

## Slavery and the Chairman Blake House

Designation Report Addendum

Olivia Dobbs

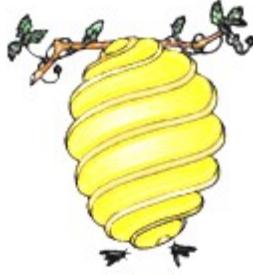
July 21, 2023

John Rennie Blake (1825-1900) was Professor of Astronomy and Philosophy and Chairman of the Faculty (1871-877) at Davidson College. Born in Abbeville, South Carolina, to a large farming family, he was familiar with the use of enslaved labor. According to census data, his father, William Newton Blake (1798-1875), enslaved 10 people in 1830. The farm most likely saw increased success in the next decades, as the number of enslaved individuals jumped from 18 in 1840 to 28 in 1850.<sup>1</sup> John did not follow in his father's professional footsteps, instead attending the University of Georgia and Harvard University's Lawrence Scientific School to become an academic.

It is highly probable that John Rennie Blake relied on domestic enslaved labor from 1861 to 1865, but there is no concrete evidence to show the use of slavery at the Chairman Blake House.

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<sup>1</sup> "United States Census, 1830", database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:XH5S-44N>), entry for William N Blake, 1830; "United States Census, 1840", database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:XHYB-14Y>), entry for Wm N Blake, 1840; "United States Census (Slave Schedule), 1850," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:HRWH-N56Z>), entry for William N. Blake, 1850.



## The Chairman Blake House



*This report was written on July 3, 1979*

**1. Name and location of the property:** The property known as the Chairman Blake House is located at 127 S. Main St. in Davidson, N.C.

