

## Slavery at the Cooper Log House

Designation Report Addendum

Olivia Dobbs

July 25, 2023

The Cooper Log House, located in the Steele Creek area, is one of the last remaining structures from the eighteenth century in Mecklenburg County. It not only represents the heritage of the Cooper family and the greater region, but it also offers an opportunity to recognize the nature of slavery within rural Mecklenburg.

The first settler of the Cooper family, John Cooper (1721-1801), appears to have not used enslaved labor; on both the 1790 and 1800 census records, he only listed his family members.<sup>1</sup> His son, William Cooper (1758-1834), was the first to list enslaved persons on the census. In 1800, he listed one enslaved individual. By 1810, he enslaved a total of five people.<sup>2</sup> Though the Cooper family does not appear on the 1820 census, the 1830 census lists a total of nine people: three children under the age of 10 and another three between the ages of 10 and 24 under William's name, and one girl under the age of 10 and a boy and girl between the ages of 10 and 24 under William's son's name, William Cooper, Jr. (1798-1887).<sup>3</sup>

William Cooper's will and estate provide the names of the enslaved individuals at the time of his death in 1834. He divided his lands and those he enslaved to his children and grandchildren. He gave his son Adam Cooper (1795-1841) an enslaved woman named Lucy and his son Alexander Cooper, (1796-1863) an enslaved boy named Jack. William Cooper, Jr., received Sampson, an enslaved boy, and his other son Thomas Cooper (? - ?) was granted Joe another enslaved boy. His daughter Martha Cooper (1791-1845) received an enslaved woman named Elizabeth and her child.<sup>4</sup> William's estate also shows the sale of four enslaved individuals: Amy and her child were sold to William, Jr., for \$440, and the children Mary and Alexander were sold to John Henderson for a total of \$554.75.<sup>5</sup>

Alexander Cooper inherited the tract of land that included the log cabin. Over the next couple of decades following his father's death, he would enslave more individuals for their labor. In 1830 he listed 6 enslaved persons, and in 1840 that number increased to 7. The most dramatic jumps in numbers can be seen in the 1850 and 1860 slave schedules. Alexander listed 11 individuals in 1850 and 16 in 1860.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "United States Census, 1790", database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:XH2M-MMW>), entry for John Cooper, 1790; "United States Census, 1800", database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:XHRW-MLN>), entry for John Cooper, 1800.

<sup>2</sup> "United States Census, 1800", database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:XHRW-MLF>), entry for William Cooper, 1800; "United States Census, 1810", database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:XHL9-DH9>), Entry for Wm Cooper, 1810.

<sup>3</sup> "United States Census, 1830", database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:XHGR-QS3>), entry for Wm Cooper, 1830.

<sup>4</sup> Mecklenburg County Will Book G., pg. 185.

<sup>5</sup> "North Carolina Estate Files, 1663-1979," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:KDGJ-H16>), William Cooper, 1834; citing Mecklenburg, North Carolina, United States, State Archives, Raleigh, FHL microfilm 1,993,806.

<sup>6</sup> "United States Census, 1830", database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:XHGR-73P>), entry for Alexander Cooper, 1830; "United States Census, 1830", database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:XHYZ-RBF>), entry for Alexander Cooper, 1840; "United States Census (Slave Schedule), 1850," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MVC5-WJP>), entry for Alexr Cooper, 1850; "United

Going by age alone, it is possible that six individuals remained under Alexander's ownership over the course of this decade.<sup>7</sup>

Alexander's estate and will illuminates the names and familial relationships of the people he enslaved at the time of his death. A woman named Susan and a girl named Kitty show up in his estate inventory, the former having been bought by G. W. Williamson. In Alexander's will, he divides those he enslaved between his surviving children and grandchildren.<sup>8</sup> Excluding Susan and Kitty, there are 19 individuals listed: Darcy and her children Esther, Margaret, and Mary Ann; Mary and her children Francis, Lucy, Cain, and Joe; Augusta and her children John, Andy, and James; Tom; Sylva; Idny (sp.); Jack; Dick; and Joe, the blacksmith.<sup>9</sup> The will ultimately split the family units; only two pairs of siblings and two pairs of mother and child remained together.<sup>10</sup>

Thomas Sandifer Cooper (1840-1904) was the last of the Cooper family to own the log cabin. Because he inherited the property from his father in 1863, there are no census records that can identify how many people he enslaved. According to his father's will, he received two boys, Tom and Dick, to use on the property.

