

E. L. Baxter Davidson House



This report was written on March 30, 1998

1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the E. L. Baxter Davidson House is located on the southeast corner of Providence and Colville Roads in Charlotte, North Carolina. The current street address is 1115 Colville Road, though until recently the street address was 1401 Providence Road.

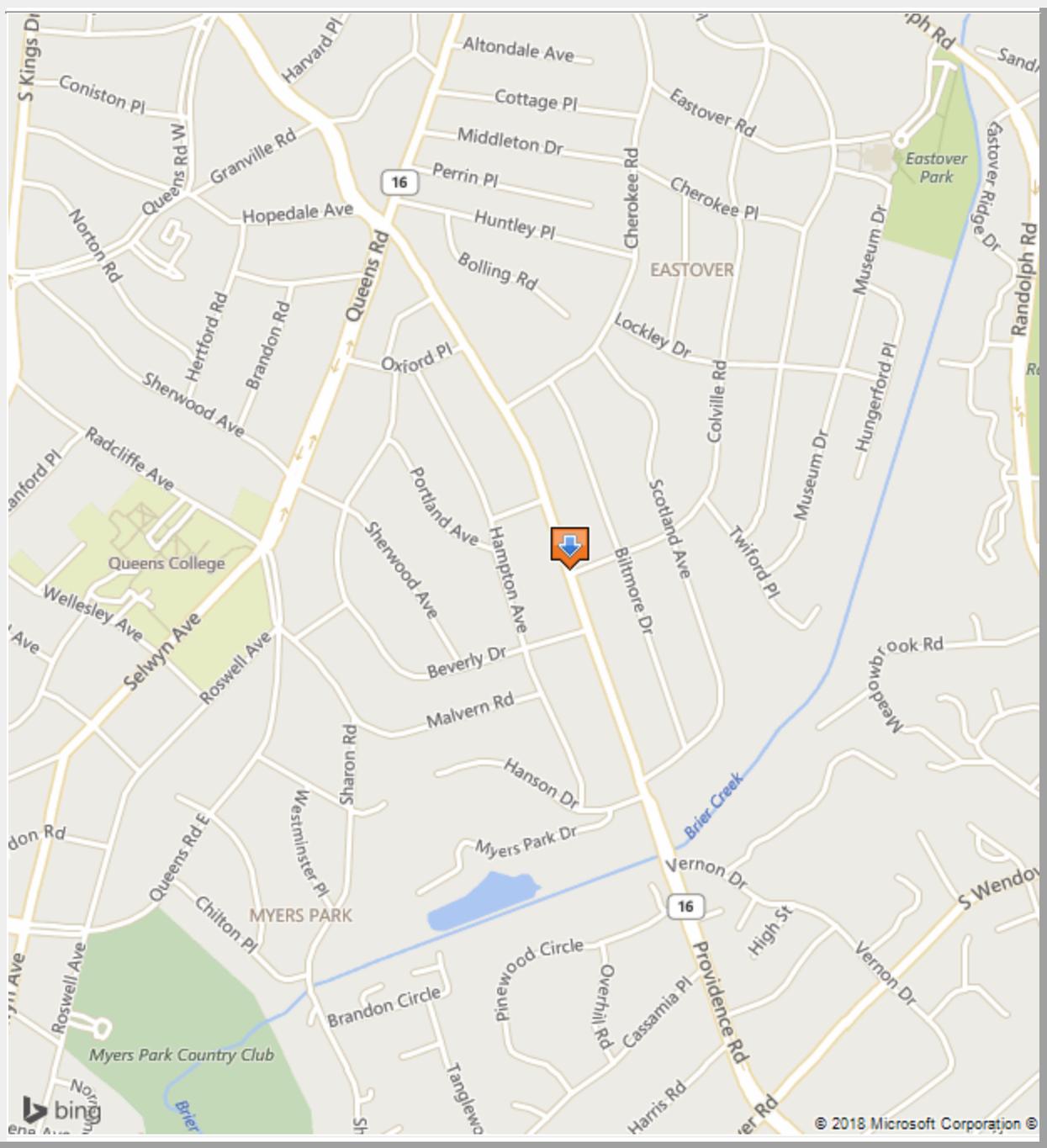
2. Name, address and telephone number of the present owner of the property: The present owners of the property are:

