

THE GRIER-FURR HOUSE



This report was written on 25 March 1991

1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the Grier-Furr House is located at 500 West John Street, Matthews, in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina.

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

The owners of the property are:

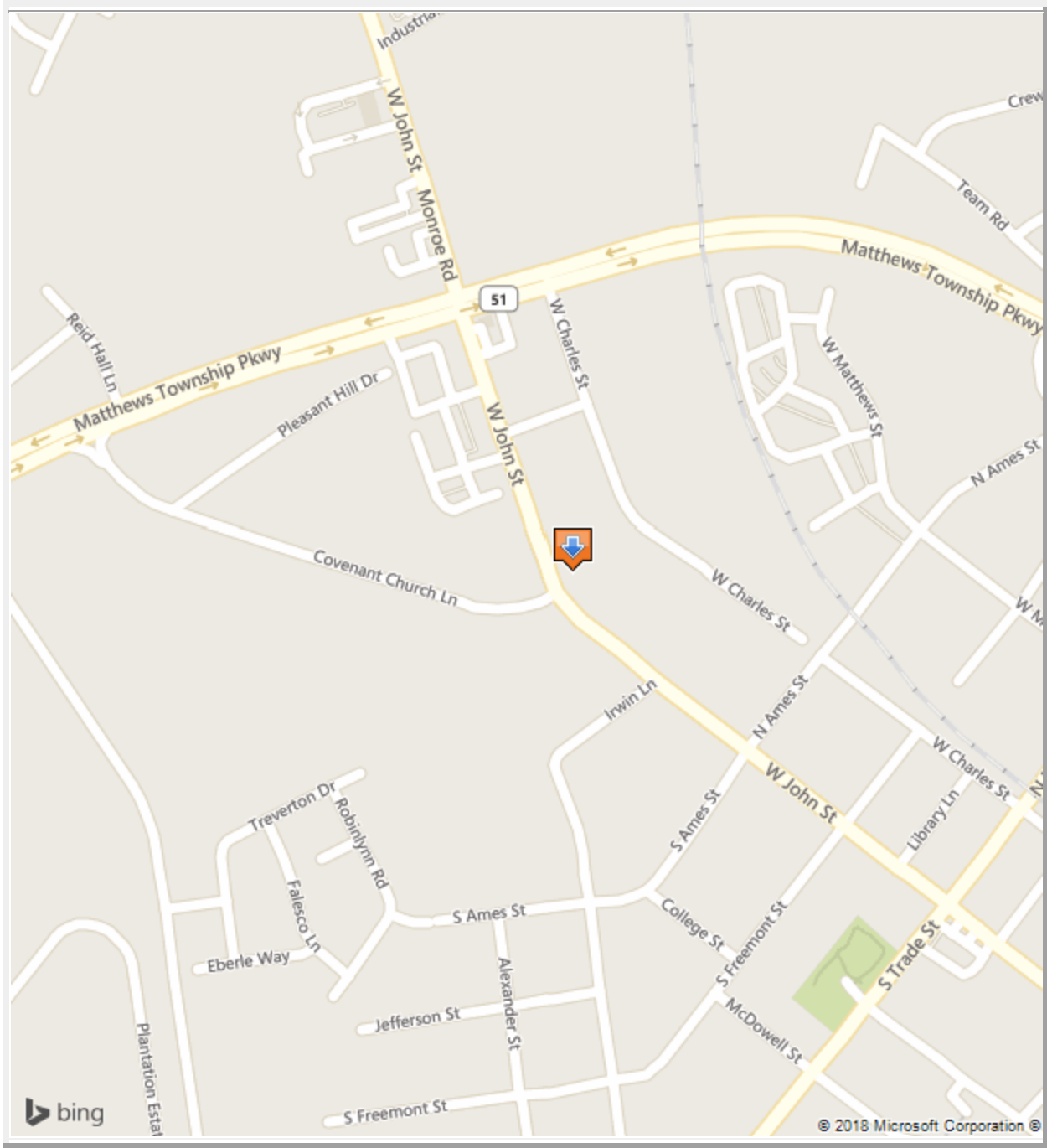
Henry and Sandra S. Donaghy
314 West Eighth Street
Matthews, North Carolina 28105

Telephone: (704) 847-5636

Tax Parcel Numbers: 193-251-18

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 193-251-18 is listed in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 5965 at page 0461.

