

RURAL HILL PLANTATION



This report was written on Oct. 5, 1987

1. Name and location of the property: The property known as Rural Hill is located on both sides of Neck Road just east of its intersection with Allison Ferry Road, in the Hopewell section of Mecklenburg County, North Carolina.

2. Name, address a telephone number of the present owner of the property: The owners of the property are:

Miss May Davidson
1300 Queens Road
Unit #207
Charlotte, N.C., 28207

Telephone: 704/375-5722

Miss Elizabeth Davidson
RFD 3 Box 335
Huntersville, N.C., 28078

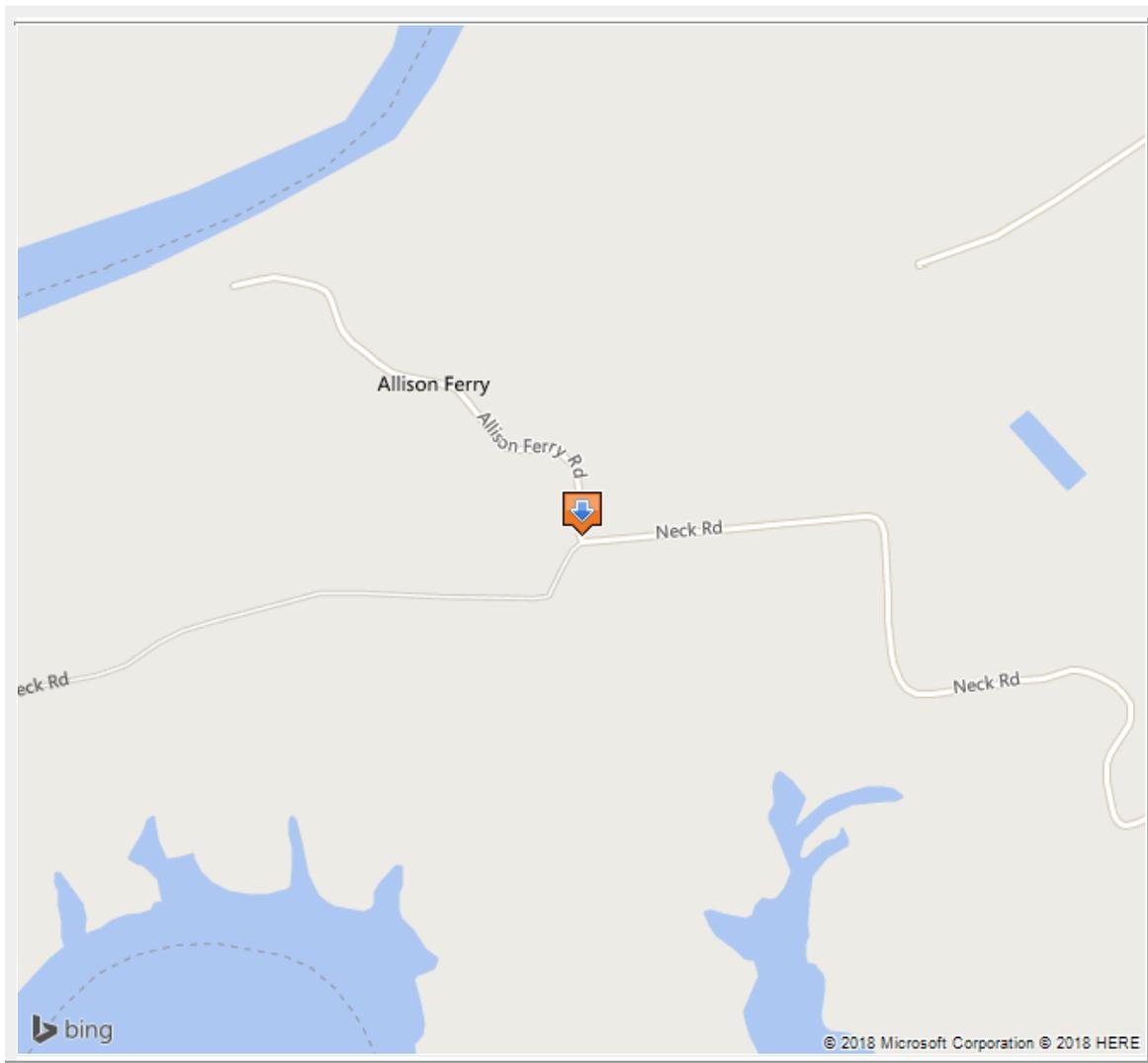
Telephone: 704/875-2169

Mr. John Springs Davidson
RFD 3 Box 335
Huntersville, N.C., 28078

Telephone: 704/875-2169

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.



