

THE NEEL HOUSE



This report was written on May 31, 1976

1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the Neal Home is located to the southwest of the intersection of Shopton Rd. and Withers Rd. in the southern portion of Mecklenburg County.

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

The present owner of the property is:

Mrs. Hannah J. Withers

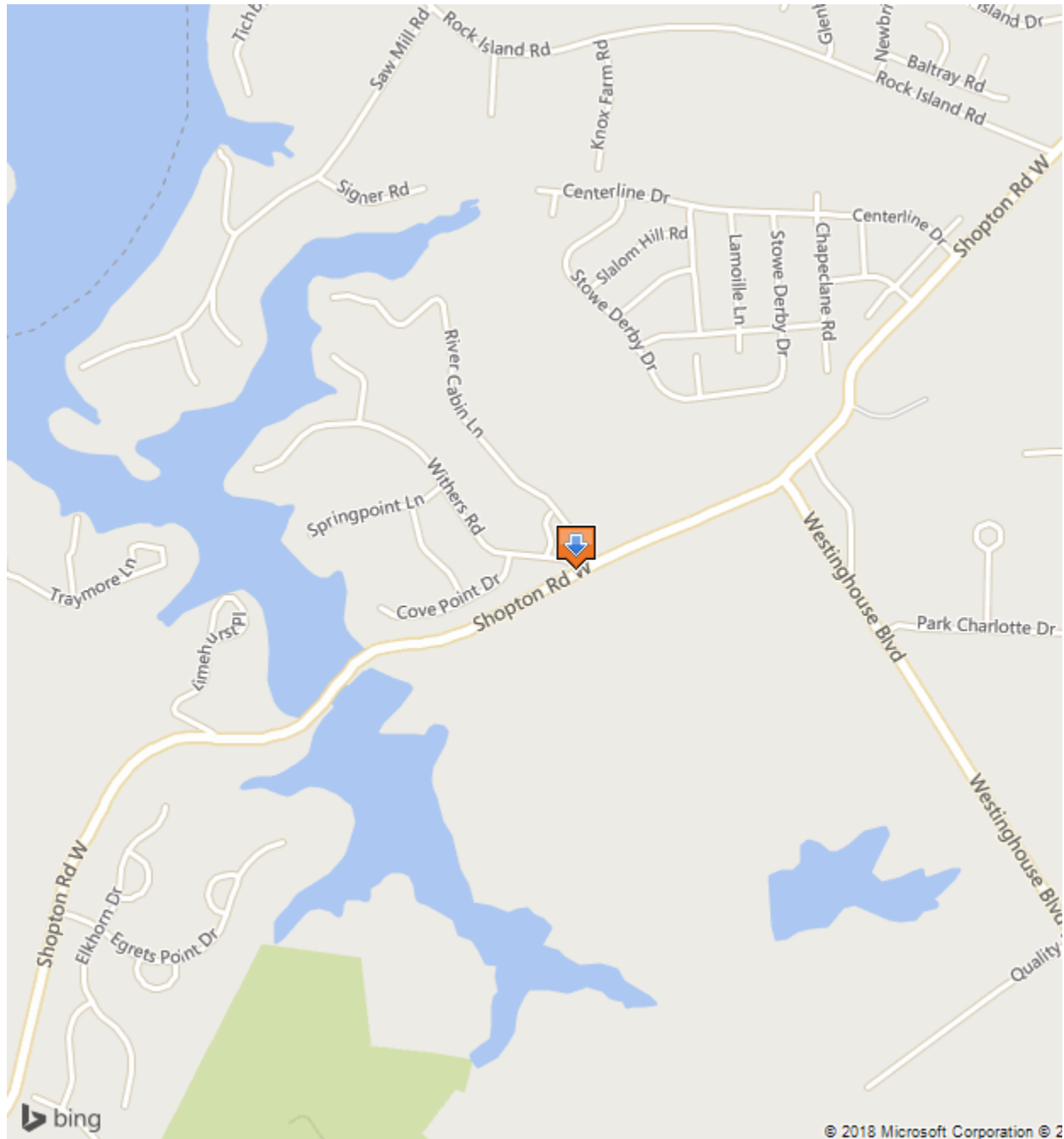
2001 Queens Rd.

