

## Slavery at Latta Place

The history of Latta Place is intertwined with the history of slavery in Mecklenburg County. In the antebellum South, plantations were very large farms that relied on numerous enslaved workers. Plantations were rare in Mecklenburg County. In ca. 1975 documents, the Latta Place Inc. nonprofit organization defined a “plantation” as a farm with an overseer and over twenty-five enslaved persons, and a “planter” was defined as someone who owned a plantation. By this definition the original owner of Latta Place, James Latta, may have become a member of Mecklenburg County’s slave-owning planter class when he hired Jess Riley to be his overseer in 1825. James Latta, an immigrant from Ireland appears to have been a first-generation slave owner. As a successful merchant in the early Republic, and as a planter Latta’s wealth partly consisted of, and relied on the ownership of enslaved people.

Latta built the existing historic house on the Latta Place property in 1800, and at that time he owned two enslaved persons. In 1800 Latta was principally a merchant and it is speculated that an unnamed enslaved man assisted Latta in that business, and that an unnamed enslaved woman labored as a domestic servant.

An 1810 tax record shows Latta owning “5 black persons.”

In December 1812 Latta paid his son-in-law and sometime business partner Rufus Reid \$400 for the purchase of an enslaved woman named Sucky and her child at a “sheriff’s sale”.

The 1820 census shows Latta owning 8 enslaved persons.

A will for Latta dated July 20, 1822 list the names of four enslaved persons: Sucky, George, Peter, and Cato.

An 1824 tax record shows Latta owning “6 black persons.”

A receipt from December 27, 1825 shows a charge for boarding for a “servant” which may indicated that enslaved people traveled with Latta in connection with his mercantile trade.

In 1826 Latta placed an ad for Peter, an escaped enslaved man.

From 1829 to 1832 a “Dr. Caldwell” billed Latta six times for medicine and treatments of the enslaved persons associated with Latta Place

In 1832 Latta made Louie, Isac, John, and “Sarah, and child” available for hire or sale.

Latta died in 1837, and revised wills and other legal documents listed the names of additional enslaved persons: Alexander, Ned, Darky, Polly, Levi, Moses, Charly, Amy, Tom, Abby, Patience, Lavinia, Martha, Norfolk, Terry, Becky, Luis, Harriet, Willy, Tony, Rachael, Ned, Philip, Andy, and Mary. After his death, Latta’s family sold Latta Place. Some of the enslaved people were inherited by his family, and others were sold.

Much more research into the general history of slavery in Mecklenburg County needs to be done to better understand how Latta Plantation fits into the County’s history.

# Latta Plantation



## Information from November 1971 National Register Nomination

The Latta House is a rectangular two-story frame dwelling covered with beaded weatherboards and resting on a low stone foundation. The west side is five bays long, and has tall windows with molded architraves and sills, those at the first level containing nine-over-nine sash while those at the second have nine-over-six. The eaves of the low gable roof on both the east and west sides are accented by a box cornice with a pierced Wall of Troy motif.

The gable ends are three bays wide with much smaller and narrower windows having six-over-six and six-over-four sash at the first and second levels, respectively. Dominating each gable end is a large single shoulder Flemish bond brick chimney set off center between the central and east bays. To the west of the south chimney is the main entrance, an extremely unusual placement. The overall mass of the house, the direction of the roof ridge, the location of the main cornice, the size of the windows, and the placement of the chimneys all would normally indicate the east side as the main facade instead of the narrow south gable end. Apparently this was also the feeling of a twentieth-century occupant who converted the north window on the east side into a door.

The location of the main entrance reflects the unusual floor plan, which includes a wide hall along the west side of the house with two rooms to the east. The hall originally connected the front and rear entrances, but the rear doorway has been converted to a window and the north section of the hall partitioned to form a small

bathroom. The main entrance remains intact with the four-light transom above a door flat-paneled on the outside and sheathed in a chevron pattern inside. The walls and ceiling of the hall, like the rest of the rooms of the house, are finished with wide horizontal sheathing. A delicate molded chair rail continues uninterrupted to form a sill beneath each window. The windows have unusually heavy crossetted architraves, as do all the interior doorways at the first level. The open-string stair which rises in a single flight from the west side of the hall is particularly well-executed, incorporating a Georgian style balustrade with a heavy molded handrail and a square newel cap, reeded balusters square in section, and an unusually large wave bracket on the end of each step. The entire balustrade is repeated in half section on the opposite wall. Beneath the stair is a large double cupboard with flat-paneled doors above and below the chair rail.