5. Current Deed Book Reference to the property: This property is divided into several parcels. They are:

Tax Parcel Number 013-042-18 Deed Book 1631, Page 571

Zoning: Farm

Appraised Value: Land (28 acres) \$7,670 Improvement \$0 Total: \$7,670

Tax Parcel Number 013-042-19 Deed Book 1631, Page 570

Zoning: Farm

Appraised Value: Land (30.5 acres) \$10,010 Improvement \$0 Total: \$10,010

Tax Parcel Number 013-042-20 Deed Book 1631, Page 569

Zoning: RU

Appraised Value: Land (44 acres) \$92,400 Improvement \$58,780 Total: \$151,180

Tax Parcel Number 013-181-02 Deed Book 1631, Page 571

Zoning: Farm

Appraised Value: Land (54 acres) \$12,310 Improvement \$36,200 Total: \$48,510

Tax Parcel Number 013-181-01 Deed Book 1631, Page 571

Zoning: RR

Appraised Value: Land (64.54 acres) \$125,850 Improvement \$0 Total: \$125,850

6. A brief historical sketch of the property: This report contains a brief historical sketch of the property prepared by Dr. William H. Huffman, Ph.D.

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 the criteria for designation set forth in N.C.G.S. 160A-399.4:

a. Special significance in terms of its history, architecture, and/or cultural importance: The Commission judges that the property known as Rural Hill does possess special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations: 1) the Rural Hill plantation holds great promise in terms of archeological significance, especially since minimal ground disturbance has occurred on many portions of the property; 2) the Rural Hill plantation contains many historic buildings and sites, including the kitchen (now modified into a modern residence), the ruin of the main house (destroyed by fire in 1886), a smokehouse, ash house, well house, crib, grainery, two former schoolhouses, and a family cemetery; 3) Major John Davidson (1735-1832), the initial owner of

Rural Hill, was a leading citizen of Mecklenburg County in the late 1700's and early 1800's; and 4) the property retains a setting which is reminiscent of its antebellum setting.

b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling, and/or association: The Commission contends that the architectural description by Ms. Nora M. Black which is included in this report demonstrates that Rural Hill 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 "historic property." The current appraised value of the improvements is \$71,090. The current appraised value of the 221.04 acres is \$248,240. The total appraised value of the property is \$319,330.

Date of Preparation of this Report: October 5, 1987

Prepared by: Dr. Dan L. Morrill
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Properties Commission
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Historical Overview

Dr. William H. Huffman
January, 1987

Rural Hill was the name given to the plantation house located on a promontory near the Catawba River in the northwest part of Mecklenburg County that was built by Major John Davidson (1735-1837) in 1788. The original mansion burned in 1886 (partial ruins remain), and the present house is an expansion and remodeling of the original kitchen.

Major Davidson was born on December 15, 1735 in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania to Robert and Isabella Ramsey Davidson, who, sometime earlier, had emigrated to the United States from Scotland. Family tradition has it that Robert Davidson died young, and that Isabella migrated to Rowan County with son John and daughter Mary in the

mid 1700s, where she married Henry Hendry, a tutor to the children. John Davidson became a blacksmith and came to Mecklenburg County about 1760, where he located in the Hopewell Church section. On June 2, 1761, he and nineteen-year-old Violet Wilson (1742-1818), the second daughter of Catawba River plantation owner Samuel Wilson, were married. (Eldest daughter Mary Wilson became the grandmother of President James K. Polk.)¹

The newlyweds got their start through a gift of land split off from Samuel Wilson's plantation holdings. Their first house was a two room log cabin, which over time grew to have eight, and became known as Rural Retreat. It was located about a hundred yards north of the later mansion house, but was lost in a fire in 1898. With the other pioneer families of the section, the Davidsons prospered before the Revolutionary War through their own industry and good fortune to be pioneers in an area rich in natural resources. Ten of their children survived to adulthood, as did sixty-one grandchildren.²

