

Survey and Research Report on the Erwin-Oehler House



This report was written on September 1, 2000

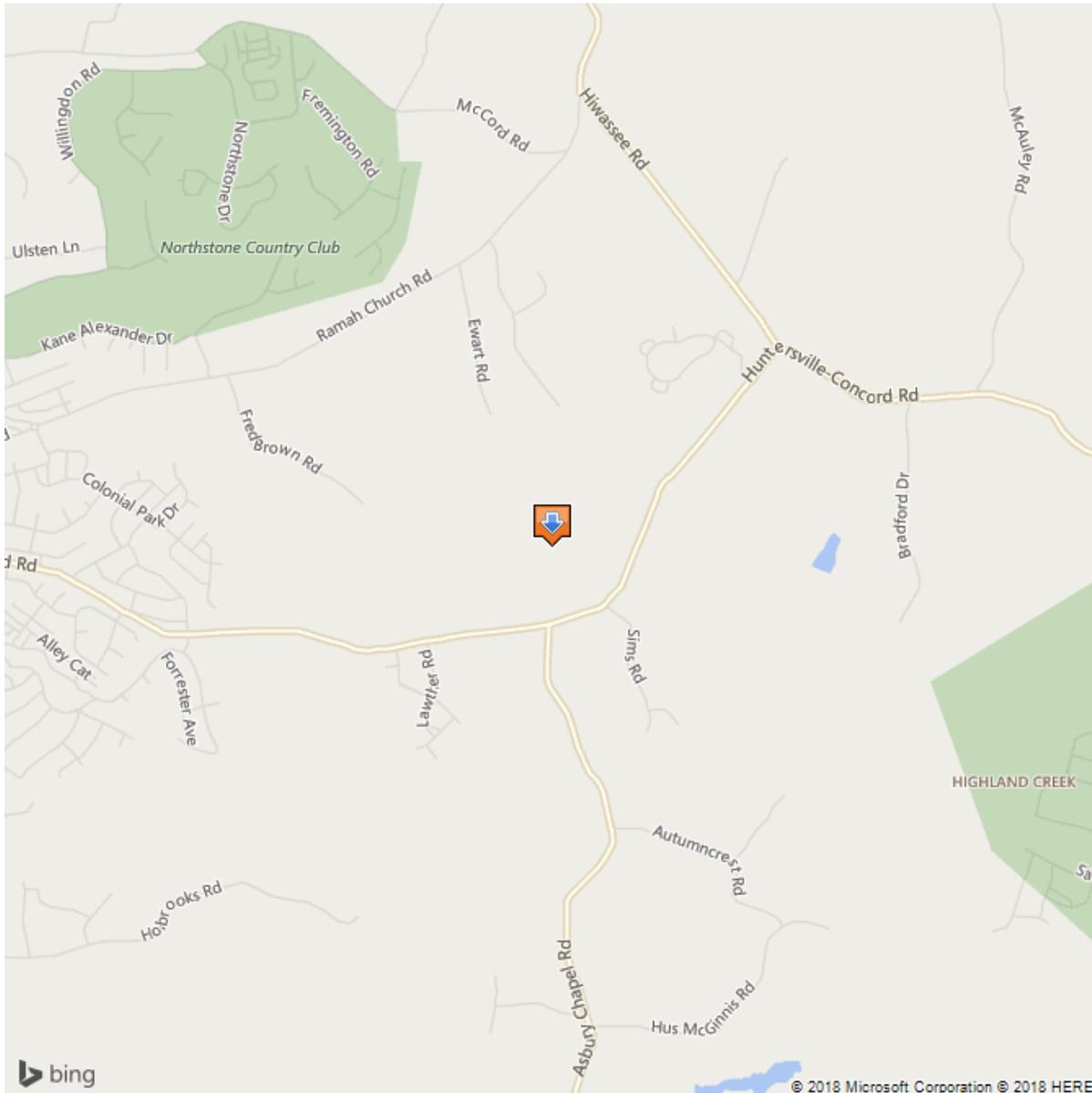
- 1. Name and location of the property:** The property known as the Erwin-Oehler House is located at 14401 Huntersville-Concord Road, Huntersville, N.C. 28078.
- 2. Name, address, and telephone number of the current owner of the property:**

Frances Ferrell Rogers
P.O. Box 236
Huntersville, N.C. 28078

Telephone: (704) 875-6953

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 depicting the location of the property.



