

WALLACE ALEXANDER HOUSE
613 South Aspen Street, Lincolnton, North Carolina

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Wallace H. Alexander House, built-in 1852, is the only surviving antebellum one-story, double-pile, center hall plan residence in Lincoln County. Hugh twelve-over-twelve sash windows retain many of their original panes. Comparable windows are found on only two other antebellum structures in the county: Pleasant Retreat Academy, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and the Barrett-Hoyle House.

HISTORICAL SKETCH

“For and in consideration of the sum of one hundred dollars and for love and affection” are the words that James T. Alexander used when he conveyed ten acres of land and “a new house lately erected” to his elder son Wallace Henderson Alexander. The 1852 deed described the property as adjoining the Town of Lincolnton “on the south side of said town” and bounded on the northwest by the York Road. Built on a center hall, double-pile plan, the one-story house with fine Greek Revival details became the home of Wallace H. Alexander and his family.

Wallace Henderson Alexander was born February 4, 1824, the son of James T. and Harriet (Clark) Alexander. Like his father, he was employed as a saddle and harness maker in the town of Lincolnton.¹ In October 1850 Wallace H. Alexander was united in marriage to Mary Royal Robertson of Caswell County, North Carolina.² Daughter of Dr. George and Sarah (Allen) Robertson, the bride was from a prominent and wealthy family. Upon their marriage, the young couple received six Negroes from the slaveholdings of Dr. Robertson. When Dr. Robertson died intestate in February 1855, his slaveholdings numbered forty-one slaves. Documents in his estate file stipulate that some years prior to his death, Dr. Robertson gave six slaves valued at \$4,000 to his daughter and son-in-law Mary and Wallace Alexander.³ By 1858, Wallace Alexander accumulated considerable indebtedness. In order to provide security for various loans, he mortgaged his home and some of the slaves he received from his father-in-law. While the mortgage on the home was eventually paid, records indicate the he may have forfeited some of the slave property.⁴

In order to make “a family settlement of property,” Wallace Alexander, on May 21, 1859, conveyed to Henry Cansler, trustee, all land, dwelling house and outbuildings, five Negro slaves (two women and three young children), one mule, one wagon, one carryall, one buggy, all household and kitchen furniture, all other personal property and effects of every kind. The property was to be held in special trust for the sole use and benefit of

¹ 1850 Lincoln County, NC Census

² Caswell County Marriage Bond, 21 Oct. 1850, North Carolina Office of Archives and History, Raleigh

³ Caswell County Estates, Estate of George Robertson, North Carolina Office of Archives and History, Raleigh

⁴ Lincoln County Deed Book 43, Page 350, 394, 457-458.

Mary R. Alexander, her present children, and any future children. As part of the trust agreement, Wallace Alexander also relinquished any interest to which he might be entitled in the estate of his deceased father-in-law Dr. George Robertson. The terms of the trust further provided that after the death of Wallace Alexander and his wife Mary R. Alexander, all property remaining would be equally divided among the surviving children of their children's heirs.⁵ While the marriage of Wallace H. and Mary (Robertson) Alexander produced six children, four sons and two daughters, only two of the children would live into adulthood.⁶

Wallace Henderson Alexander died June 1, 1872, and was buried in the **old Emmanuel Lutheran Church cemetery**, a short distance from his home. Local historian William L. Sherrill, writing in the *Annals of Lincoln County*, described him as a "well known and prominent citizen of Lincolnton."⁷ Following the death of her husband, Mary R. Alexander and her children continued to reside in the home. To supplement the family income, Mrs. Alexander took in a boarder, a female student attending private school in Lincolnton. Martha A. "Mattie" Robinson of Selma, Alabama, resided with the Alexander family and later married John F. Anthony of Lincolnton.⁸

On November 4, 1884, Ella Alexander, daughter of Wallace and Mary Alexander, was wed to Charles H. Motz, son of prominent Lincolnton businessman Wade Hampton Motz. The marriage was performed in the **Presbyterian Church** in Lincolnton by the pastor **Rev. R.Z. Johnston**. Following their marriage, the couple resided with Ella's mother. The family of Ella and Charles Motz grew to include two children, Alexander H. Motz and Mary Royal Motz. Ella Alexander Motz was a gifted musician who taught piano and voices lessons, and the Alexander-Motz home was often the scene of social gatherings.⁹

Following a short illness, Mary Royal (Robertson) Alexander died at her home on March 26, 1896. Her remains were interred in the Methodist Church cemetery beside the grave of her youngest child Frank Alexander who died in 1888. In reporting her death, the local newspaper described her as "a much beloved and highly respected woman" who

⁵ Lincoln County Deed Book 44, Page 126-128.