In addition to being a hard-working planter, John Davidson began to take an active part in public life. With most other able men of the area, he served in the county militia, and in January 1773, became one of Mecklenburg's two delegates (with Martin Phifer) to the colonial N. C. Assembly in New Bern, a post he held for about a year. In the turbulent times just prior to the Revolutionary War, Davidson was elected a member of the Committee of Safety for Mecklenburg, and meetings were held in Charlotte to discuss grievances and methods of action. One such meeting was called for May 19, 1775, by Col. Thomas Polk, and two men from each captain's company in the colonial militia were selected to attend; John Davidson and John McKnitt Alexander were the Hopewell delegates. Tradition has it that the following day, May 20th, the delegates signed the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence, which was carried to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia.³

In September, 1775, a State Militia was organized by the Provincial Congress of N. C., and John Davidson received a commission as second major of the Mecklenburg troops under Col. Thomas Polk; the following April, 1776, Davidson was made a First Major under Col. Adam Alexander. After three field campaigns, Davidson became a staff officer of the Salisbury Brigade, and was present at Cornwallis' defeat of the American forces at Camden, S.C., in 1780. When Cornwallis occupied Charlotte shortly afterward, foragers from his army were apparently headed toward the provisions at Davidson's plantation when they ran into a "hornet's nest" of sniper fire at McIntyre's farm just seven miles from the Davidson place.⁴

In December, 1780, General Greene replaced General Gates as commander of the southern patriot forces, and ordered General William Lee Davidson, a distant relative of John, to slow Cornwallis' expected crossing into North Carolina, so that the main

force could retreat to the north. General Davidson decided to harry Cornwallis when he attempted to cross the Catawba at Cowan's Ford, and according to tradition, Major John Davidson provided transportation for his troops, an encampment site on the plantation, and the loan of a horse for the General on the day of the battle. Chalmers Davidson relates this story of the incident:

Tales are told that the General mounted his horse under a low bowed tree on leaving and that the slaves predicted dire results from the ill omen. The premonition of the negroes, if the tale is true, proved correct, for General Davidson was killed by the first British fire from the Catawba and his horse returned riderless to the stables of Major John.⁵

The General was buried secretly at night in the Hopewell Church graveyard.

After the war was over, John Davidson returned to the life of a prospering country squire. Over a period of years he acquired about five thousand acres of land, and in 1788, he decided to build a fine brick mansion atop a rise just south of his eight-room log house. The two-story, Georgian-style house was constructed of brick made nearby, and was the grandest of the Catawba River plantation houses and the center of the Davidson and extended families for many years. The floor plan of the house before the Civil War has been described thusly:

The basement contained the dining room on the east (entire length), a hall, and a kitchen, a pantry and a store-room on the west. The last was the only room in the house without a fireplace. The first floor was divided by a central hall about ten feet wide. To the west was the great parlor with a smaller room at the north which was separated by a folding partition. When the partition was folded to the walls the west side of the first floor was thrown into one large apartment. To the east of the central hall were two bed chambers. The second floor was divided by a similar hall with two bed rooms on either side, The rooms to the west of the upstairs hall could be thrown together by raising a hanging partition to the ceilings. Ceilings on both main floors were about ten feet high. The garret was one great room with windows only in the gable ends.⁶

The plantation out-buildings included a well house and ash house (there lye for soap was made) of brick, a summer kitchen (now part of the present residence), a carriage house and a smoke house (where hens were smoked and taken to Charleston to exchange for other goods), and barns, stables, pens and slave cabins. Still surviving

are the well house, ash house, smoke house, outer kitchen (incorporated into a residence), an old crib and granary. A one-room schoolhouse that probably dates from the 1910s is located just to the southwest of the mansion site.⁷ The lanes leading to the house (Meadow Lane, to the southeast; Robin's Lane, to the northwest; and the mill lane, directly south; the mill itself is now under water) were lined with cedar. The grounds themselves were liberally planted with a mixture of common and rare shrubs, trees, and flowers. All in all, it must have presented a picture of an idyllic country mansion, and been one of the finest showplaces along with the other two brick mansions in the section, the Cedar Grove or Torrance House on Gilead Road, and the Williamson-Patterson Walnut Grove House on Patterson-Potts Road.⁸

By 1790, Major Davidson was one of the major plantation owners of the county: he owned twenty-six slaves, a number that was only exceeded on the plantations of Thomas Polk and John Springs. It is said that he personally instructed all of his slaves in their work by the skill of his own manual labor, and in the days before the widespread raising of cotton, the slaves represented a considerable estate. Produce from the farm was marketed in Charleston and Philadelphia.⁹

