead is significant as an extraordinary example of a diverse and profitable turn-of-the-century farm complex, and as a tangible reminder of the wide variety of roles that a farmer could play within his small rural community. The typical farm in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Mecklenburg County was a self-sufficient complex, supporting not only cash crops like corn, cotton and grain, but also a variety of livestock (mainly hogs, cows and chickens) and kitchen gardens for family consumption. The daily operation of the average farm required an array of barns, storage sheds, and other outbuildings in addition to the farmhouse. William Bradford's farming operations alone necessitated two large barns, a

number of large chicken houses, cotton sheds, and even an unusual poured concrete building directly behind the house that served as a large cooling house where the family stored fruits and vegetables. A large farmstead in its own right, the additional buildings that housed William Bradford's other business ventures (the sawmill, cotton gin, blacksmith shop, and store) made the Bradford Farmstead an exceptional complex.¹¹ Although not all of the original outbuildings remain – the sawmill is gone, as are the chicken coops (torn down in the 1970s), the cotton gin and blacksmith shop, along with one of the farm's two barns—the farmstead as it stands today still conveys a sense of the original magnitude of Bradford's operations, and reflects the self-sufficient nature of life in early-twentieth century Mecklenburg County. In addition, the Bradford Farmstead has retained its original pastoral setting, surrounded by open fields and mature groves of trees.

The Bradford farmhouse itself is significant as the centerpiece of the Bradford Farm and as a representative example of late-nineteenth century rural vernacular architecture in Mecklenburg County. As Sherry Joines-Wyatt writes: "The period between the close of the Civil War and 1910 was one of rapid development and change," characteristics that were "expressively shown" through changes and developments in the design and construction of vernacular farmhouses.¹² New technologies in mass-production of decorative details, coupled with an ever-expanding network of railroads meant that even the most isolated farmer could easily update the look of his house. By the late 1800s, otherwise modest farmhouses were adorned with scrolled brackets, finials, decorative scrolled eaves, and turned porch details indicative of the wildly popular Victorian style. Although the I-house continued to be the most popular choice for Mecklenburg County farmers, even this conservative form showed subtle signs of Victorian influence—wrap-around porches, irregular plans (most often in an 'L' or 'T' in plan), and a 'triple A' roofline helped to "modernize" the traditional I-house form.¹³ The Bradford House, a gable-front-and-wing modification of the typical I-house plan, exhibits all of these typical "folk Victorian" features.

Standing across the road from the house, the Bradford Store, which served as a social gathering place for members of the Ramah Community, is also architecturally significant as an early example of hand-cast concrete block construction in rural Mecklenburg County. By the time William Bradford began plans to build his general store around 1910, concrete block had become a relatively popular and widely-used building material—in 1907, over a hundred companies across the United States were producing cast iron hand-tamped concrete block machines. Not only was concrete more durable than wood, it was cheaper, easier to build with and required no specialized labor. Early promoters of concrete block construction claimed that "two men [with no prior experience], one mixing and one tamping, could make some eighty to one hundred blocks a day."¹⁴ William Bradford and his son Hurd Grier Bradford purchased a concrete block machine and set up production across the street. By 1911, the store – a one-story building made primarily of smooth-faced block with rusticated "stone block" corners – was completed. The Bradfords were so impressed with the result, they used concrete block for another small outbuilding close to the main house. The presence of other similar concrete block outbuildings in the area—including the well house at the nearby Washam Farm—suggests that the Bradfords may have made concrete block to sell at their store or loaned their machine to neighbors. A 1997 inventory of Mecklenburg County's historic rural resources makes no mention of concrete block outbuildings, and the vast majority of the area's early twentieth

century outbuildings listed in the survey are simple frame structures. The Bradfords' use of concrete block for several of their buildings represents a break in traditional rural construction methods.