There are no concrete records that show what became of the people the Cooper family enslaved after the end of the Civil War. The nearby Mount Olive Presbyterian Church's cemetery contains one Cane Reid (ca. 1854-1925), whose age and lineage matches that of the Cain mentioned in Alexander's will. A Cain Reid shows up in the Steele Creek area on the 1870 census, although his race is mistakenly listed as white. The son of Levi and Mary or Harriet Reid, he married Margaret Wall (1860-1962) and had 11 children: Mary L. A. Reid (1880-?), Andy Reid (1881-?), Addie Reid (1882-?), Hattie Reid (1885-?), Anna Reid (1889-1978), James Reid (1891-?), Charlie Reid (1892-?), Clifton Reid (1896-1972), Marie Reid Williams (1898-1975), Mozell Reid (1902-1979), and Mason Reid (1907-1964).<sup>11</sup>

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States Census (Slave Schedule), 1850," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:WK5L-8BPZ>), entry for Alex Cooper, 1860.

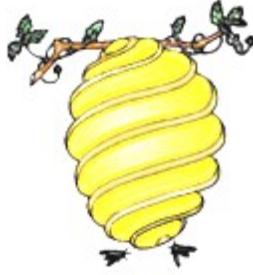
<sup>7</sup> The 1850 slave schedule lists a 50-year-old man, a 44-year-old woman, a 15-year-old girl, a 6-year-old boy, a 5-year-old boy, and a 2-year-old girl. The 1860 slave schedule then lists a 60-year-old man, a 54-year-old woman, a 25-year-old woman, a 16-year-old boy, a 14-year-old boy, and a 12-year-old girl.

<sup>8</sup> "North Carolina Estate Files, 1663-1979," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:KDGJ-H1W>), Alexander Cooper, 1863; citing Mecklenburg, North Carolina, United States, State Archives, Raleigh, FHL microfilm 1,993,806.

<sup>9</sup> Mecklenburg County Will Book J. p. 158.

<sup>10</sup> Cain and Joe were given to Alexander's widow, Elizabeth Dunn (1812-1880), and Lucy and Francis were given to Alexander's daughter, Feriba Almina Cooper (1845-1934). Augusta and her son James were given to his daughter, Frances Elizabeth Cooper (1847-1926), while Darcy and her daughter Esther were given to his daughter, Laura Catherine Cooper (1842-1903).

<sup>11</sup> "Cain Reid," genealogical entry, *FamilySearch*, <https://www.familysearch.org/tree/person/about/GCGV-6JK>.



# COOPER LOG HOUSE



*This report was written on June 6, 1984*

**1. Name and location of the property:** The property known as the Cooper Log House is located at the intersection of the Dixie River Rd. and the Mt. Olive Church Rd. in the Dixie Community of southwestern Mecklenburg County.

