

The Robert Potts, Jr. House



This report was written on Mar 2, 1976

1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the Robert Potts, Jr. House is located on the Smith Road one-half mile east of Cornelius, North Carolina in northern Mecklenburg County.

2. Name, addresses, and telephone numbers of the present owners and occupants of the property: The present owners of the property are:

Mrs. L. Rodney Whisnant (Miriam Smith Whisnant)
P. O. Box 156
Cornelius, North Carolina 28031

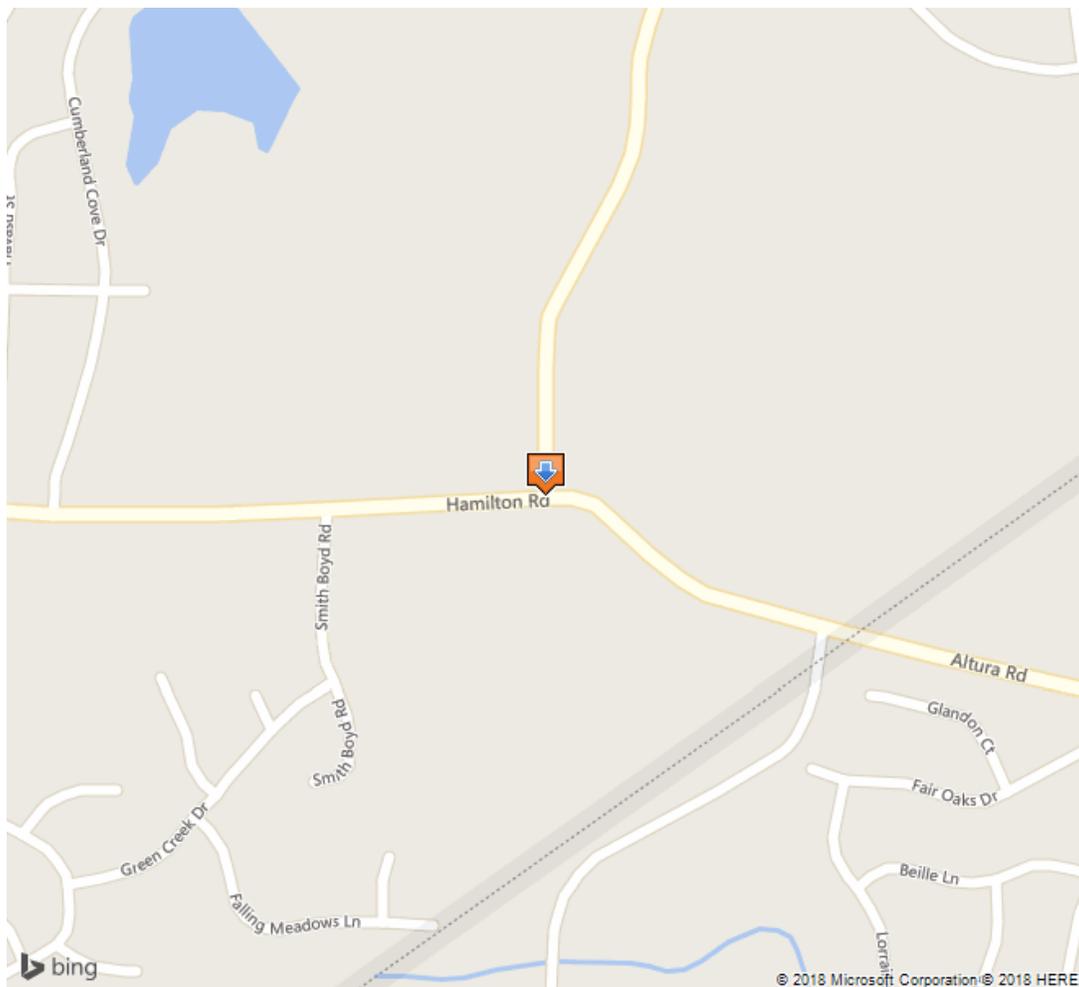
Telephone: (704) 892-8251

Mrs. Charles C. Hunter (Lilyan Smith Hunter)
P. O. Box 176
Cornelius, North Carolina 28031

Telephone: (704) 892-8698

3. Representative photographs of the property: Representative photographs of the property are included in this report.

4. A map depicting the location of the property: This report contains A Guide to Historic Sites and Buildings taken from *The Plantation World Around Davidson* by Dr. Chalmers G. Davidson showing location of the Robert Potts House. The report also contains a Tax Office map which indicates the location of the house.