But the plantation was not Davidson's only interest. After experimenting with the iron ore found in a fifteen-mile stretch in Lincoln and Catawba counties, he is said to have developed a broad-axe from the local ore. He then became a business associate of Peter Forney, who owned major interests in the ore beds, and the partners founded the Vesuvius furnace and Mt. Tirzah forge in Lincoln County. By 1791, Davidson and two of his sons-in-law, Alexander Brevard and Joseph Graham, bought out Forney and operated the business at a considerable profit. In 1804, Davidson sold his interests in the business to the sons-in-law.¹⁰

In the decade between 1790 and 1800, the number of Davidson's slaves dropped from twenty-six to nineteen, but that was soon to change because of the invention of the cotton gin in 1793. In 1810, the number had risen to thirty, and he had given the same number to his sons Robin (who lived one mile west at Holly Bend and in time became the largest plantation owner in the county with over 100 slaves) and Jackey.¹¹

In 1823, when he was in his eighty-eighth year, Davidson decided that it was time to retire (his wife Violet Wilson Davidson had died in 1818 at the age of seventy-six), and so he appointed one of his sons-in-law, William Lee Davidson (the son of the Revolutionary War general) as his trustee to dispose of all his personal and real property, which was allocated according to the terms of his will. Major Davidson spent the remainder of his days (he lived to be ninety-seven) living with William Lee and Betsy Davidson at their plantation Beaver Dam, which is two and a half miles east of Davidson College.¹²

He was buried in the Rural Hill Burying Ground, located just south of the plantation house on the present Neck Road, where he was preceded by his wife and followed by many other members of the Davidson family. A descendant of Major Davidson's, E. L. Baxter Davidson (1858-1943), in 1921-1922 enclosed about an acre of the burial ground with a rock wall, landscaped the interior under the supervision of Lee Collier, a landscape gardener, and made other improvements, all at a cost of \$20,000. Baxter Davidson also had plans drawn up for the restoration of Rural Hill, but died before they could be carried out.¹³

According to the terms of Major Davidson's will, his mansion house tract, which is roughly about the size of the combined holdings of the Davidson family parcels today, went to his son John [Jackie] (1779-1870) and his wife, Sarah Harper Brevard Davidson (1780-1861),¹⁴ and in the 1840s it had passed to grandson Adam Brevard (1808-1896) and his wife, Mary Laura Springs Davidson (1813-1872).¹⁵ One of Brevard Davidson's sons, Robert, was captured and interned by Union forces during the Civil War, and after the war made his way back to Rural Hill only to die of the neglect suffered during confinement.¹⁶ The other son, Baxter Davidson, made the improvements to the Rural Hill Burying Ground mentioned above, and was a major benefactor of Davidson College.¹⁷ In 1886, while still under the ownership of A. Brevard Davidson but occupied by a great-grandson of Major Davidson, John Springs Davidson, the mansion house burned while the family was away at a fair in Charlotte.¹⁸

In January, 1894, Brevard Davidson conveyed the Rural Hill property to grandson Joseph Graham Davidson (1868-1949),¹⁹ who in 1910, agreed to a division of the land into five lots of 62-1/2 acres each, which reserved one for himself and one each for his four brothers and sisters.²⁰ In 1953, to settle the estate of J. G. Davidson, the Rural Hill land was once again divided, which resulted in the present configuration of parcels owned by descendants of Major John Davidson.²¹

The remains and setting of Rural Hill are a vitally important part of the rapidly-disappearing pioneer heritage of Mecklenburg County and must be preserved if that heritage is not to be lost to future generations.

¹ Chalmers Gaston Davidson, *Major John Davidson of Rural Hill* (Charlotte : Lassiter Press, 1943), pp. 1-7.

² *Ibid.*, 72-79.

³ *Ibid.*, 11-29.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 31-36.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 45-46; interview with Elizabeth Hampton Davidson, 15 Jan. 1987.

⁸ Chalmers Gaston Davidson, *The Plantation World Around Davidson* (Davidson: Briarpatch Press, 1982), pp. 65-6, 70-71.

⁹ Chalmers Gaston Davidson, *Major John Davidson of Rural Hill* (Charlotte : Lassiter Press, 1943), pp. 53-4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 55-57.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 57-58.

