

**OAK ROW AND ELM ROW**



*Elm Row*



*Oak Row*

*This report was written on May 3, 1977*

**1. Name and location of the property:** The property known as Oak Row and Elm Row is located on the campus of Davidson College in Davidson, NC.

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

The present owner of the property is:

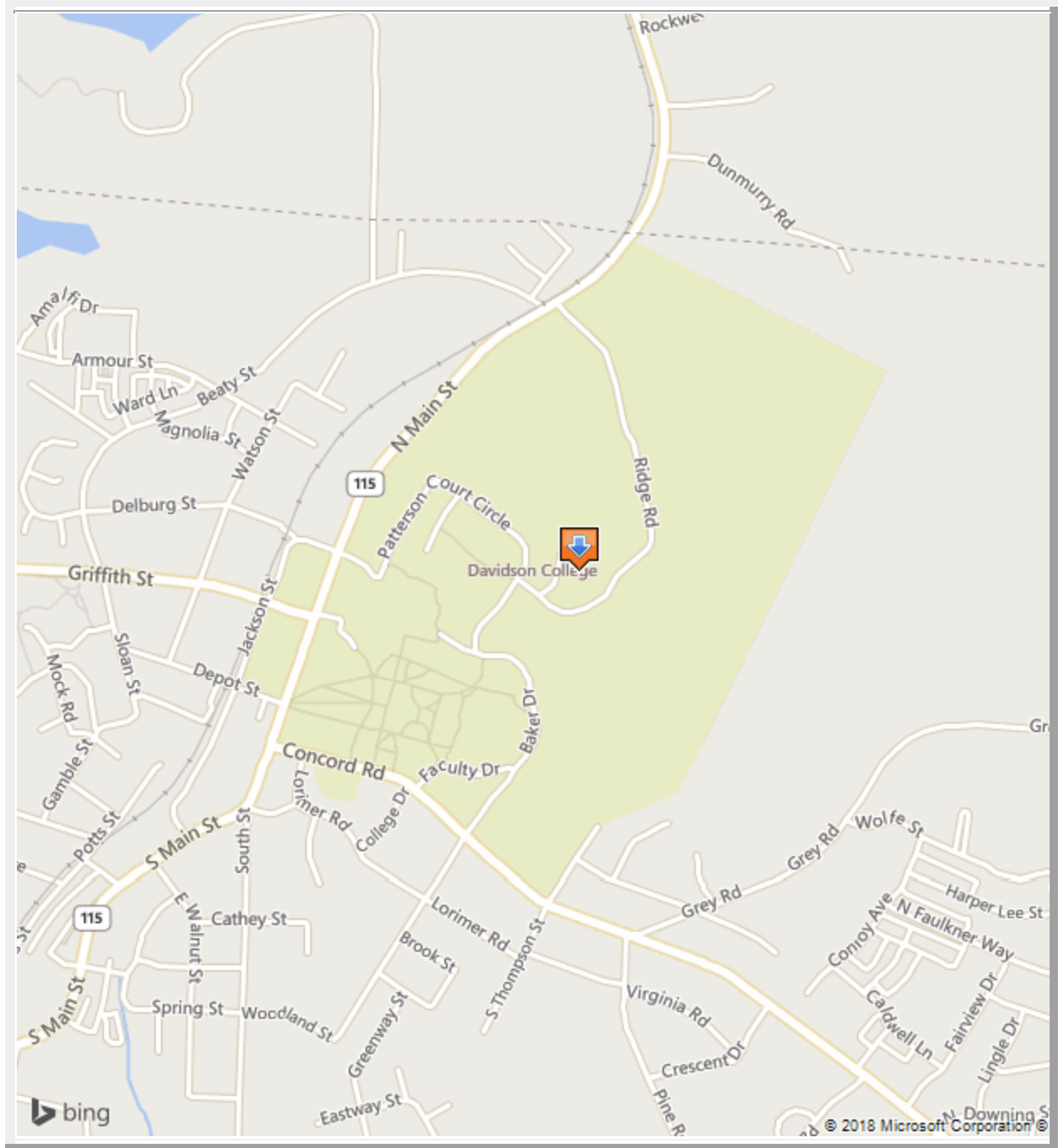
Davidson College

Davidson, NC 28036

Telephone: 892-8021

**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 Book Reference to the property:** The most recent reference to this property is found in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 2434 at page 339. The Parcel Number of the property is 00316201.

