

Stonewall Manor

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16 August 1995

Stonewall from Plantation Home to Historical Site

In the beginning, oak trees and blooming flowers surrounded this beautiful old plantation home called Stonewall that overlooked the Tar River near the falls. The house received its name from the stone wall along the front. Now, it has become a National Historical Site and represents the wealth and affluence of the original owner. This old home has the distinction of being the first brick house built in Nash County during the eighteenth century. The mansion sits on a site located near the modern day intersection of U.S. Highway 64 and Falls Road in Rocky Mount, North Carolina.

Stonewall was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1971, a designation that prevented it from succumbing to rapid growth and development in the area. It has been restored by the Nash County Historical Association under the direction of the State of North Carolina Department of Archives and History, to preserve an important part of the early heritage and history of Nash County and Rocky Mount.

It is my endeavor to give the readers of this work a tour of Stonewall from its beginning in the early 1800's to the present day. I will discuss the plantation home as it relates to the owners or occupants, architectural design, furnishings, early social events, and the restoration process. All of which will

culminate into an appreciation for and desire to learn more about Stonewall.

Although Stonewall has had many residents during its 165 to 170 year history, there have been only five owners. The home was built between 1825 and 1830 by its original owner, Bennett Bunn. In 1814 he inherited the land from his father, Benjamin Bunn and would later build a stunning antebellum style home on the property. Bennett, his wife Sally, and their son William occupied the residence from the time it was built until the elder Bunn died in 1849. Mr. Bunn was a large cotton planter in the area who owned some 2000 acres of land, most of which was a mile and a half further east of the mansion. The main part of the plantation was located where the Hardees Headquarters and the old Rocky Mount airport are now. The slave quarters and the cotton gin were at this location. Stonewall was situated on a 126 acre tract of land across the river from Rocky Mount Mills (Ricks Interview).

Also, the Bunn family was prominent in social circles in Rocky Mount and entertained quite often at Stonewall. Other activities included hunting, fishing and horse racing which were common occurrences for the gentlemen during this time (Watson 26). While slaves played a major role in the day to day duties of the home, they were instrumental in the overall plantation operations. Depending on the source quoted, it is believed that Bunn owned between 100 and 135 slaves. In fact, some feel that slave labor was used to aid in the construction of Stonewall.

During his life, Bunn invested heavily in the Wilmington and Weldon Railroad (Battle B1). Due to the large sum of debts

associated with his investments, Stonewall and all 2000 acres of land was sold upon his death in 1849 to Richard Henry Harrison in order to settle the estate.

Harrison was a wealthy widower and prominent planter from Edgecombe County. The records tend to show that Harrison was not a permanent resident of Stonewall, but he furnished the home and traveled from Edgecombe County on occasion to oversee the property. Harrison owned the property until his death in 1856 at which time it was inherited by his nephew, Kenelm Harrison Lewis.

Mr. Lewis was serving as a attorney for the Court of Pleas and Equity in Tarboro at the time. After inheriting the property, he resigned the position and took up residence at Stonewall. He married Elizabeth Heritage Bryan and they honeymooned in Europe. During the trip they purchased a number of furnishings of which were nine large Italian paintings. Upon their return they did extensive renovation work to the property. The primary renovations included the installation of inside stairs to the main floor which still remain, and they also changed some of the trim work. Receipts also show that wallpaper was replaced in some of the rooms as well. One receipt indicates that Lewis paid \$60 for French silk wallpaper and installation of that paper (Ricks interview).

Another interesting story that has been recounted follows; during the Civil War, a raiding part of Union soldiers burned the cotton, grist, and saw mills across the river from Stonewall. It is believed that the plantation home and grounds survived the Civil War because of the highly wooded land that obscured the soldiers view (Watson 26).

In addition, two children were born to the Lewis family while at the estate. A son, John, and a daughter, Annie, remained with their mother at the home after the father's death in 1868. At his death, Lewis left tremendous debts equaling \$133,265 (Battle 8D). Since he had been guardian for several nieces and nephews, Richard Harrison Lewis took the Stonewall property in settlement to save part of his inheritance. But most of the farm land had to be sold to settle the remaining debts. Richard immediately gave his Aunt Elizabeth, a lifetime right to the property. She and the two children lived at the estate on a meager income from her widows dowage until her death in 1916. It is during this period that the house and property deteriorated. In order, to supplement her income, Mrs. Lewis taught piano lessons and sold many of the household furnishings. In later years, her daughter taught at a private school in the area. Around the turn of the century her son, John was the publisher for a local newspaper called the Rocky Mount Phoenix (Ricks interview). Upon Mrs. Bunn's death her nephew, Richard Harrison Lewis chose to sell the property to the Rocky Mount Mills for \$15,000 (Mattson 274). The children relocated to Raleigh where the daughter, Annie, became a tour guide at the Museum of History (Ricks tour).

