

FORBIS-VENN HOUSE



This report was written on Jan. 31, 1991

1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the Forbis-Venn House is located at 5607 Matthews-Mint Hill Road, Mint Hill, in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina.

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

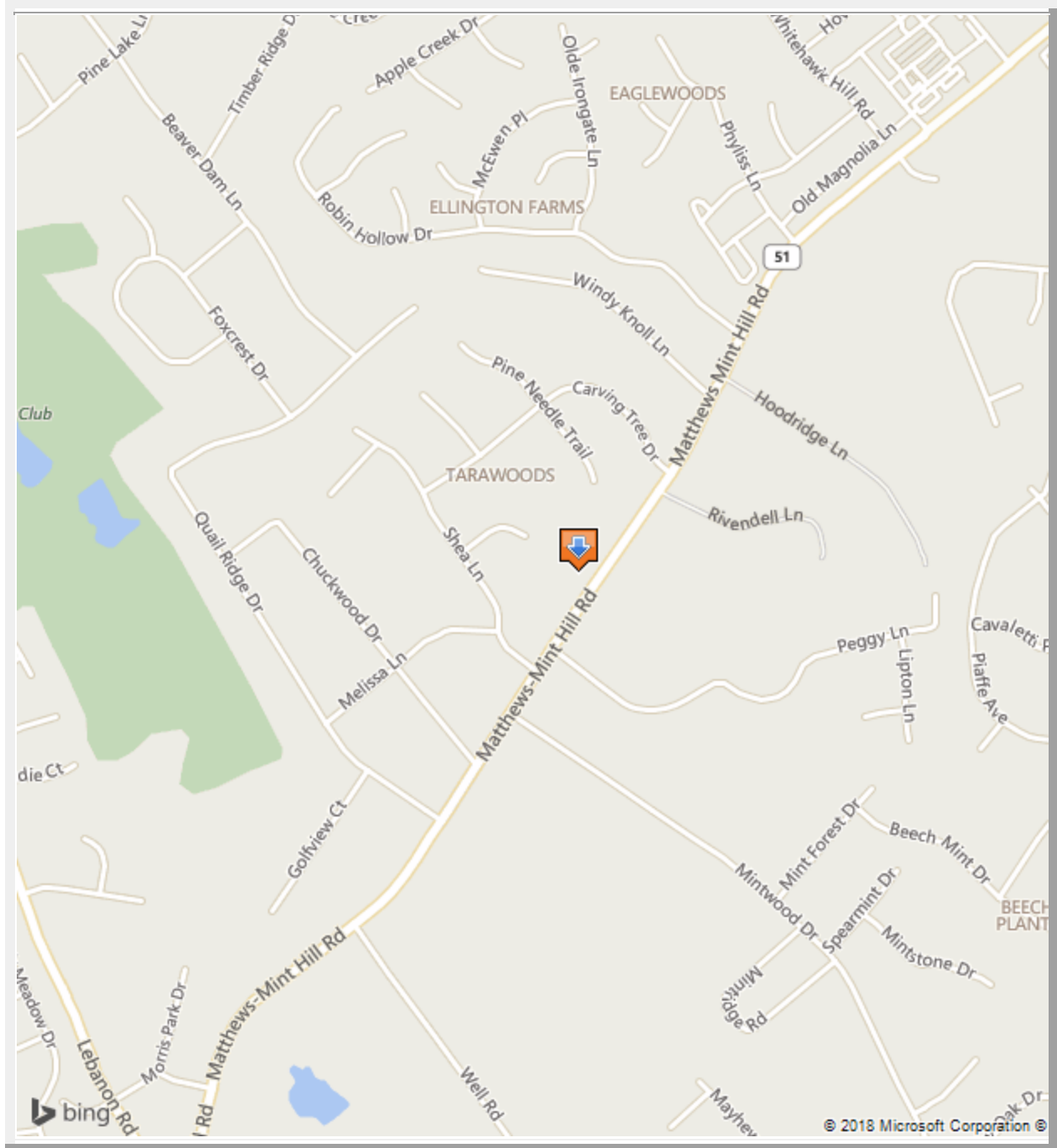
Robert G. and Rebecca B. Venn
5607 Matthews-Mint Hill Road
Mint Hill, North Carolina 28227

Telephone: (704) 545-0780

Tax Parcel Numbers: 135-281-14

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.



Click on the map to browse

5. Current Deed Book Reference to the property: The most recent deed to Tax Parcel Number 135-281-14 is listed in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 4317 at page 822.

6. A brief historical sketch of the property: This report contains a brief historical sketch of the property prepared by Ms. Paula M. Stathakis and Ms. Nora M. Black.