⁶ Buried in Emmanuel Lutheran Church cemetery, Lincolnton, are: infant son of W.H. and M.R. Alexander, died Feb. 10, 1852; Willie K. Alexander, son of W.H. and M.R., born May 6, 1859, died Aug. 11, 1863; Mary W. Alexander, dau. of W.H. and M.R., born Oct. 31, 1862, died Jan. 9, 1864. Buried in the Old Methodist Church cemetery, Lincolnton, is Frank Alexander, son of W.H. and M.R., born July 17, 1868, died Sept. 4, 1888.

⁷ William L. Sherrill, *Annals of Lincoln County* (Charlotte, NC: Observer Printing House, 1937): 214.

⁸ 1880 Lincoln County census: Mary Alexander is head of a household consisting of herself, daughter Ella age 24, son George age 22, son Frank age 11, and Mattie Robinson age 17, a boarder in the home. Lincoln County Marriage License, 1 Dec. 1881, John F. Anthony age 21, son of John P. and Mary A. Anthony, to Martha A. Robinson age 18, daughter of T.R. and Mary Robinson of Selma, Alabama. Marriage performed in Presbyterian Church, Lincolnton, by Rev. R.Z. Johnson

⁹ Mrs. Joseph Graham, undated article to *Lincoln County News*, Charles R. Jonas Library, Lincolnton. Interview by author with Peggy Costner Simmons, 20 April 2001, Davidson, North Carolina. Mrs. Simmons related that her mother Annie Nixon Costner and her mother's brother Joseph R. Nixon would walk from their home on East Main Street in Lincolnton to the Alexander-Motz house for piano lessons from Ella Motz.

had lived “to a ripe old age.”¹⁰ After the death of Mary Alexander, her surviving mentally handicapped son George R. Alexander moved to Caswell County to reside with his maternal aunt Sallie Robertson. Following the death of her husband, Ella Alexander Motz and her son and daughter also moved from Lincolnton to Caswell County.

In 1917, George R. Alexander of Caswell County, by his aunt and guardian Sallie A. Robertson, A.H. Motz of Caswell County, and Mary R. Foundation of Edgecombe County petitioned the Lincoln County Superior Court to allow the sale of the “Alexander lands” in the town of Lincolnton. The petition described the property as containing thirty-three and one-half acres “unimproved and having no buildings thereon save and except a residence house containing four or five rooms.” The property had a tax valuation of \$1,980 and was being rented for \$8.50 per month. The petitioners A.H. Motz and Mary R. Fountain were brother and sister, children and heirs of Ella Alexander Motz, each having one-fourth undivided interest in the property. The petition stated that they had been in possession of the property for seven years. George R. Alexander was the brother of Ella Alexander Motz and had a one-half undivided interest in the property. The petition was granted by the Lincoln County Superior Court on May 26, 1919. On June 6, 1919, the petitioners conveyed the title to the property to Charles A. Jonas of Lincoln County. The selling price was twelve thousand dollars.¹¹

One week later title again changed hands when **Charles A. Jonas** conveyed the property to **L.A. Crowell** for “five thousand dollars and other valuable considerations.” The new owner, Lester A. Crowell, was a prominent local physician and co-founder of Lincoln County’s first hospital. While part of the Alexander lands was soon utilized for construction of new residential housing, the area immediately surrounding the Wallace H. Alexander House was surveyed into a lot measuring 110 feet by 225 feet. On December 14, 1922, L.A. Crowell and wife Mary H. Crowell conveyed the house and lot to their daughter-in-law Frances Geitner Crowell, wife of Dr. Gordon B. Crowell.¹²

The eldest child of Dr. Lester A. and Mary Hull Crowell, **Gordon Bryan Crowell** chose to pursue a medical career, following in the footsteps of his father and grandfather. Graduating from **Lincolnton High School** in 1913, he entered the University of North Carolina. In November 1917, his studies were interrupted when he enlisted in the United States Army Medical Corps. After serving ten months in France, he resumed his education, first at the University of North Carolina and later at the University of Philadelphia. In June 1921, Gordon Bryan Crowell was united in marriage with Frances Geitner, daughter of a prominent Hickory, North Carolina family. The couple resided in Philadelphia for one year while he completed his medical schooling. Following graduation in June 1922, Dr. Gordon Crowell returned to Lincolnton where he joined his

¹⁰ *Lincoln Democrat*, Lincolnton, NC, Friday, March 27, 1896.