5. Current Deed Book Reference to the property: The most recent deed to the property is located in Mecklenburg County Deed Book #1140, page 245. The tax parcel number to the property is 019-401-02.

6. A brief historical sketch of the property: This report contains a brief historical sketch of the property prepared by Emily D. Ramsey.

7. A brief architectural description of the property: This report contains a brief architectural description prepared by Emily D. Ramsey.

8. Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets the 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 Erwin-Oehler House possesses special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations:

- 1) The Erwin-Oehler House is a tangible reminder of the agricultural economy that shaped life in largely rural nineteenth-century Mecklenburg County.
- 2) The Oehler family figured prominently in the social and religious activities around the Ramah community in northeast Mecklenburg County.
- 3) The Erwin-Oehler House is a rare example of farmhouse architecture in Mecklenburg County, and reflects the melding of European building practices with local and regional vernacular architecture.
- 4) The Erwin-Oehler House retains its pastoral setting, recalling the rural landscape of pre-twentieth century Mecklenburg County.

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

The Commission contends that the architectural description prepared by Emily D. Ramsey demonstrates that the Erwin-Oehler 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 tall or any portion of the property which becomes a "historic landmark." The current appraised value of the house is 413,390. The current appraised value of the 140.47 acres of land is \$709,030. The property is zoned OPS.

Date of Preparation of this Report: September 1, 2000

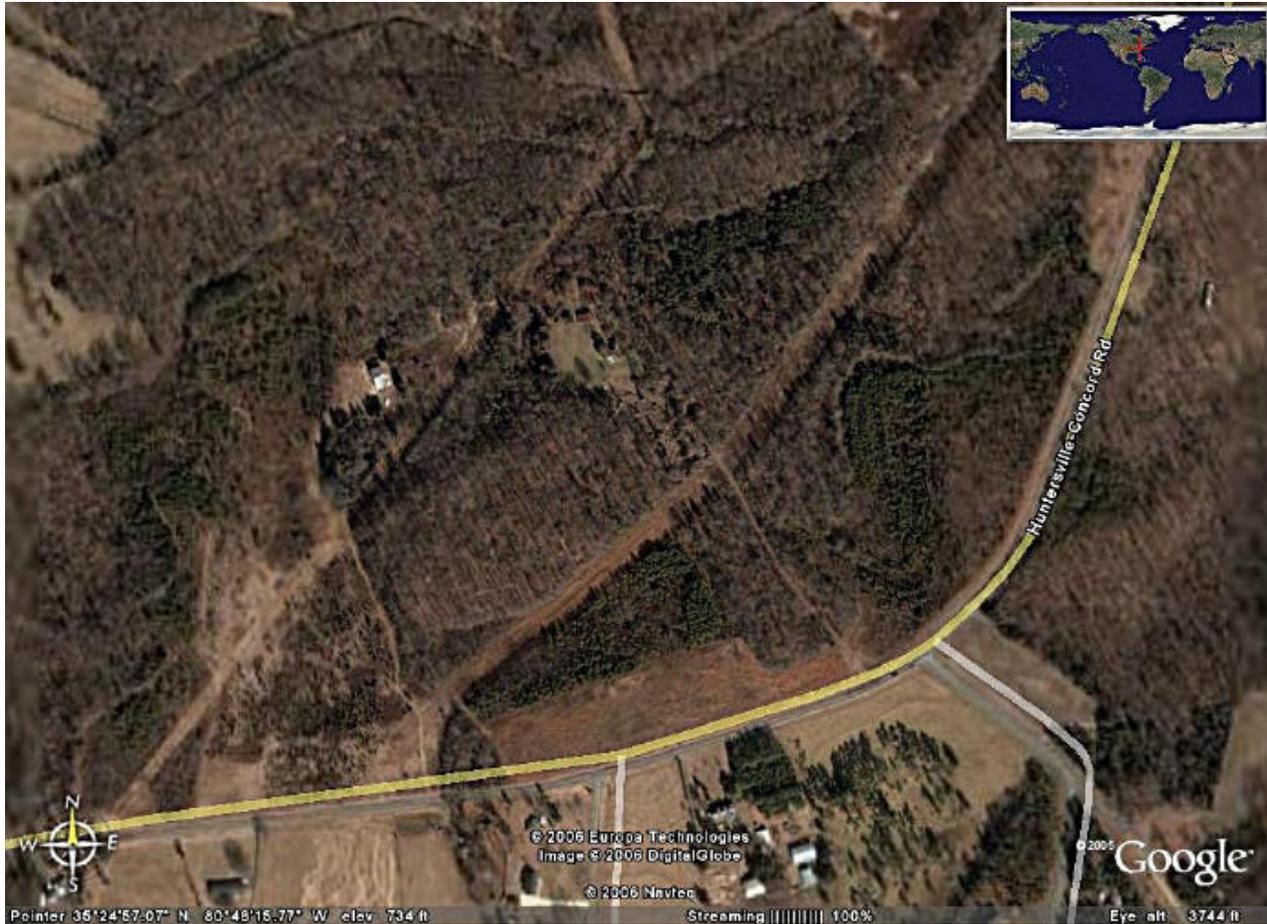
Prepared by: Emily D. Ramsey
745 Georgia Trail
Lincolnton, NC 28092

