

Slavery at the Grier-Rea House

Designation Report Addendum
Susan V. Mayer, SVM Historical Consulting
September 2024

In the 1820 U. S. Census, the first in which the property is listed, Rev. Isaac Grier enslaved seven Black people.¹ When his mother Margaret Livingston Grier died in 1825, she bequeathed to Rev. Grier “a negro girl named **Julian**.”² Julian may have been one of three enslaved people listed in the household of Rev. Grier in 1830, along with another female also aged 10-23 and a male aged 10-23.³ This would place her year of birth between 1807 and 1820.

In the 1840 U. S. Census, Rev. Grier had only a Black man aged 36-54 counted as enslaved.⁴

Rev. Grier died in 1843, and in his will bequeathed over a dozen enslaved Blacks to family members:

- To daughter Martha Grier Witherspoon, “the negro man **Nace**, boys **Albert** and **Jim** also the negro woman **Sarah** and all her children not other wize (sic) herein disposed of and also my house woman **Lotsey**”;
- To granddaughter Isabella Witherspoon, “our little negro girl **Nynus Ann**, child of Sarah”;
- To grandson John Grier Witherspoon, “out little negro boy named **Davy**”; and
- To son Rev. Robert Calvin Grier, “the negro men **Mose**, **Ephraim** and **Curtis**, the women **Judy** and **Julian** together [illegible] all the children of the latter and a negro boy named **Less**, oldest child of Sarah.”

He also stipulated that either Martha or Robert would take “my old negro man **Lewis**” to “maintain him comfortably for the least money annually paid out of a fund hereinafter to be provided” from sale of furniture and other household items.⁵

In the 1850 U. S. Census, Robert was living at Due West, South Carolina, where he was serving as president of Erskine College. In the slave schedule, he listed nine people:

Male, age 75	Male, age 73	Male, age 16	Male, age 15
Female, age 21	Female, age 5	Female, age 2	Female, age 20
Female, age 3			

One of the elderly men may have been Lewis. It appears that Julian was not with the family has had been specified in his father’s will.

¹ 1820 U. S. Census, Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, 170.

² Mecklenburg County Will Book C, Page 130.

³ 1830 U. S. Census, Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, 390.

⁴ 1840 U. S. Census, Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, 288.

⁵ Mecklenburg County Will Book H, Page 156.

Unfortunately, ownership or residence of the Grier-Rea House after Rev. Isaac Grier's death and before Emancipation is unknown. In the 1870 U. S. Census, some Black farmers with the surname Grier lived in Providence Township in the area near the house. They included:

- **George Grier** (50), wife **Maria** (45), son **Daniel** (20), daughter **Sarah** (18), son **Crailey** (16), daughter **Celia** (20), and son **Walter** (2)⁶
- **James Grier** (21) and **Frank Grier** (10) lived in the household of **Melissa Harkey**⁷
- **Wash Grier** (45), wife **Emeline** (40), son **Richard** (15), daughter **Eliza** (14), daughter **Nancy** (12), daughter **Laura** (10), and son **William** (6)⁸
- **Henry Grier** (40), wife **Ann** (35), son **William** (16), daughter **Lizzie** (14), and daughter **Dora** (12)⁹
- **Henry Grier** (40), wife **Cinda** (35), son **Ike** (16), daughter **Nancy** (12), daughter **Ellen** (10), and mother **Mila** (84) who said she was born in Africa¹⁰

White farmer Robert Grier, son of Isaac Grier, Jr. and grandson of Rev. Isaac Grier, also lived nearby and is listed as the household after George Grier. It is possible that these Griers had been enslaved by this line of the family.¹¹

⁶ 1870 U. S. Census, Providence Township, Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, 10.

⁷ 1870 U. S. Census, Providence Township, Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, 11.

⁸ 1870 U. S. Census, Providence Township, Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, 11. Wash had been enslaved by William Winfield Grier, Sr. He rose to prominence in the Black community in Providence Township after Emancipation, with children Richard and Eliza attending college and becoming physicians. Eliza was the first African American woman admitted to medical practice in Georgia. "A Piece of Shuck Found Twenty-Eight Feet Underground," *Charlotte Observer*, October 18, 1877; "A Useful Woman Dead," *Charlotte Observer*, April 22, 1902.

⁹ 1870 U. S. Census, Providence Township, Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, 12.

¹⁰ 1870 U. S. Census, Providence Township, Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, 12.