¹¹ Lincoln County Orders and Decrees, Book 19, Page 191-244. Lincoln County Deed Book 127, Page 565-568.

¹² Lincoln County Deed Book 139, Page 117.

father's medical practice. He and his wife moved into the Wallace H. Alexander House and installed many furnishings they purchased in Philadelphia.¹³

During the next four years, Dr. Gordon B. Crowell became a prominent and well-respected surgeon on the staff of Lincoln Hospital. The family grew with the birth of a daughter in May 1923. In late April 1926, Gordon Crowell became ill with influenza. The illness worsened and despite all medical efforts, he died on May 9, 1926. The tragic death of this promising young physician saddened the entire community.¹⁴ One month after the death of her husband, Frances Geitner Crowell gave birth to her second child. Shortly afterward, she and her children moved to Hickory to reside with her parents. The house in Lincolnton was then rented. Three years later, Frances Crowell married J. Frank Davidson and she and her children moved to Panama where Mr. Davidson was employed.¹⁵

During the 1930s, Walter L. and Pearl Abernethy and their four children resided in the Wallace Alexander House, the family having moved to Lincolnton from Gastonia. Mr. Abernethy operated a local grocery store. Although ownership of the house changed in 1935, the Abernethy family continued to rent the house for several more years.¹⁶

On June 5, 1935, Frances Crowell Davidson and husband J.F. Davidson conveyed the Wallace Alexander House and lot to Ralph W. Carter and his wife John Anthony Carter.¹⁷ Mr. Carter was the owner of a local insurance agency and Mrs. Carter taught at Lincolnton High School. For Mrs. Carter, the house had a special sentiment. It was her mother Mattie Robinson Anthony who, as a student, boarded with the Wallace Alexander family. The new owners continued renting the house to the Abernethy family while they continued residing with Mrs. Carter's mother on North Aspen Street in Lincolnton. By 1940, Mr. and Mrs. Carter and their young son had moved into the Wallace H. Alexander House. A newspaper obituary for Mattie Robinson Anthony indicates that she died on May 15, 1940 at the home of her daughter Mrs. Ralph W. Carter after an illness of three weeks.¹⁸ During the half-century the Carter family resided here, the house and grounds received careful attention.

Ralph W. Carter died in 1985, and his wife died in 1991. On January 20, 1992, Ralph W. Carter, Jr., their son and heir, conveyed the Wallace H. Alexander House and lot to Joey M. Houser.¹⁹ Mr. Houser made cosmetic renovations to the house by refinishing the

¹³ Interview by author with Dr. Gordon C. Crowell, 20 April 2001, Lincolnton, North Carolina. Crowell was the nephew of Dr. Gordon B. Crowell. Interview by author with Frances Crowell Watson, 20 April 2001, Hickory, North Carolina.

¹⁴ *Lincoln County News*, Lincolnton, North Carolina, Monday, May 10, 1926.

¹⁵ Frances Crowell Watson interview.

¹⁶ Interview by author with Ermintrude Little Mullen, 15 May 2001, Lincolnton, North Carolina. Interview by author with Marjorie Abernethy Hoffman, 16 May and 23 May, 2001, Lincolnton, North Carolina.

¹⁷ Lincoln County Deed Book 168, Page 414-415.

¹⁸ Interview by author with David C. Heavner, 10 May 2001, Lincolnton, North Carolina. Interview by author with Marguerite Heafner, 11 May 2001, Lincolnton, North Carolina. Interview by author with Frances Killian, 15 May 2001, Lincolnton, North Carolina.

¹⁹ Lincoln County Deed Book 784, Page 296-297.

floors, painting, putting up new wallpaper, and installing new kitchen cabinets. The only structural alteration he made was the removal of a closet in the den to provide access to the hallway from the den.²⁰ Houser completed the renovations by 1995 and put the house on the market the same year. On February 29, 1997, Joey M. Houser conveyed the house and lot situated at 613 South Aspen Street to Michael W. Graham and his wife Crystal P. Graham.²¹ The Wallace H. Alexander is currently on the market.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

The Wallace H. Alexander House has been included in two separate surveys completed by representatives of the State Historic Preservation Office in Raleigh, North Carolina. On August 2, 1967, Arthur J.P. Edwards examined the house as part of a North Carolina Historic Sites Survey. Marvin A. Brown examined the house again in 1985 as part of the architectural survey of Lincoln County. A written description of survey findings was prepared in 1967 and again in 1985, and is on file in the State Historic Preservation Office.

