

RURAL HILL DAVIDSONS: BRIEF HISTORY

ROBERT AND ISABELLA (RAMSAY) DAVIDSON

Family tradition holds that Robert and Isabella Davidson emigrated from the area around Dundee, Scotland, with two servants in the early 1730's. Robert and Isabella arrived in America and settled in Chestnut Level, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. As they began to build their new life, Isabella was said to have had a love for spending money. In time their estate was squandered. Robert died at age 27, leaving her penniless.

Isabella decided to move southward with other Scots to the Carolina territory along the Great Wagon Road, which ran through the Shenandoah Valley. John her son, and Mary her daughter, came with her. The family settled in Rowan County near present day Salisbury, North Carolina. There she remarried a gentleman named Henry Hendrey (or Henry). He was a graduate of the College of New Jersey (later renamed Princeton University). Henry was a noted educator and was an excellent tutor to John and Mary.

JOHN AND VIOLET (WILSON) DAVIDSON

John Davidson was born on December 15, 1735 in Lancaster County Pennsylvania. He apprenticed as a blacksmith after moving with his mother and sister to Rowan County in North Carolina. The blacksmithing was against his mother's wishes and the family story says that John & Mary did not appreciate their Mother's new family. In his mid 20s, he and his sister moved to Mecklenburg County. There he met Violet Wilson, the daughter of Samuel Wilson, a nearby plantation owner. On June 2, 1761, John and Violet were married. It is believed the newlyweds received their homestead through a gift of land split off from Samuel Wilson's holdings.

John & Violet Davidson's first home was a two room log cabin they called Rural Retreat. The cabin stood for 135 years, eventually growing to growing to eight rooms. Unfortunately, there are no known photographs of the structure. It burned in 1898.

In 1788 John Davidson had a large brick Georgian style plantation home built. This home would be known as Rural Hill. A two story structure was constructed with a full basement and high attic, giving the spacious home a total of four floors. Four end chimneys graced the east and west sides of the home. Stone sills, glazed brick, ornate transoms, and ornate architecture produced one of the finest homes along the banks of the Catawba River. Sadly, the large home suffered the same fate as the Rural Retreat cabin; burning while the Davidson family were away at a Charlotte area fair in November 1886. The ornate brick columns are all that survive to this day.

BUILDING A FAMILY

Major John and Violet Davidson had 10 children. There were three sons, Robert, John, and Benjamin, and seven daughters, Rebecca, Isabella, Mary, Violet, Sarah, Margaret, and Elizabeth, of whom three married distinguished officers in the American army. Isabella married General Joseph Graham, whose personal account of the Battle of Cowan's Ford is a lasting testimony to the heroism of the American militia. Rebecca married Captain Alexander Brevard, who served in nine decisive campaigns. Mary married Dr. William McLean, who had been a surgeon in the Continental Army.

PUBLIC AND MILITARY CAREER OF MAJOR JOHN

Before 1771, John Davidson served as a Justice of the Peace in the Magistrate Court in Mecklenburg County. In January 1773, John Davidson became one of Mecklenburg County's two delegates to the colonial North Carolina Assembly in New Bern. He and Thomas Polk introduced

measures for the establishment of a public road from Mecklenburg County to the North Carolina coast. He and Martin Phifer presented a bill for the "public establishment of learning." The bill to create Queens College passed the legislature but was vetoed by Governor Martin. He also assisted in the recognition of Charlotte as the County seat and the establishment of a courthouse. His experience as a legislator was not altogether happy. He had witnessed little in New Bern to win loyalty to Royal Government and his name does not appear in the public record after January 1774. In 1778 John was serving as one of 18 Justices of the Peace in Mecklenburg although it was thought that he had been one for longer than that.

As with most other able men of the area, he also served in the Mecklenburg County militia. With hostilities growing between the Americans and the Crown, John was appointed to the Committee of Safety of Mecklenburg. When the Provincial Congress of North Carolina organized the State Militia on September 9, 1775, John Davidson was appointed second major in the Mecklenburg militia. He served under Rutherford against the Cherokee in the "Snow Campaign." John Davidson was promoted to first major on April 23, 1776.

Major John Davidson left field service after the 1775 and 1776 campaigns (summer of 1776), taking the position of Brigade Major on the staff of the Salisbury Brigade. One of his grandsons said that he had declined to accept the same rank in the regular army under an officer who had never seen service, but nevertheless he was one of the most active "Hornets" of Mecklenburg County, records place him with the militia when they went to Cross Creek to battle the Scots Highland Tories. Among the officers of the day in Gates' camp; Brigade Major Davidson was on duty at Lynch's Creek on August 8 1780 and at Rugely's Mill on August 13, 1780. The Battle of Camden took place on August 16 and Gates was decisively defeated by Cornwallis. John Davidson did not fight at Fishing Creek on August 18, 1780; he had escaped to Charlotte and was there when the news of the defeat arrived.