¹² *Ibid.*, 67-69.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 50-51.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 72-79; Will Book G. p. 74.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁶ Chalmers Gaston Davidson, *The Plantation World Around Davidson* (Davidson: Briarpatch Press, 1982), pp. 67.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Chalmers Gaston Davidson, *Major John Davidson of Rural Hill* (Charlotte : Lassiter Press, 1943), pp. 46-8.

¹⁹ Deed Book 263, p. 28.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Deed Book 1631, p. 569.

Architectural Description

By Nora Mae Black

Rural Hill is located on the north side of Neck Road just beyond the McDowell's Creek Wastewater Treatment Plant in northern Mecklenburg County. The Davidson family cemetery and two one-room schoolhouses associated with Rural Hill are located east of Rural Hill on the south side of Neck Road prior to its intersection with Allison Ferry Road.

The original plantation house called Rural Hill was built in 1788 by Major John Davidson. It was destroyed by fire in November, 1886. Photographs show that part of the front wall and the side walls stood until early in the 20th century. ¹ At that time, the standing walls had become a hazard and were torn down. The debris was used to fill in the basement of the original plantation house.²

The plantation house had a foundation of stone possibly taken from the nearby Catawba River.³ A few of the stones still dot the grassy site. Three porch columns and the pier for a fourth column are still standing. Several filigree iron balustrades lean against the piers. The columns and the iron balustrades (believed to be from Philadelphia ⁴) were probably added some time after the original construction of Rural Hill.⁵ The columns are made of triangular bricks put together like the wedges of a pie and then covered with cement. Each square brick pier has a square cement cap to support the round column.

Hand carved stone gutters are still buried in the ground at points on the perimeter of the former house. An iron fireplace back leaning against a tree has the following markings: "Vesuvius Furnace J. Graham"

The detailed descriptions of Rural Hill provided by Chalmers Gaston Davidson in his several books provide valuable information since almost nothing remains of the original plantation house: He even mentions blue prints for a complete restoration of

the brick plantation house that were drawn at the time one of his books was written.⁶ If available, those blue prints could add immeasurably to the study of Rural Hill.

Old Kitchen/Current Residence

Rural Hill originally had a detached kitchen to keep heat from cooking away from the main house and to prevent fire from reaching the family living quarters. The two-story kitchen still exists although it has been extensively renovated. Standing on its original site, it now serves as the residence of Miss Elizabeth Davidson and Mr. John Springs Davidson. The most recent major changes occurred in 1939 and 1948. Electricity began to be delivered to the area surrounding Rural Hill in 1939 by the REA. A major renovation in 1948 added a new facade to the building. At some point, a wing was added to the original kitchen to provide additional living space. Originally, the building is believed to have had exterior- end chimneys. ⁷ At this time, there is one central chimney.

The house is a two unit, side-gabled I-house with a front-facing L-extension. The plan, however, is not apparent since the main or "front" entrance was moved to the south side of the L-extension during a renovation. A paneled interior door from the original plantation house was used as the door for the new entry. It is in good condition, having been protected from the elements by a storm door. A one-story gabled porch was added to the north or "back" elevation and later was enclosed. A one-story sun porch with a dropped shed roof running half the width of the west elevation is a recent addition.

The shingle roof has a moderate pitch. The eaves overhang but there are no moldings or decoration. The lapped siding was added during a major renovation. Almost all windows in the house are 6/6 protected by storm windows. Windows on the south elevation are paired.

Smokehouse

The side-gabled smokehouse was constructed about 1788.⁸ A dropped-roof shed for a car park was added adjacent to the north side about 1940. The original portion of the smokehouse has a heavy timber frame set on a stone foundation. The lapped horizontal boards are nailed to the frame with cut nails. The present roof is of metal with boxed eaves. There is one door on the east elevation made of boards approximately 13 inches wide. A small visor of metal roofing has been added beside the door. The building, including the added shed, is approximately 27 feet by 17 feet.

Ash House

The front-gabled ash house, where lye for soap-making was produced, is constructed of utility brick laid in common bond. It has a low-pitched shingle roof and white board trim. The small building is approximately 6 feet by 8 feet. There is one door on the east elevation that is 30 inches by 60 inches. The building has no other openings. A large crack extends from the upper corner of the door to the roof. The ash house is the closest of the buildings surveyed to the old kitchen/residence.

