

Slavery at Isaac Newton Alexander Mill Ruin

Designation Report Addendum

Olivia Dobbs

July 19, 2023

The Isaac Newton Alexander Mill Ruin was built in the fall of 1857 by its namesake in Sharon Township. Powered by what is now known as Briar Creek, the mill served the farmers of the region, processing their wheat, corn, and cottonseed. The founder, Isaac Newton Alexander (1808-1892), did not operate the mill, as he would hire men to oversee the operations.

Alexander himself was a slave owner. The 1830 census lists 20 enslaved persons: four boys and three girls under the age of 10, five boys and three girls between the ages of 10 and 24, one man and one woman between the ages of 24 and 36, and one man and two women between the ages of 36 and 55.¹ The 1840 census shows 4 enslaved persons: a boy and a girl under 10 years of age, a boy between 10 and 24 years of age, and a man between 24 and 36 years of age.² This dramatic decrease in the number of people Alexander enslaved can most likely be attributed to the estate of Alexander's father, Charles Taylor Alexander (1764-1828). The senior Alexander had three minor heirs at the time of his death, and Isaac, being the executor of the estate, most likely had possession of the enslaved persons bequeathed to his young siblings. The 1850 slave schedule lists 7 enslaved individuals: one 70-year-old woman, one 24-year-old woman, one 22-year-old man, one 20-year-old man, one 18-year-old boy, one 6-year-old boy, and one 1-year-old girl.³

There is little evidence that shows the use of enslaved labor at the mill itself. The opening of the mill and its probable use of enslaved labor can be seen in the 1860 slave schedule. Alexander had enslaved 22 individuals: one 80-year-old man, two 25-year-old women, two 20-year-old men, two 18-year-old boys, one 15-year-old boy, three 15-year-old girls, one 14-year-old boy, two 10-year-old girls, one 9-year-old girl, one 6-year-old girl, one 4-year-old girl, one 3-year-old girl, two 2-year-old girls, one 2-year-old boy, and one 1-year-old boy.⁴

Sources that provide the names of those Alexander enslaved are also scarce. Alexander was a long-time elder of Sharon Presbyterian Church. While church records reveal names of enslaved members, unfortunately, only one name can be connected to Alexander. The entry for May 17, 1862, notes that Harriet, a woman enslaved by I. N. Alexander, was examined and admitted to church privileges.⁵ A 27-year-old Harriet Alexander living in Sharon Township appears on the 1870 census, but with the abundance of women with the same name in Mecklenburg County, it is difficult to say whether that is for sure the same Harriet.⁶

¹ "United States Census, 1830", database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:XHGR-QSP>), entry for Isaac Alexander, 1830.

² "United States Census, 1840", database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:XHYZ-RFZ>), entry for Isaac N Alexander, 1840.

³ "United States Census (Slave Schedule), 1850," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MVCP-66X>), entry for I N Alexander, 1850.

⁴ "United States Census (Slave Schedule), 1860," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:WK5L-LQPZ>), entry for I N Alexander, 1860.

⁵ "Coloured Communicants," Book 2 "Records of Sharon Church", 1855 - 1874, Sharon Presbyterian Church records, MS0385, Manuscript Collections, J. Murrey Atkins Library Special Collections and University Archives, UNC Charlotte.

⁶ "United States Census, 1870", database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MW82-W2T>), Harriet Alexander in entry for Jerry Alexander, 1870.

Furthermore, the 1870 census lists two Black members in Alexander's household. John Alexander, 22, worked as a farmhand, and Annithe (sp.) Neal, 11, worked as a domestic servant; in all likelihood, they were probably formerly enslaved by the Alexander family.⁷ A John Alexander shows up in the Sharon region in the 1880 census, but there is no concrete evidence to show that he is the same individual as the one in the 1870 Alexander household.⁸

⁷ "United States Census, 1870", database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MW82-Y3L>), entry for Isac Alexander and Elizabeth Alexander, 1870.

⁸ "United States Census, 1880", database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MCXC-3JF>), entry for John Alexander and Henrietta Alexander, 1880.

Isaac Newton Alexander Mill Ruin



This report was written on March 4, 1981

1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the Isaac Newton Alexander Mill Ruin is located along the banks of Briar Creek on the campus of Myers Park High School in Charlotte, NC.

