

230 South Main Street: The Sloan House

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Historic Preservation

Dr. Morrill

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The Sloan House is both an elegant example of turn of the century architecture and a window into the history of Davidson, North Carolina. The house, located at 230 South Main Street, is a south facing Queen Anne style home built in the late Victorian period, approximately 1900. This lovely home was once in the middle of a row of homes.<sup>1</sup> It is flanked still by elegant homes to its west, though the Davidson Town Hall is now to its east.

This section of Main Street was home to the oldest Davidson families. South Main Street was farmland in the antebellum era and part of the Walnut Grove plantation of the Johnston Family.<sup>2</sup> The Johnston family, through the years and various marriages, were related to a number of the prominent families of Davidson, perhaps this is why so many of them settled on this street. The Withers House is located across from the Sloan house and the Cathey house, home of James Lee Sloan Sr., is just down the street. Queen Anne style homes were “the choice of bankers, lawyers, doctors and other professionals who sought to strut their architectural stuff in small town America in the 1880’s and 1890’s.”<sup>3</sup> The Queen Anne style also favored cottages, of which the Sloan house is a prime example.

The original proprietors of the house were J. Lee Sloan Jr. and Ida (née Withers) Sloan both who came from old Davidson families. The Sloan family had been principal landowners in the area and the Sloan store, created in the late 1870’s was one of only

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<sup>1</sup> Davidson: Mecklenburg County, Map, (New York: Sanborn Map Company, December, 1915) From North Carolina State Archives, North Carolina Maps. [http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm4/document.php?CISORO\\_OT=/ncmaps&CISOPTR=6730&REC=9](http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm4/document.php?CISORO_OT=/ncmaps&CISOPTR=6730&REC=9).

<sup>2</sup> Mary Beaty, *Davidson: A History of the Town from 1835 until 1937* (Davison: Birarpatch Press, 1979), 97.

<sup>3</sup> S. Allen Chambers and John C. Poppeliers, *What Style Is It?: A Guide to American Architecture* (Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 2003), 73.

three stores in town.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the Sloan family owned extensive sections east of college property before Davidson College was founded.<sup>5</sup> James Lee Sloan Sr. was a commissioner of Davidson from 1885-1886 and 1887-1888. His son, James Lee Sloan Jr., also known “Mr. Jimmy Lee” graduated from Davidson College in 1884 and was about to begin his long career as local businessman and sometimes postmaster and mayor.<sup>6</sup>

Jimmy Lee Sloan and Ida Withers were the first couple to get married in Davidson College Presbyterian Church<sup>7</sup> erected in 1885. “Their marriage united two of the oldest families in the area and was a considerable social event.”<sup>8</sup> The Davidson College Presbyterian Church was erected because the townspeople of Davidson College wanted their own building rather than attending services in the college chapel. It was only appropriate that Ida Withers and J. Lee Sloan, members of Davidson College high society were the first to wed in a church created by and for the old families of Davidson. The name of the town changed from Davidson College to just Davidson in 1891.

Besides building his house, Jimmy Lee was one of the people responsible for building the modern town of Davidson. Up until the 1890s the main reason for the town was the college and while there were some businesses, there was no real industry. In 1890 Jimmy Lee was one of a number of businessmen who founded the Linden Mill. This was soon followed by the construction of the Delburg Cotton Mill that opened in 1908. The mills changed the town from a college community to a village with multiple

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<sup>4</sup> Beaty, 43.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

economic bases. The mills helped the town grow from 500 residents in 1910 to 1,500 by the 1920s.

Jimmy Lee was also responsible for building up the downtown commercial center of Davidson. In 1914 Jimmy Lee built a three-part brick commercial building on Main Street next to the White Drug Company that contributed to the development of the northern end of Davidson's business district.<sup>9</sup> In Sloan's obituary in the *Charlotte Observer*, it is stated that he was the secretary and treasurer of the two cotton mills in town, Linden Mills, and the Delburg Mills. He was also vice president and one of the organizers of the Bank of Davidson and a member of the first Presbyterian Church.<sup>10</sup>

If the marriage of Jimmy Lee and Ida was a big social event in Davidson, their daughter's wedding to George H. Currie would be one as well. Jimmy Lee was a prominent businessman, and also the mayor at the time his daughter, Marie, 21 wed George H. Currie, 36 of Clarkton County<sup>11</sup> on January 11, 1909. Her wedding was a society affair, being substantially covered by a reporter from the *Charlotte Observer*. The Sloan Home was featured prominently in the coverage. This reporter wrote that this affair, which occurred "at the beautiful cottage home of Mr. And Mrs. J. Lee Sloan was the scene tonight of one of the prettiest weddings in Davidson." "The decorations were of beautiful pattern and artistically worked out. In the parlor crossing midway overhead were two lines of evergreens with holly berries, forming a star in the centre of the ceiling whose effect was very striking. Across the bay window was an arch of evergreens

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 138

<sup>10</sup> "James L. Sloan, Davidson, Dies: Postmaster and Business man succumbs to Illness of six weeks duration," *Charlotte Observer*, August 13, 1932.