Charlotte, NC 28207

Telephone: (704) 332-5744

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 911 at page 426. The parcel number of the property is: 19921101.

6. A brief historical sketch of the property:

Sufficient documentation is not available to determine the exact date of the construction of the house. Samuel Neel, son of Henry Neel and Nancy Reed Neel, built the Neel house sometime between 1810 and his death in 1828. The structure replaced a less refined dwelling which Samuel Neel and his family had occupied nearby. A prominent farmer and landowner in the Steele Creek Community, Samuel had married Margaret Grier in 1798. Eight children were born to this union. They were William Henry Neel (1799-1888), Susan Spratt Neel (1801-1844), Thomas Grier Neel (1803-1885), Samuel I. Neel (1805-1861), James Hamilton Neel (1807-1827), Nancy Hannah Neel (1810-1857), Alexander Grier Neel (1815-1898), and Margaret Adeline Neel (1821- 1896). That Samuel Neel achieved prominence in the Steele Creek Community is not surprising. His father, Henry Neel was among the early Scotch-Irish settlers in this section of what was then a portion of Anson County. Henry Neel began to acquire land along the Banks of Armour's Creek as early as 1762. A significant portion of this property was subsequently acquired by his son, Samuel. In other words, Samuel did not start from scratch. His birth on May 28, 1773, had brought him into a family of considerable substance. Margaret Grier Neel lived in the house as a widow until her death on October 18, 1837.

The plantation continued to prosper under the supervision of her four surviving sons. The youngest, Alexander Grier Neel, resided in the house until his death on February 25, 1898. For many years, Alexander served as an elder in the Steele Creek Presbyterian Church, thereby carrying on the Neel tradition of active membership in that congregation. Indeed, many members of the family are buried in the cemetery there. The most prominent of Samuel's children was William Henry Neel, his eldest son. Acquiring the title of "General" because of his leadership of the local antebellum militia, General Neel maintained a keen interest in public affairs. Married in 1819 to Miss Hannah G. Alexander, he lived in a home which he constructed nearby. He was County Commissioner and a member of the Steele Creek Presbyterian church. He derived his livelihood from the cultivation and processing of cotton. He was one of the first citizens in Mecklenburg County to engage in the cotton manufacturing business. In the years before the Civil War, he operated a cotton mill near his home. Alexander Grier Neel's widow and children sold the Neel House and surrounding property in 1899. In the second decade of this century it was purchased by Benjamin F. Withers, who lived on what was then East Ave. in Charlotte at the present location of the Lawyers Building. Mr. Withers conducted farming and dairy operations on the property and used the house as a summer residence. His son and daughter-in-law, Hannah J. Withers, lived in the house for a short time after they were married. Their daughter and son-in-law, James B. Craighill, also moved into the house as newlyweds, residing there for about four years. The house has continued to serve as a rural retreat for the Withers family.

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

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

a. Historical and cultural significance: The historical and cultural significance of the property known as the Neel House rests upon two factors. First, it has strong associative ties with a family of considerable local prominence. Second, it has architectural value as one of the finer Federal Style plantation houses extant in Mecklenburg County. Indeed, it is the only structure of its type in the Steele Creek Community.

b. Suitability for preservation and restoration: The Neel House retains much of its original integrity and therefore is suitable for preservation and restoration.

c. Educational value: The Neel House has educational value as one of the finer older homes Mecklenburg County.

d. Cost of acquisition, restoration, maintenance or repair: The Commission has no intention of purchasing this property nor is it aware of any intention of the owner to sell. The Commission assumes that all costs associated with renovating and maintain the structure will be paid by the owner or subsequent owners of the property.

e. Possibilities for adaptive or alternative use of the property: The Commission concurs with the present owner's intention to maintain the house as a viable dwelling. The house could be transformed into a house museum.

f. Appraised value: The current tax appraisal of the structure is \$8,220. The current tax appraisal value of the land is \$68,140. The Commission is aware that designation of the property would allow the owner to apply for a special tax classification.

g. The administrative and financial responsibility of any person or organization to underwrite all or a portion of such costs: As indicated earlier, the Commission has no intention of purchasing this property. Furthermore, the Commission assumes all costs associated with the structure will be net 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 structure.

9. Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets the criteria established for inclusion of the National Register of Historic Places: The Commission judges that the property known as the Neel House does meet the criteria of the National Register of Historic Places. Basic to the Commission's judgement is its knowledge of the fact that the National Register of Historic Places functions to identify properties of local and state historic significance. The Commission believes that the property known as the Neel House is of local historic 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 the Neel House is of local historic importance for two reasons. First, it has strong associative ties with a family of considerable local prominence. Henry Neel was among the first settlers in the Steele Creek Community. His son, Samuel, made the house the center of a major cotton plantation. His son, Alexander, was an elder in the Steele Creek Presbyterian Church. General Neel was

prominent in political and commercial affairs. Second, the house has architectural value as one of the finer Federal Style plantation houses extant in Mecklenburg County.

Bibliography

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

Materials supplied to James A. Stenhouse by James B. Craighill.

Records of the Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office.

Records of the Mecklenburg County Tax Office.

Date of preparation of this report: May 31, 1976

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

Telephone: (704) 332-2726

Architectural Description

In Southern Mecklenburg County, where Shopton Road approaches the Catawba River at Armour's Creek, stands the remarkably preserved ancestral home of the Neel family. This two story Federal house, with Georgian influences, is an exceptional example of the plantation architecture favored by the hardy 18th century Scotch-Irish settlers in Piedmont Carolina. Since its original erection, probably early in the nineteenth century, the house has been constantly inhabited, most of the time by members of the Neel family, so it has suffered no damage from neglect and little from weather or age. The house is a simple two story rectangular structure with a one story lean-to wing extending across the full width at the rear. Built on a high knoll and

facing southeast toward the river, the house has a center hall plan with two primary rooms on each floor. Two lesser rooms occur off the hall in the lean-to, and one is at the head of the stair. The front facade is three bays wide with symmetrically-placed nine-over-nine light windows at each side of the main entrance downstairs and three balancing six light-over-nine light windows on the second floor. Each end elevation features carefully crafted double shouldered chimneys rising high above a gabled roof. Single windows flank these chimneys on each floor, and small, four light garret windows occur beside the chimneys in the gable walls at each end. In the southwest end of the first floor lean-to is a small single shouldered chimney flanked also by six light over six light windows.

All chimneys are of hand-made brick, likely produced on the farm, and expertly so, since they show no deterioration. Brick colors range from deep brownish and bluish red to lighter sand and earth tone buff, also typical of the eighteenth century Plantation brick of this region. Coursing is Flemish bond and shows the expected queen closers at each corner. The chimneys rest on field stone bases which rise to the same height as the solid foundation walls of the house, also of field stone. Above this foundation wall, the exterior surfaces of the house are covered with moderately wide clapboard finished on the lower edges with a delicate hand planed bead. Corners are defined with narrow boards joined at a beaded edge. At the eave a shallow overhang rests on a relatively plain bed mold with no frieze. The overhang fascia is trimmed with wide intricately-shaped shingle molding. This wide molding is repeated in the barge trim on the gable rake. The barge molding terminates at the eave ends in a unique pedestal, designed as the top of a small classical pilaster and capital and showing strong Georgian influences.

Exterior window and door openings are surrounded with elaborate wide casing. One piece window sills are exceptionally heavy molded wood with bull nose edges turning down to a cavetto form below. A tall exterior windows are original three panel blinds with hand-wrought strap hinges and drive pintles still in place. The original six panel front and rear doors are intact, set in fine heavy molded frames which include four light transoms above both entrances. The high pitched roof is now covered with tin sheets, though the original surfaces were likely hand riven cypress or oak shingles smoothed with a draw knife. On entering the front door one encounters a strangely narrow canter hall running front to rear. Just inside the entrance, the hall forms a small foyer from which doors open at the left into an elegant dining room and at the right into a much simpler and smaller parlor. In the rear portion of the hall, whose length is reduced by an interior door at the rear of the two story section of the house, is a narrow stair which begins with steep winders in the rear hall corner and rises in a single run toward the front thirteen feet to a small second floor landing. This stair occurs within the hall space and results in a hall width barely adequate for the rear interior door. The stair is relatively simple and cramped yet it features exceptionally fine scroll brackets at the ends of open treads on the string. Walls in the first floor hall are plaster above fine molded chair railing. Below this are carefully trimmed recessed wood panels forming a sophisticated wainscot. At the top, a simple crown mold joins the plaster walls to flat wide ceiling boards. The door leading from the foyer to the dining room is not original, but when one enters this room an extraordinary display of elegant trim appears. Most striking is the large fireplace surrounded by a sophisticated mantle and overmantle. This woodwork is an elaborate combination of molded and reeded members delicately fabricated by hand to create an impressive center piece.