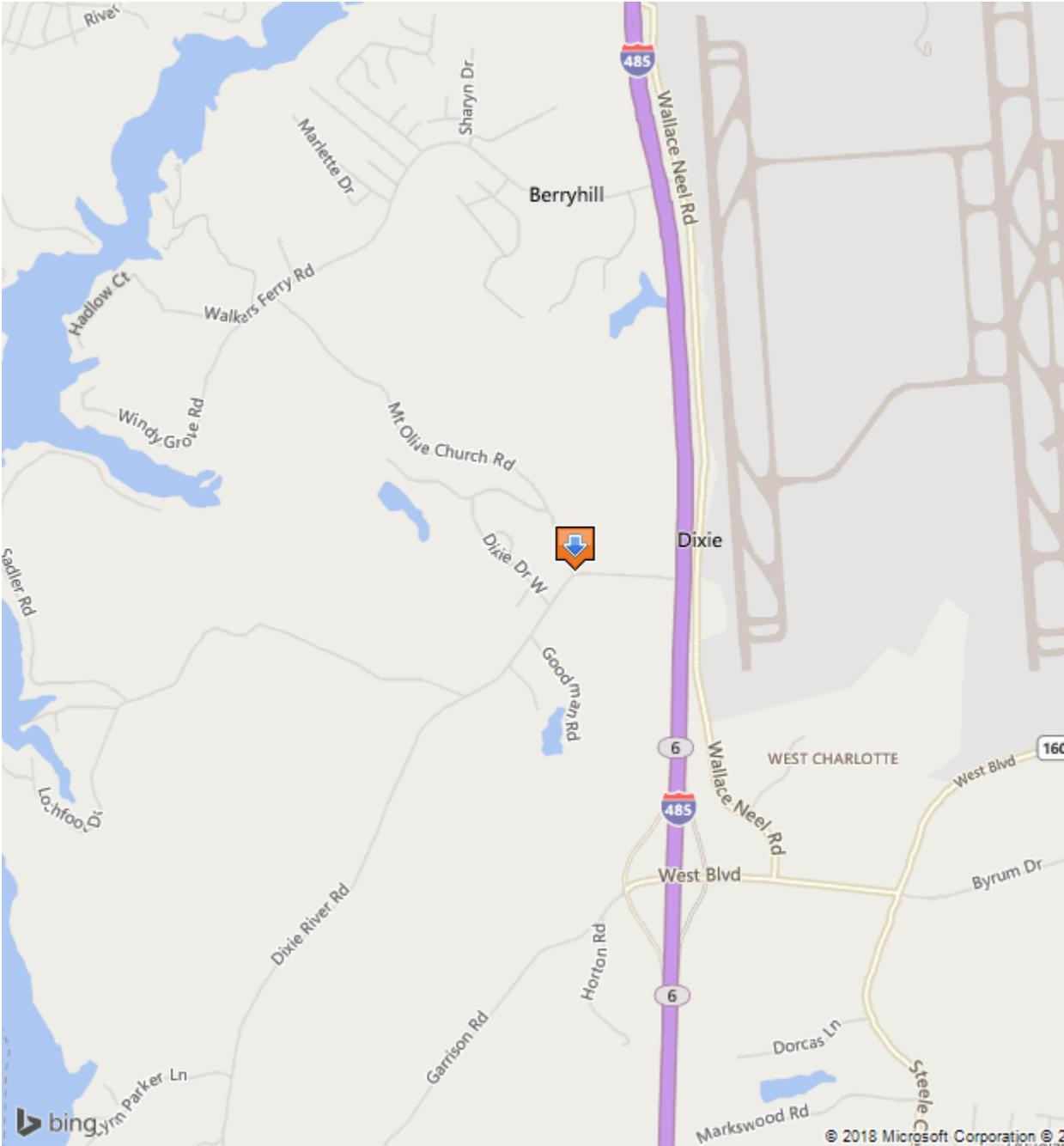
**2. Name, address, and telephone number of the present owner of the property:**

William C. Nygren & wife,  
Brenda J. Shepler  
RFD 4  
Box 421A  
Charlotte, N.C. 28208

Telephone: 704/393-0515

**3. Representative photographs of the property:** This report contains representative photographs of the property.

**4. A map depicting the location of the property:**



**5. Current Deed Book Reference to the property:** The most recent deed to this property is recorded in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 4203, Page 621. The Tax Parcel Number of the property is 113-152-07.

**6. A brief historical sketch of the property:** This report contains a brief historical sketch of the property prepared by Dr. William H. Huffman, Ph.D.

**7. A brief architectural description of the property:** This report contains an architectural description of the property prepared by Mr. Joseph Schuchman.