THE BATTLE OF COWAN'S FORD

In 1780 Cornwallis marched out of Charleston and across the Carolinas with orders to put an end to the rebellion in the south. The occupation of Charlotte further strengthened Mecklenburg community resolve. The patriots were usually outnumbered, but strategic battles at Kings Mountain, Cowpens, Sherrill's Ford, Cowan's Ford and Guilford Courthouse left Cornwallis troops so depleted that he retreated to Wilmington before moving on to Virginia and final defeat at Yorktown.

In December, 1780, General Nathaniel Greene ordered General William Lee Davidson, a cousin to John Davidson, to delay the British army's expected advance northward through North Carolina. This delaying action would allow General Greene to move the main body of his army to more suitable ground to give his outmatched American troops the greatest possible advantage for battle. General Davidson assembled some of the militia at Rural Hill where they camped for several days prior to February 1, 1781.

While General Greene was moving toward Salisbury, General Lord Cornwallis was marching westward from his headquarters in Charlotte towards Lincolnton. He then turned east advancing toward the crossing at Cowan's Ford, where General Davidson awaited the British. The battle would take place only about four miles north of Rural Retreat. In the opening shots of the battle General Davidson was shot from one of John Davidson's finest horses, dying shortly thereafter. The horse returned without its rider to the stables at Rural Retreat later that day. The General was buried secretly that evening in the cemetery of Hopewell Presbyterian Church, located four miles south of Rural Hill on Beatties Ford Road.

FINAL YEARS

Violet passed away in 1818 and was the first to be buried in the Rural Hill Burying Ground. In 1823, at the age of eighty-eight, John Davidson decided to retire from Rural Hill and went to live with his son-in-law William Lee Davidson and John's daughter, Betsy, at their home "Beaver Dam", located three miles east of what is now the town of Davidson. John would live to be quite old for his time; he died in 1832 at the age of 97.

JOHN & SARAH HARPER (BREVARD) DAVIDSON

Major John Davidson turned Rural Hill over to his son John, who was later in life nicknamed "Silver Headed" Jacky. This peculiar name grew from tales of a remarkable incident involving a timber cutting accident. A heavy limb fell on Jacky, fracturing his skull. Jacky's nephew, Dr. John McLean, who had just graduated from medical school at the University of Pennsylvania, averted Jacky's death by lifting the splintered skull off the brain and replacing it with a silver plate. Such an operation at that time was an amazing and unusual feat. The silver plate remained exposed in his head and became the object of much curiosity. A successful planter, Jacky lived to be 91 years old, upholding the Davidson family reputation for longevity.

ROBERT & MARGARET (PEGGY) {OSBORNE} DAVIDSON

Another son of Major John Davidson, Robert, also known as "Robin", remained in the area of Rural Hill, building Hollybend Plantation in 1801 just one mile west of his father's house. He married Peggie Osborne, daughter of Captain Adlai Osborne from Center Church. They had no children, but were foster parents to several. Robert, one of the largest slave holders in Mecklenburg County, later became one of the founders of Davidson College.

ADAM BREVARD & MARY LAURA (SPRINGS) DAVIDSON

In 1835, Major John Davidson's grandson, Adam Brevard Davidson, contracted for and supplied the lumber to build Davidson College, all of which he sawed at his own mills located at Rural Hill. In 1837, Brevard's father Jacky retired to Rural Retreat, the original 1761 log cabin, which had grown to contain eight rooms, and turned Rural Hill over to his son and daughter-in-law, Mary Laura Springs of York County, South Carolina.

Around 1845, Adam Brevard and Mary Laura made many improvements to Rural Hill including modernizing the Georgian hip style roof line to have gable ends and the creation of the boxwood and formal flower gardens, some of which remain today. Mary Laura's manuscript journal which mentions the gardens is in the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Brevard served as president of the Mecklenburg Agricultural Society for some 15 years before the American Civil War and was interested not only in crops but also in livestock such as Devon, Ayreshire and Durham cattle and horse breeding with Rural Hill thoroughbreds and advertised as far away as Charleston. His address to the Agricultural Society on the "Culture of Clover" was published in the Western Democrat.

Although he frequently referred to himself as a "clodhopper", Brevard, like his grandfather, was a believer in internal improvements and became wealthy through investments in railroads, cotton mills and real estate. Following the War Between the States and the loss of much of his fortune, he turned Rural Hill over to his son John Springs, moved to Charlotte and remade his fortune in real estate development.

SLAVERY AT RURAL HILL

Chalmers Davidson, a later descendant of the Davidson family, and a professor at Davidson College, once commented in A Plantation World Around Davidson that the majority of people in Mecklenburg County were not slave owners. The majority of those who were slave owners had only a few. A man, who worked his own land, assisted by eight or ten "hands", was still seen as a farmer, not a planter. The dividing line was considered to be something between 25-30 slaves as the ownership of so large a number customarily required the services of an overseer. The land owner who employed an overseer was considered a planter.

In the years that followed the invention of the cotton gin in 1792; there was major expansion of the number of enslaved Africans in the Carolinas. On January 1, 1808, 20 years after the ratification of the US Constitution, the US Congress outlawed the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade; although there is little evidence that the law was enthusiastically enforced.