Thomas M. and Theresa R. Evans
1115 Colville Road
Charlotte, NC 28207

(704) 375 5992

3. Representative photographs of the property: This report contains representative black and white photographs of the property. Color slides are available at the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission office.

4. Maps 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 deed to this property is recorded in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 8173 on page 14. The tax parcel number of the property is # 155-121-02.

6. A brief historical sketch of the property: This report contains a brief historical sketch of the property.

7. A brief architectural description of the property: This report contains a brief architectural description of the property.

8. Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets 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 Commission judges that the property known as the E. L. Baxter Davidson House does possess special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations:

1) The E. L. Baxter Davidson House was sited on an isolated stretch of Providence Road, alone and surrounded by woods, when it was built in 1927. Though it was then located well beyond the outer reaches of urban development, it soon became part of one of Charlotte's most upscale neighborhoods. As such, it stood as a precursor of the growth and development patterns which would forever alter the landscape of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County.

2) It is the only building in Mecklenburg County associated with Colonel E. L. Baxter Davidson, who was "a descendant of noteworthy ancestry...[who was]...representative of those qualities of patriotism, strength of character and keen intelligence which have always distinguished the Davidson family." It was once said that "the Colonel might even be considered a municipal institution in the fine things he does for the city of Charlotte in the way of perpetuating its history and tradition." It is only fitting for us to honor his memory, just as he honored the memory of his ancestors, who were important figures in Mecklenburg County history.

b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling and/or association: The Commission contends that the physical and architectural description which is included in this report demonstrates that the E. L. Baxter Davidson House meets this criteria.

9. Ad Valorem tax appraisal: The Commission is aware that designation would allow the owner to apply for an automatic deferral of 50% of the Ad Valorem taxes on all or any portion of the property which becomes a designated 'historic landmark.' The current total appraised value of the improvements is \$212,700. The current total appraised value of the lot is \$162,000. The current total value is \$374,700. The property is zoned R-3.

10. Portion of the property recommended for designation: Only the exterior of the E. L. Baxter Davidson House and its lot are currently being considered for historic designation.

Date of preparation of this report: March 30, 1998

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Historical Overview

Land History

Providence Road is one of the oldest routes through southern Mecklenburg County, running from the city of Charlotte to Providence Presbyterian Church (a designated Charlotte- Mecklenburg Historic Landmark) and beyond. Most of the route passed through farmland until well into the twentieth century. In the mid-1920s, the area around the E. L. Baxter Davidson House belonged to Sarah L. Pharr. Miss Pharr realized the value of her property, which was propitiously located at the southern edge of the latest upscale neighborhood, Eastover. In 1926, she had a subdivision plan drawn up by civil engineer Wilbur W. Smith and recorded at the courthouse.

John H. McArn

John H. McArn was one of the early purchasers of lots in Sarah L. Pharr's subdivision. He bought lot 16 in block 8 on July 1, 1926. This was not, however, the first or only transaction between Miss Pharr and Mr. McArn. A 1925 contract on file at the Register of Deeds office named the county of residence for both of them as Robeson

County. One could conclude from this that they were acquainted there before doing business in Mecklenburg. On January 3, 1925, they entered into an agreement regarding a development scheme for 102 acres she owned north of Myers Park. This agreement granted McArn "the right and privilege to develop, handle and sell" the proposed subdivision, and spelled out some significant details of the arrangement. For whatever reason, the contract was canceled on October 1, 1927, in accord with "the mutual desire and agreement of both parties."