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

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 in history, architecture, and for cultural importance: The Commission judges that the property known as the Grier-Furr House does possess special significance in terms of Matthews and Mecklenburg County. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations: 1) the Grier-Furr House was built between 1877 and 1888; 2) Julius S. Grier was a prominent farmer and furnishing merchant in the Matthews area; 3) Henry Baxter Furr, owner of the property from 1917 until his death in 1953, was a Matthews entrepreneur of local notoriety; 4) the Grier-Furr House is architecturally significant for exemplifying the vernacular interpretation of Folk Victorian housing with Greek Revival detailing; 5) the largely intact interior of the Grier-Furr House shows the pattern of living in the late 19th century; 6) the Grier-Furr House illustrates an important technological advance for housing - the advance from heating with the seven fireplaces to the use of stoves; and 7) the Grier-Furr House provides a timeless landmark in the changing streetscape of Matthews.

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 Grier-Furr 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 \$76,860. The current appraised value of Tax Parcel 193-251-18 (approximately ninety-two feet of frontage by one hundred and seventy feet of depth) is \$31,830. The total appraised value of the property is \$108,690. The property is zoned R20.

Date of Preparation of this Report: 25 March 1991

Prepared by: Dr. Dan L. Morrill
in conjunction with
Ms. Nora M. Black

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Historical Overview

This austere, two story farmhouse is situated on approximately three-quarters of an acre at the intersection of NC 51 and West John Street in Matthews, NC. Local legend says that it was built in the late nineteenth century, perhaps in 1877 or 1878, but there is no extant evidence to confirm this.¹ The earliest deed reference to this property is 1883, which records the purchase of two tracts by W.B. Arrowood from D.C. and Mary Shaw and from the estate of J.V. Houston.² Attempts to place the ownership of this property any further have been inconclusive.³ W.B. Arrowood sold the property to J.S. (Julius S.) Grier in 1901. According to Monie MacLaughlin, who lives across the street from the Grier house, her great grandfather, E.C. (Eli C.) Grier built this house for his son Julius and his daughter-in-law Jennie. E.C. Grier lived in the Providence township and already owned a house similar to the one he built for his son.⁴ Another long-time Matthews resident, Johnnie Thielina, related similar information and believes that the Grier residence in Providence was located near the intersection of Kuykendall Road and Providence Road.⁵

According to public record, E.C. Grier never owned the property in Matthews where he allegedly built a home for his son. E.C. Grier appears in the manuscript census in 1860, 1870, and 1880 in the Providence township. He was a prosperous farmer; before the Civil War, he owned a 330 acre farm worth \$4000.00 and eight slaves.⁶ The disruption caused by the Civil War in the region does not appear to have been particularly detrimental to E.C. Grier. By 1870, his farm increased to 450 acres, valued at \$10,000.00, which he operated with \$500.00 worth of farm machinery. Like other farmers in the Piedmont, his crop emphasis was corn and cotton. He also raised hogs. In addition to his agricultural pursuits, E.C. Grier was also actively engaged in real estate speculation, and he occasionally dealt in slaves before 1860.⁷ Julius was the second of eight children and the eldest of E.C. and Lydia Grier. In the 1880 census agricultural schedule, he is recorded in the Providence township as the owner of a 162 acre farm which produced mostly cotton and corn with the help of nearly year round hired labor.⁸ He appears in the Morning Star township in the 1900 manuscript census and is described as a merchant of dry goods. As a furnishing merchant, J.S. Grier frequently arranged crop liens with some of his customers who could not afford to pay cash for their fertilizer.⁹ In this regard, J.S. Grier was typical for a man in his time and place. In the early twentieth century, Mecklenburg County was largely rural, and the lives of many small farmers were governed by the weather. As a farmer, Grier relied heavily on cotton as his cash crop and used tenant farmers to plant and pick the crop. As a furnishing

merchant, he provided dry goods and agricultural equipment for the rural town of Matthews. In addition to this, his store also extended credit for fertilizers and other farm necessities, and served as agents for the distribution of cotton between farmers and textile industry.