Statement of Significance

The Erwin-Oehler House is a structure that possesses local historic significance because it is a tangible reminder of the agricultural economy that shaped life in largely rural nineteenth-century Mecklenburg County and because of its association with the Oehler family, which figured prominently in the social, religious, and business activities of the Ramah Community of northwest Mecklenburg County. The mid-nineteenth century saw the beginning of a period of rapid development and growth in Charlotte and Mecklenburg County that would continually progress well into the twentieth century. Although the vast majority of Charlotte-Mecklenburg was still rural, Charlotte's economic, commercial and physical growth in the decades leading up to the Civil War created new opportunities and advantages for the area's farmers and helped to attract farmers relocating from northern states and from abroad.

One such farmer was George Martin Oehler, who, along with many of his relatives, emigrated from Germany to northern Mecklenburg County in the early 1840s. Oehler married a native of Mecklenburg and settled in the Ramah community in the northwestern section of the county. In 1852, he purchased 250 acres from Caleb Erwin and built an impressive and unusual farmhouse on the property for his growing family.¹ There, the Oehler family farmed the land and became important figures within the social and religious spheres of the Ramah Community. George Oehler became an elder of Ramah Presbyterian Church in 1856 and remained a prominent member of the congregation until the Civil War, when he was asked to leave because of his "Northern sympathies." George Oehler's youngest son, James Cornelius Oehler, would continue the family's dedication to the church by attending Princeton Theological School and becoming a Presbyterian minister.²

The Erwin-Oehler House is also significant architecturally for its unusual blending of German building practices and regional vernacular building styles. The two-story, three-bay-wide and one-bay-deep farmhouse, or "I-house" plan, was one of the most popular forms for rural residents and farmers throughout the nineteenth century. The Erwin-Oehler House is a rare example of this common form; while the vast majority of I-houses in Mecklenburg County (and throughout the state) were wood frame construction covered with wooded clapboards, the Erwin-Oehler House is a heavy, almost spartan brick structure and the only known brick I-house in the county. Although the house itself is unusual, the land that surrounds the Erwin-Oehler House reflects the rural landscape as it was on countless farms in and around Charlotte-Mecklenburg. While many nineteenth-century farm complexes have been stripped of their original rural surroundings by encroaching suburban development and subdivisions, the Erwin-Oehler House, encircled by pristine fields, woodlands, and streams, retains its rural, agricultural setting.