The 1920s housing boom was in full swing by 1926, and McArn tried to cash in on it. He established a business presence in Charlotte by 1926, the first year that the McArn Land Company was listed in the city directory. Over the next few years, he obtained many lots from either Miss Pharr or the Lex Marsh Company, a developer. In October and December of 1927, McArn and the Lex Marsh Company filed contracts for the construction of two apartment houses. Like his arrangement with Miss Pharr, these projects also fell through, and the contracts were canceled in July of 1928.

Despite his questionable success in business, McArn managed to leave his mark on the landscape. On July 1, 1926, he obtained the title to the lot at the southeast corner of Providence and Colville Roads, and soon after built a fine brick-veneered house for himself. According to city directories, McArn and his wife Bessie had moved to Charlotte by 1927, and in 1928 were listed as residing at that address. Since it was located outside the Charlotte city limits at the time, no building permit was required. The first mention of the building in the legal records is in the October 1927 contract with Lex Marsh Company. At that time, McArn planned to leverage the "Owner's equity in his residence known as 2001 Providence Road" as partial payment for construction costs. 2001 Providence Road was the original address of the house, but that changed within a few years to 1401 Providence Road. The current owners have changed the address again to 1115 Colville Road.

At the time it was built, the E. L. Baxter Davidson House was the only house on that stretch of Providence Road. Eastover was just becoming established, and hadn't yet reached that far south. McArn anticipated the pace and direction of growth when he chose the location for his house. Baxter Davidson's great-niece remembers when it stood alone, surrounded by woods. It was annexed by the city of Charlotte in 1928, and has been an urban address ever since.

McArn's foray into the development business was marked by failure, and he ultimately lost his home on Providence Road. On August 7, 1929, he conveyed the property to Lex Marsh Company. Five days later, Lex Marsh enacted a Deed of Trust with the Mechanics Perpetual Building and Loan Association against the property for \$16,000. Then on August 30, the property, along with the note, was transferred back to John H. and Bessie M. McArn. One possible explanation for this unusual behavior

was that McArn needed to raise cash and couldn't get a loan on his own. This series of transactions effectively left him with his home and a \$16,000 note.

Mechanics Perpetual Building and Loan Association foreclosed on the McArns on May 20, 1930, seven months after the stock market crash of 1929. After that, the McArns dropped out of the public record in Mecklenburg County and the house stood vacant for five years.

Colonel E. L. Baxter Davidson



E. L. Baxter Davidson in his fancy top hat.

Edward Lee Baxter Davidson (1858-1944) was a member of the illustrious Davidson family of Rural Hill plantation in north Mecklenburg County. Their story here began when Major John Davidson (1735-1832) immigrated to Mecklenburg County around 1760, and in 1761 married Violet Wilson (1742-1818). Violet Wilson was said to have descended from English royalty. They settled on a tract of land which remained until recently in the ownership of Davidson descendants. John Davidson was a prominent landowner, planter, slaveowner and businessman. He was quite active politically and militarily and achieved the rank of Major during the American Revolution. In 1788, he built a Georgian-style brick mansion that has been called "the grandest of the Catawba River plantation houses." Tragically, the house burned in 1886, leaving only ruins and the remains of its massive masonry columns. The site, along with the family burying ground, was declared a Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmark in 1987.

Major John Davidson had ten children, two of whom went on to build nearby plantation houses that endure today as designated Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks. Robert "Robin" Davidson (1769-1853) built Holly Bend (c. 1800) on Neck Road and his brother Benjamin "Independence Ben" Davidson (1798-1829) built Oak Lawn (c. 1820) on McCoy Road. A third son, John "Silver-headed Jacky" Davidson (1779-1870) became the father of Adam Brevard Davidson (1808-1896), who in turn became the father of E. L. Baxter Davidson.