<sup>11</sup> Certificate of Marriage, George H. Currie to Marie Sloan, 11 June 1909, Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. Office of Register of Deeds, Charlotte, North Carolina.

trimmed in flowers.”<sup>12</sup> The announcement concluded by saying that Marie and George Currie, a businessman who went to the University of North Carolina and Harvard will live in Clarkton County.

In 1924 when Jimmy Lee remarried, he built a new house for his new bride and he gave this house to his daughters Marie and Louise. The next year Marie and George, who already had a house, gave full title to the house to Louise Sloan. Miss Louise never married but lived in this house for the next sixty years.

Louise Sloan was one of the more colorful characters in Davidson’s history. Miss Louise was “a trifle close with her money,”<sup>13</sup> this is perhaps why she spent everyday in the library and never knowingly subscribed to any newspaper as long as she could read them for free.<sup>14</sup> According to Kline, who now leases the house, she spent her days in the library, because she was too frugal to heat her home. The house was full of newspapers (which she presumably got from dumpster diving) and twigs to burn at night. She also dumpster dived late at night. Kline recounts a story retold to him of Miss Louise in her 70’s tipping over garbage cans at 11pm.<sup>15</sup> She was known to search the “town’s post office for usable discards.”<sup>16</sup> When Louise Withers Sloan’s eulogy was given, the speakers said that he/she would not tell “Miss Louise stories” because all of them had to do with her being stingy and having a recollection of things in her pockets.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> “Currie-Sloan Nuptials,” *Charlotte Observer*, January 11, 1909.

<sup>13</sup> Chalmers G. Davidson, “Louise Withers Sloan 1892-1992: A Remembrance,” *Mecklenburg Gazette*, January 29, 1992.

<sup>14</sup> William E. Thompson, Eulogy for Louise Withers Sloan, January 9, 1992, Davidson College Archives and Special Collections.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Kline, interview by author, February 27, 2012.

<sup>16</sup> Davidson, “Louise Withers Sloan 1892-1992: A Remembrance.”

<sup>17</sup> Kline has stated that any time there was a wedding in town, Miss Louise would have a large handbag full of wedding food.



While Miss Louise was a legendary spinster, it is rumored she had at least one opportunity to get married. When she sold the house to the town of Davidson, there was a letter found upstairs on a window seat of the dormer window from William H.

Richardson, city editor of the Raleigh Times, postmarked Raleigh, Aug. 8, 1915.

Richardson wrote: "Do you miss me? Do you miss me bad enough to promise that when I get things in shape and prove that I can save and invest, you will marry me and be my own little wife?"<sup>18</sup>

Miss Louise was not only frugal in her personal life but also in her business affairs. While Miss Louise often looked like a bag lady, when she "put her black velvet evening dress for a college benefit, she looked like the million dollars she was reputed to have."<sup>19</sup> She had inherited all of the commercial buildings on Main Street that had been built by her father. When a young insurance agent fixed up his rented office at his own expense, he proudly showed her his work. And his next rent notice reflected an increase - "because the property was worth more" said Joe Gardner, chairman of the Davidson Historic Preservation Committee, who remembers her well. Kline commented that Miss Louise would go around to her rental properties at night secretly evaluating if she was charging enough. This legendary frugality proved to be instrumental in the preservation of the house.

Because Louise Withers Sloan was so frugal, there had been very few improvements done to the house since she inherited it. When she sold the house to the

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<sup>18</sup> Pat Borden Gubbins, "Grand Old Lady Stills Holds Sway House will keep spot on Main Street," *The Charlotte Observer*, April 19, 1992, [http://infoweb.newsbank.com.librarylink.uncc.edu/iw-se arch/ we/InfoWeb?p\\_product=AWNB&p\\_the me=aggregated5&p\\_action=doc&p\\_docid=0EB 6C946AC12DFF 8&p\\_docnum=1&p\\_queryname=2](http://infoweb.newsbank.com.librarylink.uncc.edu/iw-se arch/ we/InfoWeb?p_product=AWNB&p_the me=aggregated5&p_action=doc&p_docid=0EB 6C946AC12DFF 8&p_docnum=1&p_queryname=2).

<sup>19</sup> Davidson, "Louise Withers Sloan 1892-1992: A Remembrance."

town of Davidson in 1989, arguments ensued to who would be able to lease the house. In fact, in 1992, when the Davidson community players hosted a haunted house for Halloween in the Sloan house, there were lines down the block.<sup>20</sup> People couldn't wait to see the magnificent house that for so many years was not seen by the public.