Historical Overview

During the decades leading up to the Civil War, Charlotte-Mecklenburg entered the beginnings of a prolonged period of growth and prosperity that would continue, in one form or another, until the Great Depression well into the twentieth century. The discovery of gold in the area in 1799, which resulted in construction of a branch of the U.S. Mint near the center of Charlotte, along with the arrival of the Charlotte and South Carolina Railroad (one of the first railroads in western North Carolina) in 1852, which prompted the completion of four railroads through Charlotte by the time of the Civil War, all helped to make Charlotte-Mecklenburg a main trading and distribution center by the mid-1800s, in addition to its already solid reputation as a leading agricultural center.³ Farmers nearby now had easy access to railroads and, consequently, to an expansive trading network for cotton, the county's

leading cash crop since the invention of the cotton gin in 1793, and other cash crops such as corn and wheat.

These new developments, coupled with Charlotte-Mecklenburg's strong and agriculturally diverse economy, made the area an attractive location for farmers relocating from northern states and from abroad.⁴ In the mid-nineteenth century, a large group of at least six related Oehler families, descended from Johann Georg Oehler and Maria Magdalena Leonhardt of Wuerttemberg, Germany, immigrated to the United States and settled in northern Mecklenburg County and southern Cabarras County.⁵ George Martin Oehler was among them, and he wasted no time putting down roots in his new country. By the early 1850s, George Oehler was married to Mecklenburg native Elizabeth B. Thomasson and was the father of seven young children.⁶ Since church affiliation formed the center of community life in nineteenth-century Mecklenburg, George and Elizabeth Oehler became active members of Ramah Presbyterian Church, which in turn helped establish the Oehler family in the small, closely-knit Ramah community in northeast Mecklenburg County.

In 1852, George Oehler purchased a large parcel of land (around 250 acres) from Caleb Erwin, a wealthy planter and well known public figure in Mecklenburg County who owned almost 800 acres in Ramah near Clarks Creek.⁷ Although there has been some debate as to whether the house was built by the Erwin family in the early 1800s and sold to George Oehler in the 1852 transaction, or built by George Oehler after he bought the property, no evidence exists to suggest that the house predates George Oehler's purchase of the property. Furthermore, architectural features of the house examined in a 1988-1989 survey suggest a mid-nineteenth century construction date; this information, coupled with the unusual use of brick for the otherwise simple farmhouse, indicates that George Oehler was most likely the builder of the house.⁸

After completing the two-story, one-pile farmhouse, George Oehler began farming his land, eventually cultivating over ninety of the two hundred and fifty acres he owned. The Oehlers grew corn, wheat, oats and some cotton as primary cash crops, in addition to a variety of vegetables produced in the family's kitchen garden. The family also raised swine for slaughter, cows for milk, cheese and butter, and sheep for wool and meat.⁹

The Oehlers, like most farming families in Mecklenburg County, did not own slaves before or during the Civil War, although they did employ two teenage boys, Martin and John, as farm hands and one young female laborer, Elizabeth, to help Elizabeth Oehler and her daughters with household chores and gardening. Martin, John and Elizabeth lived on the farm with the Oehler family.¹⁰