5. Current Deed Book Reference of the property: This report contains a complete chain of title for the property. Special notice must be given to the fact that this property has been owned by the Potts family, and their descendants from purchase of

the Land Grant on September 4, 1753, until the present time. The Parcel Number of the property is 00708103.

6. A brief historical sketch of the property: This report contains an historical sketch prepared by Dr. Chalmers G. Davidson.

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 Robert Potts, Jr. House and property rests upon two factors. First, members of the Potts family have contributed greatly to the historical development of Mecklenburg County. Second, the house and the surrounding outbuildings and facilities are of substantial local architectural significance and form one of the richest sources of historical artifacts in Mecklenburg County.

b. Suitability for preservation and restoration: The house contains many of the original furnishings. Moreover, while having been modified to meet the demands of a contemporary lifestyle, the house retains many of its initial architectural features. The house should therefore be maintained in its present state of preservation. Some of the outbuildings are in need of repair.

c. Educational value: The structure has been featured in several books dealing with historic houses in Mecklenburg County. This fact attests to the educational value of the property. The educational value of the house rests upon its historical and cultural significance to Mecklenburg County.

d. Cost of acquisition, restoration, maintenance, or repair: The Commission has no intention of purchasing the property. Indeed, the Commission knows of no inclination of the present owners to sell. The house is in an excellent state of repair. Some of the outbuildings are in need of attention. However, the Commission assumes that the owner of the property will pay all expenses associated with the preservation, maintenance, and restoration of the property.

e. Possibilities for adaptive or alternative uses of the property: As noted above, the Commission believes that the house and property should not be adapted to an

alternative use. However, if the owners should wish to sell the property at some future date, the house and property could serve as an farm museum.

f. Appraised value: The 1975 appraised value of the house itself is \$7250.00. The appraised value of the land is \$64670.00. The Commission is aware that designation of the property would allow the owner to apply for a special property tax classification.

g. The administrative and financial responsibility of any person or organization willing 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 that all costs associated with the structure and property will be met by whatever party now owns or will own the property.

9. Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets the criteria established for inclusion on the National Register: The Commission recognizes that the National Register of Historic Places was established to single out and to provide protection for properties of local and State historic significance. The evidence generated by this report and the data provided by the comprehensive inventory of the pre-1900 built environment performed by the Commission convince the Commission that the Robert Potts, Jr. House does meet the criteria of the National Register of Historic Places. Clearly, the Robert Potts, Jr. house is of local historic significance because of the accomplishments of the Potts family and because of the architectural merit of the structure.

10. Documentation of why and in what ways the property is of historical importance to Charlotte and/or Mecklenburg County: The Commission believes that the Robert Potts, Jr. House is significant to the history of Mecklenburg County because of its architectural merit and because of the historical accomplishments of the Potts family. Detailed documentation in support of both contentions is contained in the historical sketch prepared by Dr. Chalmers G. Davidson and in the architectural description prepared by Mr. Jack O. Boyte, A.I.A.

CHAIN OF TITLE

1. Original Land Grant dated the 11th of April, 1752 George II conveyed to John Brevard 636 Acres in Anson County on the headwaters of Rocky River. N.C. Land Grant XI, 4-5 Original document in possession of present owners.