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

Davidson College  
Davidson, N.C. 28036

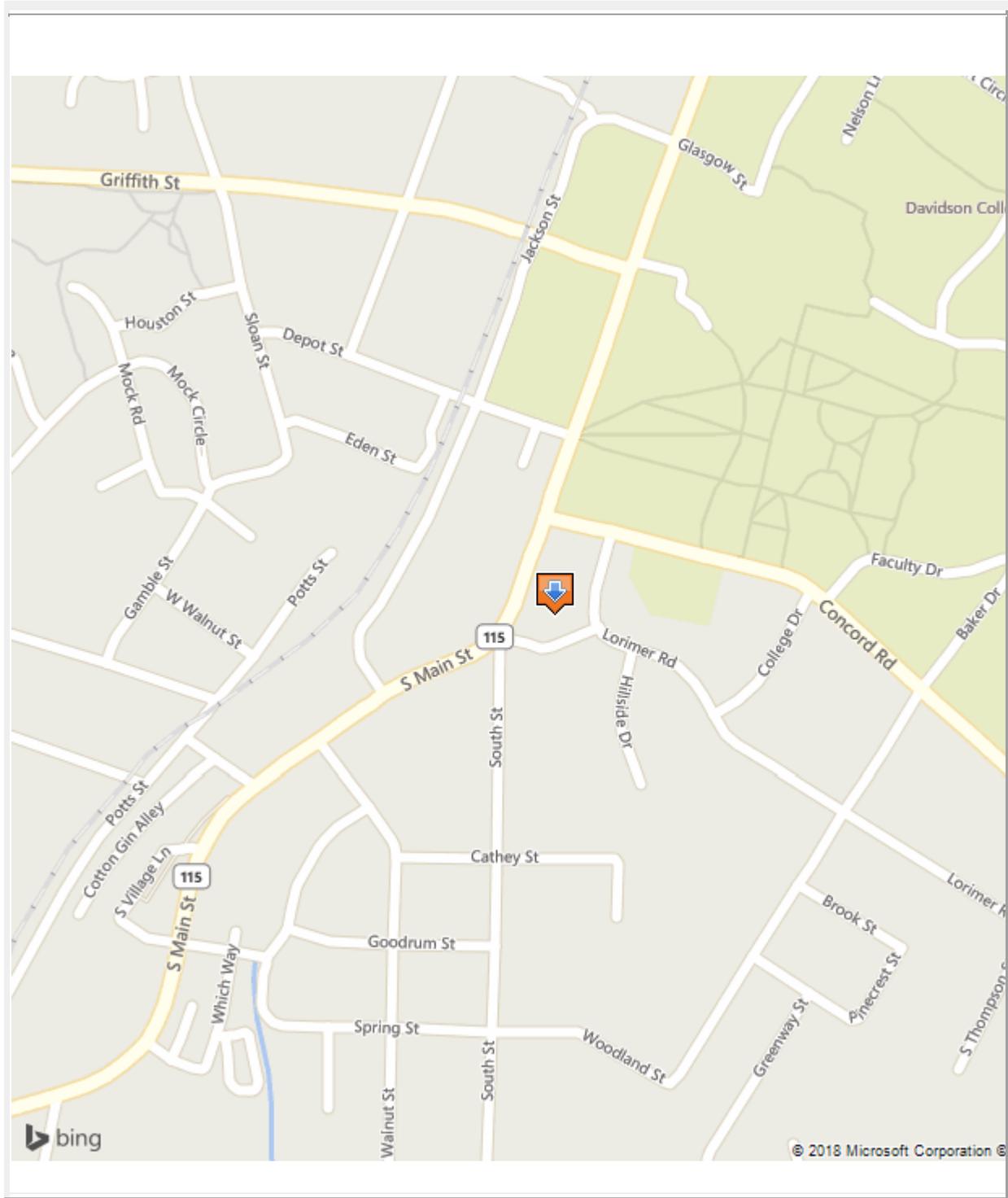
Telephone: 892-2000

The present occupant of the property is:

Dr. Anthony S. Abbott  
127 S. Main St.  
Davidson, NC. 28036  
Telephone: 896-6281

**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 a map depicting the location of the property.



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**5. Current Deed Book Reference to the property:** The earliest deed which sets forth the boundaries of Davidson College is recorded in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 4 at Page 420, The Tax Parcel Number of the property is 007-013-13.

**6. A brief historical sketch of the property:**

Local tradition holds that the structure was built shortly after John Rennie Blake joined the faculty of Davidson College in 1861 and that he was its initial occupant.<sup>1</sup> Born in 1825 in Greenwood, S.C., he received his academic training at the University of Georgia and taught at several institutions before coming to Davidson as Professor of Astronomy and Philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Blake remained at Davidson until 1885, when he retired and returned to his home in Greenwood, S.C.<sup>3</sup> During these difficult years of military defeat and Federal occupation of the South, Professor Blake contributed greatly to the survival of the institution which he served. At the end of the Civil War, not a few individuals argued that Davidson College should be closed. Only eleven students graduated in 1866, while the class of 1860 had had forty-six members.<sup>4</sup> Blake was among those who urged that the college press on, so to speak.<sup>5</sup> And his commitment to this proposition was more than verbal. As Bursar or chief financial officer of Davidson in the late 1860's and early 1870's, he undertook a variety of tasks, even to the extent of repairing college facilities himself.<sup>6</sup>

**John Rennie Blake**

The most important of Professor Blake's contributions to Davidson College occurred in the 1870's. On June 27, 1871, President G. Wilson McPhail died.<sup>7</sup> The Board of Trustees, meeting on October 24, 1871, voted to institute a new system of governance at Davidson. No President was elected. The Board instead vested executive power in the Chairman of the Faculty, an official elected by the Faculty itself.<sup>8</sup> D. H. Hill, a member of the Board, reported that the plan was adopted "in deference to the wishes of the Faculty."<sup>9</sup> Apparently, the teachers at Davidson were influenced by the fact that the Chairmanship system was in vogue at other academic institutions at that time, including the University of Virginia.<sup>10</sup> Shortly after the October meeting, John Rennie Blake was elected Chairman of the Faculty.<sup>11</sup> He continued in that capacity until June 1877, when the Board of Trustees voted to re-establish the office of President and elected Rev. A. D. Hepburn to that position.<sup>12</sup>

An official of the college has characterized Blake's Chairmanship as "unique in its character and remarkable in its history," It was a "period of unsurpassed energy and enterprise," the writer went on to explain. Among the major accomplishments of these years (1871-77) were: 1) substantial increases in faculty salaries through increased tuition, 2) enforcement of stringent entrance examinations, 3) expansion of membership of the Board of Trustees beyond the Presbyteries of North Carolina, 4) inauguration of major fund raising campaign, and 5) enrichment of curriculum.<sup>13</sup>

Following Professor Blake's retirement, the house was occupied by Professor William Daniel Vinson of the Mathematics Department.<sup>14</sup> Vinson, a native of Sumter County, S.C., and graduate of Washington and Lee University, had joined the Faculty in 1883. He resided in the house until his death in 1897.<sup>15</sup> Throughout the ensuing decades, the house has served as the residence of a series of individuals who have been associated with Davidson College.<sup>16</sup>

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## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Chalmers Gaston Davidson, *The Plantation World Around Davidson* (Mecklenburg Historical Association, 2nd. edition, 1973) pp. 16-17. Hereafter cited as *Davidson*.