Although George Oehler adjusted well to his life in the United States and in the South, his views on slavery clashed with those held by the majority of southern farmers, and these differing views created tension and division within the Ramah community when the Civil War broke out. The Oehlers had never owned African-American slaves, and family stories depict George Oehler as a man staunchly opposed to the system of slavery that had created the wealthy plantation economy in the South. These beliefs, even in an area where most farmers did not own slaves, were extremely controversial. According to Ramah Presbyterian Church history, George Oehler, along with his sons, James and Milas, and his son-in-law, Thomas Brewer, divided the congregation and aggravated tensions and dissent in the church when they attempted to bring in a Northern Presbyterian minister, Reverend McFarland, to preach to the Ramah Presbyterian congregation in 1866.¹¹ Still smarting from the recent defeat of the Confederacy, the people of Ramah Presbyterian Church were determined to keep northerners, and all those with northern sympathies, out of their congregation. What had begun as a heated debate reached a surprising climax when McFarland attempted to enter the church to preach. Several of his more vehement opponents locked the church doors, and Thomas Brewer, whom most of the church members assumed was acting on George Oehler's orders, responded by "jump[ing] through the window and open[ing] the door of the church by violence." The congregation reacted swiftly; on April 7, 1866, the elders of the church voted to suspend George Oehler, "whose sympathies were entirely with the north from the church and from his office as elder."¹²

Despite his suspension from the church, which no doubt damaged his standing within the Ramah Community, George Oehler, his wife and his children stayed in the community and continued life on their farm. Eventually, the family was welcomed back to Ramah Presbyterian Church, where George and Elizabeth Oehler worshipped until their deaths.¹³

George Oehler's death in 1871 left his wife, Elizabeth, with full ownership of the farm. She and her son, Milas, ran the farm with the help of tenants and farmhands, and after Elizabeth Oehler died in 1883, Milas took over ownership of the farm and a majority of the land.¹⁴ Although Milas continued to farm his father's property after his mother's death, living in the house with his wife, Susan Morrison Oehler, their five children and several relatives, his interest in farming dwindled as his interest in gold increased, until finally, in the early 1920s, Milas (then in his sixties) abandoned the farm in Mecklenburg County and headed west to look for gold.¹⁵ Other members of the Oehler family drifted into and out of the Erwin-Oehler House, until Milas returned briefly in 1926 to mortgage his family homestead to a man named Wash Davis. The property, including the house and approximately 160 acres, was sold in 1945 to Sherrill and Georgia Ferrell of Guilford County for \$5,500.00.¹⁶ The family lived in

the house until Sherrill's death in 1985. The property is presently owned by Ferrell's daughter, Frances Ferrell Rogers, and was occupied by her son, David Rogers, until 1999.¹⁷ Now vacant, the house remains an excellent example of a nineteenth century farmhouse, and a visible reminder of the prosperous agricultural economy that existed in Mecklenburg County before, during, and after the Civil War.

Architectural Description

Mecklenburg County was, like most areas in North Carolina, primarily a county of small farmers until well into the twentieth century. As a result, most of the rural dwellings built in Charlotte-Mecklenburg during the 1800s tended to be modest farmhouses. By far the most popular and widespread vernacular architectural form in Mecklenburg was the simple "I-house" a two-story, three-bays-wide by one-bay-deep rectangular structure, often with a front porch and detached kitchen in the rear (many were later attached to become rear kitchen ells). The interior was a straightforward, practical plan, most often consisting of a central hall flanked on each side by a single room. Although Mecklenburg farmers were not entirely ignorant of national architectural trends, particularly after the arrival of the railroad in 1852, only a select few had the time or the means to erect elaborate structures. Often, details of a particularly popular architectural style would be modified and simply integrated or "attached" to the basic I-house form. In this way, well-to-do farmers in the first half of the 1800s could use restrained Federal ornamentation or grand Greek Revival elements to reflect their status in the community. Only a few decades later, the mechanization of building practices and the widening network of railroads allowed even modest farmers the opportunity to transform their simple dwellings into elaborate Victorian structures, with the addition of mass-produced spindles, sawnwork, and vergeboards which could be tacked onto the exterior of any building. Despite this continual changing of surface details, the I-house remained the most popular house form in Mecklenburg County until well into the twentieth century. Even today, a person driving through rural portions of Mecklenburg and surrounding counties might typically encounter dozens of clapboard-covered I-houses.¹⁸

