

Contextual and Significant Importance of the  
John Eli Brattain House



Alicia Messick

4/19/2012

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**1. Name and location of the property:** The property known as the John Eli Brattain House is located at 305 South Main Street in Davidson, N.C.

**2. Name, address, and telephone number of the current owner of the property:**

Robert T. Hoyle (deceased) and Isabel S. Hoyle  
305 South Main Street  
Davidson, N.C. 28036  
Telephone: 704-892-1294

**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. The U.T.M. coordinates for the property are: Zone 17 513467.5E / 3928115.8 N



**5. Current and Historical Deed Book Reference to the property:** The tax parcel number of the property is 007-018-15.

Transaction Date	Grantor	Grantee	Book	Page
7/2/1963	William A. Cathey	Robert T. Hoyle	8893	570
6/18/1956	Connie A. Gamble	William A. Cathey	1858	283
5/27/1944	Otto H. Eargle	Connie A. Gamble	1125	49
11/10/1943	John James, Commissioner	Otto H. Eargle	1107	191
7/26/1880	S. C. Scofield	John Eli Bratton	25	170

## **Introduction**

The origin story of the town of Davidson, North Carolina is unique when compared to those of other urban areas in Mecklenburg County. While early growth and expansion are in part attributable to the railroad and industry, the town of Davidson came into being as a result of the establishment of Davidson College and the religious views that accompanied it. Between the years of 1835 and 1874, Davidson existed and grew primarily due to the fact that it was attracting new students and faculty from the surrounding areas. The early built environment was made up of residential and educational buildings along with a few commercial buildings erected by those hoping to make a living providing goods and services to the newly formed community.<sup>1</sup>

## **Historical Context**

In 1835, a group of Presbyterian Church members met at the home of William Lee Davidson located off of current day Highway 73. The Church's governing board hoped to build a new college in the area and put this group to the task of locating an appropriate area. The location was selected based on its proximity to Charlotte, Salisbury and Statesville with the hope that the school would draw in new students from the surrounding towns. The area was selected for a number of other reasons as well. First, it was on a high ridge between both the Catawba and Yadkin Rivers making it less susceptible to malaria, while also offering very fertile soil permitting a "self-supporting manual labor institution"<sup>2</sup>, in other words, clearing and farming the land. The area also appears to have been attractive because it was boasted as a very "morally

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<sup>1</sup> Jennifer Payne, "The Evolution of the Built Environment of Davidson, North Carolina," Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, last modified April 2006, <http://landmarkscommission.org/Surveys/surveydavidsonpayne.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Mary D. Beaty, *Davidson: A History of the Town from 1835 until 1937* (Davidson, NC: Briarpatch Press, 1979), 3.



healthy climate”<sup>1</sup> where young men could be educated for gospel ministry. Finally, the land came at a bargain. According to Davidson historian Mary Beaty, the records are unclear; William Lee Davidson either gave the Presbytery 469 acres for free or at the low cost of \$1,521. The College was named “Davidson” after his father, General William Davidson, who died in the Battle of Cowan’s Ford.<sup>2</sup>

The Concord Presbytery worked quickly to raise \$30,000 in the short span of five months. During this time, the building committee was busy determining the number of buildings to start with as well as the materials to use. Local businessmen and church members donated both time and material and, once the land was cleared, they began laying the foundations. The first and largest of the buildings was the elaborate Chapel, and according to Beaty, “[w]hen Robert Hall Morrison (first president of Davidson College) stood on the Chapel’s foundation and led a large gathering of people in the ceremony of laying the cornerstone, Davidson – college and town – really had its beginning. The day was April 7, in 1836”.<sup>3</sup>

### **Davidson College and the Town of Davidson College**

Davidson College continued to grow both by accepting more students but also with new land acquisitions. The college acquired so much excess land that the trustees came up with the idea of a 99-year lease of land lots.<sup>4</sup> The lease came with the understanding that the lots could not be used for purposes not in line with the moral integrity of the College. In some cases, houses

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<sup>1</sup> Beaty, *Davidson*, 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

were built in the surrounding area with the sole intent of renting to college faculty which Mary Beaty lists as a perk paid by the College.<sup>1</sup>

During the middle of the nineteenth century, the downtown area of Davidson was built along two main thoroughfares, Main Street and Concord Road. In 1839, Reverend Walter Pharr built his home across the street from the President's House. In 1847, the College decided it was time for the President's House to be upgraded, and a two-story brick house was built across from the Chapel. Two Presidents took up residence in the "Louisiana" house located across Main Street. All fourteen of the lots owned by the College were leased by 1850 as part of their 99-year lease program.<sup>2</sup>