**8. Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets the criteria 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 Cooper Log House does possess special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations: 1) the log house, built c.1780's or 1790's by William Cooper (1758-1834), is one of the few 18th-century structures which survives in Mecklenburg County; 2) the house continues to serve as a residence; and 3) the house and its two additions bear testimony to the evolution of the rural built environment of Mecklenburg County during the 18th and 19th centuries.

**b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling, and/or association:** The Commission contends that the attached architectural description by Mr. Joseph Schuchman demonstrates that the Cooper Log House meets this criterion.

**9. Ad Valorem Tax Appraisal:** The Commission is aware that designation would allow 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 appraised value of the 6.010 acres of land is \$10,820. The current appraised value of the improvements is \$24,040. The total current appraised value is \$34,860. The property is zoned R12.

**Date of Preparation of this Report:** June 6, 1984

**Prepared by:** Dr. Dan L. Morrill, Director  
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Properties Commission  
1225 S. Caldwell St.  
Charlotte, N.C., 28203

Telephone: 704/376-9115

## *Historical Overview*

*William H. Huffman*  
*July, 1983*

The Cooper log house, now located on six acres of land at the intersection of Dixie River Road and Mt. Olive Church Road in the Steele Creek section of the county, was built about the 1780's or 1790's. While the original structure was added on to about 1840 and 1880, the eighteenth-century log structure, which has been uncovered by the present owners, is still basically intact. <sup>1</sup>

Although the records from that time are often inconclusive, the available evidence suggests that the house was built by William Cooper (1758-1834). William was the son of a pioneer settler of the Steele Creek area, John Cooper (1721-1801). That section of the county began to be settled about 1751 and was probably named after Robert Steele, a trader with the Catawba Indians. By about 1760, the predominantly Scotch-Irish settlers had organized the Steele Creek Presbyterian Church, where five generations of Coopers are buried along with many other pioneer families of the area. <sup>2</sup>

From the county records, John Cooper seems to have first acquired property in the area in 1767 and 1768, totalling three hundred thirty-six acres. <sup>3</sup> The original purchase of 1767 was from George Augustus Selwyn (1719-1791), an English gentleman and member of Parliament, whose father, John Selwyn, had been given a block of one hundred thousand acres lying between the Rocky and Catawba Rivers by King George II in 1745. <sup>4</sup> William Cooper appears to have inherited part or all of his father's lands in the Steele Creek district, but this cannot be established with complete certainty since neither John Cooper's will nor estate records appear to be extant. <sup>5</sup> It is certain, however, that William Cooper also purchased an additional three hundred sixty-four acres in 1782, 1785 and 1803. <sup>6</sup>

William Cooper is reputed to have built a log church in the vicinity of the log house, <sup>7</sup> and since he was active during the time it is thought the house was constructed (1780's or 90's), and this taken with the fact that he was the apparent owner of the land, it is a reasonable presumption that he built the log house about that time. Cooper was no doubt a typical plantation owner of that era who raised a variety of crops, perhaps including corn, wheat, hay, oats and cotton, in addition to livestock. The farming and household chores were assisted by slaves, and when they became old enough, the sons and sons-in-laws also took part in the farming. On Sundays, work would be put aside, the Sunday best clothes put on, and the team hitched to the wagon for the ride to church. Back home, the Sunday meal would be prepared in the detached summer kitchen, while the team was put away in the nearby barn. Less than a hundred yards from the house would have been located the frame or log slave quarters, where the slaves would supplement the rations given to them by the family through hunting, fishing and trapping, and perhaps raising something on their own small plot. When William Cooper died in 1834, he divided his lands and slaves among his five sons and daughter's children. <sup>8</sup> The parcel with the log house appears to have been passed to William's son Alexander Cooper (1798-1863), to whom we can credit ownership with complete certainty. <sup>9</sup> It was probably during Alexander Cooper's ownership that the first addition to the house was made, c. 1840, which is the section on the right side as one faces the original log

structure. Alexander carried on the family farming tradition in the area, and had acquired about three hundred and fifty acres of land at the time of his death in 1863, which was in turn divided among his children.<sup>10</sup>