7. A brief architectural description of the property: This report contains a brief architectural description of the property prepared by Ms. Nora M. Black.

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 cultural importance: The Commission judges that the property known as the Forbis-Venn House does possess special significance in terms of Mint Hill and Mecklenburg County. The Commission bases its judgment on the following, considerations:

- 1) the ca. 1878 Forbis-Venn House is one of the most intact dwellings in Mint Hill of the post-Civil War period;
- 2) the Forbis-Venn House is architecturally significant for exemplifying Mecklenburg County's vernacular two-story, I-house with extension;
- 3) the braced frame structure and reused materials show the ingenuity required of local farmers following the Civil War;
- 4) the cross gable dormers demonstrate the use of vernacular decoration;
- 5) many original features remain following ownership by three generations of the Forbis family; and
- 6) the Forbis-Venn House provides valuable insight to the life of farm families 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 included in this report demonstrates that the Forbis-Venn House 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 current appraised value of the improvements is \$60,630. The current appraised value of the 1.000 acres is \$15,000. The total appraised value of the property is \$75,630. The property is zoned R-20.

Date of Preparation of this Report: 31 January 1991

Prepared by: Dr. Dan L. Morrill
in conjunction with
Ms. Nora M. Black
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission
1225 South Caldwell Street, Box D
Charlotte, North Carolina 28203

Telephone: 704/376-9115

Historical Overview

Prepared by: Ms. Paula M. Stathakis and Ms. Nora M. Black

The Forbis-Venn House was built in 1878 by Richard Calvin Forbis. A Civil War veteran who was wounded twice during his tour of duty, Forbis returned to Mecklenburg County to the peacetime occupation of farmer with his second wife, Jennie McCombs Forbis. According to family legend, neighboring friends helped Forbis build a two-story house on family land. This house has been home to three generations of the Forbis family.

The style was supposedly copied by other farmers in the area. The house, built out of oak that was felled on the lot, had two downstairs bedrooms and attic space that could be finished as the family required. The kitchen was attached to the rear of the house as a fire precaution. The house still has the L-shaped porch that was part of the original plan. The doors were put together with round pegs instead of nails. Behind the front door is a gun peg where Richard Forbis was reputed to have kept a gun handy to discourage unwanted visitors. This gun is now in the possession of Mrs. Betty Ross, a granddaughter of Richard Forbis, who lives next door to the Forbis-Venn House.¹

Richard Forbis appears in the 1870 Agricultural Census with only thirty acres of land, the total value of the land and buildings was \$170. He owned some cattle, one mule and six hogs. He raised winter wheat (19 bushels), Indian corn (190 bushels), and Irish potatoes (20 bushels). In addition to his crops, he made 40 pounds of butter, 16 gallons of molasses, and \$100 from his yearly slaughter. He demonstrated vast economic improvement in the ten years that followed 1870.

The 1880 Agricultural Census shows Forbis to be the owner of seventy tilled acres, one hundred and seventy acres of woodlands, three acres of meadows, and twenty acres of other unimproved land, a total of two hundred and sixty-three acres. The total estimated value of the farm was \$2,925. In 1879, Forbis hired black farm laborers (actual number not disclosed) for forty-five weeks and spent approximately \$44 on their labor.

Like many farmers in the area, Forbis placed a strong emphasis on corn (25 acres, 300 bushels) and cotton (12 acres, 5 bales). Unlike many farmers of the post-war period, however, he did not depend exclusively on these crops. At least in 1880, Forbis did not place himself in the difficult position of dependency on cash crops such as cotton at the expense of self-sufficiency. Forbis also grew oats, wheat, Irish and sweet potatoes as well as some orchard produce. He also continued his production of molasses, an uncommon enterprise in Mecklenburg County.²

Forbis also maintained a full barnyard. He raised two milk cows and six sheep; the sheep produced eleven pounds of wool and six lambs in 1879. He raised eleven hogs and one hundred and twenty-five barnyard poultry that produced two hundred and twenty-five barnyard poultry that produced two hundred dozen eggs.³

Richard Calvin Forbis died in 1926 and left the farm to Henry Baxter Forbis, his son. Henry Baxter Forbis and his wife, Maude Allen Forbis, raised the following six children in the Forbis-Venn House: Betty Forbis Ross, Richard Forbis, Frances Forbis Blanchard, Henry Baxter Forbis, Jr., Mary Forbis Duncan, and Wilma Forbis Todd.