**6. A brief historical sketch of the property:**

Oak Row and Elm Row constitute part of the original Quadrangle of the Davidson College Campus. The structures initially served as dormitories and were constructed shortly before the college opened its doors to students in March 1837. Elm Row, the farther of the two from N. Main St., originally stood between two structures which no longer exist -- Steward's Hall (a dining commons and classroom building) to the right or south, and Tammany Hall (a two-story professor's house) to the left or north. The structure was moved a few feet southward in the 1960's. Oak Row is the only one of a series of one-story brick dormitories (probably three) which initially stood on the western side of the Quadrangle and stretched from Eumenean Hall to a point opposite the President's House. Both Oak Row and Elm Row originally contained four rooms. The style and placement of the buildings suggest that the founders of the institution were hoping to duplicate the ambience of Thomas Jefferson's famous "Lawn" at the University of Virginia. The exteriors of the buildings retain their original Jeffersonian Classical features, but the interiors of the structures have been massively altered and now house facilities of the Fine Arts Department of the college. Nevertheless, Oak Row and Elm Row possess historic significance because of their age. The Campus of Davidson College contains five antebellum structures (President's House, Philanthropic Hall, Eumenean Hall, Elm Row and Oak Row) of which these two constitute forty percent.

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

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

**a. Historical and cultural significance:** The historical and cultural significance of the property known as Oak Row and Elm Row rests upon two factors. First, the buildings constitute part of the original campus of a regionally-important institution of higher education. Second, the structures are among the more architecturally significant antebellum edifices which survive in Mecklenburg County.

**b. Suitability for preservation and restoration:** As mentioned above, the buildings retain much of their exterior integrity. If the owner wishes, he could return the interior of the structures to an approximation of their original appearance.

**c. Educational value:** The educational value of Oak Row and Elm Row stems from their historic significance. Also worth noting is the fact that these are the only antebellum structures surviving in Mecklenburg County which once served as dormitories.

**d. Cost of acquisition, restoration, maintenance or repair:** At present the Commission has no intention of purchasing the fee simple or any lesser included interest in this property nor is it aware of any intention of the owners 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 structures are currently being used for adaptive uses and are therefore clearly suited for that purpose. The Commission would welcome, however, the restoration of the interior of the structures to an approximation of their original appearance.

**f. Appraised value:** The current tax appraisal value of Elm Row is \$2390.00. The current tax appraisal value of Oak Row is \$15060.00. The Commission is aware that designation of the property would allow the owner to apply annually for an automatic deferral of 50% of the rate upon which Ad Valorem Taxes are calculated. This property, however, is exempt from Ad Valorem Taxes.

**g. The administrative and financial responsibility of any person or organization willing to underwrite all or a portion of such costs:** As stated earlier, the Commission at present has no intention of purchasing the fee simple or any lesser included interest in this property. Furthermore, the Commission assumes that all 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 property.

**9. Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets the criteria established for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places:** The Commission judges that the property known as Oak Row and Elm Row does meet the criteria of the National Register of Historic Places. Basic to the Commission's judgment is its knowledge that the National Register, established by the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, represents an expansion of the Federal Government's listing of historic places to include places of local, regional and state significance. The Commission believes that the property known as Oak Row and Elm Row is of local and regional 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 Oak Row and Elm Row is historically significant for two primary reasons. First, the buildings constitute part of the original campus of a regionally-important institution of higher education. Second, the structures are among the more architecturally significant antebellum edifices which survive in Mecklenburg County.

---

Bibliography

*An Inventory of Older Buildings In Mecklenburg County and Charlotte for the Historic Properties Commission.*

Chalmers Gaston Davidson, *The Plantation World Around Davidson* (Davidson Printing Co. for the Mecklenburg Historical Association, Davidson, NC, 1973 2nd ed., rev.) pp. 1-7.

Records of the Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office.

Records of the Mecklenburg County Tax Office.

**Date of Preparation of this report:** May 3, 1977

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

Telephone: 332-2726

***Architectural Description***

During the eighteenth century, and especially in the post-revolutionary years, large numbers of Scotch-Irish Presbyterians came to Mecklenburg and its neighboring Piedmont Carolina counties. These disciplined people fostered education as well as piety. Having the distinction of being the site of the first college in North Carolina, Charlotte was the center where these pioneers established Queens College in 1771. Responding to urging from Mecklenburg Presbyterians, Governor Tryon successfully sponsored an act which established the college and financed it by a duty of six pence per gallon on all rum made or consumed in the county. Troubles with George III and later financial stringencies caused by the war forced the school to close in 1780. The Presbyterian determination to establish a college for Mecklenburg youth never

flagged, however. In the early 1830's, the local Presbytery appointed committees to find land for a seminary, to raise the needed money, and to build a college. Important to this charge were instruction from the Presbytery that the site "must be within fifteen miles of Cowan, Ford." Obviously the name of the school was already on their minds, for at Cowan's Ford the namesake, General William Lee Davidson, fell a hero during the Revolution. On high land said to drain eastward to the Yadkin and westward to the Catawba the site committee secured acreage for the college (traditionally said to have been donated by General Davidson's descendant, William Lee Davidson, II.) Meanwhile supporters in Mecklenburg and its neighboring counties subscribed over \$30,000, and the building committee contracted with Messrs. S. & J. Lemly and H. Owens to erect eight buildings for the college, described thusly:

"three blocks one story high, 18 x 66 feet; one, two stories, 40 x 50 feet; one, two stories, 20 x 66 feet; one two stories, 22 x 32 feet; one, one story, 18 x 18 feet, and one, one story, 12 x 12 feet. All structures to have rock foundations, to be covered with tin, painted and completely finished for a total sum of \$10,250.00. Installment payments due March, 1836, March, 1837, and March, 1838."