J.S. Grier died ca. 1910¹⁰ of causes unknown. His family sold a great deal of farm equipment, livestock, crops, and collected \$1375.22 from the sale of cotton collected as rent from tenant farmers in Providence to shore up his assets. Among the disbursements, the estate of J.S. Grier paid \$447.95 to be divided among thirty tenant farmers and farm laborers. The property was sold to Henry Baxter Furr in 1917.¹¹ Furr lived there until his death in 1953, and his family kept the property until 1977. Henry Furr earned his living through a variety of enterprises. He was an herbalist, he was an agent for Rawley products, and he was reputed to be a purveyor of bootleg alcohol. A large counter formerly occupied the front hall where Furr displayed and dispensed his herbal concoctions. Within arm's reach of this counter is a small closet that opens under the front stairs. This closet, which locks with a hook and eye from the inside, was sometimes used to hide illegal alcohol from government inspectors. Someone would sit in the closet with the contraband and lock the door from the inside, which gave the impression that the door was stuck. Furr also traveled around town with a suitcase of Rawley products and managed to call on most residents twice a year.¹² (Rawley products were patent medicines). All of these business ventures allowed Furr to maintain the large house and his five children until he died. The Furrs eventually converted the property into a boarding house.

Some of the Furr children continued to live in the house with their spouses, and after they moved out, the apartments made for the Furr children were occupied by renters. The house could accommodate up to five families; even the front porch was enclosed for boarders. All of the boarders and the remaining Furrs shared one unheated bathroom which presently serves as a laundry room. All seven fireplaces were closed and wood burning stoves were installed in each room where the house was converted.¹³ The wood mantelpieces have holes carved in them to allow for stovepipes. The Furrs planted a magnolia tree on the west side of the house and a mock orange shrub in the front yard. The mock orange shrub, now the size of a small tree, has historically provided entertainment for Matthews youngsters who have enjoyed the pleasures of pelting each other with mock oranges through several generations. The seeds of this tree have scattered over Matthews thanks to the activities of children and squirrels. Traditionally, Matthews churches use magnolia leaves for Christmas decorations and the thorns from mock orange trees to make a crown of thorns for Easter, a practice that is continued to the present day. Two large oaks formerly stood in the back yard. All of the large trees in the backyard were destroyed by Hurricane Hugo (1989). The largest tree was a water oak with an eighteen inch circumference.¹⁴ When this tree fell, it took three other trees with it and it tore off the back porch. During the repair, the current owners discovered an exposed heat duct that has heated the backyard for years. Apparently, the back porch was enclosed at one time, and when it was opened, the heat from this source was never closed.¹⁵ There are no extant outbuildings, although recent owners of the property have discovered foundations for at least two: a barn and a structure that housed an acetylene plant that generated gas for lighting before the house was wired for electricity. The current owners have unearthed a series of brick walks in the back responsible for their construction.¹⁶ The Furr family sold the house in 1977 to James and Kay Cockman.¹⁷ The Cockmans sold the property in 1979 to J. Richard and Jean D. Marshall. J.R. Marshall was the director of the Charlotte Opera.¹⁸ The Marshalls, divorced in 1981, sold the house in 1982 to

John and Cheryl Webster.¹⁹ who sold to Jon Ritt in 1986.²⁰ Ritt and his housemate are credited with planting innumerable daffodil bulbs around the house which nearly overpower it in the spring and the current owners are happy to share with the community. The present owners, Henry and Sandra Donaghy, purchased the property in 1989.²¹ Like owners before them, the Donaghys continue the tradition of maintaining and upgrading the premises. They frequently meet former residents or boarders of the house who have interesting anecdotes to relate about their experiences there.