Henry Forbis, Sr., farmed the land, and worked for Cole Manufacturing Company. As a farmer, Henry Forbis' interests were as diverse as his father's. He raised corn, cotton, and strawberries and other garden produce, as well as hogs and chickens. Betty Forbis Ross remembers that her father sold strawberries in town and at one time hired two laborers that lived on the property. One laborer lived in the house and one lived in an outbuilding. She does not recall that hired labor was commonplace on the farm during her childhood.⁴

Henry Forbis, Sr., died at age 81 in the same downstairs bedroom where he was born. Prior to his death, the house passed to his son Richard and his wife Linda Williams Ross.⁵ Henry Forbis' other children received lots near the house.

In 1978, Richard Forbis sold the house to Bart and Juanita Peaden, who lived there until 1980.⁶ The Peadens sold the house to the present owners, Robert and Rebecca Venn.⁷ The Venns have done extensive work to the exterior of the house. Henry Forbis, Sr., had covered the unpainted oak boards with asbestos shingles. The Venns removed these shingles to discover that most of the original oak siding had survived in good condition. Today, the nineteenth century farmhouse built by Richard Forbis stands amid late twentieth century suburban development.

Notes

¹ The above information was gathered from an interview with Mrs. Betty Ross, 9/6/90. Mrs. Ross quoted descriptions of the exterior and interior construction from an article written by Mrs. Bart (Juanita) Peaden, who owned the house from 1978-1980. This article was published in *The Southeast News*, March 28, 1979.

² □ Agricultural Schedule, 1880, Mecklenburg County.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Mrs. Betty F. Ross, 9/6/90.

⁵ Deed 2949-107, November 6, 1967. Register of Deeds, Mecklenburg County Courthouse.

⁶ Deed 4122-100, October 27, 1978. Mecklenburg County Courthouse.

⁷ Deed 4316-822, July 5, 1980. Mecklenburg County Courthouse.

Architectural Sketch

Prepared by: Ms. Nora M. Black

The Forbis-Venn House is located on the northwest side of Matthews-Mint Hill Road (Highway 51), north of the intersection with Shea Lane and south of the intersection with Carving Tree Drive, in the Town of Mint Hill in southeastern Mecklenburg County. The entry facade of the house faces southeast. The house is currently owned by Robert G. and Rebecca B. Venn.

The house is an excellent example of the two-story, extended I-house with center hall that was fairly common in the post-railroad years between approximately 1850 to 1890. This period, often referred to as the National Folk House period, coincided with the spread of the railroad throughout the United States. The Forbis-Venn House is enriched with two cross gable dormers on the southeast facade and a cross gable incorporated into the front porch over the entry.

Construction of the Forbis-Venn House was probably completed in 1878 by Richard Calvin Forbis. Forbis constructed the house himself with the help of his family. The braced frame structure is joined with hewn-and-pegged joints. The structure contains some pieces of logs and half-round logs. The Forbis family appears to have been a frugal lot using whatever materials happened to be available.¹

Richard Forbis used German siding on the portion of the wall protected by the front porch. The original foundation consisted of piers of handmade brick; the piers have been infilled with modern brick. Over the years, the house evolved to meet the needs of various owners. The original siding of oak lapped horizontal boards is still in place; rotten or damaged boards have been replaced with similar material. The entire house is painted putty with ivory trim. Shutters are brick red; a narrow band of black encircles the window sash.

The Forbis-Venn House has a compound, L-plan. The ground plan of the section of the house nearest the highway is that of a side-gabled structure three units wide. One gable-roofed, one story wing at the rear (northwest) of the house forms the rest of the L-shape. Originally, the house contained 2,000 square feet. The Venns, current owners, extended the gable-roofed wing with an addition of 1, 500 square feet to the extreme northwest end. Contained in the addition are living spaces and a garage. The addition is also gable-roofed; however, the roofline is lower than the original section. The current owners matched the windows, trim, and cornice returns to the original house. No sections of original construction were removed during renovations; however, an old stone-lined well beside the house was closed for safety reasons. Original glazing still remains in many windows.

The side-gabled section of the house (facing southeast towards Matthews-Mint Hill Road) is one unit deep by three units wide. The front (southeast) elevation of the house is divided into two units having symmetrical windows and one unit with a centered door on the first floor and a window on the second floor. The three upstairs 6/6 windows are original; canvas awnings were added for sun protection. On the first floor, the main entry surround is original. The door is a

replica of the original as described by the Forbis family; it consists of two arched glass panels and two wooden panels. The door's hardware, such as the twist door bell and the brass knob are antique; however, they are not original to the house. The two single first floor windows were replaced with two double 6/6 window units during remodeling in the 1920's.