From this remarkable document emerged the Davidson College campus of 1838.

Listed first in the contract, "three blocks one story high, 18 x 66 feet were four room dormitories, later expanded to include two additional blocks and known collectively as "The Rows". The campus plan was originally matching four sided courts or quadrangles anchored by a centered chapel, "two stories, 40 x 50 feet" in the contract, the President's House, "two stories, 22 x 32 feet" in the contract, and Stewart's Hall, "two stories, 20 x 66 feet." Aligned with the long sides of the quadrangles, the dormitories came to be known as "Oak Row" on the west and "Elm Rows on the east. And now one block from each of these rows is preserved, Oak in its original location and Elm recently relocated a short distance southward. The recorded agreement with the contractors fails to mention brick. But an initial purchase by the building committee consisted of 250,000 brick "bought from Major John Caldwell at the kiln for \$4.00 per thousand to be ready by November, 1835." All eight first buildings were obviously to be solid brick construction, and the preserved "rows" illustrate this. With solid exterior brick walls over 12" thick, the simple rectangular 18 x 66 foot structures rest on field stone foundation walls. Rising about ten feet to corbeled headers which form overhang cornices, exterior brick work is irregular American bond with one course of glazed headers for each four, five or six courses of stretchers.

Here and there in the face brick in order to maintain a proper bond masons placed small 'closers' which vary from one to three inches wide. The two buildings are

basically similar, yet they vary in some details. After the cornerstone was laid in April of 1836, there must surely have been delays in construction, for the work appears to have been hastily done. There are waves and undulations in the horizontal coursing, not at all typical of the skilled craftsmanship usually found in early nineteenth century brickwork. In Oak Row the window heads have uneven, even carelessly laid small headers over openings which do not align with adjacent courses, another rare example of poorly done work. There is no record of the founders having hired anyone to design the structures other than the builders mentioned in the contract. Nevertheless the influence of more sophisticated Federal Style comes through in the general proportions of the structures as well as in the detailing of wood components. Records of the other six original buildings, which were later demolished, describe them as being 'Jeffersonian' and there are dormitories on Jefferson's University of Virginia campus called 'Ranges', which are quite similar to the Davidson 'Rows'. In plan the two dormitories are similar, each containing four rooms with an entrance opening from the axial quadrangle, and each with a fireplace. Adjacent to the entrance in each room is a six light over nine light window, while on the opposite wall in each room are two symmetrically placed windows, assuring the students generous ventilation during the warm fall and spring semesters.

Door frames and trim are original, but all of the original hand fabricated doors have been replaced. The windows all show mortise and tenoned connections joined with wooden pegs typical of the early nineteenth century. Muntins, casing, etc. have recognizable delicate molded shapes typical of the late Federal period. Several lights are still glazed with the original blown glass. In the face of the far right sill of the western building, the words "Oak Row" are legibly cut in the granite. Likely a later feature, the letters appear to be quite old. Window sills in both buildings are heavy Mecklenburg granite, as are door thresholds throughout. In the brick work of the window heads, however, there are surprising differences. All of the windows and doors in "Oak Row" have simple, even primitive, brick rowlock headers laid in a noticeably irregular manner over the openings. Whereas, in the twin building, "Elm Row", the window and door openings are crowned with carefully rubbed wedge brick which form precise brick jack arches. Elsewhere the two remaining rows are similar, even to the irregularities which occur in the quality of the face coursing. When the first building committee wrote the specifications for the rows they said that the buildings were to be 'covered with tin,' an obvious reference to the first roofing material. Later changes included a wood shingle roof which appears in an 1893 daguerreotype of Oak Row, and still later this was changed to slate, which now covers both buildings. Rising at a moderate slope to a long uninterrupted ridge, the roof terminates at each end with simple gables.



From fireplaces at each end there are brick chimneys built integrally with the gable walls. At the very center of the buildings another chimney occurs which contains flues from the two adjoining fireplaces in the middle rooms. These three chimneys are laid in common bond and rise well above the ridge to corbeled courses which form typical expanded chimney crowns. The earliest photograph of the dormitory entrances shows no canopy or cover. Presently, however, there are simple shed roofed covers over all entrances. These were added soon after the turn of the century. Steps at each door rise directly from the ground and do not include a landing at the doors. Original brick fillers under the stairs create solid strings. These two extraordinary buildings are intriguing reminders of the original Davidson College architecture. Having been in constant use since first erected in 1836, the structures have a rich history, and contribute significantly to the architectural history of North Carolina as well as this region.