¹¹ 1870 U. S. Census, Providence Township, Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, 11.

GRIER-REA HOUSE NEW SITE



This report was written on February 6, 1989, updated April 2, 2002 and April 26, 2015

1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the Grier-Rea House is located at 6701 Providence Road, in the Providence section of Mecklenburg County.

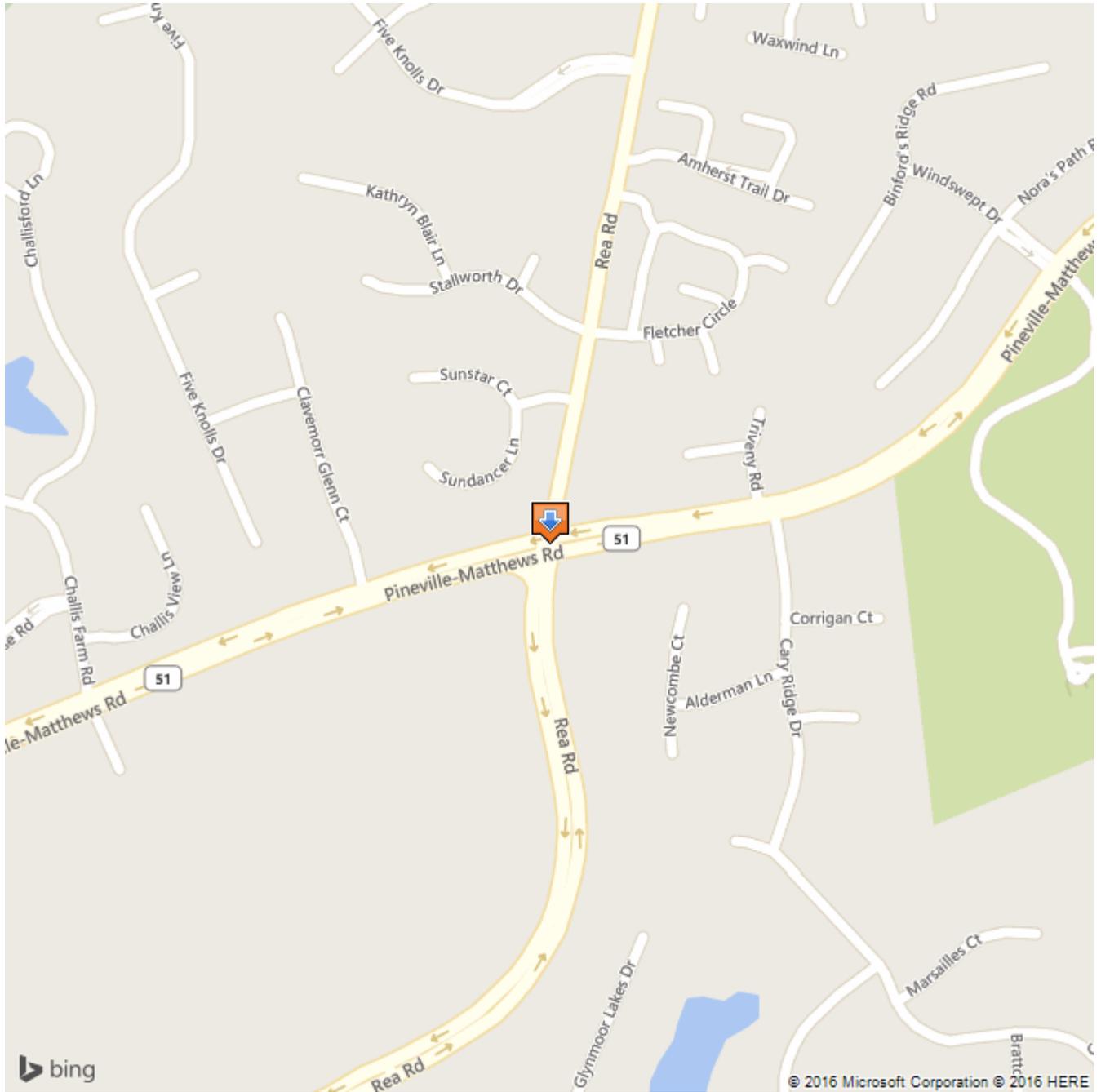
2. Name, address and telephone number of the present owner of the property: The owners of the property are:

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission
2100 Randolph Road
Charlotte, NC 28202

(704)- 376-9115

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 which depicts the location of the property.



5. Current Deed Book Reference to the property: The most recent deed is recorded in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 5562, Page 243. The Tax Parcel Number of this property is: 211-593-15.

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

7. A brief architectural description of the property: This report contains a brief architectural description of the property prepared by Dr. William H. Huffman and updated by Stewart Gray.

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 Grier-Rea House does possess special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations: 1) the Grier-Rea House, erected according to local tradition in 1804, is unquestionably one of the older plantation houses surviving in this portion of Mecklenburg County; 2) the house is a rare survivor from the rural built environment and landscape which once dominated this portion of Mecklenburg County.

b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling, and/or association: The Commission contends that the architectural description by William H. Huffman which is included in this report demonstrates that the Grier-Rea House and Farmstead 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."

There are 2.91 acres in Tax Parcel Number 211-593-15. The current appraised value of the land is \$190,140. The current appraised value of the improvements is \$41,260. The total appraised value is \$231,400.

Date of Preparation of this Report: February 6, 1989, updated April 2, 2002.

Prepared by: Dr. Dan L. Morrill, updated by Stewart Gray
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission
2100 Randolph Rd.
Charlotte, N.C. 28207
Telephone: 704/376-9115

Historical Overview

*Dr. William H. Huffman and Dr. Dan L. Morrill
January 1989 (Revised November 2014)*

The Grier-Rea House was built c.1815 as the home of Isaac Grier (1776-1843) and his wife, Isabella Harris Grier. Born in Greene County, Georgia the son of Robert Grier of Pennsylvania and Mary Livingston of Ireland, Isaac Grier attended Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, from which he graduated in 1800. Dickinson College was established in 1783 largely due to the efforts of Benjamin Rush, a Philadelphia physician and signer of the Declaration of Independence. Located on the Pennsylvania frontier, Dickinson at its beginning had close associations with Presbyterianism. That Grier obtained a college education was no small accomplishment at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Clearly, he was a person of

substantial accomplishment and erudition. After two years of theological study under the tutelage of an A.R.P. minister, Grier was ordained in 1802, served briefly as an itinerate minister, and was called to preach at the Sardis and Providence A.R.P. Churches in Mecklenburg County, and the Tirzah A.R.P. Church in what is now the Waxhaw section of Union County. He arrived in Mecklenburg County about 1804.¹

Isaac Grier's career is intimately bound up with the history of the Associated Reformed Presbyterian Church. The Presbyterian Church was racked by disunity in the 18th century, a process that began in Scotland. Disagreements arose over theological issues and matters of church governance. Led by Ebenezer Erskine (1680-1754), a group of dissenters insisted that salvation required only faith in the saving grace of Jesus, not upon a life of rectitude and the rejection of sin as prerequisites. The dissenters also insisted that each congregations had the right to reject the placement of a minister at its head . The controlling majority of the Church of Scotland was unrelenting in its opposition to Erskine and his followers. Consequently, the dissenters withdrew and formed their own church, which eventually became the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, in 1782. It was as an A.R.P. minister that Isaac Grier came to Mecklenburg County.²

Isaac Grier faced daunting challenges during his early ministry. The Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church was plagued by internal dissension and loss of membership. Most A.R.P. congregations, primarily in Pennsylvania and New York, reunited with the Presbyterian Church in the 1820s, leaving the A.R.P. congregations in the Carolinas and Georgia to fend for themselves. Isaac Grier was one of the founders of the A.R.P. Synod of the South in 1822. He was also among those responsible for the establishment in 1839 of Erskine College in Due West, S.C., a college and a seminary to train A.R.P. ministers. No less challenging for Grier was the fact that A.R.P. congregations, including some in Mecklenburg County, were splitting apart when dissatisfied members formed their own synod or governing body. Isaac Grier was adept at interpersonal relationships and possessed substantial powers of cajolery. Although Sardis A.R.P. Church remained his principal pulpit, he assumed the leadership in 1808 or 1809 of a splinter group in the Steele Creek A R.P Church and was able to set into motion the momentum that eventually brought the two factions back together. "It was part of Isaac Grier's nature to be a peacemaker and healer of the breach," writes Jennings B. Reid in his history of Sardis Presbyterian Church. Isaac Grier traveled by horseback in 1827 to a meeting in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in an attempt, albeit unsuccessful, to reunite all A.R.P. congregations, including those in the North. One of Grier's companions on the journey described the minister's pleasant demeanor. ". . . our travelling companion and guide, Rev. Isaac Grier, had such a fund of anecdote, such a knack of whiling away the time in agreeable conversation, that we scarcely realized the tedious of the journey." In 1821 Grier journeyed over 1300 miles to visit and preach at A.R.P. congregations in Georgia, Florida, and Alabama. He made another trip to Alabama in 1823 on behalf of the church.³

Jointly serving Sardis Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church and Little Steele Creek A.R.P. Church for over thirty years, Grier performed his customary pastoral duties. He preached. He baptized children and adults, He performed wedding ceremonies. He administered the sacraments, visited the sick, and buried the dead. It is difficult to imagine today what life was like in Mecklenburg County in the first decade of the nineteenth century. Because the rivers of

the Piedmont were not continuously navigable into the Coastal Plain, growers of the principal cash crop, cotton, had to haul their harvests by wagon over primitive roadways to the heads of navigation on the Catawba-Wateree, the Yadkin-Pee Dee and the Cape Fear. The great majority of Mecklenburg farmers were self-sufficient agriculturalists. They ate what they planted and wore what they made. Most abodes were humble in size and amenities. A family was fortunate if it had a home with wooden floor.⁴



During his first years in Mecklenburg County Isaac Grier was unmarried and most likely boarded in the homes of Sardis A.R.P. and Little Steele Creek members. A man of sophistication and advanced education as well as strategic outlook, Grier persuaded the Sardis congregation to establish an academy, named Union Academy. Its principal purpose was to participate in the training of ministers for the Associated Reformed Presbyterian denomination. On August 3, 1808, Isaac Grier married Isabella Harris, who was reared in the Steele Creek community of Mecklenburg County. Early in his marriage Grier purchased 102 acres on what is now Rea Road. It was there he would build his and Isabella's house. One can surmise that the location of the house was dictated by it being approximately midway between the two churches Grier served, Sardis Associated Reformed Presbyterian Church on Sardis Road and Little Steele Creek A.R.P. Church on Sandy Porter Road. As to why it was built, one can speculate that it was occasioned by the birth of the couple's first child, Martha Harris Grier, on June 16, 1814. Their second child, Robert Calvin Grier, who would go on to become himself a major figure in the A.R.P. church, even serving as president of Erskine College, was born on March 2, 1817. A third child died as a young boy.⁵



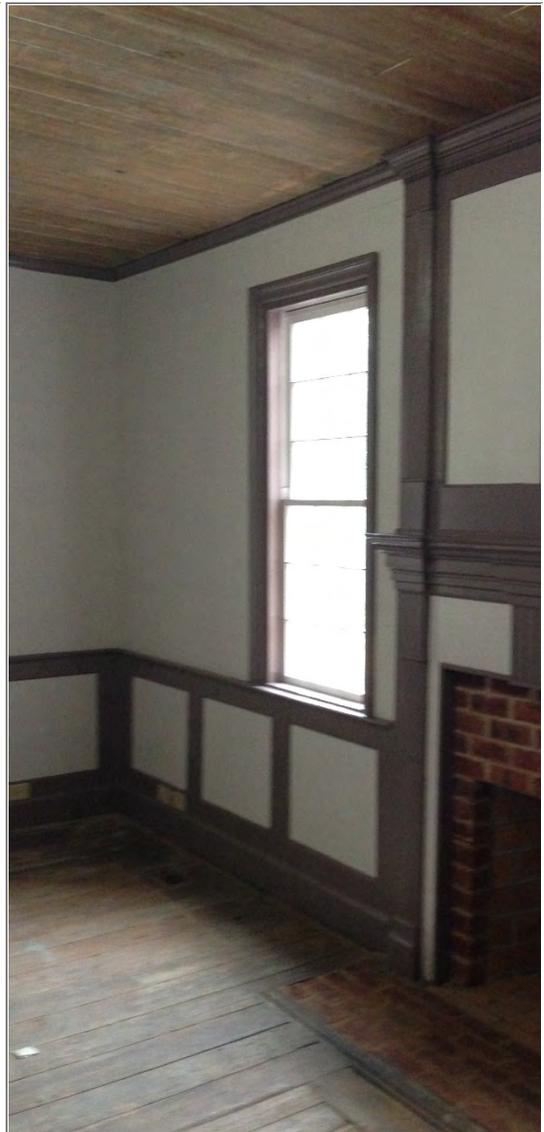


The Home Of Isaac And Isabella Grier

The Federal style home was the centerpiece of a farm. It was customary for ministers to have farms as a means to obtain additional income. Grier owned a small number of slaves who worked the land. Isaac and Isabella's Grier's house had few rivals in that section of Mecklenburg County. The sophisticated woodwork, including the stairway which originally adorned the south wall of the main parlor, is still extraordinary in its refined detailing. An original imposing mantel and overmantel still adorns the north wall of the parlor. Originally a two-pile, two-story house, the home was enlarged probably in the 1820s or 1830s to accommodate the growing number of people residing there. Isaac's widowed mother moved in, as did two of Isaac's brother's orphaned children.⁶



Stairway Originally Seen From Parlor



Mantel And OverMantel In Parlor

Isaac Grier retired from the ministry on October 5, 1842, one year after the death of his wife. He expired on November 2, 1843. Isaac Grier and Isabella Grier are buried side by side in the oldest cemetery at Sardis Presbyterian Church. Their son Robert Calvin Grier, who lived in South Carolina, inherited the farm and sold the property in separate parcels in the late 1840s and early 1850s. It is uncertain who acquired the house.⁷



The Graves of Isaac and Isabella Grier in the Sardis Presbyterian Church Cemetery

The history of the Grier-Rea House entered a new phase in 1872. Green Lee Rea (1798-1890), a prosperous Mecklenburg farmer, added the Grier farm to his substantial holdings; and his son,

John Laney Rea (1827-1915) and his wife, Sarah Elizabeth Rea (1829-1873), made the house and the approximately 400 acres of land their home. John Laney Rea and Sarah Rea had reared ten children in an earlier abode, not in the Grier-Rea House.⁸ John Laney Rea, Jr. (1870-1961) acquired the house from his father in 1905.. His wife was Margaret Jane Youngblood Rea. They produced a number of children. At the turn of the last century the Grier-Rea House must have been a hubbub of activity. Children scurrying about. Rea overseeing the cultivation of crops, mainly cotton. Tenant farmers working the fields. Margaret attending to her brood of children. A photograph of the family and servants taken on Christmas Day 1898 provides a rare glimpse into the kind of life the Rea family was living. A front porch with Victorian detailing was added to the house during this period to bring it more in line with prevailing tastes. The rear addition was also extended to accommodate the ever-growing family.⁹



T. Leon Rea (1914-2000), the youngest son of John and Margaret Rea, inherited the house from his father in 1961. By then suburban development was beginning to surround the property. T. Leon Rea and his wife, Catherine Rea (1917-1995) became fixtures in the neighborhood. Leon attempted to maintain a rural lifestyle in a world that was being transformed around him. Children in the adjoining neighborhoods remember going to the Grier-Rea House to ride horses and gather produce in the gardens. But nothing could prevent the onslaught of economic change.¹⁰ In 2002, after their mother and father had died, the children of Leon and Catherine Rea, sold the remaining farmland to developers who moved forward with constructing a shopping center. The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission acquired the house and moved it approximately 1.8 miles eastward to its current location at the intersection of Providence Road and Alexander Road. The Commission restored the house and offered it for sale. The current owners of the Grier-Rea House purchased it as their residence in December 2014.



House Being Restored

1. Reid, Jennings B. *A Goodly Heritage: The Bicentennial History of Sardis Presbyterian Church of Sardis Presbyterian Church 1790-1990 Charlotte North Carolina*, Sardis Presbyterian Church (1989). <http://www.dickinson.edu/homepage/256/history>
2. Lathan, R. *History of the Associate Reformed Synod to which prefixed is a history of the Associate Presbyterian and Reformed Presbyterian Churches*. E Book.
3. Reid.
4. Bolton, Charles C. *Poor Whites of the Antebellum South*, Duke University Press (1993).
5. Reid.
6. Reid. <http://www.hpo.ncdcr.gov/nr/MK2698.pdf> Hereinafter cited as National Register Nomination
7. National Register Nomination.

8. Mecklenburg County Certificate of Death. Book 3, p. 1164. Authors were unable to determine from land records the instrument of initial ownership by the Grier family.

9. Interviewer with T. Leon and Catherine Rea, Charlotte, NC 12 January 1989, by Dr. William H. Huffman. Mecklenburg County Deed Book 195. p. 507.