2. Name, address, and telephone number of the present owner of the property: The present owner of the property is:

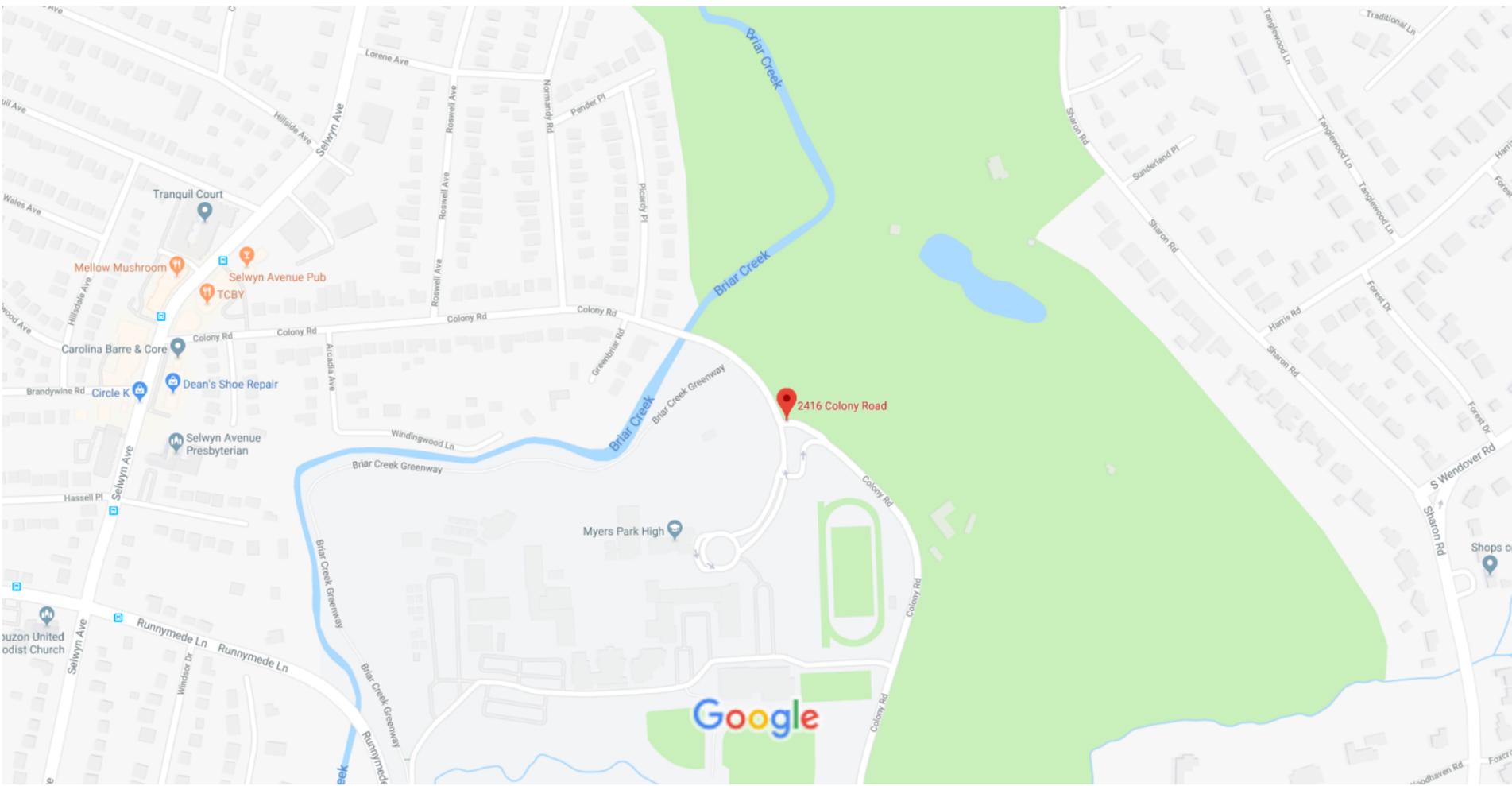
The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education
Education Center
PO Box 30035
Charlotte, N.C. 28230

Telephone: 704/379-7000

3. Current Deed Book Reference to the Property: There is no individual deed listed for this property. The Tax Parcel Number of the property is: 175-071-02.