Beginning in 1845, students were allowed to eat outside of the school which Mary Beaty suggests was the onset of the Davidson tradition of private boarding houses. She states three reasons for its importance: "it has enriched the town by many families drawn here over the years by the chance to make a useful and highly respectable living while educating their sons at Davidson College; it has occasioned the building of many large houses which have been a part of Davidson life; and it has served to bridge the gap between town and campus by bringing great numbers of students directly into the homes of Davidson families".<sup>3</sup> The earliest example of the private boarding house was the home of Thomas W. Sparrows, built in 1840 and located on Main Street across from the campus. Thomas Sparrows was one of the earliest shopkeepers, an elder of the Presbyterian Church and a supporter of the College until his death in 1890. Some of the students referred to the Sparrows' house with the endearing name of "Sparrowburg". The house

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-10.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

remained a boarding house under the management of Mrs. John Scofield, Mrs. Blair and finally, Mrs. Hatley Barnes and her daughter until it was torn down in 1960.<sup>1</sup>

Around the mid-1850s, things had settled down and the College was no longer attracting as many young men. It seemed as though conditions would worsen until Mr. Maxwell Chambers of Salisbury left the College \$250,000 in his will, which made Davidson one of the wealthiest colleges in the country. Mr. Chambers' generosity sparked a new period of growth both in and around the College. More students enrolled, bringing the number up to one hundred twelve, and two new faculty members were hired increasing the total to six.<sup>2</sup> In remembrance of Mr. Chambers, the College hired a contractor from New York, Mr. John N. Scofield, to construct the "Old Chambers" building. It soon became the school and area's most impressive building at that time and was made of local brick, stone and wood.<sup>3</sup>

### **Transportation and Industrialization**

As more houses were built and the demand for industry grew, there was also a need for an improved transportation system. In 1854, the red clay road, running north to south through Davidson, became known as Plank Road (Main Street) when wooden planks were constructed on top of it. The new technology allowed for both a drier and quieter travel experience. Wood tends to weather rather quickly and by 1860, much of the road was destroyed and abandoned. It seemed as though the railroad came to town just in time.

In 1860, it was reported that Charlotte was only an hour away by train. By 1861, Davidson was connected even beyond Charlotte due to the fact that it granted the Atlantic,

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-21.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

Tennessee and Ohio Railroad Company rights to use College land.<sup>1</sup> The railway was not only useful for getting people from one place to another; it offered a more efficient and cost effective way to transfer goods such cotton and later, textiles. Before the introduction of trains, the public means of travel was the stagecoach which included the shipment of cotton. Unfortunately, stagecoaches traveled most routes only once each way per week and more popular routes, just two times per week.<sup>2</sup>

In 1848, there were only a couple of mills in the area but all were closed prior to the start of the War. The focus at that time was more on large-scale cotton production and subsistence farming. After the War, there was a shift in interest from agriculture to industry. With the reestablishment of the rail line in the 1870s, Mecklenburg County was on its way to becoming a central hub for trade and transportation. Soon enough entrepreneurs set their sights on the economic opportunities created by the new found trio of transport, industry and cotton, and Mecklenburg became the largest cotton-producing county in the state. The first cotton mill in Davidson, Linden Cotton Factory, opened in 1890 and by 1893, the town was announcing plans for a new cotton gin on Concord Avenue. Business was going so well in Davidson that in 1899 the Southern Cotton Seed Oil Company was built.<sup>3</sup>

### **Plantation Life around Davidson**

The College and town of Davidson were not alone in the growth and prosperity of the mid-nineteenth century. The surrounding areas were owned and farmed by many well-known

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 19-20.

<sup>2</sup> Chalmers G. Davidson, *The Plantation World Around Davidson: The story of North Mecklenburg "before the war."* (Davidson, NC: Davidson Printing Company, 1973), 125.

<sup>3</sup> Stewart Gray and Paula M. Stathakis, "Survey and Research Report on the Davidson Cotton Mill," Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, last modified February 2004, <http://landmarkscommission.org/S&Rs%20Alphabetical%20Order/surveys&rDavidsonCotton.htm>



families. While some of these farms yielded modest farmhouses, wealthy planters built large plantation style homes. As mentioned previously, William Lee Davidson donated the land for the College from part of his plantation acreage at Beaver Dam where he lived in a two-story log house with his first wife “Betsy Lee”, the daughter of Major John Davidson of “Rural Hill”.<sup>1</sup>

“Rural Hill” is boasted as one of three large, brick plantation homes built in the Hopewell community during this era. It was built in 1788 near the Catawba River but burned in 1886.