Physical Description

The Bradford Farm consists of two parcels of land that stand opposite one another along Davidson-Concord Road. The Bradford Farmhouse and surrounding outbuildings stand on the northern side of the road, on a rectangular parcel of land. The house, a two-story gable-front-and-wing frame structure with a triple-A roofline and original clapboard siding, stands at the front of the parcel. A large hipped roof front porch runs the entire length of the façade. Several later additions extend from the main body of the house. One of two similar gabled rear additions extends from the eastern side of the rear elevation and houses the family kitchen; a small shed addition, built in the 1930s, adds pantry space and a separate entrance onto the eastern side of the kitchen. The second gabled addition extends behind the house's central hallway, and is connected to the kitchen by what was originally a rear shed porch. The porch was enclosed and turned into a sitting room in the 1990s—the exterior of this addition features aluminum siding and a new brick chimney. The house retains many of its original six-over-six double hung windows, with the exception of paired two-over-two windows on the east elevation, a configuration of three single paned windows on the rear of the 1990s addition, and a one-over-one window (with what may be an original sunburst transom) on the rear of the kitchen. The metal roofing was put into place in 2001. The house's two original chimneys are simple brick with a corbelled top – the rear chimney is of a similar design. The house has little in the way of exterior decoration for a Victorian era house – a small, rounded design graces the ends of the house's gables, and simple Doric columns support the porch. The interior of the house retains many of its original features, including hardwood floors, wooden fireplace mantels, wainscoting, board and batten ceilings, and the original staircase (although the newel post has been replaced).

The outbuildings surrounding the Bradford House are all early-to-mid-twentieth century structures; to the west of the house stands a small concrete block building (with blocks identical to those used on the store) built in the 1910s that served until the late 1950s as the residence of the Bradford's African American farmhand, Rob Billy. Elizabeth Milsaps added the frame rear addition to this tiny structure, which now serves as her studio. A large, two-story unpainted frame storage building and a small frame chicken coop stand behind the studio. Immediately behind the house are the remains of a 1915 poured concrete building that, according to Hurd Grier Bradford III, was used as a large cooling house, where the family would store vegetables and fruits from the kitchen gardens. The family's two-story frame smokehouse stands behind this cooling house. Beyond the smokehouse, the land slopes downward towards the woods. On the edge of the woods stands the farmstead's remaining barn, a large, front gable frame structure covered in vertical wood planks and constructed in 1949.

The only building on the complex's southern parcel, the Bradford Store, stands on the edge of the road, facing the house. It is a one-story rectangular, front-gabled structure made of plain-faced, hand-cast concrete block with rusticated concrete block corners. The entrance to the building features a pair of wooden doors inset with ten glass panes flanked by large window openings filled with twenty-five fixed glass panes and topped by three transom openings with five panes apiece. The rear (south) elevation features two double-hung, six-over-six windows with large wooden lintels, and a plain wooden entranceway on the east elevation once gave access to the store's office. A gabled wooden overhang extending off the front of the building provided shelter for customers. The 1930s gas pump has been removed.

The Bradford Farmstead, despite minor alterations and the loss of several outbuildings, retains its integrity as a well-preserved example of a large turn-of-the-century farm complex in Mecklenburg County, an integral part of the Ramah Community in northeast Mecklenburg County, and a tangible reminder of Mecklenburg County's robust post-Civil War cotton economy. The Bradford Farm and Store, surrounded by pristine cornfields and woodland, both retain their original rural settings in the midst of rapidly expanding commercial and residential development.

¹ Thomas Hanchett, "The Growth of Charlotte: A History" (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, 1997), www.cmhpf.org.

² Sherry J. Joines and Dr. Dan Morrill, "Historic Rural Resources in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina" (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, 1997), www.cmhpf.org.

³ Eric Lang, "Report on the Bradford House and Store" (unpublished research paper, UNC-Charlotte, 2001), 3-4.

⁴ Emily and Lara Ramsey, interview with Joe Washam conducted January 10, 2002. Hereinafter cited as Washam Interview.

⁵ Lang, 4.

⁶ Lang, 2.

⁷ Emily and Lara Ramsey, interview with Hurd Grier Bradford II, conducted January 11, 2002, hereinafter cited as Bradford interview. Lara Ramsey, interview with Elizabeth Bradford Milsaps, conducted January 13, 2002. Hereinafter cited as Milsaps Interview.

⁸ Bradford Interview.

⁹ Washam Interview.

¹⁰ Milsaps Interview.

¹¹ Bradford Interview.

¹² Joines and Morrill, 4.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Pamela H. Simpson, *Cheap, Quick and Easy: Imitative Architectural Materials, 1870-1930* (Knoxville, 1999) 11-15.