2. John Brevard to John Potts dated the 4th day of September, 1753 by lease and release 636 Acres in Anson County. Book C-1, Page 226
3. John Potts conveyed to son, Robert Potts, Sr. on January 16, 1770 636 Acres in Mecklenburg County, N.C. Register of Deeds Book 7, Page 255.
4. Robert Potts, Sr. conveyed to son, Robert Potts. Jr. On July 24, 1811 a tract of 96 Acres called a "deed of gift". Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Book 20, Page 130.
5. Robert Potts. Jr. conveyed to son, Thomas Espy Potts January 20, 1848 by Will Clerk of Superior Court Will Book J Pages 76,77.
6. Thomas Espy Potts Heirs conveyed to son, William Robert Potts on October 20, 1898. Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Book 127, Page 452.
7. William Robert Potts conveyed to Nephew, Clifton Eugene Smith on December 11, 1946 by Will Mecklenburg County Clerk of Superior Court Will Book 5, Page 327.
8. Clifton Eugene Smith conveyed to Daughters, Miriam Smith Whisnant and Lilyan Reid Smith Hunter by Will dated August 15, 1969 Mecklenburg County Clerk of Superior Court Roll 69-47, Frame 648.

Historical Overview

Dr. Chalmers G. Davidson

On September 4, 1753, John Potts, planter, received by "lease and release" from John Brevard for the sum of 40 pounds sterling, a grant containing 636 acres of land in Anson County and duly recorded in Book C-1, Page 226, "lying and being on the headwaters of Rocky River, adjoining Robert Brevard and others." -- This being the tract granted to John Brevard by George II dated April 11, 1752, and recorded in North Carolina Land Grants XI, Pages 4,5, and 18. Early records indicate that John Potts was one of the earliest pioneers in this area having come here in the migration with the Scotch Irish through Virginia into North Carolina and lived on the tract of land before obtaining and recording his land grant. John Potts was a member of the Potts families who had long been residents of the colonies in Maryland and later Chester County, Pa., in the 1720's and 1730's. He was a relative of Isaac Potts of

Valley Forge, Pa. (whose home Gen. Washington used as headquarters) and of John Potts of Potts Grove near Pottstown, Pa.

John Potts and his wife, Geals, were also owners of land granted in the Fourth Creek settlement of Rowan County by the Honorable John Earl Granville for 580 acres dated January 3, 1761, and recorded in Vol. IV Part II, Pages 900, 901. A map identifying the land holdings of the Fourth Creek settlers is found in Rowan County records and has been published in Carolina Cradle by Robert Ramsey. There is, however, no evidence that John Potts ever resided on this grant of land. He and his wife, Geals, deeded this tract to their son, William, by Deed dated April 18, 1764, Recorded Book 6, Pages 74-76, in Rowan County.

The 636 acre Grant in Anson County (by this time known as Mecklenburg County) was given by "Deed of Gift" and Will from John Potts to his "beloved son, Robert" on January 16, 1770. Robert Potts married Elizabeth McKeown and were parents of nine children. He was cited on three occasions for his "Patriotic Aid" during the Revolutionary War and owned 10 slaves recorded in the 1790 Census. In his Will filed in 1822 Robert Potts divided the 636 acre tract among his surviving sons, John, James, Robert, Jr., Jonathan, and Edwin, along with the "200 more or less acres making up the homeplace which I now live on," to his widow, Elizabeth.

Robert Potts, Sr., deeded two tracts of land from the original grant to Robert Potts, Jr. One tract for 96 acres obtained July 24, 1811, and one for 121 acres in 1815. On August 22, 1811, Robert Potts, Jr., married Nancy Eveline Alexander Gillespie and built for her the home known today as the Robert Potts, Jr. home. Early letters among his personal papers list him residing at "Hickory Grove" - whether this was the name of the home or the area in which he lived has not been determined. The first entry in his Bible states "Commenced housekeeping, January 1812." The materials for the house were all obtained on the plantation - logs, clapboards, and stone for the foundations and chimneys. The "log pit" used to shape the huge hand-hewn logs and the quarry site are viewable on the property today. The furniture, most of it fashioned from walnut, maple, pine, and apple wood, was cut on the plantation and made for Robert Potts, Jr. A great number of the original have been restored and remain in the home. Robert Potts, Jr., was a thrifty man and through the years became very successful as a planter. He succeeded in acquiring much of the original land grant for himself by purchasing three of his brothers' holdings and inherited the remaining tract from his mother in 1833. Robert, Jr., and Nancy had 10 children. He served as a founder and Ruling Elder of Bethel Church, which he helped to grow, giving of his time and money. He continued to contribute generously throughout his life. Perhaps his most notable contribution to the area was his interest in education - prompting him to give time and money in helping to establish Davidson College along with his "Good Friend", William L. Davidson, whose plantation adjoined his. He was