Dominating the large southeast parlor is the elaborate mantel on the south wall. It consists of a heavy architrave around the rectangle opening flanked by flat-paneled pilasters beneath the molded cornice self. The shelf breaks over the pilasters forming caps and over a narrow central tablet which contains a single flat panel. The overmantel is composed of three slender fluted pilasters separated by two rectangular flat panels. Above is a molded cornice ornamented with a guilloche band. The uppermost molding of the cornice continues around the room (a feature that recurs in all rooms having overmantels).

The mantel in the smaller north parlor is similar but has fluted pilasters supporting the mantel shelf and a lozenge motif across the cornice in place of the guilloche band. A curious feature of the southeast parlor is the apparent former location of a window in the west wall between the parlor and the main hall. The opening was filled quite early with flush boards, but the crossetted architrave remains. Among items listed in the 1840 estate sale of James Latta, the builder of the house, was a window sash, possibly the one for the parlor window.

The plan of the second floor is essentially the same as the first except that the south end of the hall is partitioned off to form a small unheated bedroom, and the enclosed attic stair rises from the northwest corner of the hall. The mantels in the main bedrooms, although not quite as elaborate as those downstairs, are equally sophisticated in design. In the north room the small fireplace opening is framed by a heavy surround flanked by fluted pilasters. The molded shelf breaks over the pilasters forming their caps. The overmantel features two tall fluted pilaster strips which extend to a Wall of Troy molded cornice, framing a large rectangular section of the sheathed wall. The mantel in the opposite room is similar but lacks the overmantel.

The only remaining contemporary outbuilding is the smokehouse, located just north of the house. Covered with beaded weatherboards, it has a low pyramidal roof crowned by a small wooden pinnacle.

The Latta House was built about 1800 by James Latta on land he bought in 1799 from Moses Hays. Latta, then living in nearby Lincoln County, paid \$600 for a 100-acre tract on the east side of the Catawba River, and it is believed that he had his plantation house constructed there shortly thereafter. James Latta was a traveling merchant and planter who came from Ireland to America in 1785. He had three daughters who were educated at Salem Academy (then a boarding school for girls, now a women's college located in Old Salem in Winston-Salem, North Carolina), and who became the mistresses of some of the finest plantations in the area--Oak Lawn, Cedar Grove, and Mount Mourne. In 1800 he purchased for 135 silver dollars half of a fishery near his plantation; that property had been granted to Gideon Thompson by George III in 1772.

The dwelling house property was deeded by James Latta and his wife, Jane, to Benjamin W. Wilson and Robert Latta in 1819. The deed contained the provision that the Lattas would continue living there, as well as a special provision of trust for their son, Ezekiel. The son, however, died in 1820, long before the death of his father. Soon after James Latta died in 1837, his "River Lands" were advertised for sale in the *Charlotte Journal* (January 26, 1838). The tract "on which the deceased resided" was described as a "plantation [where there] is a good two story Dwelling House, with all necessary out-buildings, unusually well built, and arranged more conveniently than most places in this country."

In 1841 two tracts of the plantation were finally sold to David Harry for \$2,450 by Rufus Raid, executor of Latta's estate. He died in 1849, and in 1853 the tract of land "formally owned by David Harry" was sold to William A. Sample. Sample, an elder in the Hopewell Presbyterian Church for forty-six years, had four sons who volunteered for service in the First North Carolina Regiment during the Civil War. In his will, probated August 4, 1877, William Sample left the part of the "Home Tract" including the house to his son, Hugh. The house remained in the Sample family for many years until 1922, when it was deeded to the Catawba Manufacturing Company. At that time the Catawba Manufacturing and Electric Power Company was a wholly-owned subsidiary of Southern Power Company. When the latter merged with Duke Power Company in 1927, the Latta House property was deeded to Crescent Land and Timber Corporation, and at present the land, but not the use of the house, was leased to the United States government, a lease to be in effect until June 30, 1975.

The Latta House is an especially interesting early Federal house with a plan unique for its period in North Carolina. The fine stair with elements of Georgian design, the

rather elaborate mantels, and the consistent use throughout the house of graceful, skillfully executed early Federal motifs make the Latta House one of the very best of its period in the upper Piedmont.