In the final division of Alexander's lands, son Thomas S. Cooper (1840-1904) became the last member of the family to own the eighteenth-century log house. In addition to seeing Civil War service, Thomas S. Cooper held the office of sheriff of Mecklenburg County from about 1887 to 1898.<sup>11</sup> It was during his ownership that the second addition to the house was made about 1880, which is directly behind the central log building extending to the northeast.<sup>12</sup> Sheriff Cooper, who engaged in farming and the buying and selling of property in the county, also had an interest in the furniture company of Cooper and Lewis, but did not take active part in its management.<sup>13</sup>

In 1897, the Cooper log house passed out of the family ownership for the first time when the sheriff sold it to Joseph A. Freeman (1859-1925) as part of a one hundred sixty-one acre tract of land.<sup>14</sup> Freeman and his wife lived on and farmed the property until 1928, when he (then a widower) lost it through foreclosure.<sup>15</sup> The succeeding owners, James M. Yandle (1888-1965) and his wife Mary M., sold the house with one hundred twenty-five acres in 1940, and two years later it was divided down to a twelve acre plot. In 1951, the tract was further divided into six acres, its present size.<sup>16</sup>

Over the years, the Cooper house has seen many changes, both to its own structure and the surrounding landscape. The present owners, William and Brenda Shepler-Nygren, have undertaken extensive work to expose and refurbish, where possible, the original structure, and have spent many hours researching the history of the house in addition to gathering related local folklore. Included in the folklore was information from a former resident of the house, John Yarborough, who died about three years ago. Yarborough told the Nygrens that in the 1930's, there was a gold mine shaft on the knoll behind the house (which has not been located in recent times), as well as a sorghum mill behind the barn, and that when he was a child, he saw remains of possible slave quarters on the property, a wood structure with brick chimney. He also said that Walker's Ferry Road used to run near by the house, and on the corner (with Mt. Olive Church Road) was a big oak tree from which lynchings took place in Sheriff Cooper's time. His daughter, Joan Brown, was born in what is now the kitchen of the present house, and she now lives nearby at a site formerly occupied by a log barn.<sup>17</sup>

As one of the few remaining eighteenth-century structures remaining in Mecklenburg County in any form, and even rarer, one which is still being used for its original purpose, the Cooper log house is distinctly historic. It not only encompasses the original log structure of the late seventeenth- hundreds, but two nineteenth-century additions which are also of historic interest in their own right. Historic preservation necessarily involves mostly town buildings and dwellings, but the value in preserving our rural heritage is also equally evident, and the Cooper log house provides a unique opportunity to do so.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Interview with William Nygren, Charlotte, N.C., 3 March 1983.

<sup>2</sup> *The History of Steele Creek Presbyterian Church*, 3rd Edition (Charlotte: Craftsman, 1978), pp. 13-16, 21, et passim.

<sup>3</sup> Old Deed Book 3, p. 238, 12 January 1767; Old Deed Book 4, p. 460, 20 July 1768.

<sup>4</sup> Old Deed Book 2, p. 109; *George Selwyn and His Contemporaries*, 4 vols. (Boston: Francis Niccolls, 1843), I.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Brenda Shepler-Nygren, who conducted an archival search in Raleigh: Charlotte, N.C., 20 July 1983.

<sup>6</sup> Deed Book.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with William Nygren.

<sup>8</sup> Will Book G, p. 185.

<sup>9</sup> Division of Alexander Cooper's lands, Orders and Decrees, Book 4, p. 40., 1890.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.; Will Book J, p. 158.

<sup>11</sup> *History*, op. cit., p. 181; List of sheriff's deeds, Grantor Book, 1840-1918: *Charlotte News*, May 30, 1904, p.5.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with William Nygren.

<sup>13</sup> *Charlotte News*, May 30, 1904, p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> Deed Book 121, p. 451, 8 July 1897.