The entrance appears to have changed little over the years. The entrance consists of a wooden enframing with abbreviated side lights (three panes of original glass) surrounding the door. Beneath the sidelights are ivory wooden panels. The door itself, as mentioned earlier, is a replica of the original.

The one-story, hipped roof porch on the highway (southeast) facade wraps halfway around each of the gable ends of the I-house section of the house. The porch has a concrete floor and steps installed when the wooden ones needed replacement. It has brass carriage lamps installed by the current owners. The porch ceiling is of beaded board. The porch roof is supported upon square tapered white columns resting on brick piers; these were added in the 1920's. Originally, the porch had wooden columns with a balustrade. A broad, low-pitched gable indicates entry at the center of the porch; a pediment formed by that gable is covered with shaped shingles laid in a decorative pattern.

Two cross gable dormers on the southeast (highway) facade are covered with the same decorative pattern of shaped shingles found in the porch gable. Each of the cross gables has a small square window framed with white molding. The plane of the cross gables is the same as that of the front wall.

The northeast gable end has four windows, two 6/6 double-hung sash on each story. The southwest gable end has three windows, two 6/6 double-hung sash on the second floor and one 6/6 on the first floor. A window on the first floor of the southwest gable end was replaced in the 1920's with a fifteen-light French door to give access to the porch. Each of the side gabled facades has an exterior masonry chimney exiting the roof at the peak of the gable.

A small hip-roofed porch added along the northwest (rear) facade of the I-house section was enclosed with 4/4 double hung sash and a double French door; the exact date of this addition and enclosure by the Forbis family is unknown.

The one-story wing to the rear of the side-gabled section is four rooms deep by one room wide. Additional space was obtained for a hallway by enclosing a porch that ran the length of the north side of the wing. A masonry chimney located on the northwest gable wall signals the end of the original construction; it is now an interior chimney between the original house and the extension of the wing added in the 1980's. The windows of the wing are 6/6 double hung sash. The door on the north side of the wing is modern with nine lights and four triangular panels.

The roof of the house is covered with modern shingles. Relative to the height of the house, the roof has a low pitch which causes the wall to dominate the view of the facades. The boxed eaves have a wide overhang with a single piece of molding for decoration. There is a wide overhang on the gable ends with simple, undecorated cornice returns.

The interior of the house has many original features; however, renovations occurred in the 1920's and again in the 1980's. The ceilings of the I-house section of the first floor are boards approximately six inches wide. The upstairs ceilings are of beaded board. The rooms in the I-house section have walls covered with horizontal boards approximately six inches in width. The walls of the dining room and an upstairs bedroom have been covered with wallpaper; however, the original horizontal boards remain beneath the covering. The four rooms in the two-story I-house section are square and approximately 13' 6" by 13' 6".

One unit of the width in the interior of the I-house is devoted entirely to a hallway and stair from the front entry to the original rear entry. Marks on the stairway and on the wall beside it indicate that the stair was enclosed at one time. The first floor hallway, the stairway wall, and the upstairs hallway have walls covered with German siding. In the hall, the stair landing and a couple of steps drop below the ceiling level. Both were carefully boxed with German siding and trimmed with molding.

The fire surround in the Forbis-Venn House living room or parlor is a close approximation of the original. In the dining room is a 1920's fire surround with Victorian detailing. The original wood floors are of heart pine laid in random widths. In some rooms, the floors have been covered with carpet. Door surrounds and floor moldings were updated in the 1920's.

The four panels pegged wooden doors found throughout the interior are original. Over one door are wooden gun supports installed by Richard Forbis.² Most interior doors have flat boards for the door surround; the corners are not mitered.

The interior walls of the kitchen had no board covering until approximately 1912. The Forbis family had wrapped newspapers around the inside of the room to provide insulation. The latest newspaper found by the Venns during renovations was dated 1912.³

An oil furnace and air conditioning make the house more comfortable for the current owners. New lighting fixtures meet current electrical codes. The current owners completed their addition to match the original house including interior trims, finishes, and hardware. One exception is the exterior of the addition which has Masonite siding; however, it is in the same pattern as the original weatherboarding. The second exception is the flooring in the addition; hardwood flooring was not used.

The Forbis-Venn House can provide important information about farm life in Mecklenburg County following the War Between the States. Its presence on Matthews-Mint Hill Road reminds those who pause to admire it of a more peaceful, slower-paced era when farmers tilled the land to earn their livings.

Notes

¹Information gathered from an interview with Robert G. and Rebecca B. Venn, current owners, on 13 January 1991. Mr. Venn did much restoration work himself in the 1980's and speaks from direct observation.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.