After purchasing Stonewall, Rocky Mount Mills spent \$10,000 to renovate the property in order to use it as a superintendent's home. Some of the repairs included replacing most of the exterior wood and adding the present columns to the front portico (related photo I). Also, a sleeping porch was added to the back of the house (related photo II). Interior improvements that were

made included cementing the basement, adding running water, and wiring for electricity. After the completion of the repairs, it became a home of distinction as it had been in the past.

Next, Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Holden resided at Stonewall for nine years with their four daughters. Once again the home became filled with excitement, laughter, and joy when two of their daughters were married in the home. In the 1940's, the Herbert Schell family leased the property from the mill. They undertook major renovation projects which included the reinforcement of the floors, addition of two furnaces, and a basement workshop (Battle 8D). One notable event that occurred during the Schell occupancy was a magnificent reception for the President of Turkey at which more than 500 people were expected to attend. A variety of other tenants lived at the property until 1973 when it was leased to the Nash County Historical Association for the purpose of a group headquarters and restoration.

The Historical Association set out on a mission to raise funds and restore the estate in a manner indicative of the early 1800's. The architectural design of the 1830's was late Federal as depicted by Stonewall. The exterior is of a Flemish bond brick pattern which has been painted red to get a uniform color with white to represent the mortar joints (Mattson 275). In this technique, the bricks are laid with an alternating long and short brick pattern that gives a cross effect, and they are "put together with a mortar of sand and turpentine" (Battle B1). "Bunn selected a spacious hip-roofed form that was five bays wide--rather than the three bays of local houses" during this

period (Mattson 15). Furthermore, Stonewall is a solid brick structure.

Located on the ground floor is the English basement and at construction it consisted of a tar and resin floor. The basement included the wine cellar, laundry room, storage room and summer dining room or winter kitchen (Battle B1). The second floor, also called the main floor, included the drawing room, main dining room, kitchen, and library. A wonderful work of art are the twin wishbone or double spiral staircase that leads to the third floor which has four large bedrooms. The house was originally constructed without bathrooms, but subsequent renovations have added two baths. The house contains twelve spacious rooms and a north-south or center hall on each floor. Window seats are located on the ground and main floor to make use of the twenty inch thick wall depth. While early heating was accomplished via nine fireplaces, the house had only two chimneys to accommodate all of them. The largest of these fireplaces is located in the summer dining room.

In fact, two of the main features of the summer dining room are the Federal mantel and oversized fireplace (related photo III). Therefore, in the winter months the dining room was used as a kitchen. On the wall in this room hangs a photograph that shows the house and grounds during the latter years of the Lewis occupancy. It depicts the run down condition of the home and the over grown yard in the late 1800's to early 1900's.

Next, on the main floor drawing room or parlor, wallpaper hangs that is a "hand-screened scenic paper, imported from Paris, and made by Zubert" (Ricks tour related photo IV). Also, there

is extensive trim work in this room, the hall, and the formal dining room. It took an expert artisan to install this trim and it is indicative of work found further north. Therefore, it was found in homes in Philadelphia and Baltimore not in North Carolina in the mid 1800's (Ricks interview). Another display of expert craftsmanship is the marbleized vernacular designed baseboards on the main floor and the front two rooms of the third floor (Mattson 275).

The library houses some law books that are from a lateral descendant of the Bunn family. Another interesting feature of this room are pictures that represent the four seasons of the year. They are Currier prints (not Currier and Ives as it is known today). These pictures pre-date the partnership between Mr. Currier and Mr. Ives. Also, hanging over the butlers chest is a charcoal drawing done by a local artist in the 1880's. It depicts the old covered bridge across from the Tar River at Rocky Mount Mills (Ricks tour related photo V).