appointed a member of the First Board of Trustees of Davidson College and one of his sons, Charles Stanhope Potts, entered the first class session. Other sons, Zebulon and Thomas Espy, were also educated at Davidson. Records show that a daughter, Nancy Eveline, was college educated, but the exact institution attended was not named.

Robert Potts, Jr., willed the homeplace tract to his youngest son, Thomas Espy Potts and appointed his "good friend", David A. Caldwell to a guardianship of his son. Money was stipulated for his education at Davidson College in the will. Thomas Espy Potts was forced to buy a great deal of the plantation and home accouterments in 1860 at a public sale when Robert Potts, Jr.'s second wife disagreed with the will and settlement of the estate. Thomas Espy Potts married Rebecca Catherine White of the Centre Church community on August 3, 1852, and they had seven children. He served during the Civil War in the cavalry under Gen. J. E. B. Stuart and letters recording his experiences are included among the generations of Potts papers. Thomas Espy and Becky Potts entertained many of the Methodist Circuit Riders who held meetings at early Zion Church - as their home was "quite close by and hospitable" as one minister wrote them.

Through will and division deeds Thomas Espy Potts passed the Potts House and land to his youngest son, William Robert Potts. Tracts of land were also deeded to another son, Thomas Pritchard Potts and daughter, Lillie Rebecca Potts Smith. William Robert Potts married Katherine Wilson of Caldwell Station - a granddaughter of Andrew Springs. They had no children, but left a large sum of money to both Barium Springs Orphanage and Childrens Home of Winston-Salem.

By will, William Robert Potts left the Potts House and land in 1946 to his nephew, Clifton Eugene Smith, the son of his sister, Lillie Potts Smith. Enough information can never be written of the "love relationship" that emerged between the Potts House and Cliff Smith. He and his wife, Mary Reid, a former teacher, lived on the Lillie Potts Smith tract of land and with his inheritance from "Uncle W. R.," blended together again the large tract of Potts Plantation. In 1946 Clifton and Mary Smith restored the Potts House to be lived in once again by another generation of Potts descendants. Lumber was again cut from Potts land for new clapboards and two newly-constructed east and west wings. The restoration was done in very painstaking steps - Cliff Smith was a perfectionist - seeing that every nail, latch, door, and window was left as it was in the original 1811 construction. He supervised long hours of research - this was in 1946, when this kind of activity was not the popular "in thing" to do. When all was completed the blend of old family home and history with livable 20th century accommodations was finalized. Clifton and Mary Smith were parents of two daughters, Miriam Smith and Lilyan Reid Smith. As parents they continued the traditional Potts Presbyterian heritage by sending their daughters to Queens College.

On August 15, 1969, Clifton Eugene Smith passed the Potts House (1811) and the original plantation land to the seventh generation of appreciative Potts descendants, Miriam Smith Whisnant and Lilyan Reid Smith Hunter. It is our belief that nowhere in Mecklenburg County does there remain such a lovely tribute to perseverance, loyalty, and love of country as displayed by the generations of the Potts Family of North Mecklenburg. Robert Potts, Jr.'s House, furnishings, papers, and original plantation all still intact -- always family owned and occupied - never abandoned or "Gone with the Wind."