E. L. Baxter Davidson was born at Rural Hill plantation to Mary Laura Springs (1813-1872) and Adam Brevard Davidson (1808-1896). He was the fourteenth of fifteen children born to the couple. A 1941 newspaper column says this about him: "a descendant of noteworthy ancestry whose brilliance of achievement, loyalty to duty and unselfish courage have been a challenge and an inspiration, Colonel Davidson is representative of those qualities of patriotism, strength of character and keen intelligence, which have always distinguished the Davidson family." Sometime after the Civil War, when Baxter was still a boy, his father moved the family into the burgeoning town of Charlotte and invested in real estate. Baxter began his working life as a clerk in his brother's store and would later make his own fortune in real estate. Among Baxter's investments were several properties in the heart of Charlotte, on the square at the juncture of Trade and Tryon Streets. His biography described him as "remarkably successful," and of his business acumen, says that "his intelligence and farsightedness, as well as his energy and determination in overcoming obstacles, have had their results in achieving what might have been too hard a task for a more easily daunted man." At some point, he acquired the moniker "Colonel," although he never served in the military.

Education was important to Baxter Davidson. He received his earliest schooling locally, and then attended the Finley High School in Lenoir. Davidson College, named after his relative General William Lee Davidson, was his alma mater. He graduated from there in 1881, and left the bulk of his estate to the college when he died.

Proud of his ancestry, Colonel Davidson took an interest in local and family history. His home on Providence Road contained a "family picture gallery." He was a member of the North Carolina Historical Society and served as a District Vice President of the Sons of the American Revolution. A 1931 newspaper article says of him: "the Colonel might even be considered a municipal institution in the fine things he does for the city of Charlotte in the way of perpetuating its history and tradition..." In 1923, he undertook the project of restoring and landscaping the Davidson family cemetery at Rural Hill. He enclosed the burying ground with an attractive rock wall built from three varieties of native stone found around the property. Later, he had similar walls built along Beattie's Ford Road in front of Hopewell Presbyterian Church and Williams Memorial Presbyterian Church. Historical markers were constructed and

placed along Beattie's Ford Road at the McIntyre battle site, at Neck Road, near NC 73, and at the Iredell County line. He undertook these projects entirely of his own volition and at his own expense. All three walls and four markers still remain today and could be considered local landmarks.

In April of 1935, at the age of 76, Baxter Davidson married. He wed a 48-year old widow named Sarah Vosburgh. Sarah and Baxter undoubtedly had a courtship period, for they knew each other for more than a year before their marriage. An unsourced newspaper clipping in the archives at Davidson College dated December 2, 1934, reports an automobile accident that Sarah Vosburgh and Baxter Davidson were involved in near Lincolnton. At the time of their wedding, it was noted of Sarah that "she had resided in Charlotte for a number of years and was widely known for her graciousness."



E. L. Baxter Davidson, Sarah Vosburg Davidson, Dr. Chalmers Davidson at Holly Bend

Sarah and Baxter Davidson purchased the house at 1401 Providence Road (now 1115 Colville Road) in July of 1935, where they remained for the rest of their lives. Baxter reportedly chose the house because it met his one criteria--the ceilings had to be high enough to hold his prized secretary desk. Baxter Davidson died in 1944 at age 86.

Sarah Williams Vosburgh Davidson

Sarah May Williams (1886-1973) was born in 1886 in Essex County, Virginia to William A. and Sarah Watts Williams. She was a descendant of William A. Williams, a signer of the Declaration of Independence. She married David Augustus Vosburgh, presumably in Virginia, and together they had a son, David Williams Vosburgh (1921-1957). David A. Vosburgh was a traveling salesman. Perhaps his business brought him through Charlotte, and he liked it well enough to move here. He is listed in the 1925 city directory as residing in the Clayton Hotel. There is no further listing until 1928, when Sarah W. Vosburgh was listed alone and named as his widow. Her profession was mentioned as practical nurse, and she lived in Steele Creek. By 1930, she had moved to N. Long Street and remained at that address until she married Baxter Davidson in 1935.