When George Oehler arrived in Mecklenburg County in 1842, he was no doubt influenced by the vernacular architecture of the area, particularly the ubiquitous I-house. When he bought land on which to erect his house in the Ramah community in 1852, Oehler planned a house that fit perfectly into the rural built environment, but

which also reflected European architectural influences. The Erwin-Oehler House is undoubtedly an I-house form (a rectangular, two-story, one-pile structure) but several features make the house distinctive - a unique version of a rather common house type. Oehler's use of brick in place of the usual wooden clapboards reflects a European predilection for brick and stone structures according to Virginia and Lee McAlister, authors of *A Field Guide to American Houses*, although structures with masonry load bearing walls were the minority in America, they were most often constructed by European immigrants who wished to continue the tradition of their homelands, where wood was scarce and brick was considered a superior building material.¹⁹ The walls of the Erwin-Oehler House, several feet thick in places, are unusual features on a relatively small farmstead. Oehler's decision to build a basement kitchen instead of a detached kitchen also diverged from popular local building practices. Basements required more time and labor than a simple frame outbuilding, and though small root or storm cellars were common in Mecklenburg farmhouses, a large kitchen basement like the one beneath the Erwin-Oehler House, complete with brick floor and two large cooking fireplaces, was an unusually elaborate element in a simple farmhouse.

The original portion of the Erwin-Oehler House is a two-story, side gable, rectangular brick structure done in common bond, three-bays-wide by one-bay deep with regular fenestration and two brick end chimneys. Several family stories debate the origin of the brick used for the house - one story contends that the brick was shipped from England to Charleston and brought up to the homesite by a wagon train led by slaves; another contends that the bricks were made on site.²⁰ Although brick was commonly brought from Charleston to areas inland, and particularly to Charlotte, it was most often a type of brick called "pressed brick," made and shipped to Charleston from Philadelphia. North Carolina produced mainly common brick, both in commercial brickyards and small, on-site productions.²¹ The foundation is constructed of large slabs of granite, encasing a full kitchen basement beneath the house. Granite was also used for the sill of the house's windows, which contain wooden muntins and frames, many held together with wooden pegs and apparently original to the house. Oehler family history claims that, originally, two large porches flanked the front and back elevations of the house. The present porch is not original, and was most likely constructed in the 1940s by Sherrill Ferrell, who also constructed the wooden addition on the southeast side of the house, which contained a more modern kitchen, bathroom and family room.²² Another major addition was added earlier to the rear of the house, quite possibly as a kitchen ell to replace the original basement kitchen, which may have proven impractical for the household. The wooden ell is in a state of great disrepair and has fallen away from the original house.

Although the house itself has suffered from neglect and interior alterations, it remains an excellent and uncommon example of a nineteenth-century farmhouse. Moreover, the rural and agricultural context of the house have remained virtually intact. The house is currently surrounded by over 140 acres of undeveloped, undisturbed land. From the house, one can look out onto an uninterrupted view of fields and woodlands, and it is easy to imagine what life on this farm (and in rural Mecklenburg County in general) might have been like almost 150 years ago.

Notes

¹ Auswanderungsakten, 1806-1888, Brackenheim (Wuerttemberg) Oberamt (microfilm): record of application for permission to emigrate. Marriage bond for George Martin Oehler and Elizabeth B. Thomasson, 5 January 1841, Mecklenburg County, NC.

² Ramah Presbyterian Church Records. George and Elizabeth's children were all baptized at the church.

³ Thomas Hanchett, "The Growth of Charlotte: A History" (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, 1985).