While the work is light and somewhat delicate, it still has a Georgian character. In this room, which encompasses half of the first floor area, there is also fine panelled wainscoting on all walls below plastered upper surfaces. The repeated recessed panels in the wainscot are two feet or more wide and fabricated from a single board. At the ceiling, a massive modillion cornice surrounds the room. Featuring intricate molded bands with an intermediate reeded band, this cornice includes a continuous line of small dentils separated by round pierced inserts. The ceiling consists of wide tongue and grooved boards on whose surface one can see the elongated plane marks typical of hand finished material. Floors are also hand-planed wide tongue and grooved pine planks. In this room one window faces the front and two occur at the side, flanking the centered fireplace. A noteworthy feature in this fireplace is the hearth formed of large flat sand stone slabs. It is said that these stones have the ability to trap and hold heat, and thus provide a lasting warming surface for food containers.

In the rear dining room wall an original door leads to a small lean-to room containing a simple fireplace. This was likely a pantry area and the fireplace used to warm food prepared in an exterior kitchen. Much of the finish work in the lean-to room has been replaced with modern materials in recent years. From the entrance foyer a hall door on the right opens into a surprisingly simple parlor. Since the dining room is so elaborately decorated, the restrained detailing in the parlor is more striking. The fireplace in this room is quite small and surrounded with-just a minimum of narrow molded trim. There is no over mantel. Walls in this room have molded panel wainscoting with the same chair rail that occurs elsewhere. Above this the surfaces are plaster and terminate at a narrow crown mold joining smooth, hand-planed ceiling boards. Of the three second floor rooms, the large master bedchamber dominates. This room comprises fully half of the second floor area and matches the size of the dining room below. In this room the panelled wainscoting with smooth wide surfaces cut from boards fully two feet presents an impressive lower wall finish. Above this, plastered surfaces extend to a simple crown mold at the wood ceiling. The fireplace in this room is small and simple.

On the opposite side of the stair landing is a small unimposing bed-chamber. In this room the trim is simple, though there is fine wainscoting similar to that found elsewhere in the house. There is no fireplace in this chamber even though the chimney at this end is double shouldered with the high shoulder above the expected location of second floor fireplaces. As a matter of fact, the house has been altered on several occasions. Some changes appear to have been made early in the nineteenth century. Aside from the obvious removal of the east side second floor fireplace, there are strong indications that a garret stair was installed in the corner of the small bedchamber in the early 1800s. Several changes in the garret framing were made soon after the original construction, including the addition of four light garret windows in the early years. The entire garret is now floored with modern planks. In the garret one can see the remarkable hand hewn rafters and joists mortised and tenoned and secured with trenails. Each member is marked in a Roman numeral series. This is typical of the identification method used by early craftsmen for ground fabrication and fitting prior to the erection of heavy framing members. In the attic the original rough water sawn shingling strips remain with ends of the original stamped shingling sprigs showing. The massive water sawn exterior framing members are exposed in a small closet below the garret stair. These members are fully six inches or more square and joined with typical mortise and tenoned connections secured with large wooden pegs, no nails having been used in the frame of the house. In this closet area one can see the exceptional brick 'noggin' (or filler)

which occurs between all of the exterior wall studs. Plaster surfaces are applied directly to this brick on both floors and remain in fine condition.

There is one original dependency remaining in the main house vicinity. A two story log storage building stands at the rear which retains much of its original material. Of particular note is a fine handmade battened door with original wrought iron strap hinges. During the middle years of the eighteenth century, the Piedmont region of North Carolina south of Salisbury saw a steady influx of Scotch-Irish settlers. After early years in log structures, most of which have been lost, these families steadily improved their fortunes and around the turn of the century and many of them built more sophisticated manor houses. The Neel House is an outstanding example of this Federal period architecture in Mecklenburg, and must be numbered among the most important structures remaining in the county. Its preservation and restoration are essential.