NOTES

¹ Suzanne Gulley, writer for *The Matthews News*, prepared an essay about the Grier house (September 2, 1981). In this essay, she wrote that the elder residents of the town recalled that E.C. Grier built the house in 1878. E.C. Grier also served in the state legislature from 1862-1865.

² Deeds 60-475, April 23, 1886, and 62-529, May 15, 1888. Register of Deeds, Mecklenburg County Court House.

³ It is possible that part of the property was purchased by Mary Shaw in 1882 from M.E. Crowell in deed 42-525, October 23, 1882, which shows that she bought four acres for \$400.00 on the east side of Charlotte on Monroe Road near Matthews. The ambiguity of the deed makes it impossible to know the exact location of this property.

⁴ Interview with Monie MacLaughlin, November 29, 1990.

⁵ Interview with Johnnie Thieling, December 3, 1990.

⁶ *1860 Census Agricultural Schedule 4, North Carolina; 1860 Manuscript Census of Slave Population, North Carolina.*

⁷ See Grantor and Grantee Indices 1840-1913, Register of Deeds, Mecklenburg County Court House.

⁸ 1880 Census Agricultural Schedule 2, North Carolina. 75 acres of J.S. Grier's 120 improved acres were devoted to cotton, 30 to corn and 12 to oats. The remainder produced rye, Irish potatoes and sweet potatoes.

⁹ See the list of crop liens in J.S. Grier's name in the Grantee Index 1840-1913. Register of Deeds, Mecklenburg County Court House.

¹⁰ This date is an estimate. Grier's estate was not settled until 1912, but the settlement was based on profits and assets of 1910. His son, E.C. Grier was appointed administrator of the estate in 1910. See Book of Administrators-Executive-Guardians (A-E-G) 2-71; Book of Annual

Accounts 14-99. 100; and Book of Final Settlements 5-425, Office of Clerk of Estates, Mecklenburg County Court House.

¹¹ Deed 367-179, January 24, 1917. Register of Deeds, Mecklenburg County Court House.

¹² Interview with current owners. Henry and Sandra Donaghy, November 28, 1990. Essay about the property written by a former owner. Ron Ritt, n.d.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ A former owner of the property, Jon Ritt, believes that this tree was older than the house, and in his essay, he wrote that a county extension agent estimated its age at 150 years.

¹⁵ Interview with Henry and Sandra Donaghy.

¹⁶ Interview with Henry and Sandra Donaghy; Essay by Jon Ritt.

¹⁷ Deed 3970-394, June 5, 1977. Register of Deeds, Mecklenburg County Court House.

¹⁸ Deed 4174-351, April 4, 1979; Essay by Jon Ritt.

¹⁹ Deed 4559-167, July 23, 1962. Mecklenburg County Court House.

²⁰ Deed 5965-461, February 15, 1989, Register of Deeds, Mecklenburg County Court House.

Architectural Sketch

The Grier-Furr House is located on the east side of West John Street in Matthews, North Carolina. It is located south of the intersection of West John Street with Lois Street and north of the intersection with Ames Street. The front or west facade of the house faces West John Street; the rear or east facade overlooks a long narrow back yard. The house serves as a landmark to the town; most residents of Matthews identify the house as "the big two-story house at the stoplight where Highway 51 turns west." The Highway 51 bypass (scheduled for completion in the near future) is located approximately one thousand feet north of the Grier-Furr House. Its opening will relieve the house and its occupants of much traffic vibration and noise. Over the years, the Grier-Furr House grew and evolved to meet the needs of the owners; it is now approximately 3,300 square feet. It was constructed to be a single-family house, converted to a boarding house/apartment house, and now serves as a residence and office. The ground plan of the original portion of the house is that of a side-facing T, irregularities in the plan have been formed by additions. The two story elevation is not dominated by the moderately pitched roof. The Grier-

Furr House has a compound, gable-front-and-wing shape. A hip-roofed, one story porch began within the L formed by the gable-front-and-wing and wrapped around the east side. The Grier-Furr House was built during the era of the National Folk House in the United States; it is a Folk Victorian house with Greek Revival details.¹ As with many houses of this era, details copied from earlier eras have been used to enliven plain, utilitarian facades; the interpretations and finish of the details used depended on the skill of the builder and the preferences of the owner.

