

# Survey And Research Report On

## The Cemetery at the John Dinkins Farm



*This report was written on March 22, 1993*

**1. Name and location of the property:** The property known as the Cemetery at John Dinkins Farm is located on Nation's Ford Road near the intersection with the Outer Loop, Charlotte, in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina.

**2. Name, address and telephone number of the present owner of the property:** The owner of the property is:

John H. Bell, Jr.

2224 Cedar Bird Lane

Charlotte, North Carolina 28270

Telephone: (704) 841-8263

Tax Parcel Number: 203-055-13

**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 maps which depict the location of the property.



**5. Current Deed Book Reference to the property:** The most recent deed to Tax Parcel Number 203-055-13 is listed in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 7213 on page 629.

**6. A brief historical sketch of the property:** This report contains a brief historical sketch of the property prepared by Dr. William H. Huffman.

**7. A brief architectural description of the property:** This report contains a brief architectural description of the property prepared by Ms. Nora M. Black. A booklet entitled "The Dinkins Cemetery," written by Michael O. Blackstock, includes further information, epitaphs, photographs, and a map of the cemetery.

**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 Cemetery at John Dinkins Farm does possess special significance in terms of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations:

- 1) members of the Dinkins family were prominent early settlers and plantation owners settling in Mecklenburg County by 1723;
- 2) John Dinkins bought the 241-acre tract encompassing the cemetery in 1795;
- 3) the earliest known burial in the Cemetery at the John Dinkins Farm is that of Elizabeth Lawrenc [sic] in 1798;
- 4) many of John Dinkins' children and their offspring are buried in the cemetery; 5) some of the earlier tombstones may have been carved by members of the Bigham family, well-known stone carvers;
- 6) nineteen graves at the Cemetery at the John Dinkins Farm still have headstones;
- 7) additional graves and headstones would be revealed by archaeological excavation;
- 8) the Cemetery at the John Dinkins Farm gives important information about early burial practices in Mecklenburg County; and
- 9) preservation of the Cemetery at John Dinkins Farm gives honor and recognition to early settlers in Mecklenburg County.

**b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling, and/or**

**association:** The Commission contends that the architectural description by Ms. Nora M. Black (supplemented by the Blackstock booklet) included in this report demonstrates that the Cemetery at John Dinkins Farm meets this criterion.

**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 improvements have been moved from the site. The current appraised value of the tract is \$181,910. The size of Tax Parcel 203-055-13 is 4.640 acres in the current tax records or 7.372 acres (including road right of way) in the deed filed 2 March 1993. The 0.49 acre cemetery is located at the northern end of the tract. The total appraised value of the Tax Parcel is \$181,910. The property is zoned I1.

**Date of Preparation of this Report:** 22 March 1993

**Prepared by:** Dr. Dan L. Morrill Ms.

Nora M. Black, Associate A.I.A.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission

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### ***Historical Overview***

*Prepared by: Dr. William H. Huffman*

Located near the interaction of Nation's Ford Road and the Outerbelt Freeway 8-1/2 miles southwest of the center of Charlotte, the Dinkins Cemetery is one of Mecklenburg County's oldest and best preserved family cemeteries. In addition to having headstones that may have been carved by the Bighams, well-known stonecarvers of the area, it is also associated with the Dinkins family, who were

prominent early settlers and plantation owners. The Dinkins House (now moved to a new location on Sharon View Road in Charlotte), with which it was associated, was a stagecoach inn or tavern on the post road between the Catawba Indian Nation in South Carolina and Charlotte (thus "Nations Ford" Road). <sup>1</sup>

The Dinkins family first came to America when brothers John, James and Thomas landed in Charleston on the 19th of October, 1717 with four members of the Armstrong family, brothers John William, Robert, Henry and cousin Rufus George. The Dinkinses were originally Welsh, but migrated to Scotland in the sixteenth century, and later to Londonderry in Northern Ireland, from which they left for America. By 1723, they were settled in Mecklenburg County. <sup>2</sup>

The Dinkins family history has not been fully reconstructed and remains somewhat confusing, but some information has been gathered by various historians over the years. John Dinkins (c. 1731-1811), a descendant of one of the original settlers, bought a 241-acre tract from Francis Smart that encompasses the cemetery in 1795, but he may have lived on the land as early as 1788. <sup>3</sup> It is presumed that he built the plantation house and inn between 1795 and 1809 (when he prepared his will in which the house is mentioned). <sup>4</sup> There is an older frame, two-story structure behind the house site that may have been an earlier residence. Since the earliest known burial in the cemetery is 1795, the establishment of the graveyard is consistent with these dates.