4. Representative Photographs of the Property: This report contains representative photographs of the property.

5. A map depicting the location of the Property: This report contains a map which depicts the location of the property.



6. A brief historical sketch of the Property: In July and August 1857, Isaac Newton Alexander (1808-1892), a native of the Clear Creek community of Mecklenburg County, purchased a large tract of land along Sugar Creek and along Little Sugar Creek, now Briar Creek, in the Sharon section of Mecklenburg County. ¹ Soon thereafter, a water-powered grist mill was erected on his farm. It was a two-story frame building which rested upon a rock foundation. ² Mr. Alexander, a farmer, did not operate the mill but brought "millers" to his farm to oversee the gathering and grinding of grain into flour and meal. ³

The Isaac Newton Alexander Mill served the farmers of the surrounding countryside, who brought their wheat and corn, the principal grain crops of ante-bellum Mecklenburg to the facility for processing. ⁴ It must have been a hubbub of activity. As late as 1880, the mill was in full operation, not only processing grain but also producing cottonseed oil, the first in Mecklenburg County, peanut oil and castor bean oil. ⁵ But in the late 1880s and 1890s, more efficient plants, such as a roller mill in Dilworth, made the Isaac Newton Alexander Mill obsolete, and the old building fell silent. ⁶ On August 28, 1896, the *Charlotte Observer* reported that the mill dam "at the old Captain Alexander mill" had been washed away by heavy rains. "It was swept completely away," the newspaper noted. "The people in that neighborhood think it a good riddance." ⁷

Isaac Newton Alexander died on November 18, 1892. ⁸ A member and long-time elder at Sharon Presbyterian Church, he was buried in the Sharon cemetery beside his wife, Caroline Morrison Alexander (1825-1863), whom he had wed on August 8, 1845. ⁹ The *Charlotte Democrat* described him as a "good Christian man". ¹⁰ The *Charlotte Weekly Observer* was even more expansive in its praise of Isaac Newton Alexander, "His walk in life was that of an honest man and exemplary Christian," the newspaper declared. ¹¹ Cyrus Morrison Alexander, his son, who was associated with the mill operation, lived until March 6, 1947. ¹²

In the early 1950s, when Myers Park High School was built, Dr. E. H. Garinger, Superintendent of the Charlotte Schools, suggested that the art building and the history building be located near the mill ruin. Also, local chapters of the United Daughters of the Confederacy advocated the restoration of the mill. Neither of these proposals materialized. ¹³ The Isaac Newton Alexander Mill is a unique element in the built environment of Charlotte. Unhappily, only remnants of the complex survive. The mill pond extended northward on Briar Creek, covering most of what is now the golf course of Myers Park Country Club. The rock dam was about fifteen feet high. ¹⁴ Just above the mill, one can see traces of the flume or rock-lined trench which brought the water to the overshot or breastshot wheel that powered the grinding apparatus. The dressed millstones, both the runner stone and the bedstones, are extant, but in 1969 they were moved to a spot near the entrance to Myers Park High School.

Footnotes

¹ Mecklenburg County Deed Book 3, Page 803. Mecklenburg County Deed Book 3, Page 809-810. Gravestone of I. N. Alexander in the Cemetery at Sharon Presbyterian Church. "Mecklenburg County - Watermills " (a folder in the vertical files of the Carolina Room of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Library).

² Letter from Mr. Beaumert Whitton to the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Properties Commission (May 7, 1979).

³ The United States Census reveals that at least three millers operated the facility. Burton Flanigan (1860 Census, p 21-23); Eli Blackwelder (1870 Census, p. 265); George A. Cook (1880 Census, p. 533).

⁴ *Western Democrat* (June 2, 1857), p. 3.

⁵ 1880 Census, p. 533. "Mecklenburg County- Watermills".

⁶ *Charlotte Observer* (November 26, 1985), p. 4.

⁷ *Charlotte Observer* (August 28, 1898), p. 5

⁸ Gravestone in the Cemetery at Sharon Presbyterian Church.

⁹ Mecklenburg County Marriage Bonds, p, 4. Gravestone of Caroline Morrison Alexander in the Cemetery at Sharon Presbyterian Church.

¹⁰ *Charlotte Democrat* (November 25, 1892), p. 3.

¹¹ *Charlotte Weekly Observer* (November 21, 1892), p. 4. There is also an obituary article for him in the *Charlotte Observer* (November 19, 1892), p. 1.

¹² *Charlotte News* (March 3, 1947). *Charlotte Observer* (March 8, 1947), p. 3.

¹³ "Mecklenburg County- Watermills"

¹⁴ *Charlotte Observer* (August 28, 1898), p. 5.

7. A brief architectural description of the property: This report contains an architectural description of the property prepared by Jack O. Boyte, AIA.

8. Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets the criteria set forth in NCGS 160A-399.4:

a. Special significance in terms of its history, architecture, and/or cultural importance: The Commission judges that the property known as the Isaac Newton Alexander Mill Ruin does possess special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the fact that this is one of the few mill ruins which survive in Mecklenburg County and the only one of this type in this section of the city and county.

b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling and/or association: The Commission judges that the architectural description included herein demonstrates that the property known as the Isaac Newton Alexander Mill Ruin meets this criterion.