During the 1860s, Major John Davidson’s son Jacky and grandson Brevard owned the land along with fifty-six adult slaves.<sup>2</sup> Major John Davidson gave his eldest son Robin a large portion of his land near the end of the eighteenth century where he built the house known today as “Holly Bend”. Robin and his wife “Peggy” had no children of their own but he was said to have been the richest planter in Mecklenburg County, owning more than one hundred slaves, at the time of his death in 1853.<sup>3</sup>

“Cedar Grove” and “Walnut Grove” make up the second and third brick mansions associated with the Hopewell community, located just a few miles west of Davidson College.

“Walnut Grove”, also known as the Williamson-Patterson site, was originally the home of Reverend John Williamson of Hopewell Church, an original trustee of Davidson College. Along with being a preacher and trustee, Reverend Williamson was also a planter and slave owner. Upon his death, he left the house to his brother, Dr. Samuel Williamson, a retired president of Davidson College. William Patterson then bought the house for his son John, and named it “Walnut Grove”. The house burned in 1945.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Davidson, *Planation World*, 19.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 30-31.



“Cedar Grove”, the last remaining of the three brick mansions, was built in 1831 by James Galbraith Torrance. He was a trustee of Davidson College and one of his sons attended the school while the rest attended Chapel Hill. He died in 1847 leaving the house and sixty-five slaves to his third wife.

Other notable plantations and farms located in the near vicinity of Davidson College included “Ingleside”, “Oak Lawn”, “Edgewood Farm”, “Latta Place”, “Woodlawn” and “Mount Mourne”. The residents of these homes were, in some way, typically connected through marriage but also connected to both the town and college of Davidson.

## **The Civil War**

Large plantation style farms and the need for slave labor ultimately led to the debate over states’ rights and the division of the country. Between the years 1826 and 1850, the number of slaves in Mecklenburg County had almost doubled from 1,500 slaves to 2,713 slaves owned by 678 people. As early as 1820, anti-slavery and pro-slavery politicians came to an agreement under the Missouri Compromise which declared slavery would not be permitted in the unorganized territory of the country. After the presidency of James Madison, residents of Free states became known as “abolitionists” when they began demanding the suppression of slavery.<sup>1</sup> The debate over slavery came to a head in 1860 with the election of Abraham Lincoln as President. His platform made it very clear to the people of North Carolina and other Southern states that he did not have their best interests at heart in regard to the issue of slavery. North

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<sup>1</sup> D. A. Tompkins, *History of Mecklenburg County and The City of Charlotte From 1740 to 1903* (Charlotte, NC: Observer Printing Press, 1903), 133.

Carolina succeeded on May 20<sup>th</sup>, 1861 after the Civil War was already underway.<sup>1</sup> The War lasted four brutal years and affected Davidson and the surrounding areas in more than one way.

Davidson College continued to run business as usual during the War and despite the fact that three Confederate Generals, Stonewall Jackson, D. H. Hill and Rufus Barringer, were all married to daughters of the College's first President, Robert Hall Morrison, little news of the War reached the campus. However, the town felt the effects of war in other ways; the newly laid railroad was torn up and transplanted to Virginia while the College invested its endowment in Confederate Bonds.<sup>2</sup>

### **Post-War Recovery Era**

After the War, the town relied heavily on the success of the College to pull them out of financial hard times. Chapel Hill closed during the War and didn't reopen until the mid-seventies which brought new, seasoned faculty to Davidson College. New people in the area required new houses which were not built in the elegant fashion of the pre-war years, but nonetheless, built. It was during this time that Dr. Holt, a Confederate Army surgeon, and his wife moved to town and purchased the Coldiron cottage, now known as the Holt-Henderson-Copeland House on North Main Street.<sup>3</sup> This house and its subsequent owners provide another example of the private boarding house tradition in Davidson.

Throughout the 1870s, the town continued to expand around the College, but a much greater expansion occurred after the town was incorporated on February 11th, 1879 and named the Town of Davidson College. The incorporation of the town meant a mayor would be elected

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 135-36.

<sup>2</sup> Beaty, *Davidson*, 32-33.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

as well as commissioners, and these positions would be filled with many family names well-known throughout Davidson's history including Scofield, Brattain and Cathey.<sup>1</sup>

## **Religion**

After its incorporation, the Town of Davidson College continued to establish itself separate from the College and this was seen most evidently in the building of a new Presbyterian Church. While the residents had traditionally attended services at the campus chapel alongside students and faculty, there was a growing need to have a church of their own. Townspeople and faculty worked hand-in-hand to raise the money needed for the construction, with faculty members each pledging two hundred dollars for the minimum of \$2,500 needed; the church was completed in 1885.<sup>2</sup>

Residents of the community were not all part of the Presbyterian Church. Many travelled a significant distance to Cornelius where they were members of the Mt. Zion United Methodist Church. Finally, in 1908, ninety-nine Davidson members joined forces and formed a Davidson Methodist Church still located on South Main Street today.