Exterior

The siding is lapped horizontal boards; both siding and trim are painted white. Some of the siding is original; some is siding used to enclose porches of the house when it was remodeled for use as a boarding house about the time of World War II. The most recent addition of new siding occurred following damage caused when an enormous tree fell on the northwest corner of the house during Hurricane Hugo in September 1989. The tree was so large that parts of it extended along the west side of the house and blocked traffic on West John Street. Although a son of the current owners was asleep in a second floor bedroom, he was not injured when the tree crashed through the roof and walls.² The red and gray fiberglass shingle roof has a moderate pitch; the variegated color of the shingles keeps them from dominating the white walls. The Greek Revival detailing is most evident at the roof-wall junction. A wide trim board decorates the triangle formed by each gable. The gables have a wide overhang with elaborate cornice returns; the depth of the overhang provides shadow detail particularly under the cornice returns. The wide eave overhang is boxed and has shingle molding. The cornice has three parts: a simple bed molding; a wide, undecorated frieze board; and a square cut molding to outline the bottom edges and sides of the frieze board. The cornice runs around the house; however, the frieze board is discontinuous across the gable ends. Another small detail speaks of the Greek Revival influence. Each corner board has a small piece of molding between its top and the frieze board to give the illusion of a column capital. This makes the cornerboards appear somewhat like the pilasters that were commonly used on the corners of frame houses in the Greek Revival era. Many of the windows contain the original leaded glass; most are 4/4 double hung sash. The window surrounds are narrow and not elaborate; however, they do have decorative moldings.

The house was originally set on brick piers. The piers have been infilled with modern brick; the entire underpinning has now been painted white. The gable-front portion is two units deep by one unit wide. It has an interior masonry chimney that exits at the center of the ridge. The gable ends have a single window centered on each story with a wooden, louvered vent in the gable. The west or eave elevation has two symmetrical ranks of single windows. The horizontality of the west elevation is broken by a vertical utility chase that runs from the underpinning of the house to the bottom of the eave. The wing portion of the original construction is one unit deep by two units wide. It has an exterior masonry chimney located on the north eave wall. One unit of the width is devoted entirely to a hallway and stair. The other unit of width is one large room with a fireplace. The front (south) elevation of the wing portion is divided into one unit having symmetrical single windows and one unit with a single window over the entrance. Enclosure of the east end of the porch added a one-story unit with paired windows. The main entrance, located on the south elevation of the wing portion, appears to have changed little over the years. It consists of an elaborate Greek Revival wooden enframingent surrounding the paired doors, transom, and sidelights. The white enframingent has simple decorative moldings. The moldings of the sides of the casing give definition to the ears and knees (the splaying at the top

and bottom) of the enframing. The transom is broken into three lights; the divisions of the transom lights are decorated with jig-saw cut brackets that support the entablature of the enframing. The center light is the width of the doors while the lights at either end are the width of the sidelights. The sidelights do not run the full height of the door but end just above the knees of the enframing. Beneath the sidelights are white wooden panels.

A pair of screen doors opens to a pair of narrow four panel doors. The hip-roofed one-story porch on the front elevation has wooden flooring that is painted gray. The ceiling is wide flat boards and has only one modern light fixture installed over the door. The square wooden colons are chamfered; they are not set on bases. The east end of the porch was enclosed to provide a kitchen for an apartment that once existed in the Grier-Furr House. The enclosure has a pair of 6/6 double hung sash on the West John Street elevation; the small room still contains the old kitchen sink. The east elevation displays a confusion of roofs, windows, and doors. Above the first floor, the two-story gable end of the wing portion of the house provides an anchor for the enclosures and additions. The second floor of the east gable end is detailed in the same Greek Revival manner as the south gable end. The enclosed one-story porch that wrapped from the front of the house merges with an early addition. The first floor elevation has two pairs of 6/6 double hung sash at the south end, two pairs of 4/4 double hung sash in the middle, and a 6/6 double hung sash and a five panel wooden door at the north end. Several additions to the north facade of the house make it difficult to discern the exact nature of the rear portion of the original structure. It appears that a one story ell on the north facade at the east corner was two units deep and one unit wide. This wing shared a brick chimney with the T-plan section; all of the detailing of this end suggests that it was original. A shed-roofed porch ran along the west facade of this wing; however, it has been enclosed in recent years. A second floor renovation provided a gable-roofed bathroom constructed in the second story of the L of the rear (north) facade. Weathering of the door surround and flooring of this bathroom suggest that it was probably a porch at one time. Another first floor addition on the northeast corner included a shed-roofed bath room that has been converted to a laundry room. A one story shed roof porch on the northwest corner overlooks the back yard. It was enclosed during the apartment house days of the Grier-Furr House but has been restored as a porch. Windows on the north elevation include 4/4 double hung sash, paired 9/6 double hung sash, and a 6/6 double hung sash.