9. Ad Valorem Tax Appraisal: The Commission is aware that designation would allow for 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 Ad Valorem appraisal on the 72.9 acres of land is \$5,789,320. The current Ad Valorem appraisal on the improvements is \$4,181,270. The property is exempt from the payment of Ad Valorem taxes.

Bibliography

Charlotte Democrat.

Charlotte News.

Charlotte Observer.

Charlotte Weekly Observer.

Gravestones in cemetery at Sharon Presbyterian Church.

Letter from Mr. Beaumert Whitton to the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Properties Commission (May 7, 1979).

Mecklenburg County Marriage Bonds.

"Mecklenburg County - Watermills" (a folder in the vertical files of the Carolina Room of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Library).

Records of the Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office.

Records of the Mecklenburg County Tax Office.

United States Census (1840, 1850, 1860, 1870, 1880).

Date of Preparation of the Report: March 4, 1981.

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Architectural Description

by Jack O. Boyte, AIA

Charlotte has within its city limits numerous historic sites of value and significance. While many retain only a suggestion of their original form, there is one whose land and structural remains are surprisingly undisturbed; the Isaac Newton Alexander grist mill. Obscured and protected by rough terrain and thick underbrush, the massive granite foundation walls of this mid-nineteenth century grist mill remain much as they were when first erected in the red clay hillside of the Briar Creek valley where it passes Myers Park High School.

Passing years have seen continuing damage to the mill remains. There are mounds of stone rubble around the base of the walls. Here and there in the rubble are rectangular granite blocks which were once part of the tall ashlar walls of the structure.

The foundation walls outline in clear relief the size and shape of the mill house, and the surrounding earth forms illustrate original shapes of the wheel well, water canals and diversion ditches. Evidence remains to tell of roads and ramps as well as the original tail race where lowered water returned to the creek.

The main body of the structure is approximately twenty-five feet wide and thirty feet long. Three foot thick foundations of random granite ashlar follow this shape along an east-west axis. The east end is buried in the hillside. And here is the tallest remnant of the original wall. More than twelve feet high, the wall stands straight and solid against earth pressure just as it has since 1850.

South of the main building are stone remnants of a wing which measures some ten feet square. This appendage, likely floored at the same level as the main structure, was probably used to divert incoming grain to the lower level for transfer to the mill stone grain hoppers.

On the upstream side of the building there is a huge excavated channel as long as the house. Rubble stones line the sides and most remain as they were when the mill was first built. Deep and wide enough for a water wheel of twelve or more feet in diameter, this well indicates that the mill power came from an overshot wheel, though the evidence now seen could also hint of a much larger breast wheel.

The creek valley, which forms a wide sweeping arc for several miles above the mill site, is lined with steep rocky sides. Isaac Alexander obviously found the site well suited for a dam and mill pond, for he established an extraordinary grist mill in the valley. And though it no longer exists, the location of the Alexander mill pond is identified by remnants of a water canal which reached from the pond to the mill. This shallow ditch, still visible on the brow of the southern creek bank, was about an eighth of a mile long. Its depth and width were determined by the water supply required to adequately fill the wheel buckets as the mill operated. Water flow was controlled by baffles and diversion channels in the canal. Still evident, just above the mill, is a deep secondary spillway through which canal water was directed when the miller chose to vary the wheel movement. The lower level, or ground floor, of the mill appears to have been a stone enclosed grinding area. Above this was a wooden upper floor where grain was received and the prepared meal was sacked and stored. Mounted high in the north wall of this room, the water wheel axle transmitted power to the mill stones through a series of wood and iron gears. Fortunately, students of the nearby high school salvaged both the bed stone and the grind stone from the mill site soon after the school was completed in the late 1950s. These valuable artifacts are on permanent display in the school yard and appear relatively intact.

Stones which have diameters of about four feet illustrate important elements in the construction of the Alexander grist mill. At the same time they demonstrate the skill of the stone cutter who shaped and furrowed the grinding stone.

The upper floor of the building, which was level with the old road bed, contained two or more rooms. Here farmers delivered grain for grinding and meal was bagged or stored. Here, also, there were quarters and offices for the miller, who often operated the equipment around the clock. The wooden structure has all vanished, so its form must be conjectural until research completed the accurate story of this important old building.

This relic is a graphic reminder of a popular home industry in early Mecklenburg. The streams around Charlotte were repeatedly used for mill power in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. With the advent of steam power after the Civil War, most mills fell into disuse and have disappeared. So this site, protected as it is by its location and situated on public land, presents an extraordinary opportunity to preserve a permanent and significant part of our pioneer heritage.