The town attorney, Richard J. Kline won the battle for the house after presenting a plan to put \$30,000 worth of renovations in to the house and to furnish it with Queen Anne furniture<sup>21</sup>. Kline claims that when he began to work on the house, it had knob and tube electrical wiring. This type of wiring was not installed after the 1930's. It is probable that when her parents converted the house from gas to electric, this was the original wiring. Since Kline leased the house, he has torn this out and installed modern electric wiring. This is one of the few changes made to the house since it was built. The house still has the original flooring, ceiling, and doorbell. All the woodwork (the chair rail molding and wainscoting) is also original to the house. It merely needed a cleaning. Most of the glasswork is also original to the house. The tin roof is also original to the house.

The exterior of the house has yellow clapboard siding over a brick foundation. The front façade is asymmetrical in appearance with an octagonal turret on the left corner that forms the corner of the wrap-around covered porch and a dominant front facing gable on the second floor that mirrors the shape of the turret. The tin roof of the house is hipped with parts of the house protruding out to form gable roofs such as the one next to the porch at the right side of the front façade. There are two large windows on the first floor and one on the second level. The porch also boasts the most unique feature of the

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<sup>20</sup> Kline, Interview by author.

<sup>21</sup> Gubbins, "Grand Old Lady Stills."

house, an enclosed gutter that was created solely for cosmetic purposes.<sup>22</sup> This, however, has practical implications, as there is no need to clean leaves out that do not collect.

Another unusual feature of the house is the eyebrow window i.e. a window in the shape of an eyebrow, a curvaceous way to get some light and, perhaps, ventilation in a top-floor space while distinguishing a building's facade. They were popularized in America in the second half of the 19th century by Boston architect Henry Hobson Richardson, the father of the Shingle style.<sup>23</sup> Today, eyebrow windows aren't restricted to the roofs of Shingle-style replicas. According to Morristown, New Jersey, architect Nick Bensley, who puts eyebrows on many of his residential projects, "They really break up the monotony of a rectilinear roof or flat interior ceiling. Besides, curves are sexy."<sup>24</sup> As you can see in the pictures, the eyebrow window adds much needed light to a very dark inner staircase made of dark wood.

Unlike many Queen Anne houses the front door does not lead to a large entryway but instead to a hallway from which the rooms connect. At the back of the hallway is the stairway to the second floor. In other words, you must walk to the back of the house and then walk forward on the staircase to reach the second floor. This is different from most houses where the staircase begins in the front and you walk back to ascend. Because of the hipped roof, all the second story rooms are irregularly shaped with protrusions occurring all along the walls. This house has no such thing as a rectangular bedroom.

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<sup>22</sup> Kline, Interview by author.

<sup>23</sup> Jefferson Kolle, "Adding an Eyebrow to Your Roof," *This Old House magazine*, 2012, <http://www.thisoldhouse.com/toh/article/0,,357593,00.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.



In the original house, there were two pot belly stoves, both on the left (west) side of the house.<sup>25</sup> Each main room on the ground floor has a fireplace in it, four fireplaces in all. Originally, the kitchen of the Sloan house was in a separate building behind the house. This was common in southern homes both to reduce the heat in the main house in the days before air conditioning and more importantly to lessen the chance of a kitchen fire burning down the entire house. In the 1920's, the house was renovated and a kitchen was added on the (back, right), northeast side of the house. When the original back window frame was taken out, it was put around the east side window of this new back room. The kitchen has since been torn out and serves as an office and bathroom for attorney Richard Kline who leases the building from the Town of Davidson.

The Sloan House, at over 110 years old, is a great example of what gracious living looked like at the turn of the last century. Even with all the windows however, I found the house dark and some of the rooms a little strange. Modern homes let in more natural light but most are boxes with none of the exterior energy of this elegant structure. Like Miss Louise, the Sloan House stayed the same, while the world around her changed.

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<sup>25</sup> Kline, Interview by author.

## Bibliography

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- Thompson, William E. Eulogy for Louise Withers Sloan. January 9, 1992. Davidson College Archives and Special Collections.

## Photographs

The Sloan House

230 South Main Street

Davidson, North Carolina 28035

Mecklenburg County

All Photographs were taken on January 27, 2012.

The U.T.M. coordinates for the property are: Zone 17 513588.1 E , 3928261.0 N

The Sloan Family is buried in the Davidson College Cemetery

533-537 North Main Street

Davidson, North Carolina 28035

All Photographs were taken on January 27, 2012.

The U.T.M. coordinates for the property are: Zone 17 513935.9 E, 3929000.1 N