<sup>2</sup> *The Semi-Centennial Catalogue Of Davidson College 1837-1887* (E. M. Uzzell, Raleigh, N.C., 1891) p. 18. United States Census of 1870 for Mecklenburg County, p. 144.

<sup>3</sup> *The Semi-Centennial Catalogue Of Davidson College 1837-1887* (E. M. Uzzell, Raleigh, N.C., 1891) p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Wilson Ling, ed., *Alumni Catalogue of Davidson College, Davidson, NC: 1837-1924* (The Presbyterian Standard Publishing Company, 1924), pp. 74-76., p. 86. Hereafter cited as *Ling*.

<sup>5</sup> *The Semi-Centennial Addresses of Davidson College* (E. M. Uzzell, Raleigh, N.C., 1888), pp. 147-155. Hereafter cited As *Addresses*.

<sup>6</sup> Minutes Of The Meetings Of The Board Of Trustees of Davidson College (unpublished manuscript in the archives of Davidson College) vol. 2, p. 539. Hereafter cited as *Board. Addresses*, pp- 147-155.

<sup>7</sup> *The Southern Home* (July 4, 1871), p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> *Board*, pp. 513-514.

<sup>9</sup> *The Southern Home* (October 31, 1871), p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> *The Charlotte Democrat* (October 31, 1871), p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> *Board*, p. 546.

<sup>12</sup> *Charlotte Observer* (June 28, 1877), p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> *Addresses*, pp. 147-155.

<sup>14</sup> *Davidson*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>15</sup> *Ling*, p. 27.

<sup>16</sup> *Davidson*, pp. 16-17. An early photograph of the house is on page 4 of the 1895 catalogue of Davidson College.

**7. A brief architectural description of the property:** This report contains an architectural description of the property prepared by Laura A. W. Phillips, architectural historian.

**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 the Chairman Blake House does possess special historic significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg . The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations: 1) it is one of the older houses which has had a continuous association with Davidson College, 2) its initial occupant, John Rennie Blake, was an individual of great importance in the early development of Davidson College, and 3) it is one of the finer examples of a Greek Revival style cottage extant in Mecklenburg 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 Chairman Blake House meets this criterion.

**9. Ad Valorem Tax Appraisal:** The Commission is aware that designation would allow the owner to apply annually 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 tax appraisal of the land is \$18,700. The current tax appraisal of the structure is \$32,950.

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## Bibliography

*Charlotte Observer.*

Chalmers Gaston Davidson, *The Plantation World and Davidson* (Mecklenburg Historical Association, 2nd. edition, 1973).

Thomas Wilson Ling, ed., *Alumni Catalogue of Davidson College 1837-1924* (The Presbyterian Standard Publishing Co., 1924).

Minutes Of The Meetings Of The Board Of Trustees of Davidson College (unpublished manuscript in the archives of Davidson College) vol. 2.

Records of the Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office.

Records of the Mecklenburg County Tax Office.

Lucy Phillips Russell, *A Rare Pattern* (The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, N.C. ).

*Charlotte Democrat.*

*The Semi-Centennial Addresses of Davidson College* (E. M. Uzzell, Raleigh, N.C., 1888).

*The Semi-Centennial Catalogue of Davidson College* (E. M. Uzzell, Raleigh, N.C., 1891).

*The Southern Home.*

United States Census of 1870 for Mecklenburg County.

**Date of Preparation of this Report:** July 3, 1979.

**Prepared by:** Dr. Dan L. Morrill, Director  
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Properties Commission  
139 Middleton Dr.  
Charlotte, N.C, 28207

Telephone: (704) 332-2726

## *Architectural Description*

The Chairman Blake House, located at 127 S. Main Street, Davidson, is a one and a half story frame cottage in the Greek Revival style which appears to date from ca. 1890. The house is situated on the rear of a spacious lot and is surrounded by trees.