Architectural Description

This house is a log structure, modified from time to time by Potts descendants, while retaining most of its original characteristics. The massive hewn log outer walls stand today as they were first built. The exterior surfaces were likely exposed when first erected. However at a later unknown date they were covered with clap board siding, and in recent years modern siding has been applied. The fine interior wood trim and wall finish are essentially original.

Simple dwellings of logs, notched together at the corners were introduced to America around 1638 by Swedish settlers in Delaware. Subsequently, German and Scotch-Irish immigrants adopted this form of construction. During the southerly expansion of the 1700's, the log cabin was widely used in this timber-rich frontier, since it could be built with only the aid of an axe and requires few costly nails. First log cabins were seldom intended as permanent homes. When families wanted better houses with more amenities, they either abandoned their cabins, incorporated them into larger cabins, or used them as slave quarters.

On the Potts Plantation the second dwelling was again of log construction, much larger and finished with more sophistication than the first. It is likely that the original cabin was used for slave quarters after the second dwelling was completed. Surprisingly, the foundation remains of the first cabin are intact near an original, undisturbed, plantation slave cemetery.

The second house is a simple rectangular two story structure, resting on a low field stone foundation, with two rooms on each floor. Exterior single shouldered brick chimneys rise at each gabled end, providing fireplaces in all rooms, a plan which

reflects the influence of eighteenth century Virginia tidewater. One story wings now flank the original structure, having been added by a growing family for more living space. These wings are of recent vintage, however, and have no historic significance.

The front entrance is sheltered by an original shed-roofed porch extending across the full width of the house and supported by unusual square brick columns, covered initially, with smooth stucco. This porch is enclosed with a rounded wooden rail and delicate square balusters, said to have been carefully copied from the original work. The front first floor facade has a center door flanked by double hung, six over six light windows on each side.

The front door leads into a low-ceilinged parlor featuring a large fireplace with a carefully crafted federal mantel, bordered by high narrow plain wooden pilasters, molded cornices and an integral molded narrow mantel shelf. The original brick fireplace surround and hearth are intact, though presently faced with marble. Walls are covered with smooth, hand planed boards, applied horizontally to furring strips on the exterior log walls, and standing vertically in the single interior partition. A molded chair rail is applied to all walls, below which painted panel edges create a highly decorative motif. A moderate crown mold joins the walls to the wide board ceiling. The interior partition consists of tongue and groove vertical boards, and separates the parlor from a smaller dining room to one side. This smaller room is finished with matching wood trim, and includes a fireplace and mantel similar to those in the parlor. Floors throughout the house are original wide pine planks in the parlor, however, oak strip flooring was recently added. At the rear, a lean-to addition is connected to both rooms by original six panel doors. The rear dining room door provided access to the original kitchen located about twenty-five feet to the rear of the main house. Further study could well show that there was an original wing at the rear, balancing the front lean-to porch.

An open stair rises steeply in two runs to the second floor at rear of the parlor. A molded rail and small square pickets show skilled craftsmanship. A rare feature of the balustrade are unusual three baluster groups on the treads. The hand rail is reflected on the stair wall with a painted shape below which are painted panel edges. The stair rail terminates at large square newel posts with a molded caps at the first and second floors.

Original doors throughout the house are typically six paneled with mortised and tenoned stile and rail joints secured with wooden pegs and feature recessed flat panels on one side and fine bead and quirk molding on the other. They are curiously low, clearing at the head just over six feet. All original door hardware is intact. Iron rim box locks with brass knobs, occur on each door. Exterior door hinges are wrought iron

straps with drive pintles. Interior doors and several small closets have hinges, with simple iron lift latches on the cabinet doors.

At the head of the stair a wide open landing is partially enclosed with some exposed original log construction. The logs are hewn to equal thickness and vary in height. Wide spaced cracks are luted with clay and stone and pointed with lime and sand mortar.