However, the most outstanding and spectacular feature of the main floor is the twin wishbone or double spiral staircase in the south hallway that leads to the third floor. The stairs are a magnificent work of artisanship that now is almost a lost art. The stairs have "simple moulded rails, scrolled at the newels, and plain balusters rectangular in section" (Mattson 275) (related photos VI-VII). Equally important, the archway between the stairs has a carved egg and dart molding through the center. In this molding the egg represents the beginning of life and the dart which is an arrow pointing down represents death or the ending of life (related photo VIII). The archway molding

symbolizes a continuing circle of generations (Ricks tour). Since the stairs are located at the back entrance and were easily accessible to visitors, many feel that the back of the house served as the main entrance (Chiplely C15). Another factor that confirms this theory is the door located at this entrance is a square door and different from the other three leading to the outside. Now lets ascend those beautiful wishbone stairs to the third floor and the bedrooms.

The third floor master bedroom is painted a Prussian blue color and the marbleized baseboards in this room is quite different from the other rooms (related photo IX). Furnishings in this room are mostly of the Empire style which was popular in the 1830's and 1840's. The bedside table in this room belonged to the granddaughter of Bennett Bunn, the original owner. Across the hall this bedroom uses the same color of paint and has Sheraton furniture that came from a descendant of the Bunn family. It was donated to Stonewall by Mr. Ramsey who was the great-great grandson of Bennett Bunn (Ricks tour). The other two bedrooms do not have the extensive trim work or marbleized baseboards as the previous ones. However, the material for the curtains and bed top in one of them has the distinction of originally being designed for a collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (related photo X). The designer, Harry Henson, was a former resident of Rocky Mount and donated the material to Stonewall (Ricks tour). All the rooms are furnished with pieces that are appropriate for the house; however, to be furnished authentically it must have pieces that were there during the time of the original owner, Bennett Bunn (Ricks interview). The

Empire furniture was the style in the 1830's. Before Stonewall could be furnished the exterior and interior had to be completely restored.

The major effort to restore Stonewall came amid fear of its destruction in the late 1960's to early 1970's. At that time plans were under way to develop a new highway 64 by-pass around Rocky Mount. Unfortunately, the plans showed that the highway was to go through the center of the house. Therefore, local citizens rose to the challenge of maintaining this Historical Nash County landmark. A committee was formed to not only block the path of the new highway, but to permanently protect Stonewall from future encroachments and restore it to its original charm (Ricks interview).

The first phase of restoration was the relocation of part of the stone wall in front of the house (related photoXI). The north section of the wall had to be moved a few feet southward of its original location in order to accommodate the construction of highway 64 by-pass (Phelps 31).

The second phase of the restoration was the removal of the plaster in the basement area where brick walls were discovered. Consequently, the bricks were found to be crumbling and had to be replaced in some areas of the basement. At the same time, repairs were made to the exterior of the house (Ricks tour).

The third phase of the restoration process was the installation of heat and air to the entire house. Also, a security system was installed at this time (Ricks tour).

The fourth phase of restoration was the actual refurbishing with paint and wallpaper. Prior to painting research had to be

carried out to determine the original colors used in the house. The research was done by removing paint samples with a surgical scalpel and evaluating them under a high resolution microscope (Fore 1). Moreover, it was discovered during the research that some of the wall had originally been papered.

The final phase of the restoration process was the gathering of furniture and accessories to furnish Stonewall. All the furniture at the house has been donated to the Nash County Historical Association with the exception of six chairs in the formal dining room.

Finally, I have attempted to trace the history of a Nash County landmark called Stonewall. I looked at this beautiful old plantation home from three major perspectives. First, Stonewall has a rich heritage of owners and occupants. Therefore, by gaining a better understanding of the people who resided there I see a property that has changed over time to mirror the personality of its residents. All occupants have left their mark on Stonewall as well as their mark on history.

Secondly, any historical property has to be viewed in the context of its architecture and furnishings. Besides, Stonewall was and is a unique structure that is based on late Federal architecture. Its classic design was clearly built to afford the latest accommodations to a family of wealth and influence.

Last, I wanted to show how Stonewall became the valued community landmark that we know today. It has truly come full circle from a piece of property that was unique when it was built in the early 1800's to a cherished historic site that we take pride in today. Visitors can take a trip into our past with a

tour of Stonewall. I gained a better understanding of how difficult life was in comparison to modern time.

The diligent effort of the Historical Association has created a symbol of the past that can be enjoyed for generations to come. Personally, my life has been enriched not only in local history but also the history of our state and country. I have always heard that we can not plan for the future until we understand the past. Stonewall gave me a glimpse into history and an appreciation of those who came before me. Stonewall is a symbolic structure that has survived war and neglect. I think it is a perfect example of North Carolina and the character of the people. Rocky Mount is a better place because of Stonewall. I am appreciative of those who have worked to insure that Stonewall lives on for year to come.

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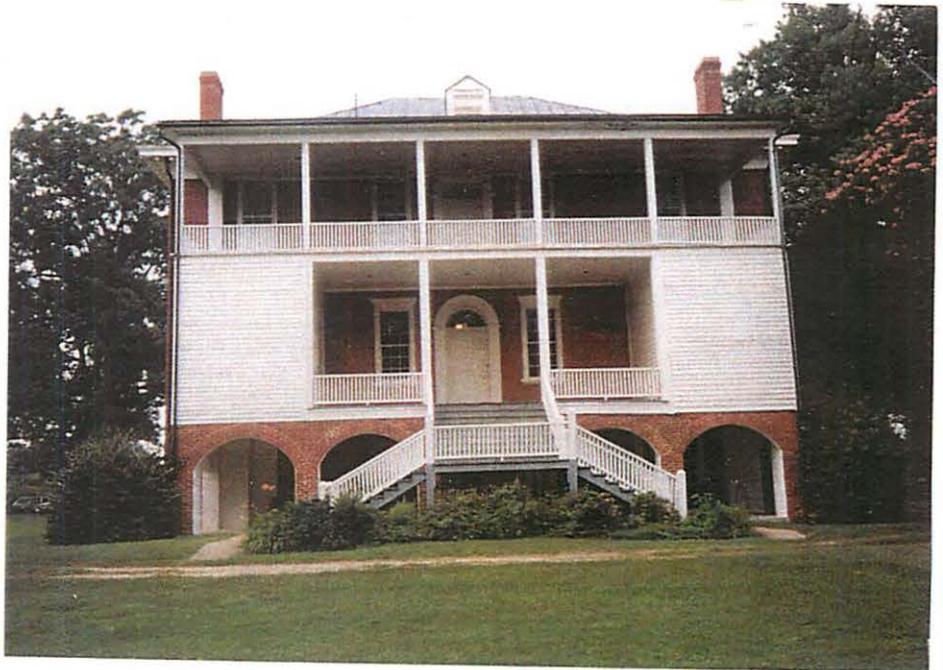
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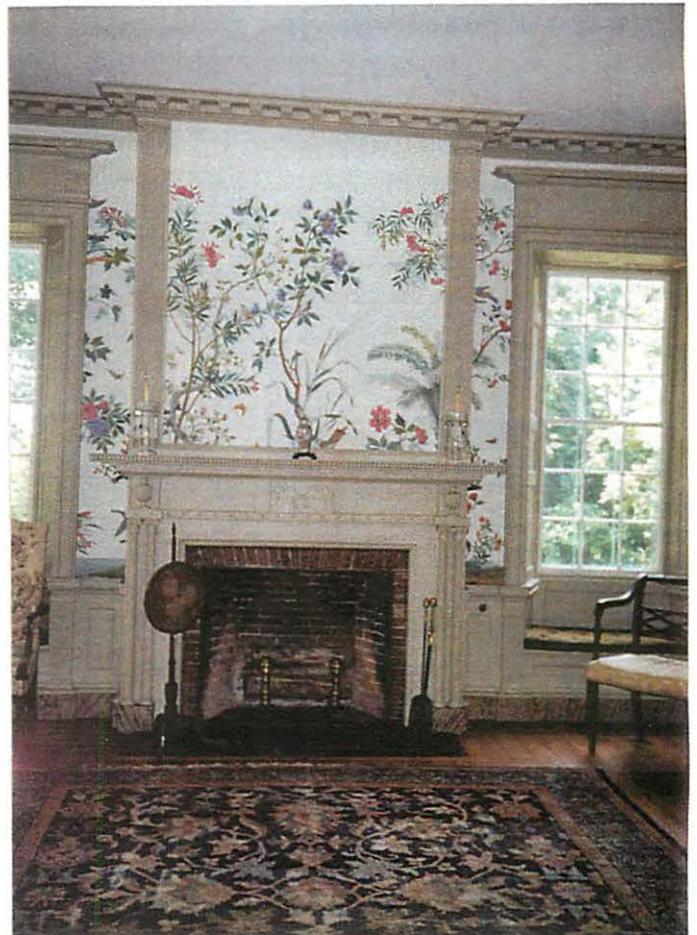
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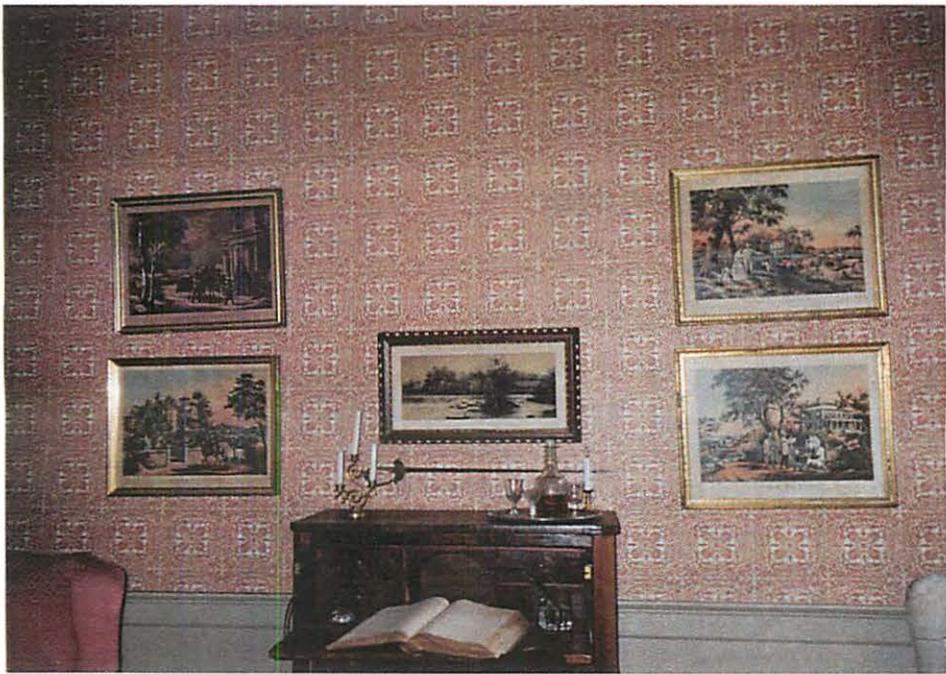
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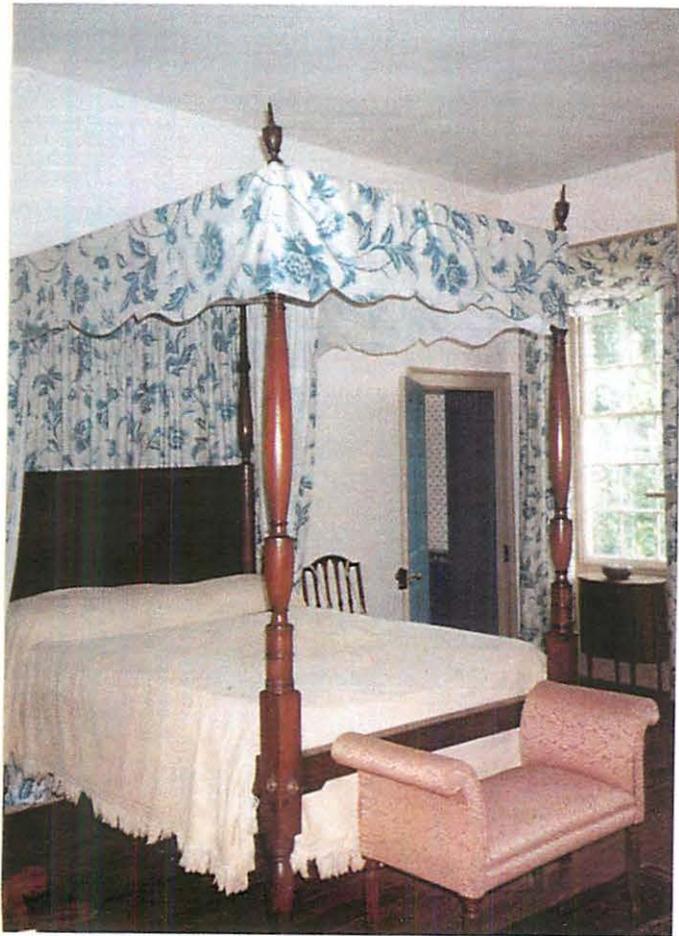
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XI