Sarah W. Vosburgh and E. L. Baxter Davidson both endorsed a prenuptial agreement just four days before their wedding date of April 20, 1935. In this contract, Baxter stipulated that Sarah was to receive \$30,000 in bonds (with interest) upon his decease. It further releases any rights, claims and interest he may have in her current or future property. In July of 1935, Sarah was the legal purchaser of the home they bought at 1401 Providence Road (now 1115 Colville Road). Perhaps Baxter had a premonition of things to come, for after his death in 1944, some of his relatives fought bitterly over his estate. In his will, he provided for Sarah, left small bequests to various churches, and set up a small trust fund for his nieces and nephews. But he left the bulk his estate to Davidson College. At the time of his death, Colonel Davidson's estate was estimated at between \$500,000 and \$1,000,000. Relatives sued to overturn the will, and the court prepared for what was thought would be "probably the largest contested will case in this county's history." Ultimately, a settlement was reached and the heirs received about \$108,000 between them. Throughout this ordeal, Sarah Davidson was able to remain in possession of the E. L. Baxter Davidson House. She continued to live there until she died of pneumonia in 1973 at age 87. She lies interred in the Davidson family cemetery at Rural Hill.

David W. Vosburgh

David Williams Vosburgh (1921-1957) was born in Richmond, Virginia to Sarah May Williams and David Augustus Vosburgh on February 19, 1921. When he first came to Charlotte is unknown. Letters written to his mother in 1931 and 1932 indicate that he was living apart from her, in Virginia, probably with relatives. Perhaps the newly-widowed Mrs. Vosburgh felt that others could provide for him better than she could at the time. David W. Vosburgh attended Davidson College, where he participated in various sports and activities and was a member of the Pi Kappa Alpha fraternity. After his graduation in 1942 "although he was offered a more lucrative position," he chose to serve Davidson College by working on a campaign to raise subscriptions for a new

gymnasium. At that time, he was considered "one of the most friendly and likeable chaps in the 1942 class."

While the United States was in the grips of World War II, Vosburgh entered the army. He served as a staff sergeant in the Medical Department at the 80th General Hospital at Camp White in Oregon. David took a war bride. The 1945/46 Charlotte city directory lists his spouse as Maxine K. Vosburgh. According to county records, they did not marry here, so it is possible that he met her somewhere along his travels with the military. In any event, Maxine was also living in the E. L. Baxter Davidson House in 1945/46. They divorced, and there is no further record of her here. David, however, shows up in the city directory again living at the house in 1951. Since the main listing at that address was in the name of Baxter, and later Sarah Davidson, it is not surprising that David was listed only sporadically.

An accident at home claimed David's life on March 21, 1957 at age 36. He fell and hit his head on the concrete steps that day, and died of his injuries eight hours later. He was buried with his stepfather's ancestors in the Davidson family cemetery at Rural Hill.

Later owners

After Sarah Davidson's death, in accordance with the terms of her will, the E. L. Baxter Davidson house passed out of the family to a friend and caretaker, John W. Gibbs. Dr. Gibbs then sold the property in 1974 to William E. and Lucy D. Christopher. The Christophers lived in the house through the late 1980s, and then rented it out to tenants for several years. The property was conveyed to the current owners in 1995.

Architectural Description

Overview

When it was built in 1927, the E. L. Baxter Davidson House was sited on an isolated stretch of Providence Road, alone and surrounded by woods. Though then located well beyond the outer reaches of urban development, it soon became part of one of Charlotte's most upscale neighborhoods. It is a handsome, two-story brick-veneered

house with Craftsman-style features that has seen very few alterations since the date of construction.

Setting

The E. L. Baxter Davidson House, together with its matching, free-standing garage, stand on a corner lot 100 by 175 feet. The house faces west toward busy Providence Road. The original driveway leads off of Providence Road sweeps in an arc in front of the house and exits onto Colville Road. This same drive has a leg which runs under the porte-cochere on the south side of the house and leads to the garage. A second, newer, driveway was put in behind the house and accesses only Colville Road. Solid wooden fencing encloses the back and part of the (north) side yard, including the new driveway. The landscaping features mature trees and ornamental shrubbery. Neighboring houses, neatly lined up on same-sized lots, are all of a slightly later vintage than the E. L. Baxter Davidson House.

Exterior

Wire-cut brick veneer covers the two-story E. L. Baxter Davidson House, which lends the home a very solid appearance. A hipped-roofed front porch shields the right (southern) two-thirds of the facade and extends out to form a porte-cochere over a portion of the old driveway. This automobile shelter has a clever feature--a low wall opposite the porch with a built-in planter box. The hip on the porch is broken by a front-facing cross gable over the center entry. The rooflines are repeated on the main body of the house--a hip pierced by a front-facing cross gable over the left (north) bay. The eaves do not reveal exposed roof rafter ends, as one would expect to see in the Craftsman style, but rather have the deep smooth soffits more commonly associated with the related Prairie style. Both cross gables are adorned with false half-timbering and a stucco finish. This decorative treatment is typical of the Craftsman style. Another Craftsman element is the bold, square brick piers that support the porch roof. The front entry is also of the style, and features a glazed front door with glazed sidelights.

Windows throughout the house are also in keeping with the Craftsman style. There is a single cottage window (a wide, single sash on the bottom with a short upper sash above it) on the first story of the left (north) bay. The dining room window (the center bay of the north elevation) has a tripartite arrangement of a short diamond-paned, fixed window in between two eight-over-one double-hung sash windows. The same eight-over-one double-hung sash windows are found elsewhere throughout the house, either singly or paired. The first floor windows are topped by brick soldier arches.

A small, one-story ell extends out from the first (west) bay of the north elevation. The configuration of this sunroom is original, but a broad exterior chimney was added on to it by previous owners. Great care was taken at the time to blend it in with the style of the house. It is stucco with false half-timbering just like the cross gables on the facade.

The original one-car garage also features the false half-timbering construction motif. The garage is freestanding and built of brick to match the house. It stands at the rear of the lot in the southeast corner.

Interior

Only the exterior of the E. L. Baxter Davidson House is being recommended for designation at this time. Therefore, the interior will not be discussed here.

Integrity

Very few changes have occurred to the exterior of the E. L. Baxter Davidson House. The stucco chimney, mentioned above, is the only significant alteration, and it was coordinated so well that the casual observer would hardly notice that it is not original. Overall, the level of integrity is very good.

Summary

The E. L. Baxter Davidson House is a handsome, solid, two-story brick-veneered house with Craftsman styling and a high level of integrity. The setting is uncompromised, and the property includes an original garage that matches the house in materials and style.

Notes

¹ Mecklenburg County Deed Book 628, page 404. Mecklenburg County Deed Book 671, page 565. Mecklenburg County Deed Book 686, page 58.

² Ernest H. Miller, compiler, Charlotte, N. C. City Directory (Asheville, NC: The Miller Press, 1926). Mecklenburg County Deed Book 679, page 316. Mecklenburg County Deed Book 686, page 85.

³Ernest H. Miller, compiler, Charlotte, N. C. City Directory (Asheville, NC: The Miller Press, various years). Mecklenburg County Deed Book 628, page 404. Mecklenburg County Deed Book 679, page 316.

⁴Mecklenburg County Deed Book 750, page 284. Mecklenburg County Deed Book 743, page 277. Mecklenburg County Deed Book 753, page 63.

⁵Mecklenburg County Deed Book 754, page 321. Ernest H. Miller, compiler, Charlotte, N. C. City Directory (Asheville, NC: The Miller Press, various years).

