

Yanceyville Historic District

Walking Tour



(Richmond-Miles History Museum)

September 24-25, 2005

Yanceyville, North Carolina

Presented by

The Caswell County

Historical Association

Begin your tour at (1) the historic **Caswell County Courthouse**, which was completed in 1861.



Note the historic marker at the northwest corner of the courthouse grounds. It tells of the murder of State Senator John Walter (“Chicken”) Stephens at the courthouse on May 21, 1870. During Reconstruction after the Civil War, Caswell was occupied by troops sent by Governor William W. Holden to find and bring to justice those responsible for the political assassination. Not until 1935 was it revealed that the Ku Klux Klan, led by John G. Lea, had garroted and stabbed the Radical Republican leader Stephens in his former office in the Caswell County Courthouse.

Continue your walk by taking the sidewalk from the Court House marker and head west on West Main Street past the old theater, barber shop, and offices.



Look south through the formal alley of cedars that frame your view of stately (2) **Clarendon Hall**, built in 1842 for banker Thomas Donoho Johnston and meticulously restored by Ben and Margaret Williams, to showcase this Federal dwelling, with Greek Revival accents.

Continuing westward, you reach (3) the stucco-over-brick **Dr. Allen Gunn House**, featuring a Mid-Victorian and Federal design with



delicate ornamentation over the front doors. The builder, Dr. Allen Gunn, was influential in both the town and county, and was once offered the office of sheriff, in return for considerable cash, by Senator John W. Stephens. Unlike the court house, the Gunn house did not receive its coat of stucco until years after 1850.



The next house on the tour is down two houses (west on West Main Street) from the Dr. Allen Gunn house. This is (4) the typically Gay 90’s town house of **Barzillai Shufford Graves** and his wife Miss Malli, which is set on a generous lot

with many old trees (a stunning site in autumn). It retains high ceilings with some original wallpaper and woodwork.

Just past the Barzillai Graves House there is a short lane which leads to the cemetery (5) where Senator John W. Stephens is buried) (in the old section-from 1857). Another Caswell Citizen may be buried adjoining Stephens. Abisha Slade, pioneer Bright Leaf Tobacco curing proves expert, died nearby in 1869.

As you return to West Main, you will pass by (6) the site of the **Abisha Slade home** (now a parking lot for the nearby funeral home).



Continue west on Main Street, past several modern homes, to (7) the stucco-covered brick cottage of **Dr. S. T. Richmond**, built ca. 1840. The protective coating was added to the bricks many years after they were laid. Dr. Richmond was a Klansman, named by John G. Lea in his posthumously published

confession of the murder of Senator John W. Stephens. Today it is popularly known as the **Sallie Martin House**, a later owner. This lovely home with beautiful interior woodwork is a “work in progress” and is being carefully restored by its owner, Designer Roger Ward of Greensboro. It will be open to visitors most of the day on Saturday and Sunday.

The last house on the left before you cross the street is said to be (8) the **Samuel P. Hill Law Office**. Hill represented the widow Stephens after the murder of her husband (who left an estate worth thousands of dollars). The little, steep-roofed office was originally a Graves property and was built probably built ca. 1810. The structure has been added to and used as a dwelling, with the nicely executed old trim still visible as evidence



of its antiquity. This early Graves house contrasts in a striking manner with the next house on the tour.



As you cross the street you will see (9) **Dongola**, built by wealthy tobacco planter Jeremiah Graves (1835-1901), whose plantation bordered the west side of Yanceyville. As he drove his wagons to Virginia markets,

Graves is thought to have been so impressed by one of the houses he saw that by 1838 he built what has been termed “the most pretentious farmhouse of the Piedmont”. He is said to have found a name from a map in his Bible showing “Dongola” as a place on the Nile River. The project took many bricks from his kilns and trees from his forests, but his woodwork seems to have been imported from Virginia. The grand scale of the double porticos, windows and doors prepare the viewer for the six or seven huge rooms and the halls. The present owner is Faiger Blackwell, owner of Carolina Pinnacle Film Studios and is part of the studio complex. Dongola has been elegantly restored on the interior and will be open to the public for most hours during the hoedown.



As you leave Dongola to return to Court Square, you will see (10) the **Walter Harrelson House** (built c. 1885). A granddaughter of Jeremiah Graves (who built Dongola) married Walter Harrelson, a Yanceyville merchant, and they built their Victorian home with the front door facing Dongola. Just to be on the safe side, however, they built another hall at right angles to the first and had another door and porch put in facing the present street. This home is now the residence of local Realtor Barry Smith, who with

his late wife Claudia, adapted the plan admirably to the needs of their growing family.

An adaptation of a different kind can be observed on the corner of the block as you continue east on West Main. Number (11) is the 1930’s Art-Deco transformation of the 1848 home of **Dr. Albert Gallatin Yancey**, which converted the structure into six apartments with modern conveniences. High ceilings, old woodwork, and beautiful floors may still be seen in the foyer as shadows of its elegant past.



On the corner of the next block (12) the **cottage of the Rucks-Kerr** complex dates from around 1835. Josiah Rucks was a coach maker, and he and Mrs. Rucks operated the boarding house and tavern next door after 1847. The story-and-a-half-building with original large chimney,

was later used for law offices. The current owner, Emerson Scarborough, whose father’s law office was in this cottage, is in the midst of a comprehensive restoration.



(Restoration Underway)



The (13) brick **Kerr Hotel** is thought by Yanceyville native and historian Katharine Kerr Kendall to have been built under the supervision of Josiah Rucks. Ibsan Rice is known to have obtained a tavern license there in 1838. Upon Rice's

death in 1848, Rucks apparently took over and added to the tavern. However, he was never able to pay for it and in 1858 joined with the Rice heirs to convey the title to Dr. Bedford Brown, Jr. This son of the U.S. Senator Bedford Brown of Rose Hill (an historic home west of Yanceyville) practiced medicine here until he became a surgeon of the Confederacy, and later a prominent physician of Alexandria, Virginia. Apparently the Rucks' continued to operate the tavern until the family left during Reconstruction. A Confederate veteran, John Kerr, operated the hotel from around 1890 until well into the twentieth century. The house is on the National Register as birthplace of Congressman John Kerr, and has entertained many distinguished guest. It is currently the Real Estate Office of Barry Smith, Realtor.

The Azariah Graves Storehouse

(14) was built long before Graves sold the adjoining hotel lot to Ibsan Rice in 1832. Azariah Graves died in 1837 after many years as a



business man in Yanceyville (earlier known as Caswell Courthouse). The upper floor formed his living quarters and the building may have been one of those mentioned by Bartlett Yancey in his 1810 report describing Yanceyville. Fuel for the two big fireplaces was stored in the full basement, and the store's shutters had bars. This building was later a newspaper office. Locals know it as Brown's Seafood, a popular gathering place where "good friends meet for good food."

The inventory of historic buildings included in the Yanceyville Historic District also include (15) the Harrelson-Watlington Building (now a law office and retail store); (16) the old Ford building (a restoration in process); (17) the buildings on the East side of the Square; (18) the Yanceyville Presbyterian Church; and (behind the courthouse) (19) Clerk of Court Haralson's home, (20) the old Jail with an indoor hanging cell; and (21) the Poteat One-Room School Building (and others).



Haralson House

Paul A. Haralson (Clerk of Court 1826 – 1841)

Known as the Clerk's House (19)



Old Jail Behind Caswell County Courthouse (20)



Poteat One-Room School House (21)

For more photographs of these historic structures and others located throughout Caswell County go to the Caswell County Historical Association website at: <http://www.rootsweb.com/~ncccha/>.