John Dinkins was apparently married several times (to Fannie Henderson in 1751; and possibly to a Margaret ("Peggy") Dinkins; and Polly, his widow), and had had a number of children, seven of whom survived in 1809 when he made his will: Martha,

b. 1766; Joshua, b. 1770; James, b. 1772; Frederick, b. 1774; Mary, b. ?; Peggy, b. ?; and Elizabeth, b. ? [and possibly Polly, b. 1771, married to John Smith; and Captain John Dinkins, (1775-1805)]. The known marriages of these children are: Martha to John Kendrick in 1785; Joshua to Obedience Kendrick in 1803; James to Lucy Kendrick in 1793; Frederick to Cynthia Springs in 1802; Mary to \_\_\_\_ Smith; Peggy to \_\_\_\_ Henderson; and Elizabeth to \_\_\_\_ Bowden. <sup>5</sup> Apparently one of the daughters at one time had been married to James Roberts who died in 1804 at the age of 27; the Roberts grandchildren are named in John Dinkins' will, and Roberts' grave had been previously recorded in the Dinkins Cemetery but is not presently found. <sup>6</sup>

Many of John Dinkins' children and their offspring are buried in the cemetery. However, the exact whereabouts of the grave of John Dinkins himself remains a mystery. He was said to be the first Baptist in Mecklenburg County, and was a longtime member of the Flint Hill Baptist Church just over the border in South

Carolina. There is a marker for him at the church, where he was a charter member in 1792 and served as deacon, but he is neither buried at Flint Hill nor in the Dinkins family cemetery to the best of present knowledge.<sup>7</sup> There appear to be additional graves in the Dinkins Cemetery for which there are no headstones. Additional headstones could probably only be found by archaeological excavation.

It is likely that some of the earlier tombstones were carved by members of the Bigham family, who operated a stone carving shop about two miles to the northeast from about 1765 to about 1820. The Bighams carved gravestones throughout the Carolina Piedmont, and the most examples of their work in one place are found at the nearby Steele Creek Presbyterian Church.<sup>8</sup>

In his will, John Dinkins left the plantation to his son Frederick, which was transferred to him when John died in 1811. The prosperity of the plantation can be seen by the fact that Dinkins had thirty-two slaves he apportioned among his children.<sup>9</sup> When Frederick died in 1824, a guardian, John Springs, administered the estate for his minor children; in 1826 the estate was listed as having 480 acres, which included about 233 acres of a widow's dower.<sup>10</sup> Ownership is not clear thereafter until it was deeded as a 414-acre tract to John Williamson by D. R. Dunlap, C.M.E., in 1855.<sup>11</sup> Williamson's daughters, Martha E. Grier and Elizabeth C. Bell inherited the property about 1883, and In 1890 Elizabeth C. Bell became the sole owner, which was then 285 acres.<sup>12</sup> In 1947, John H. Bell, Elizabeth's son, became sole proprietor when he obtained the interests of the other six heirs to the land.<sup>13</sup> The cemetery has been surveyed as a separate site.<sup>14</sup>

Restoration and a new inventory of the cemetery has been undertaken as an Eagle Scout project in 1992 by Michael Blackstock, son of Jerry and Margaret Blackstock of Atlanta, Ga. Headstones have been cleaned, inscriptions recorded, headstones repaired and reset, and the crypt of Obedience Dinkins has been rebuilt. A fence is also being constructed around the cemetery.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Research paper by Mary Boyer, dated 10 March 1978, on file at the Charlotte Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission.

- <sup>2</sup> Undated typescripts, 'The Dinkins Family,' on file at the library of Davidson College, Davidson, NC, included with this report.
- <sup>3</sup> Mecklenburg County Deed Book 15, p. 125, 27 October 1795; Boyer, note 1.
- <sup>4</sup> Mecklenburg County Will Book C, p. 37; Dinkins died July 10, 1911; Boyer, note 1.
- <sup>5</sup> Typescripts, note 2; will, note 4.
- <sup>6</sup> *Early Family Burial Grounds of Mecklenburg County, North Carolina*, compiled by Alexandriana, Gen. Robert Irwin and Jane Parks McDowell Chapters of the D.A.R. (n.p. [Charlotte], n.d. [c. 1963]).
- <sup>7</sup> Boyer, note 1.
- <sup>8</sup> National Register of Historic Place Nomination, 'Steele Creek Presbyterian Church,' Charlotte Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission.
- <sup>9</sup> See note 4.
- <sup>10</sup> Boyer, note 1.
- <sup>11</sup> Mecklenburg County Deed Book 6, p. 588; Boyer, note 1.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, Book 76, p. 599.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, Book 1243, p. 203; see also Book 5552, p. 407.
- <sup>14</sup> Survey by F. Steve Widenhouse dated 11 June 1992 for the Charlotte Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission.