The two second floor bed chambers are connected by a low, paneled door in a single board partition. The second room is reached by passing through the larger which opens from the stair hall. Both rooms have smooth, hand finished, simply trimmed wooden walls and ceilings. In the large chamber two windows face the front, one of which is centered over the entrance door below. The other is balanced at the side by a single window facing the front in the smaller chamber, thus creating a balanced three window front facade on the second floor. Each room has a single side window placed to the front of the chimneys.

From the open stair hall there is a garret trap door in the ceiling reached by a steep ladder. In the garret the original joists span the entire front to rear dimension of the structure and are centered about three feet apart. On similar spacing hewn rafters, lapped and pegged at the ridge, support the roof. The original roof has been removed, though evidence of the original shingle strips can be noted in nail holes and staining on the rafters. The rafter ends have at some past time been raised and now rest on a continuous flat wooden plate sill, not original, laid across the top of the joists. The rafter ends are uniquely shaped and indicate the characteristic curved taper used in the early form of eave construction which projected past supporting walls below to create a simple water shed, prior to the adoption of the classic form of molded cornice. In these curved tapers the original wooden pegs used to secure the rafters to the top wall logs still project down from the raised ends.

Stored carefully in the garret are all of the original window sash which were replaced with manufactured sash in recent years. These original windows show the typical delicately formed muntin bars of the early nineteenth century and contain a large number of blown glass lights. In the garret are also stored many of the original simple battened window blinds which were also replaced in recent years with paneled blinds. These original blinds still have their wrought iron strap hinges. In the gable ends of the garret are small square four light windows on each side of the chimneys. Gable framing consists some original hand hewn studs, now supplemented with intermediate sawn studs. Originally this wall was faced pit sawn wide square edge boards.

A most remarkable characteristic of this plantation is the number of preserved structures from the original farm dependencies. To the rear of the house an original

small log shed, of undetermined original use, remains in good condition. This small earth-floored building retains all of the original log walls, some of the original roof structure and the original battened door with strap hinges and drive pintles. Nearby, there is a rebuilt summer kitchen, located on the site of the original kitchen. The original location of the well shed, blacksmith shop and several other out buildings are known, and offer exciting possibilities for archeological investigation. But, by far the most promising of structures built by Robert Potts is a well-preserved barn located on a slight rise across the road, about a hundred yards from the main house. This building is constructed of massive hewn logs laid with tight fitting notched and chamfered corners, heavy pegged door and window frame openings and long hewn rafters and joists, pegged at the ridge and walls. Wide, pit sawn, board stall partitions divide the interior. These boards were sawn on the plantation and, surprisingly, the original pit is still on the place. The barn has been in constant use since the original construction in 1811, in itself an astonishing fact. The original structure measures some forty by sixty feet and includes a number of animal stalls, a large equipment and tack room, grain storage rooms, and a hay loft. In two of the animal stalls are huge, hollowed log feed troughs, likely original, measuring some twenty feet in length, and hewn from trees measuring over three feet in diameter. In the feed storage room, a grain bin, hollowed from a cypress log measuring five feet across, is an astonishing artifact. This bin was cut and installed in the barn before the structure was completed, since the size would preclude moving it into place later. Original wrought iron hardware is found here and there, throughout the building. In the barn yard is a large granite watering trough similar to those found in other early nineteenth century, North Mecklenburg plantations.

Scattered about on the four hundred acre plantation are probably a dozen or more old tenant houses. Some of these date to the earliest years and one could expect to find many important historic remains during a study of these sites.

The Potts place is a rare instance of descendants retaining original eighteenth century land grant acreage, and and preserving early buildings with faithful diligence. The preservation and restoration of this unique architectural heritage should be enthusiastically encourages and assisted at every opportunity.

Bibliography

An Inventory of Old Buildings in Mecklenburg County and Charlotte for the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission.

Architectural Description prepared by Jack O. Boyte, AIA.

Historical Overview and Chain of Title prepared by Dr. Chalmers G. Davidson.

Records of the Mecklenburg County Tax Office.

Date of Preparation of this Report : Mar. 2, 1976

Prepared by: Dr. Dan L. Morrill, Director
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission