

# Slavery at the Helper Hotel

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

Lewis Dinkins, who served as steward at Davidson College between 1843 and 1852, opened a store on the main road in Davidson in 1848.<sup>1</sup> In the U. S. Census in 1850, Dinkins was listed as owner of 21 enslaved persons, some of whom may have provided labor to the college, store, or hotel rooms he added:<sup>2</sup>

Male, age 32	Male, age 45	Male, age 27	Male, age 12
Male, age 8	Male, age 8 months	Female, age 100	Female, age 60
Female, age 45	Female, age 40	Female, age 35	Female, age 27
Female, age 17	Female, age 16	Female, age 15	Female, age 14
Female, age 9	Female, age 3	Female, age 2	Male, age 2
Female, age 23			

Dinkins sold the property to Leroy Springs in 1849 and moved to Madison County, Mississippi, after resigning as steward, where he died in 1869.<sup>3</sup> Leroy Springs was a son of John Springs, “for much of the antebellum period was one of the wealthiest, most prominent, best respected, and most politically significant citizens of York District” and an active long-distance slave trader in South Carolina.<sup>4</sup> Thus, Leroy Springs was more than familiar with enslavement. He offered a \$50 reward for return of escaped man Marion in March 1845, who was “about 23 years of age, tolerably dark...about five feet ten inches high, stout made and would weigh about one hundred and sixty pounds and has a surly sulky look.”<sup>5</sup> In the 1850 U. S. Census Leroy and his family lived in Charlotte where he operated a store in “the Brick Corner House” his father would bequeath to him upon his death in 1853. He enslaved a large number of people:<sup>6</sup>

Female, age 50	Female, age 35	Male, age 20	Male, age 22
Male, age 22	Male, age 20	Male, age 16	Male, age 18
Male, age 23	Male, age 16	Male, age 21	Male, age 14
Male, age 19	Male, age 24	Male, age 23	Male, age 18
Male, age 12	Male, age 11	Male, age 4	

In January 1852 Springs purchased from Miles B. Abernathy two enslaved women,

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<sup>1</sup> “Stewards,” Davidson College Archives & Special Collections, <https://davidsonarchivesandspecialcollections.org/archives/encyclopedia/stewards>, accessed June 10, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> 1850 U. S. Census Slave Schedule, Davidson, Deweese Township, Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, n.p.

<sup>3</sup> Mecklenburg County Old Deed Book 2, Page 421.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Tadman, “The Hidden History of Slave Trading in Antebellum South Carolina: John Springs III and Other ‘Gentlemen Dealing in Slaves’,” *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 97, no. 1 (January 1996), excerpted at “John Springs,” Find A Grave, [https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/105034313/john\\_springs](https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/105034313/john_springs), accessed June 13, 2024.

<sup>5</sup> “\$50 Reward,” *Charlotte Journal*, March 21, 1845.

<sup>6</sup> 1850 U. S. Census Slave Schedule, Charlotte, Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, n.p.

...a certain negro woman named Joamue about Twenty two years of age and her two named children vz Mary Jane & Margaret Stout for the sum of two hundred dollars...<sup>7</sup>

John Springs died in 1853, and he willed to Leroy “my Negro boys, Tom and John.”<sup>8</sup> However, Leroy Springs never lived in Davidson, having several enterprises in Charlotte including a flour mill he opened in 1855, so it is likely that his enslaved persons also never lived or worked in Davidson.

Hanson Pickney (H. P.) Helper moved to Davidson in 1855 and purchased the Springs property. It is unknown whether he brought any enslaved people with him from Rowan County. The Helper Hotel opened for business in June 1860.<sup>9</sup> The U. S. Census was conducted in Davidson almost three weeks later, and H. P. was listed as employing three enslaved people—a 25 year old woman and 18 year old man owned by William Knox of Iredell County, and a twelve year old girl rented from the estate of A. H. Torrence. It was likely that the girl worked as a servant for the Helper family, which included two young children.<sup>10</sup>

Two men are listed in the 1870 U. S. Census as “waiters at college,” likely working in Steward’s Hall—Robert Rockwell, age 21, and **Alex Helper**, age 30. Alex Helper was born around 1840 in North Carolina and was likely enslaved by the Helper family. In 1870 he was either married to or cohabitated with Adeline White Helper, who was born around 1828. She had children from a previous marriage or relationship—**Sarah White**, aged 20; **Alice White**, aged 18 and employed as a domestic servant; Ella White, aged 3; and Frank White, aged 6. However, there is a bit of confusion as Adeline and Alex are listed twice in the census, with the second listing right after the household of H. P. Helper.<sup>11</sup> The Steward Hall closed in 1876 due to lack of patronage, but Alex continued in service to the student—a Davidson resident remembered that Alex “waited on the boys around the College.”<sup>12</sup> In 1889, Alex was charged with retailing liquor without a license and found not guilty. Adeline died in 1902, and Alex passed away in 1912. Though the deed lists Alex as the purchaser, it was Adeline who bought a 0.25-acre lot in Davidson from W. A. Mock in 1874 and had erected upon it a small two-room house. This property was subject of a lawsuit filed by Adeline’s heirs soon after her death. Mary Harris, who lived with Alex as a housekeeper after Adeline’s death, took advantage of the aged man and had him deed her the property a few months before he passed. Mary refused to leave the house, and the heirs filed suit. Harris won the suit, as the deed was in Alex Helper’s name and the White family had allowed him to remain in the house until his death, and the appeal was dismissed.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Mecklenburg County Old Deed Book 3, Page 280.

<sup>8</sup> York County Will Book 3, Page 263.

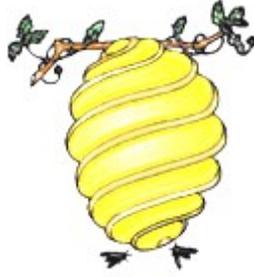
<sup>9</sup> “New Hotel at Davidson College,” *Iredell Express*, June 15, 1860.

<sup>10</sup> 1860 U. S. Census Slave Schedule, Western Division, Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, p. 27.

<sup>11</sup> 1870 U. S. Census, Davidson College, Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, p. 13, 20.

<sup>12</sup> Statement of Case on Appeal, *White et. al. vs. Mary Harris*, Mecklenburg County Superior Court, November 1913.

<sup>13</sup> “A Case of ‘Retailing,’” *Charlotte Observer*, October 25, 1889; Mecklenburg County Old Deed Book 13, Page 65; Mecklenburg County Deed Book 290, Page 280; “Heirs Seek to Recover Land,” *Charlotte Evening Chronicle*, September 20, 1912.



## **THE HELPER HOTEL**



*This report was written on October 5, 1976*

**1. Name and location of the property:** The property known as the Helper Hotel is located at 215 North Main St. Davidson, NC.

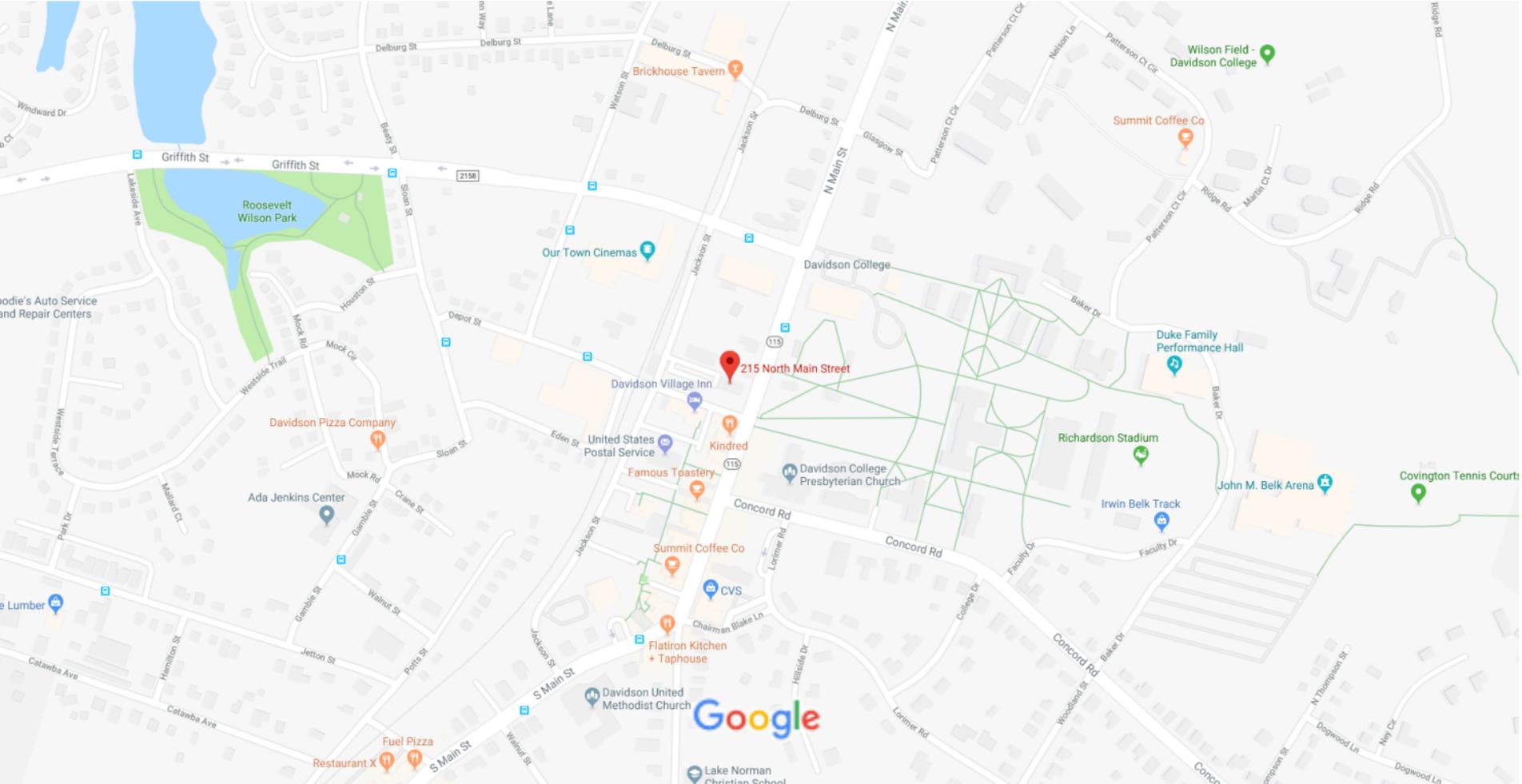
**2. Name, addresses, and telephone numbers of the present owners and occupants of the property:**

The present owner and occupant of the property is:  
Davidson College  
Davidson, NC 28036

Telephone: 892-8021

**3. Representative photographs of the property:** Representative photographs of the property are included in this report.

**4. A map depicting the location of the property:** This report contains a map depicting the location of the property.



**5. Current Deed Book Reference to the property:** The most recent reference to this property is found in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 1210 it page 607. The Parcel Number of the property is: 00325605.

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

In 1848 Lewis Dinkins erected a structure which was later to become a part of the Helper Hotel. Leased as a store building to Mr. Leroy Springs in December of that year, the structure served the growing number of students enrolled at Davidson College directly across the Great Road from Statesville to Charlotte. Mr. Dinkins demonstrated his awareness of Presbyterian sensitivities by including within the lease an explicit prohibition regarding the sale of intoxicating liquors or any other article that may be prohibited by the Regulations and Ordinances of the Trustees of Sd. College." In 1855 the building was purchased by Hanson Pinkney Helper, a native of Davie County. Mr. Helper, known as "Mr. Pink" to the students, transformed the structure into a thirteen-room hotel, the Helper Hotel.

In the late 1850s he added a two-story portico to east side of the building. Indeed, his interest in architectural embellishment persisted during the years following the Civil War. The "Widows' Walk" or observatory was added in 1871. The evidence suggests that the structure continued to house a variety of commercial enterprises. For example, in the late 1800s Dr. J. J. Dupuy operated a drug store in the big north room on the first floor. Two of his daughters, Miss Julia and Merle, married Davidson students who were to become Presidents of Davidson College -- Henry Louis Smith and Walter Lee Lingle. The Sloan family of Davidson purchased the building about 1901. The structure continued to serve the needs of the students across the street. During the 1920s and 1930s Mrs. Sadie Sloan Bohannon operated the inn as a weekend rooming house for visiting college girls. From the outset she enforced the rule that Davidson students could go only to the top of the stairs to deposit the suitcases and no farther. Obviously, she knew what she was doing. Davidson College bought the Helper Hotel in 1946. In 1971 Mr. Grover C. Meetze, architect and Director of the Physical Plant at Davidson College, supervised the restoration of the building. It is now used for the Honors College under the leadership of Dean Frontis W. Johnston. In addition to offices, classrooms, social rooms, kitchen, etc., it contains a V.I.P. suite on the second floor for visiting scholars and honored guests.

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

**8. Documentation of who and in what ways the property meets the criteria set forth in N.C.G.S. 160A-399.4:**

**a. Historical and cultural significance:** The historical and cultural significance of the property known as the Helper Hotel rests upon two factors. First, the structure is architecturally significant as a fine example of Jeffersonian Classicism. Second, the structure has strong associative ties with Davidson College and with the surrounding community. It is the oldest building in Mecklenburg County which once served as a hotel. The father-in-law of two Presidents of Davidson College operated a drug store in the building.

**b. Suitability for preservation and restoration:** The Helper Hotel is one of the finer examples of historic restoration in Mecklenburg County.

**c. Educational value:** The Helper Hotel has educational value as one of the finer examples of Jeffersonian Classicism in Mecklenburg County. It also has educational value as an example of historic restoration.

**d. Cost of acquisition, restoration, maintenance or repair:** At present the Commission has no intention of purchasing the fee simple or any lesser included interest in this property. The Commission assumes that all costs associated with maintaining the structure will be paid by the owner or subsequent owners of the property.

**e. Possibilities for adaptive or alternative use of the property:** The Commission concurs with the owner's adaptive use of the property to house the Honors College of Davidson College.

**f. Appraised value:** The current tax appraisal value of the structure is \$42,310. The current tax appraisal value of the land is \$20,000. The Commission is aware that designation of the property would allow the owner to apply for an automatic deferral of 50% of the rate upon which the Ad Valorem Taxes are calculated.

**g. The administrative and financial responsibility of any person or organization willing to underwrite all or a portion of such costs:** At present the Commission has no intention of purchasing the fee simple or any lesser or included interest in this property. Furthermore, the Commission assumes that all costs associated with the structure will be met by whatever party now owns or will subsequently own the property. Clearly, the present owner has demonstrated the capacity to meet the expenses associated with restoring and maintaining the structure.

**9. Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets the criteria established for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places:** The Commission judges that the property known as the Helper Hotel does meet the criteria of the National Register of Historic Places. Basic to the Commission's judgment is its knowledge of the fact that the National Register of Historic Places functions to identify properties of local and state historic significance. The Commission believes that the property known as the Helper Hotel is of local historic

significance and thereby meets the criteria of the National Register of Historic Places.

**10. Documentation of why and in what ways the property is of historical importance to Charlotte and/or Mecklenburg County:** As noted earlier, the property known as the Helper Hotel is of local historical importance for two reasons. It is architecturally significant as one of the finer examples of Jeffersonian Classicism in Mecklenburg County. The structure, the oldest building in Mecklenburg County which once served as a hotel, has strong associative ties with Davidson college.

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### Bibliography

*An Inventory of Older Building in Mecklenburg County and Charlotte for the Historic Properties Commission.*

Chalmers Gaston Davidson, *The Plantation World Around Davidson*, pp. 11-15.

Records of the Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office.

Records of the Mecklenburg County Tax Office.

**Date of preparation of this report:** October 5, 1976

**Prepared by:** Dr. Dan L. Morrill, Director  
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### *Architectural Description*

*by Jack O. Boyte, A.I.A.*

The historic significance of early nineteenth century Davidson College buildings is well known statewide and to some extent nationally. Inspired as they were by Thomas Jefferson's classical work at the University of Virginia, the two most renowned historic structures on the campus, Eumenean Society and Philanthropic

Society halls exhibit an elegance of design which is now unique in Mecklenburg County for the period. In the 1840s the literary societies contracted with a well-to-do Mecklenburg citizen, Lewis Dinkins, for the construction of the two buildings. No record of the designer or architect is known, but the sensitivity of proportion and detail is clear indication that a trained architect worked on the projects.

At about the time Lewis Dinkins began work on the two halls, he launched a private endeavor across Statesville Road from the college. Anticipating the need for visitor lodging and for a convenient off campus store for students, he built a small inn and store building on an axis with the two halls, and not surprisingly, in the same architectural mode. Lewis Dinkins may or may not have employed the college architect, if there was one, but he certainly faithfully duplicated the details of the two structures he was building for the college.

Having passed through numerous proprietorships, the building has also known several alterations and additions. One pre-civil war daguerreotype shows a small structure approximately half the present size and with an apparent high columned portico, or pilastered wing, on the south side. Another picture taken soon after the war shows the building essentially as it is today. This second photograph was used by the college as a guide during recent reconditioning work. The building is a simple two story rectangular structure topped with a low, slate-covered tripped roof which rises to a high flat rectangular promenade enclosed in turn by a delicate wooden balustrade. Across the front, or Statesville Road side, is an antebellum portico extending out some eight feet to the edge of the road and covering the sidewalk. Above this is a second floor balcony of like size, sheltered by a flat slate covered roof. There are seven square wood columns with simple molded caps supporting the balcony floor, then extending up to a narrow overhang at the balcony roof. Trim at this overhang cornice is minimum and includes only a simple bed mold with a plain soffit and fascia above. At the second floor, the balcony is enclosed with a small rounded rail resting on thin rectangular pickets.

As mentioned above, the original design of this structure followed the theme of the Eumenean and Philanthropic halls. Strong vertical lines created by repeated stuccoed pilasters divide the red brick exterior surfaces into uniformly spaced bays. On the front, which faces east, there are three such bays defined by corner pilasters and two more located at approximately third points in the front. Centered in the ground floor end bays are double wood paneled doors with granite sills, which are flanked by tall windows with six over nine light sash. The center bay has one window, also with six over nine light sash. On the second floor front the same window and door pattern occurs although the doors, which open from second floor bed chambers to the balcony, are single rather than double. The stuccoed pilasters are two stories high and terminate at the eaves in capitals with simple curved Doric forms. This molded form is continued in the shape of the brick between the pilasters and creates a fine overhang cornice at the roof line. This brick cornice is a striking detail and actually reflects more sophistication than the two halls across the road. This molded brick does not carry through the entire perimeter of the structure, however. At the front

there are two bays where the molded cornice appears, but at the third, or south, bay this shape is replaced by simple corbeled brick courses of relatively primitive form. It could be said that this portion of the building is the addition appended, or altered, by Hanson Pinkney Helper in the late 1850s when the front portico and balcony were attached.

On the north side there are four tall pilasters rising, not from the ground as at the front, but from a broad stucco base which extends four feet above grade. Below this base one can see evidence of a low field stone foundation wall. Between the pilasters on this side the wall surfaces are locally made red brick. On the first floor there is one six over nine light window centered in the third bay. The second floor includes single six light over nine light windows centered in each bay with heavy wooden pegged wood frames, shallow jack arches and thick stucco sills. Continuing the front and side pattern, the rear facade includes four high stuccoed pilasters spaced as are those at the front. Here are three massive brick chimneys, one in each of the three bays. From field stone bases these chimneys continue the same width up to stepped shoulders at the roof cornice. Above this they continue in reduced proportion high above the roof to corbeled caps. In the rear wall there are heavy six panel doors with granite sills in the two center first floor bays and one six over nine light window in the left center bay. On the second floor there are three windows with six over nine lights in line with the door and window below. On the south side there are again four pilasters which form three equal bays. Centered in each bay on each floor are single six over nine light windows.

The exterior brick work on the inn walls varies from the front to the side and rear, whereas the brick coursing in the Statesville Road elevation is all Flemish Bond, panels on the sides and rear are English (or common) Bond with one row of headers for every six stretcher courses. This variation reflects the brickwork in the college buildings. On Eumenean Hall the brickwork is all Flemish Bond and on Philanthropic it is English Bond. An additional similarity in the structures is the unique brick jack arch which is similar in all the buildings. This flat arch is one brick tall of tapered shapes with a small wedge brick in the center. Original sills of cut Mecklenburg granite occur below the first floor windows. On the second floor there are like-size heavy brick sills covered with stucco.

The building interior has obviously been altered and remodeled several times since the original small inn and store building was erected by Lewis Dinkins. The most recent work included refinishing all interior surfaces and replacement of doors and windows. A summary of this work indicates that new materials were fabricated to carefully match those remaining from earlier construction.

Through the paneled double doors in the right front bay one enters a large assembly hall with a ten foot ceiling, which encompasses over half of the first floor area. On the rear wall of this room is a carefully preserved original pine mantle. Surrounding a relatively small fireplace opening, this mantle is simply detailed. Plain rectangular pine half columns at each side of the opening rise to an unadorned rectangular

mantle shelf with a simple square apron below. This fireplace is the only one remaining in the building on either floor. Whereas, the existence of three large original chimneys at the rear clearly show that both floors were well served by fireplaces when the store and inn flourished in the mid 1800s.

On the left side of the first floor a second front entrance, also of double paneled doors, leads to a wide corridor. Here are a number of smaller rooms and a narrow stair which leads, in two runs, to the second floor. This stair is likely in its original location and possibly led originally from an entrance lobby to lodgings on the second floor. There is little of the original work or material now visible on either floor, however.

The importance of this building is its reflection of the architectural mood of the Davidson College Community as it emerged from Eighteenth Century Mecklenburg County. Alterations which have from time to time occurred, do not conceal the original design theme. The bold white stucco pilasters and broad white base creating precise bays of red brick and crowned by Doric capitals and broad molded cornices may have been the first classical architecture out in the county. The Jefferson-Palladian influence is here, and in the two sister buildings across the road, seen for the first time locally. It is a delightful building and its preservation enriches the community.