## **South Main Street**

The earliest growth and development of the area was unquestionably along North Main Street. Only a few houses were built along the southern corridor before the 1880s in an area known today as "South Main". This section of land was originally owned by the Johnston family which had familial connections to the previously mentioned Mount Mourne and Walnut Grove plantations. Through generations of marriage, the Johnston family also became connected

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 48-49, 178-179.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

to other well-known families in Davidson. Many of the original houses built in the South Main district were built as homes for these early unions, quickly turning it into a predominantly residential area.<sup>1</sup>

On July 26<sup>th</sup>, 1880, Stephen C. Scofield (“Skit”), owner of the Scofield Store and son of John N. Scofield, the New Yorker who built the Old Chambers building on campus, sold a plot of land to John Eli Brattain. This home site would soon become known as the Brattain house - one of three homes in the immediate area, still remaining today, attributed to members of the Brattain family.

### **The Brattain House**

The Brattain house is located at 305 South Main Street on the south corner of Walnut Street. It was built sometime around 1883 by John Eli Brattain who was a carpenter, served as a town commissioner and was an early member of the Methodist Church (built directly across South Main Street).

The architectural style of this house has many influences. It is not entirely clear where Mr. Brattain found his inspiration but the house has been termed a “Victorian cottage display[ing] strong influences of both the Carpenter Gothic and Italianate styles popular during the latter half of the nineteenth century”.<sup>2</sup> It is possible however, that he drew inspiration either from a house built according to plans of Alexander Jackson Davis, or by pioneer landscape architect and author, Andrew Jackson Downing. Downing wrote three books in the mid-nineteenth century that were widely distributed containing plans for some of Davis’ houses and

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>2</sup> Laura A. W. Phillips, “John Eli Brattain House,” Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, last modified April 1980, <http://www.cmhpf.org/essaybrattain.htm>



cottages. Houses built according to these plans were constructed as early as the 1840s and 1850s and were still being built long after the Civil War in some areas.<sup>1</sup>

The Brattain house is a one-and-one-half story, wood frame and wood sided house built on a brick foundation with strikingly similar hip-roofed porches on both the front facade (west facing elevation) and side facade (south facing elevation). The front entrance is adorned with a six-panel door with two side lights and a transom containing two panes. The main roof is complex and is best described as gabled with a cross-gable on the right and two dormers on the left (Figure 1). This pattern is consistent for all four elevations. The south facing elevation, at first glance, appears to be identical to the front of the house, but a closer look reveals differences in some of the wood working details. In its original state, the rear or, east facing facade, was likely identical to the north facade facing Walnut Street but now contains what appears to be a later addition (Figure 2). The second story windows all contain 4/4 sashes, two of which reside in the dormers and one in the cross-gable.

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<sup>1</sup> John C. Poppeliers and S. Allen Chambers Jr., *What Style Is It: A Guide to American Architecture*, (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2003), 48.



Figure 1. Front view of the Brattain house featuring main entrance porch with two dormers in hipped roof on left and cross-gable roof on right.



Figure 2. Rear view of the Brattain house features two dormers in hipped roof on left and cross-gable roof on right.

The “carpenter” Gothic influence is seen in the most striking feature of this house. Brattain used his skill as a carpenter to carve the bargeboard “gingerbread” cutouts which border the eaves and dormers by hand, making this a truly unique house (figure 3). The Italianate style influence, popular beginning in the 1850s and lasting into the 1880s, can best be seen in the overhanging eaves which contain decorative brackets, the more intricately carved brackets supporting the porch roofs, and in the detail around the windows (figure 4).



Figure 3. South facing dormer displaying intricate bargeboard cutouts





Figure 4. Detailed view of the brackets under the main eaves and under the porches

The Brattain house has long been a familiar sight to the residents and visitors of Davidson. It was built in 1883 and in the almost two hundred and thirty years since, has only been owned by four other people. Of these, S.C. Scofield (original land owner), J. E. Brattain and W. A. Cathey all served as town councilmen.<sup>1</sup>

The deceased spouse of current owner Isabel Hoyle, Robert T. Hoyle, was the brother-in-law of previous owner, William A. Cathey. Cathey was married to Robert's sister, Ruth Hoyle Cathey. Together, Robert Hoyle and William Cathey established the Cathey-Hoyle Funeral Home and Insurance Agency in the Sloan house (ca. 1870) diagonally across the intersection of Walnut and Main streets. The funeral home has since been returned to its original status as a private residence.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Beaty, *Davidson*, 178-179.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.



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