Verified by deeds to have been erected in 1852, the Wallace H. Alexander House is Lincoln County's only surviving antebellum one story residence built on a double-pile, center hall plan. The three-bay front façade expresses Greek Revival styling in its full triangular pediment and square portico with columns and dentil cornice. The front entrance is graced with a twelve light transom and two sidelights. Exterior walls are clapboard. The foundation at the front of the house is fieldstone, and the remainder is brick. The house has no cellar. Two interior chimneys laid in Flemish bond provide a fireplace in each of the four original rooms. Each of the four high wooden mantels is quite plain.

The interior displays generous proportions. The center hall is well over six feet in width and the ceilings are fourteen feet high. Wide ceiling cornices and chair rails are displayed throughout the house. The original doors have four flat panels; door surrounds are wide plain boards with square corner blocks.

Hugh twelve-over-twelve sash windows provide the most striking feature of the house. Measuring fifty-three by ninety-five inches, the windows still retain most of their original panes. The movable louvered shutters are also original. Twelve-over-twelve windows are found in only two other surviving antebellum structures in Lincoln County: Pleasant Retreat Academy and the Barrett-Hoyle House.²²

Deeds enacted by Wallace H. Alexander in 1858-59 provide a detailed description of both his real and personal property. These deeds clearly indicate, in addition to the dwelling house, the existence of appurtenant structures. Housing accommodations would

²⁰ Interview by author with Mrs. Fred Houser, 20 April 2001, Lincolnnton, North Carolina. Mrs. Houser is the mother of Joey M. Houser.

²¹ Lincoln County Deed Book 978, Page 689-690.

²² Marvin A. Brown and Maurice C. York, *Our Enduring Past, A Survey of 235 Years of Life and Architecture in Lincoln County, North Carolina*, (Charlotte, NC: Delmar Co., 1986): 16, 17.

have been required for six slaves. A barn would have been needed to provide stabling for animals and storage for a buggy, carryall, and wagon.

The Charles Raper Jonas Library in Lincolnton has an undated newspaper article written by Mrs. Joseph Graham that contains some information on the Wallace H. Alexander House. Lena Reinhardt Graham moved to Lincolnton in 1889 and during her years of residence was very active in local historical and social organizations. It is most likely that she wrote most of her articles from personal knowledge. Mrs. Graham's article described the Wallace H. Alexander property as having a pasture for cattle and an icehouse at a nearby spring. She further stated: "The original kitchen was in the yard. A two story log house on the grounds was used for servants' quarters."²³

The information in the 1858-59 deeds, and Mrs. Graham's article are in marked contrast to a later description of the property. In 1917 the heirs of Wallace H. Alexander petitioned the Lincoln County Superior Court requesting permission to sell "the Alexander lands," the property having been rented for several years. In depositions given by the Alexander heirs and various citizens of Lincolnton, the property was stated to consist of thirty-three acres "having no buildings thereon except a residence house containing four or five rooms."²⁴ These depositions document that all appurtenant structures (separate kitchens, slave quarters, and barn) were no longer in existence. Therefore, the "Alexander lands" purchased by Dr. Lester A. Crowell, Sr. in June 1919 consisted of the Wallace H. Alexander House and thirty-three acres. Dr. Crowell had the land immediately surrounding the house surveyed into its current lot size of 0.555 acres. The remainder of the thirty-three acres was eventually utilized for new residential construction.

In its current configuration, the Wallace H. Alexander House has an added rear ell, staircase in the center hall, and bedroom and bath in the attic. In June 1922, the house became the residence of Dr. Lester Crowell's son and daughter-in-law, Dr. Gordon and Frances Geitner Crowell. In a recent interview with their daughter, she stated that the house into which her parents moved in 1922 definitely had more than four rooms. In addition to her parents and herself, the family employed a full-time nanny who also resided in the household. Following the death of Dr. Gordon Crowell in 1926, Frances Geitner Crowell and her children moved from Lincolnton and the house was rented. Mrs. Crowell later remarried to J. Frank Davidson and the family moved to Panama.²⁵

During the 1930s, the Wallace H. Alexander House became the residence of the Walter L. Abernethy family. Details of the Abernethy family's residence and a description of the house during that period were provided in recent interviews with Marjorie Abernethy Hoffman, daughter of Walter and Pearl Abernethy. Certain information obtained from Mrs. Hoffman was confirmed by 1930s newspaper articles and by additional interviews with former South Aspen Street residents.

