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From slaves to merchants

COVER STORY, 2M Historians have surveyed the county and identified hundreds of sites with ties to African American history. Twenty-one of those areas – from Davidson to Matthews and spots in between – are under further study and could become our next historic landmarks.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CHARLOTTE-MECKLENBURG PLANNING COMMISSION

Stafford Plantation Log Dwelling

Location: On a former plantation in east Charlotte.

Built: Circa 1850.

Significance: The only surviving slave cabin found by the historical survey. About 6,800 slaves (40 percent of the population) lived in Mecklenburg in 1860, but few physical reminders are left from the period. The cabin likely served as a tenant house after the Civil War. Historian Stewart Gray considers it one of the survey's most significant finds.



FILE PHOTO

Water-lovers enjoy a canoe ride in the cove at the Latta Plantation boat harbor.

Get Ready to Paddle

Boat rental season arrives Saturday at nature preserve

Mecklenburg County Park and Recreation opens the boat rental harbor at Latta Plantation Nature Preserve at 5226 Sample Road in Huntersville this weekend. Starting Saturday, people can rent paddleboats, canoes, kayaks and jon boats from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. on weekends. Weekday operations begin June 16. Group reservations available by calling (704) 336-4278.

Inside

Mooresville golf course searches for a new niche

Faced with increasing competition and a sour economy, the town-owned golf course is struggling. 6M

Grandfather Mountain's Hugh Morton speaks to students

The renowned photographer and naturalist urged Country Day students to bone up on pollution issues, demand legislative change. 5M

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Frank Lytle House

Location: 16500 block of Huntersville-Concord Road, Huntersville.

Built: Circa 1910.

Significance: Though many African American farmers lived in poverty, Lytle was a prosperous community leader who owned a large house and farm and loaned money. Two schools are named for him.





COURTESY OF CHARLOTTE-MECKLENBURG PLANNING COMMISSION

Bethesda Schoolhouse

Location: 13129 Alexanderana Road, Huntersville.
Built: 1899.

Significance: Believed to be the only surviving 19th-century school building for African Americans in the county. "It's one of the oldest in the county - period," said Dan Morrill, consulting director for the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmark Commission. It's similar in style to the schoolhouse at Rural Hill plantation.



Davidson United Presbyterian Church

Location: 214 Depot St., Davidson.
Built: 1942.

Significance: Though it was rebuilt in 1942, it is a typical example of an African American church of the time and is significant because it hasn't been noticeably altered. Most churches built in the 1800s were rebuilt during the post-World War II prosperity.



Arthur Samuel Grier House

Location: 421 Montrose St.
Built: 1922.

Significance: Grier was a large landowner in the area and built this home on the edge of what would become the Grier Heights neighborhood off Monroe Road. The house is one of the largest and most impressive built by an African American in the years following World War I. It is similar to some of the homes in the former Brooklyn neighborhood, which has since been demolished. Grier owned Martin's Grocery next to the house, which is now Lupie's Café, and built about 30 smaller homes in Grier Heights. The area, also included in the survey, was named after him.

Source: Survey of African American Buildings and Sites in Mecklenburg County

SOME MAY GAIN LANDMARK STATUS

Canvass uncovers black history sites

21 offer glimpse of days of slavery, segregation in Mecklenburg County

BY MICHELE WAYMAN
Staff Writer

Some are tired, old buildings, their boarded windows and peeling paint a mystery to passers-by.

Others remain vital parts of their communities as well as reminders of the eras of slavery and segregation in Mecklenburg.

From the Ada Jenkins Center in Davidson to Lupie's Café in east Charlotte, all are sites that reveal the history of African Americans in our county.

And as a survey has revealed, some also could become our next historic landmarks.

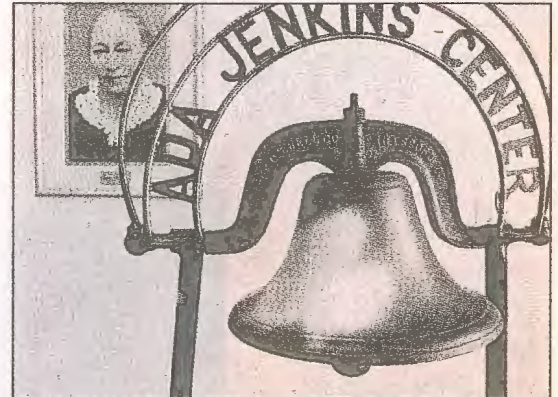
Historians Stewart Gray and Paula Stathakis spent more than a year canvassing the county for landmarks that can be tied to local African American history. Their work, under a grant administered by the N.C. State Historic Preservation office, was designed to find sites that can be added to the state study list for the National Register of Historic Places.

The two found at least 200 spots to consider and released a narrowed-down list - 19 properties and two neighborhoods - in time for Black History Month this month. Sites were considered mainly based on historical significance and building integrity.

The survey and resulting study list is by no means comprehensive. Like local landmarks in general, many of the larger, significant African American sites - for example, Johnson C. Smith University and the Biddleville community around it - already have been identified.

Instead, the survey focuses on the once-rural - now mostly suburban - areas of the county.