⁴ Sherry J. Joines and Dr. Dan L. Morrill, "Historic Rural Resources in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina" (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, 1997). An 1850 North Carolina agricultural analysis listed Mecklenburg County third in the state in cotton production, fourth in butter production, eleventh in corn production and twelfth in wheat production.

⁵ Letter from Marilyn Brown to Emily Ramsey, dated 20 August 2000. These six Oehler families settled around the Mecklenburg/Cabarras County line and joined Presbyterian congregations in Ramah, Mallard Creek and Poplar Tent.

⁶ Marriage Bond for George Martin Oehler and Elizabeth B. Thomasson, 5 January 1851, Mecklenburg County, NC. *Eighth Census of the United States: Population Schedule, Mecklenburg County (1860)*.

⁷ Interview with JoAnne Brown Miller, August 2000, hereafter cited as "Miller Interview." *Seventh Census of the United States; Population and Agricultural Schedules, Mecklenburg County (1860)*. Erwin, in addition to serving two terms in the

North Carolina State Legislature, was also a Deputy Sheriff, a Justice of the Peace, and an Elder at Ramah Presbyterian Church.

⁸ Joines and Morrill, www.cmhpf.org . The Survey contends that "inspection of the property suggests the house might date from the 1860s or 1870s."

⁹ *Eighth Census of the United States: Agricultural Schedule, Mecklenburg County (1860)*.

¹⁰ *Eighth Census of the United States: Population Schedule, Mecklenburg County (1860)*.

¹¹ Miller Interview. Letter to Dr. Robert D. Billinger from Marilyn Brown, dated August 17, 2000.

¹² Nell Bradford Jenkins. *They Would Call It Ramah Grove: A History of Ramah Presbyterian Church* (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Library Main Branch, Robinson Spangler Carolina Room, 1999), p.14.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 283-284. George Oehler (who died in 1871) and Elizabeth Oehler (who died in 1883), along with a number of their children and descendents, are buried in the Ramah Presbyterian Church cemetery.

¹⁴ Will of George Oehler, Mecklenburg County, N.C., probated May 1873.

¹⁵ Miller Interview.

¹⁶ Mecklenburg County Deed Book #692 (Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds, Charlotte, N.C.), page 176. Mecklenburg County Deed Book #1140 (Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds, Charlotte, N.C.), page 245.

¹⁷ Interview with Frances Rogers, September 2000, hereafter cited as "Rogers Interview."

¹⁸ Catherine W. Bisher, Charlotte V. Brown, Carl R. Lounsbury and Ernest H. Wood III, *Architects and Builders in North Carolina: A History of the Practice of Building* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1990) p.193. Joines and Morrill, www.cmhpf.org .

¹⁹ Virginia and Lee McAlester, *A Field Guide to American Houses* (Alfred A. Knopf, Inc, 1984) p. 89-90.

²⁰ Miller Interview. Rogers Interview.

²¹ Bisher, et. al, p.235-236.

²² Miller Interview.

Special Note: Subsequent to the preparation of this report, the Commission received an email on November 4, 2009, from Linda Long, a descendant of Caleb Erwin:

I am writing concerning the George & Elizabeth Oehler House. I am a direct descendant of Caleb Erwin. I recently received a box of photos that was in my mother's attic. In is a photo from early 1900's of a house. On the back it says, "Great, great grandfather Erwin built is still standing. N.C." I'm attaching a copy of the front and back of the photo. According to what I've read there has been a debate over whether the Oehler house was built by Caleb or by Oehler's and that no evidence exists to support that Caleb built it but that he just sold the land to the Ohelers. My picture appears to be the same house and apparently it was believed at the time of the picture that the house was built by Caleb. I just thought someone might be interested in this information.

This information proves that the house was built by Caleb Erwin, not George and Elizabeth Oehler. Hence, the name of the house should be changed to the Erwin-Oehler House.



Great, great grand-
father Lewis
is still standing
N. C.