10. Mecklenburg County Will Book 20, p. 488; Deed Book 2840, p. 477.



Leon and Catherine Rea hope historic designation will save



T. Leon Rea And Catherine Rea

Grier Rea House Being Moved To New Location

Architectural Description

Dr. William H. Huffman, updated by Stewart Gray

The Grier-Rea House is located on Rea Road, so named because it led to the Rea plantation, between Providence and the Pineville-Matthews Roads, approximately eight and one-half miles south of Independence Square. The former plantation house sits among a mix of new residential development, and small-scale commercial development, on gently rolling hills, and sloping fields that lead to the Rea (formerly Plum Tree) Branch of McAlpine Creek, from which the plantation got its water. The original location of the house was to the north of Rea Road, on top of a small knoll. The house has been moved across Rea Road, and now sits facing northeast on a two acres site. The new site is bordered on the west by a sub-division's open grassy common area. To the east, commercial property now used as a nursery. A large barn sits toward the rear of the property. In this new location the significant historic relation of the house to the road is maintained.

The house is a two-story, [Federal-style](#) farmhouse with a [side-gabled roof](#), end chimneys, and a rear-projecting, two-story ell with an end chimney and a one-story kitchen addition. There is also a [shed roof](#) addition on the west side of the rear of the original house, and porches have been added to the west and east sides of the ell. The original portion of the house is three bays wide by two deep, and the two-story ell is four bays long and one wide, while the one-story kitchen is two bays long and one wide.

Brick for the chimneys was made in a kiln set up at the creek branch.¹ The chimney brick bond is not visible, because they have been plastered over. The house foundation is stone, and is filled in with stone laid in [uncoursed rubble pattern](#). In some places brick piers have been used for the additions. The cornerstones of the front porch were carved by an Indian, who also carved a stone in an adjacent pasture that was used to make lye soap.² The floor joists in the original portion of the house are half-round. split logs. Weatherboarding covers the house, with the exception of tongue and groove boards used on the section of the front wall protected by the porch.

The house has been added onto in stages. The two-story ell appears to have been added in the second half of the nineteenth century, as was the shed roof addition. The one-story kitchen in the rear was probably added about the turn of the century.³



This Plaque at the Shopping Center at Colony Rd. & Rea Rd. marks the original location of the Grier-Rea House. Some information on the Plaque is incorrect.

A distinctive feature of the architecture is the one-story front porch that extends across the facade. Its unique latticework columns, railings, and arched overhang give it a singularly charming quality. The latticework columns, raised on stone piers, were less susceptible to rot than traditional columns or square posts, because of the excellent airflow around the wood members. The porch itself is separate and setback from the columns, affording the porch a high degree of protection from the rain. This protection from the elements is responsible for the well-preserved condition of the hand-hewn beams supporting the porch floor. The porch's simple but elegant molded handrails are attached to short posts with large wooden pegs.

The windows in the original part of the house were [four-over-four double-hung sash](#), and several are still intact. Many have been replaced with other sash sizes. In the ell, it appears that the windows that were originally used were nine-over-six double-hung sash, some of which are still intact, but others have been replaced with various sash sizes, and the second floor ell windows on the west side have been weatherboarded over. The window surrounds are simple moldings.

There are two front entries: one has double doors, solid two-over-three panel, overlit by a [sidelight transom](#), that lead to a central hallway. Just to the right of them as you face the house is a single two-over-four panel solid door that leads to a front room. Both are encased in simple, unadorned molding door surrounds.

Almost all of the interior is intact as originally built. In some rooms, modern flooring has been put over the original, but in others on the first floor and all of the second, the original flooring of heart-of-pine is still exposed. In one of the downstairs closets, the original peg construction can be seen. In general, the house is in a very good state of preservation.

In the original portion of the house, there are two rooms downstairs, a central hall with stairs that leads to the second floor, and two rooms upstairs. In the first and second floors of the ell, there are two rooms. The shed roof addition contains a bathroom, and the one-story room on the end of the ell was a kitchen. Original mantels are still intact on both floors of the original end chimneys, and on the first floor of the ell. The original decorated stair railing is also intact, as are the interior doors. There are double doors at the rear of the original hall that have a sunlight transom, all of which matches the front doors, and no doubt were once rear doors, but are now in the interior.



Historic Marker For Grier Rea House

[Click here to view interesting ephemera on Grier-Rea](#)

Notes

¹ Interview with T. Leon Rea, Charlotte, NC 12 January 1989.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.