²³ Mrs. Joseph Graham, undated article to *Lincoln Times-News*.

²⁴ Lincoln County Orders and Decrees, Book 19, Page 191-244.

²⁵ Frances Crowell Watson interview.

Marjorie Abernethy Hoffman was born in Gaston County on September 30, 1918. About 1928 the Abernethy family moved to Lincolnton and Mr. Abernethy operated a grocery store on East Main Street. In the early 1930s the family moved into the Wallace H. Alexander House, renting first from Frances Crowell Davidson. When the house was sold in June 1935, the Abernethy family rented from the new owners, Mrs. and Mrs. Ralph Carter.

The Abernethy family consisted of Walter and Pearl Abernethy, their daughters Shasta, Marjorie, and Betty, their son Carroll, and Mr. Abernethy's mother Mrs. Ida Abernethy. In recalling her family's residence at the Wallace H. Alexander House, Hoffman stated, "When you came in the front door into the hallway, the front room on the right was the bedroom of my sisters and myself. Adjoining our bedroom was the bedroom of my grandmother. The front room to the left was the living room, adjoining it was the dining room, then the kitchen. Also, at the back of the house was a bathroom, a little maid's room, and the room my parents used as a bedroom. There were stairs in the hall and upstairs in the attic was my brother's bedroom, bathroom, and closet storage." Mrs. Hoffman also recalled the high ceilings, dentil cornice, chair rail, and very large windows. She also remembered the house having radiators.

In reminiscing about living in the Wallace H. Alexander House, Hoffman recalled celebrating her sixteenth birthday on September 30, 1934. The Reinhardt family resided next door. "I was only a high school freshman. Jim Reinhardt had already graduated from high school and was going to college to study medicine; he came to my sixteenth birthday party! One of my high school teachers even came. I felt very important!"

Mrs. Hoffman also gave details of a surprise birthday dinner given to honor her father, construction of "**Dr. Steelman's brick house next door**" which occurred in 1935, and construction of the **Dr. Lester Crowell, Jr. house** on South Aspen Street in 1936. Researching local newspapers from the period revealed articles supporting each of these events.²⁶ She also recalled being May Queen of her high school class and having a photograph of herself in her "May Queen dress," the photograph being made at the portico of the Wallace H. Alexander House. The Lincolnton High School annual of 1937 documents Mrs. Hoffman as a member of the senior class that year and confirms that she was May Queen.²⁷ While Mrs. Hoffman was unsure of the exact year her family moved from the Wallace H. Alexander House, information obtained from interviews with her and confirmed by additional sources indicate it was after 1937.

When the Walter Abernethy family moved from the Wallace H. Alexander House, the next residents were Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Carter and their son. For the next fifty years the Carter family resided here. Ralph W. Carter died in 1985, and his wife died in 1991. Following the death of Mrs. Carter, her son and executor Ralph W. Carter, Jr. sold the house at auction, at which time Joey M. Houser purchased it.

²⁶ *Lincoln County News*, Lincolnton, North Carolina, Sept. 17, 1934, April 1, 1935, and July 8, 1935.

²⁷ *Pine Burr*, Lincolnton High School annuals, 1933-1937.

Under the ownership of Joey Houser, the Wallace H. Alexander Houser retained its original architectural details, receiving only cosmetic renovations such as new paint and wallpaper, and the floors sanded and refinished. Houser installed new cabinets in the kitchen area. Houser removed a closet in the den and created a doorway from the den into the hall since there was no access from the den in the rear ell to the hall without going through a bathroom adjoining the den.²⁸

On February 28, 1997, Joey Houser conveyed the property at 613 South Aspen Street to Michael and Crystal Graham. Mr. and Mrs. Graham currently have the Wallace H. Alexander on the market.

When erected in 1852, the Wallace H. Alexander House was a one-story, double-pile center hall residence. Alterations made to this original plan include the addition of a rear ell, staircase in the center hall, and finished attic space. Information compiled from deeds, court records, newspaper articles, and numerous interviews point to these alterations having been made prior to 1922 by Dr. Lester A. Crowell, Sr. in preparation of the house becoming the residence of his son and daughter-in-law, Dr. Gordon and Frances Geitner Crowell.

²⁸ Mrs. Fred Houser Interview.