The two historians started the survey with written research but soon found themselves pounding the pavement. Maps in hand, they drove to African American neighborhoods, churches and undertakers for clues.



ERIK PEREL - SPECIAL TO THE OBSERVER

This bell from the Davidson Colored School was found in the building's attic during renovations and was placed on a stand in the entry way. The school is now the Ada Jenkins Center.

"Someone sees you, eventually, and 99 out of 100 times, the person you talk to is going to be helpful in some way," Stathakis said.

They learned of the 1899 Bethesda Schoolhouse after chatting with an elderly man on his porch who sent them to see another woman who knew about the school.

They found the ruins of a church off Craighead Road in Sugar Creek after talking with a man at an auto body shop who pointed them to a jungle of trees, thickets and poison ivy.

After making their way through, the white, frame-built ruin appeared.

"It was surreal. There were dozens and dozens of sunken graves," Gray said.

"It was heart-wrenching to see it," Stathakis said. "It would have been the only rural frame church, had it been intact."

They found the most intact evidence in northern Mecklenburg, particularly Davidson. A former blacks-only school and the entire westside neighborhood around it has made the study list.

Back in the 1930s, African Americans in Davidson sold hot dogs and all kinds of fund-raisers to build a new school for their children.

The result was Davidson Colored School, which opened in

1937 and served black children through the eighth grade. Its leader was teacher Ada Jenkins.

Desegregation came 30 years later, and black children left the school to attend with whites. But the building, now named for Jenkins, offers numerous services and remains a vital part of the area.

Davidson College archivist Jan Blodgett said she thinks neighbors would embrace an historical designation for the center.

"There would be a good deal of pride," she said. "Having a black building designated, and having it be that one ... people would love it."

Dan Morrill, consulting director of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmark Commission, said the commission will continue the research and could work to make local landmarks of some of the sites. That would require action by the site's local governing body and cooperation with the building's owner.

Often, the commission will buy the building, restore it and sell it. Ultimately, the goal is to protect as many as possible.

"Forty percent of people in the county were slaves in 1860, but we have precious few artifacts from them," Morrill said.

"These are artifacts. They're big artifacts, but that is all they are."

Future Landmarks?

These properties appear on the state study list.

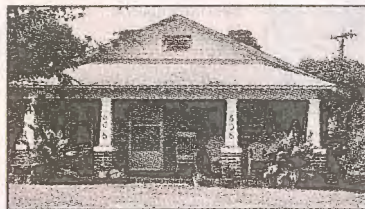
1. Stafford Plantation Log Dwelling (circa 1850)
2. John Murray Alexander Farmhouse, 4123 Glory St. (1917)
3. Presley Farmhouse, 6845 Old Plank Road (circa 1930)
4. Ashford House, 241 Hoskins Ave. (circa 1903)
5. Arthur Samuel Grier House, 421 Montrose St. (1922)
6. Martin's Grocery (now Lupie's Café), 271B Monroe Road (circa 1920)
7. Grier Heights Neighborhood, Orange Street and Skyland Avenue
8. Earnest Caldwell Bungalow, 9811 Bellhaven Circle (1920)
9. J. Wilson Alexander Farm Tenant House, 18324 W. Catawba Ave., Cornelius (circa 1900)
10. Davidson's Westside Neighborhood, including Mock Circle, Crane Street, Huston Street, Brandon Street and Mock Road areas
11. Ralph Johnson House, 115 Mock Circle, Davidson (1911)
12. Davidson Colored School (now Ada Jenkins Center), 212 Gamble St., Davidson (1937)

Rowland-Clay House

Location: 606 E. Charles St., Matthews.

Built: Circa 1930.

Significance: Charlie Rowland worked for the railroad and had this brick bungalow built for his family near the tracks. It's among the few original early 20th-century structures still in the historically black Crestdale community in Matthews and reflects a popular style from the period.



Want To Know More?

The full survey and photos of other properties are online at www.landmarkscommission.org. Click on "Browse by Topic," then "African American History."

Reach the commission at (704) 376-9115.

13. Davidson United Presbyterian Church, 214 Depot St., Davidson (1942)
14. Rich Hatchet House, 9731 Rich Hatchet Road (circa 1900)
15. Frank Lytle House, 16500 block of Huntersville-Concord Road, Huntersville (circa 1910)
16. Espy Alexander House, 300 Dellwood Road, Huntersville (1915)
17. Pink Graham House, 16101 Statesville Road, Huntersville (circa 1930)
18. Bethesda Schoolhouse, 13129 Alexanderana Road, Huntersville (1899)
19. Torrence-Lytle School, 302 Holbrooks

Red Branch Baptist Church Cemetery

Location: Blair Road, Mint Hill.

Built: Circa 1900.

Significance: Surveyors did not search for cemeteries, because usually they are excluded from the National Register. However, this one had a collection of grave markers with designs and messages etched by hand into the concrete before it dried. Some are decorated with glass lenses. Source: Survey of African American Buildings and Sites in Mecklenburg County



Mecklenburg Neighbors

Mecklenburg Neighbors contains community news from the county and suburbs of Charlotte. Advertisements may be targeted to specific areas.

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