⁶Dr. William H. Huffman, "A Historical Sketch of Rural Hill" in Survey and Research Report on Rural Hill Plantation (Charlotte: Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Properties Commission, 1987). *American Biography, A New Cyclopedia*, vol. XLVI (NY: American Historical Society, Inc., 1931), pp. 89-90. Charles Wilson Sommerville, *The History of Hopewell Presbyterian Church* (np, 1931), pp. 124-126. "Signer of Mecklenburg Declaration Sleeps at Rural Hill" *The Charlotte Observer* 8 May 1927.

⁷*American Biography, A New Cyclopedia*, vol. XLVI (NY: American Historical Society, Inc., 1931), pp. 89-93. Charles Wilson Sommerville, *The History of Hopewell Presbyterian Church* (np, 1931), pp. 124-130.

⁸"Interesting Carolina People," *The Charlotte Observer*, August 1941. *American Biography, A New Cyclopedia*, vol. XLVI (NY: American Historical Society, Inc., 1931), p. 94. Interview with Miss Elizabeth Davidson, 29 March 1998.

⁹"Interesting Carolina People," *The Charlotte Observer*, August 1941. *American Biography, A New Cyclopedia*, vol. XLVI (NY: American Historical Society, Inc., 1931), p. 94.

¹⁰*American Biography, A New Cyclopedia*, vol. XLVI (NY: American Historical Society, Inc., 1931), p. 94. *The Charlotte News*, 18 May 1932. *The Charlotte Observer*, 16 August 1931, sec. 3, p. 2. "Interesting Carolina People," *The Charlotte Observer*, August 1941. "Baxter Davidson Erected Markers at Historic Sites" *The Charlotte Observer*, 21 August 1991, Mecklenburg Neighbors sec., p. 1.

¹¹Mecklenburg County Marriage Register, 1935. *The Charlotte Observer*, 21 April 1935, sec. 2, p. 5. Undated, unsourced newspaper clipping in the Davidson College archives (E. L. Baxter Davidson scrapbook). Mecklenburg County Deed Book 867, p. 78. Interview with Miss Elizabeth Davidson, 29 March 1998. Interview with Miss May Davidson, 29 March 1998. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Health Department, Death Certificate #955. 1944.

¹²*The Charlotte Observer*, 21 April 1935, sec. 2, p. 5. "Interesting Carolina People," *The Charlotte Observer*, August 1941. Ernest H. Miller, compiler, Charlotte, N. C. City Directory (Asheville, NC: The Miller Press, various years). *The Charlotte News*, 26 November 1973, p. 4-B.

¹³Mecklenburg County Deed Book 862, page 506. Mecklenburg County Deed Book 867, page 78. Mecklenburg County Will Book 4, page 25. *The Charlotte News*, 14 October 1947. *The Charlotte Observer*, 15 October 1947, sec. B, p. 1. *The Charlotte Observer*, 16 October 1947, sec. B, p. 1. *The Charlotte Observer*, 17 October 1947, sec. B, p. 1. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Health Department, Death Certificate #2962. 1973. *The Charlotte News*, 26 November 1973, p. 4-B. *The Charlotte Observer*, 26 November 1973. *The Mecklenburg Gazette*, 28 November 1973.

¹⁴(Virginia) Bureau of Vital Statistics, Birth Certificate, vol. 1023, #6805. 1921. Personal letters and unsourced article from the Davidson College Alumni File. *Davidson College The Quips and Cranks* (Davidson, NC: 1942), p. Davidson College Alumni File. Ernest H. Miller, compiler, Charlotte, N. C. City Directory (Asheville, NC: The Miller Press, various years). Interview with Miss Elizabeth Davidson, 29 March 1998.

¹⁵Charlotte-Mecklenburg Health Department, Death Certificate #466. 1957. *The Charlotte News*, 22 March 1957, p. 14-A.