In 1790 Major John Davidson owned a sizeable number of African slaves. By 1860 the number owned by his son John (Jacky) and grandson Adam Brevard had grown considerably. An 1856 inventory dated January 1st lists the names of 30 slaves, ranging in ages from 50 to three years of age. The inventory is signed "A.B. Davidson". An equal number of slaves were also possessed by Adam's father, John at that time and also resided on the property. Rural Hill was one of 30 plantations in Mecklenburg County. Produce from the farm was sold in markets in Charleston, South Carolina and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

The location of foundations and the rubble of the chimney have been identified as the last cabin used by enslaved Africans Americans at Rural Hill. The cabin was used by tenant farmers into the 20th century. Additional building foundation stones and a possible burying ground have been located on property nearby.

DAVIDSON FAMILY IN THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

In 1861 North Carolina seceded from the Union, and her sons went off to war. Following the military tradition of the Davidson family, the first to enlist was John Springs Davidson. He joined the 1st North Carolina Artillery (10th North Carolina State Troops) Company C and rose to the rank of sergeant. He served throughout the war until the surrender of General Lee's army at Appomattox Courthouse, Virginia on April 9, 1865.

Richard Austin Davidson joined the 5th North Carolina Cavalry (63rd North Carolina State Troops) Company F, and returned home after the war.

Robert A. Davidson gave up his studies at Davidson College and enlisted. He served as a sergeant in the 5th North Carolina Cavalry (63rd North Carolina State Troops) Company F. He was captured during the war and served as a prisoner of war only to die in prison before he could return to Rural Hill.

Edward Constantine, another son of Jacky, served as a first lieutenant of troop A in the 3rd United States dragoon regiment in the Mexican War. After the war he was elected to the North Carolina General Assembly. When the Civil War began he joined a local North Carolina regiment to fight for the Southern cause.

JOHN SPRINGS AND MARGARET ABIGAIL "MINNIE" (CALDWELL) DAVIDSON

After the war the family reunited and they began to rebuild what had been lost. John Springs returned to Rural Hill to farm the land, and worked with S.B. Alexander in launching a campaign for improving the roads in the Carolina region. In spite of the challenge of rebuilding, John was instrumental in securing some of the first good road systems in North Carolina. However, Reconstruction did not go easy for some of the Davidson family members.

In November, 1886 the Rural Hill mansion burned while the family was at the fair in Charlotte. The Davidsons moved back into the log cabin of Rural Retreat and lived there until the kitchen house of the mansion was remodeled as their new home sometime after 1896 when Rural Retreat unexpectedly burned as well.

In the early 20th century the family decided to tear down the mansion's remaining walls for fear of someone getting injured. Today the remains of the stone and brick columns can be seen in the front lawn where the house once stood.

In 1894, Brevard conveyed Rural Hill to his grandson, Joseph Graham Davidson. Jo Graham agreed to divide the property five ways, reserving one parcel for himself with the others for his brothers and sisters.

The settlement of his estate resulted in the present configuration of the last 485 acres of the family property holdings that had once, although not contiguous, reached at times over 12,000 acres.

REBUILDING RURAL HILL

Colonel Edward L. Baxter Davidson, (having never served in the military, the title of colonel was honorary) was the son of Adam Brevard by his second marriage. As he grew to adulthood he helped rebuild Rural Hill and initiated the construction of the elaborate stone wall around the Rural Hill Burying Ground along with the other monuments visitors see throughout the Huntersville area today. In 1943 he commissioned plans for rebuilding the Rural Hill mansion. Charlotte architect, Louis Asbury, drew up the plans, but Colonel Davidson passed away before work could begin on reconstructing the house.

A local historian named J. B. Alexander once said of the Rural Hill Burying Ground, "The old resting place is now forgotten by all save a few who live near it." He did not live to witness the change that would come. That same resting place, entombing the Davidson lineage, is now restored to a historical shrine open to for public visitation.

RURAL HILL TODAY

In 1989, the last remaining direct descendants of John and Violet Davidson to live at Rural Hill, John Springs Davidson and his sisters, Elizabeth and May, worked with the Charlotte Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, to sell Rural Hill to Mecklenburg County. At that time the Mecklenburg County Non Profit group Catawba Valley Scottish Society (CVSS) was seeking a home to establish a Scottish heritage event, which would become known as the Rural Hill Scottish Festival and Loch Norman Highland Games. It was a perfect relationship.

Since that time CVSS, now known as Historic Rural Hill, has worked with the Mecklenburg County Parks and Recreation Department in restoring and preserving this historic farm. On February 17, 2006 Rural Hill became officially open to the public for daily visitation.

A LASTING LEGACY

Major John and Violet Davidson, their descendents, and extended family have played an immensely important role in the development of Mecklenburg County and the surrounding region. The hopes and dreams, contributions and sacrifices of this family illustrate the strengths of the rich cultural heritage that played such an important role in the development of the Carolinas.