Interior

The interior has not been gutted and modernized as have many houses of this era. Most rooms have board ceilings and original woodwork. Box locks and porcelain door knobs survive on many of the doors. Floors throughout the house are generally of hardwood; the equal width boards are two and one-half inches wide. Repairs to the hardwood floors give evidence of the changing uses of the house. Most walls are plaster; gypsum wallboard was used for repairs of water and hurricane damage. One upstairs room has walls of a pressed hardboard material nailed over the lathe that held the plaster. The original fireplace surrounds are still in place; they are simple arrangements of a mantle supported by unadorned pilasters. Fireplace surrounds have semi-circular cutouts to accommodate stoves; the fireplaces were closed when the stoves were installed. The stoves have been removed, but the fireplaces have not been reopened for use. Electric forced-air heat and air conditioning make the Grier-Furr House comfortable for its current owners. The first floor consists of the original part of the house, porch enclosures, and additions. The gable-front-and-wing section has two rooms in the gable-front portion; a narrow

hallway on the east side of the centered fireplaces allowed passage between the two rooms. The north room has a closet on the west side of the fireplace. There is a wide hallway with an open stair in the wing section. There is a closet beneath the stair; it has been reported that the hook on the inside of the closet door was locked by a person inside hiding illegal goods.³

The hallway has a double door on the south wall (the main entrance) and a single door on the north wall (the back door). The east section of the wing portion consists of one large room that served as a living room. The room has a fireplace centered on the north wall and picture molding near the ceiling. An entrance to the enclosed porch was added through a window in this room when the house was divided into apartments. The one-story ell to the rear (north) facade of the wing portion provided a kitchen and dining room. The dining room opens off the north end of the center hallway. The fireplace on the south wall of the dining room shares the chimney of the former living room fireplace. There is a very narrow closet on the east side of the fireplace. A pie closet is built into the space on the west side of the fireplace. Currently, the openings of the pie closet are filled with opal glass; however, the current owner found the tin pieces and plans to reinstall them. The east wall of the dining room has two doors opening to two small rooms that are part of the enclosed porch; the beaded board porch ceiling is still in place. Currently, the two enclosed rooms are used for offices. The dining room opens directly into the modernized kitchen. White cupboards and cabinets cover the walls now. A shed-roofed porch, which has been enclosed to form a bathroom, is on the west facade of the one-story ell. Access to the bathroom is from the kitchen. The laundry room, also accessed from the kitchen, is on the northeast corner of the house. The second floor of the house is largely original and laid out in the T-plan. Each of the three rooms has a fireplace. Closets have been added in two of the rooms. The only upstairs room addition is a bathroom at the north end of the wide hallway. As suggested earlier, the bathroom may have been constructed in an area previously occupied by a second floor porch. The Grier-Furr House is a sturdy example of one of the many housing types that make up the Town of Matthews. It continues to fulfill its basic role as a home while taking on the new function of an office.

Notes

¹ Virginia & Lee McAlester, *A Field Guide to American Houses* (New York, 1986), 88-90, 93, 308-310, 312.

² Interview with Mrs. Sandra S. Donaghy, one of the current owners of the Grier-Furr House, 21 March 1991.

³ *Ibid.*