<sup>15</sup> Deed Book 701, p. 565, 26 July 1928.

<sup>16</sup> Deed Book 1012, p. 19, 1 May 1940; Deed Book 1087, p. 68, 26 October 1942; Deed Book 1497, p.84, 15 November 1951; see chain of title thereafter.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with William Nygren.

## *Architectural Description*

*Joseph Schuchman*  
*May, 1984*

The Cooper log house is one of Mecklenburg County's more interesting residential structures. Located in the Steele Creek community, the house is set back from the intersection of Dixie River Road and Mt. Olive Church Road. The original log section was constructed about the 1780's or 1790's; a two story side wing was added during the 1840's while a two story rear ell dates from the 1880's. The present structure bears witness to the varied building and decorative traditions of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Mecklenburg County.

The two story main block (1780's or 1790's) is surmounted by a gable roof and is of log construction with half dovetail corners. Weatherboards, which may have been original to the structure, have been removed by the present owners, William and Brenda Nygren, to expose the log construction; mud nogging is evident. The main entrance door was originally located approximately four feet to the west of the present entrance. The date of the present front entrance is unknown. Its splayed and crosseted surround suggests a late nineteenth or perhaps a turn of the century construction date. It is possible that the front entrance may have been relocated to create a more symmetrical appearance although it should be noted that the fenestration, for the most part, is asymmetrically arranged. The entrance may have been moved to accommodate interior modifications, which included the construction of a new staircase. A rear entrance is surmounted by a two pane transom and contains a six panel door of mortise and tennon construction; this entrance appears to be of late eighteenth or early nineteenth century construction and appears original. 9/6 sash are used on the first story while 6/6 sash appear on the upper level.

While the interior has been altered over the years, a significant amount of detailing from the house's successive periods of growth survives. The house presently follows a center hall plan, which runs the width of the main block and side addition. The log section may have initially presented a one or two room plan. The present hall appears to date from the late nineteenth century; its detailing may be contemporary with the construction of the rear ell. A notable quarter turn open string stair rises to the second floor. Identical turned balusters and a turned newel post support the shaped handrail and are characteristic of late nineteenth century decorative motifs.

Dominating the present living room (located in the log section) is a mantle which displays a segmental arched opening and which is believed to be original; this mantle is of mortise and tenon construction. Plain piers rise to a simple frieze and a molded shelf. Wainscoting encircles the chamber. Its flush vertical board, believed to be original to the late eighteenth century structure, is set between a baseboard and a chair rail, both of which have been replaced.

The former sitting room (now kitchen) is located in the side addition, which dates from the early nineteenth century. The western side of the wall has been removed to expose the log construction of the adjoining main block. The mantle displays vernacular federal motifs;

attenuated piers rest on rectangular bases and rise to molded capitals and a molded mantle shelf. A plain rectangular frieze is set between the piers. Mantles in the rear ell are of simple pier and lintel construction, typical of late nineteenth century and turn of the century vernacular building patterns.

A closed string stair, in the ell, is simply detailed and follows a straight run. Original pine flooring remains in several areas throughout the house. Two depressions in the ground, one in the front yard and the other at the rear, are the surviving evidence of wells located on the property. A log house, with half dovetail corners, stands to the rear of the main house. The structure is believed to date from 1847, the year inscribed on a log. The house was originally located on the Griffin Family Farm to the north of Marshville in neighboring Union County. It was recently purchased and moved to the present site by the Nygrens. Plain surrounds enframe the exterior openings. 6/6 sash are the primary glazing material. Some original weatherboard sheathing remains. The building presently serves as an outbuilding. A gable roofed frame barn is further set back from the main house.

Since their purchase of the property in 1979, William and Brenda Nygren have undertaken a substantial stabilization and restoration effort of the main house, which included the removal of asbestos siding and the beginnings of a significant maintenance effort. A once-deteriorating house is being brought back to life, with a respect for the past and a commitment to the present and future.