## *Architectural Overview*

*Prepared by: Ms. Nora M. Black*

The site of the John Dinkins Farm is located on Nations Ford Road at its intersection with the outer loop road (currently under construction). The Cemetery at the John Dinkins Farm occupies a 0.49 acre tract at the northernmost end of Tax Parcel Number 203-055-13. The cemetery, as surveyed 11 June 1992, is a trapezium with its northernmost corner located in a rock bed 7.22 feet from the outer loop right of way. The cemetery is usually entered from the south side through a newly constructed gateway. An old entrance on the east side is defined by a newly constructed fence paralleling the old raised road bed. The cemetery is part of a larger tract variously described as 4.64 acres by the Mecklenburg County Tax Office or 7.372 acres by the deed filed 2 March 1992 with the Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds. Mr. John H. Bell, Jr., the owner, inherited the land from his father, Mr. John H. Bell, Sr. One of the first model cemeteries in the United States, the New Burying Ground in New Haven, CT, was planned in 1796. It was conceived with a grid layout and plantings of Lombardy poplars and yews. The rational scheme of the New Burying Ground was not well received. It was only later, in 1835, that the first suburban cemetery in America was opened at Mount Auburn in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Until that time, most people were buried in the churchyard or in graveyards in the center of town.<sup>1</sup> The third alternative, in the case of rural landowners like the Dinkins' family, was burial in a cemetery on the family's landholdings.

The Cemetery at the John Dinkins Farm is laid out like most cemeteries of the period. The headstones face east (roughly) toward the rising sun. The graves are laid out in long rows running north/south with the coffins parallel to one another. Most of the graves did not have footstones or the footstones have not survived the years. One grave, that of Obedience Dinkins, has a brick tomb with a stone cap.

Over the years, trees have been allowed to grow inside the boundary of the burial ground. The tree roots have undermined several tombstones. In some locations, trees are growing in the depressions of the graves. Additionally, Dinkins family members have said that the cemetery was part of a pasture used for grazing cattle. The cattle are said to have dislodged or broken several tombstones.

The westernmost row has ten tombstones marking graves. Other rectangular depressions along the row indicate the possibility of additional graves. The dates of death on these tombstones range from 1823 to 1830. At least four of these graves



contain the remains of the children of James and Lucy Dinkins. The children's ages range from a daughter of six to a son of twenty-two. An additional 1828 grave is marked as that of "James, son of James Dinkins" with no mention of Lucy Dinkins.

The second row from the west contains five graves with tombstones. Again there are several depressions indicating the presence of other unmarked graves. Dates of death along this row range from 1817 to 1838. This row contains the recently reconstructed tomb of Obedience Dinkins.

The third row from the west has three graves with standing tombstones. These early tombstones have dates of death ranging from 1805 to 1815. This is the row containing the grave of Captain John Dinkins. Depressions along the row indicate the presence of other unmarked graves.

The fourth row from the west has the oldest standing tombstone from 1798, that of Elizabeth Lawrenc [sic]. No family information is recorded on this tombstone.

After the fourth row, it becomes difficult to discern additional rows in the cemetery. There are many rectangular depressions that are unmarked. On the eastern side of the cemetery, however, there is a row of three rough, uncarved stones turned on end. The alignment of the stones is roughly that of previously described rows. Such stones could have been placed to mark grave sites when original tombstones were destroyed or to mark the graves of slaves or travelers who died at the Dinkins farm.

The tombstones cover a range of shapes. Several are simple rectangular slabs of stone with information about the deceased providing the only decoration. Other stones have arched tops and rounded shoulders to add stylish touches. The rather elaborate tombstone of Joshua Dinkins has a fan motif in the arched top and a beaded edge. All the tombstones, even the simplest ones, reflect the wealth of the Dinkins family. For most early settlers, the purchase of tombstone was a large expense. "Besides the cost of carving, there was a hauling fee and other funeral costs. Therefore, for those few people who could erect a tombstone, it became a statement of economic and social superiority, and the examples ... read like a guide to the area's social circles. " <sup>2</sup>

Periwinkle, often used as a ground cover in cemeteries, is spreading in several areas of the cemetery. Michael Owen Blackstock performed a great service for the Cemetery at the John Dinkins Farm when he chose it for his Eagle Scout project. Mr. Blackstock cleared out undergrowth. He restored and reset several tombstones. Rebuilding the brick tomb of Obedience Dinkins was part of the project. Mr. Blackstock also installed some fencing to help define the area to be protected.

## **Conclusion**

The Cemetery at the John Dinkins Farm is the surviving remnant of both a National Register site and a locally designated historic landmark. The finishes and decorative details of the tombstones are well-conceived and well-executed. Until now the cemetery has survived largely because it was hidden from public view. As development comes ever nearer, the site is worthy of protection as an important link to Mecklenburg County's earliest settlers.

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## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Spiro Kostof, *America by Design* (New York, 1987), 217-221.

<sup>2</sup> Wade B. Fairey, "The Changing York County, South Carolina, Tombstone Business, 1750-1850," *Journal of Early Southern Decorative Arts*, Vol. XVI, No. 2, Nov. 1990.