Well House

The metal-roofed, exposed rafter well house is approximately 10 feet wide and 24 feet long. The well is located at the south end under the roof, in an open area 10 feet by 10 feet with a gable closed by white boards and lattice trim. The well pipe extends above the stone floor and is enclosed with wood. Two posts, painted white, support the end of the roof covering the well. The rear portion of the well house is constructed of utility brick laid in common bond. The floor in this area is about 4 feet below ground level as this was an area used for cold storage. The wooden door to the cold storage area has a jack arch.

There is a small stone trough buried in the ground a few feet to the west of the well house. It is believed to have been used for watering the chickens.⁹

Crib

The square cut log crib was moved to its present location around 1900 but it is believed to be at least 150 years old.¹⁰ The low one-story single-pen crib has an attic loft. The attic loft end gables are covered with planks (some of which are approximately 13 inches wide) since the logs extend only as high as the attic floor joists. The roof is covered with metal sheets. The open eaves have exposed rafters.

The front-gabled building is approximately 24 feet by 20 feet including a shed extension which is also of log construction. The logs were hewn into rectangles (rather than the more common squares) and have faces approximately 13 inches wide with a depth of 8 inches. They are joined at the corners with a square notching system but they are not chinked with mud. The west elevation has a main door of boards to the crib, a small door of pickets to the attic loft, and a board door to the shed extension. The door to the shed extension has a wooden latch.

Grainery

The grainery is a front-gabled building of board and batten construction. It is a one-story building with an attic loft. There are extensions with dropped roofs on the east and the west elevations. The main entrance on the south elevation is a board door with

a small visor for protection from the elements. A small board door above the main entrance allows access to the attic. The steeply pitched roof is covered with metal sheets as are the roofs of the extensions. The corners of the grainery are set on large stones. The building is approximately 33 feet (12 feet for the grainery plus the two extensions) by 25 feet.

The sides of the extensions have been covered with horizontal planks. Some are missing or deteriorated. Additionally, some battens on the grainery have deteriorated to a height of 5 feet above ground level.

Newer Schoolhouse



The schoolhouse that sits closest to Neck Road is the newer of the two schoolhouses having been built in 1912 or 1913. ¹¹ It has no windows on the east elevation, five windows on the west elevation, and three windows on the south elevation (back). The north elevation (front gable end) has a small hip-roofed porch approximately 8 feet deep and almost the width of the building. The building is set on utility brick piers and has a metal roof.

The building is approximately 24 feet wide by 40 feet long. The entrance is located on the north gable end. Upon entering, there is a small cloakroom running the width of the building. The rest of the schoolhouse was undivided. There is no chimney.

The building is presently being used for hay storage. It appears that the floor has given way at several places. Mr. John Springs Davidson remembers attending classes in this building as a boy.¹²

Older Schoolhouse

The older schoolhouse is located further to the south of the newer schoolhouse and Neck Road. Both the east and west elevations have two windows. There is a single door on the north (front gable end) elevation. The south elevation has a door but it was not there when the building was used as a schoolhouse. The metal roofed schoolhouse is 17 feet wide by 24 feet long. There is no chimney. Large stones at each corner serve as piers.

A board wall, running east to west in the center of the single room, was added after the building had been retired from use as a schoolhouse.

Rural Hill Cemetery

In 1921, family members began to make improvements to the burying ground on Neck Road that had been the final resting place for the Davidson family since at least the early 1800's. By 1923 a wall built of stone from Rural Hill and the nearby Catawba River enclosed an area 150 feet wide by 250 feet long. A bronze plaque to the west of the entrance gate explains the contributions Major Davidson and his family have made to Mecklenburg County.

Major Davidson and several members of his immediate family are buried within a brick-walled area that lies within the site enclosed in 1922. The low brick wall is laid in Flemish bond topped with smooth river stones set in cement. The date 1886 is set in white stones in the center of the top of the north brick wall.

The site at Rural Hill is a large one containing several buildings of different periods. The varying methods of construction range from that of the log crib to the brick well house. Each building provides important facts about construction techniques and plantation life in Mecklenburg County over a period of more than two hundred years.

Notes:

¹ Chalmers Gaston Davidson, Major John Davidson of Rural Hill, Mecklenburg County N.C. (Charlotte, N.C. : Lassiter Press, 1943), p.40.

² Interview with Miss Elizabeth Davidson and and Mr. John Springs Davidson, March 1, 1987.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Chalmers Gaston Davidson, p. 43.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Previously cited interview.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.