The one and a half story portion of the house is five bays wide and four bays deep, with one story ell on the left rear. The house has a steep gable roof with the boxed cornice forming a triangular pediment on the gable ends, the tympanum of which is covered with weatherboarding. Underneath the cornice line a wide frieze board encircles the house. The first story windows are 6/6 sash with plain surrounds. All but those on the rear of the house have exterior louvered shutters. The house has three interior brick chimneys. The one on the north side has been rebuilt, while those on the south side and rear ell are matching with molded caps and may be original. The house is set on a brick pier foundation, the piers of which have been covered with stucco, scored to resemble stone. The interstices between the piers have been in-filled with modern brick.

A three-bay wide porch projects from the front of the house with a cross gable of slightly lower pitch than the main roof. Like the other gable ends, the cornice of the porch gable forms a triangular pediment, which is also covered with weatherboarding. Echoing these larger pediments are the smaller ones found on the gabled dormers--two on the front and one on the rear--of the main roof. The tympanum of each of the dormers is covered with flush siding rather than with weatherboarding. The front dormers appear somewhat awkward in their positions on either side of the projecting porch gable. The pediment formed by the porch cross gable, along with the four square Doric posts which support it, provides a Greek temple-like feeling, even to this cottage form. A heavy turned balustrade connects the four posts and the pilasters set against the front wall of the house. Steps lead up to the center bay of the porch to the central front door, which is surrounded by sidelights and transom typical of the Greek Revival period. The door itself has a later Victorian feeling with four recessed octagonal panels.

The rear ell is three bays deep and has an integral porch on the south side. The porch is supported by slender Doric posts of the same type as found on the front porch. The rear door of the central hall of the house opens onto this porch as does a door from the dining room in the ell. The porch has been screened-in. With all of its detailing--exterior and interior--corresponding to the main part of the house, this two-room ell appears to be original. However, local tradition suggests that it was added at some later time. If so, great care was taken to duplicate the detailing of the original part of the house. Projecting from the rear of this ell is a small one-room addition, which echoes the larger ell with its gable roof and south side screened porch. It does not, however, have the same exterior or interior detailing. The rear window of this addition has been enclosed.

The interior of the house is composed of a center hall plan with two rooms on either side originally (there have been some modifications on the left side) and with rear ell and addition beyond.

The hallway is divided into two sections--the front, or entrance hall, and rear, or stair hall. A doorway with four-panel door and molded surround divides the two sections. This doorway is representative of the original doorways to be found in the rest of the house. The molded baseboard here as in the remainder of the house approximates in form the molding of the door and window surrounds. The front hall serves as a foyer with doorways to the two front rooms and to the rear hall. The back hall houses the stairway along its left side. The stairway rises from the rear of the hall. It has a molded handrail, plain rectangular balusters, and a simple, rather bulbous newel post which is vaguely reminiscent of a Doric column. Halfway up the stairs is a plain Doric support post which rises to the ceiling above. At the rear of the back hall is a four-panel door with sidelights which leads to the ell porch. Doors on either side of the back hall lead to the rear rooms of the main block of the house.

On the right side of the hall are double parlors, divided by large sliding doors, with six vertical panels on each door. Each room has a simple Greek Revival wood mantel on the outside (south) wall. The mantels (like the others in the house) are composed of a plain Doric pilaster on either side of the fireplace opening, and a plain, wide frieze and molded shelf above. The 6/6 windows in the parlors, as in the other rooms downstairs, have a molded surround with beaded edge along the inside and a recessed-panel apron underneath.

To the left of the center hall there were originally two rooms. Although the front room has remained intact, the rear room has been divided into a small bedroom/dressing area, a bathroom, and a small hallway. The arrangement of this side of the house differs somewhat from that of the parlor side. Here the mantels are set back-to-back on the inside wall dividing the rooms. A four-panel door connects the front bedroom with the rear rooms.

The left rear ell houses the dining room and kitchen. The dining room has the same Greek Revival mantel, four-panel doors and paneled window aprons as found in the other rooms downstairs. However, unlike the other rooms, the dining room has a plain chair rail, possibly an addition. The fireplace is located on the interior dividing wall between the dining room and kitchen. To the right of the fireplace, a doorway leads to the kitchen. The kitchen windows have the same paneled apron as in the rest of the house.

Behind the kitchen is a smaller one-room addition which houses the laundry room.

In the half story upstairs there are three bedrooms and one bathroom. The southwest room has a Greek Revival mantel on the outside (south) wall, which has a Victorian arched coal grate firebox. Upstairs the floors are made of random-width boards, while downstairs the floors are composed of consistent-width boards three to four inches wide.

According to the current occupant of the house, there had been a brick ice house/kitchen building behind the house, but it was torn down around 1967.