State of North Carolina
Department of Archives and History

This is to certify that

STONEWALL

has been entered on

THE NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

by the

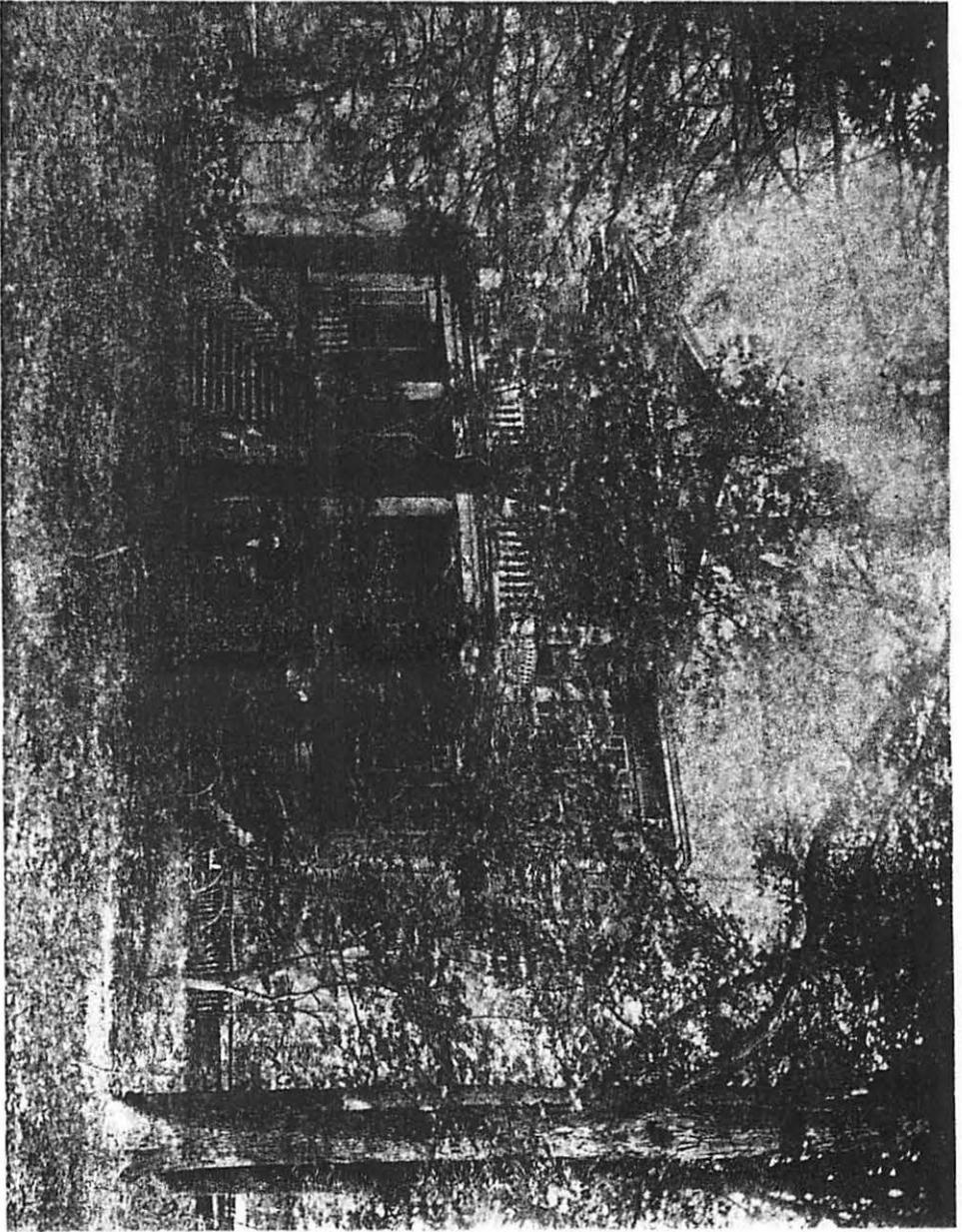
United States Department of the Interior
upon nomination by the State Liaison Officer under provisions of
the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (P.L. 89-665).

The National Register is a list of properties "significant in American history, architecture, archeology, and culture — a comprehensive index of the significant physical evidences of our national patrimony." Properties listed thereon deserve to be preserved by their owners as a part of the cultural heritage of our nation.

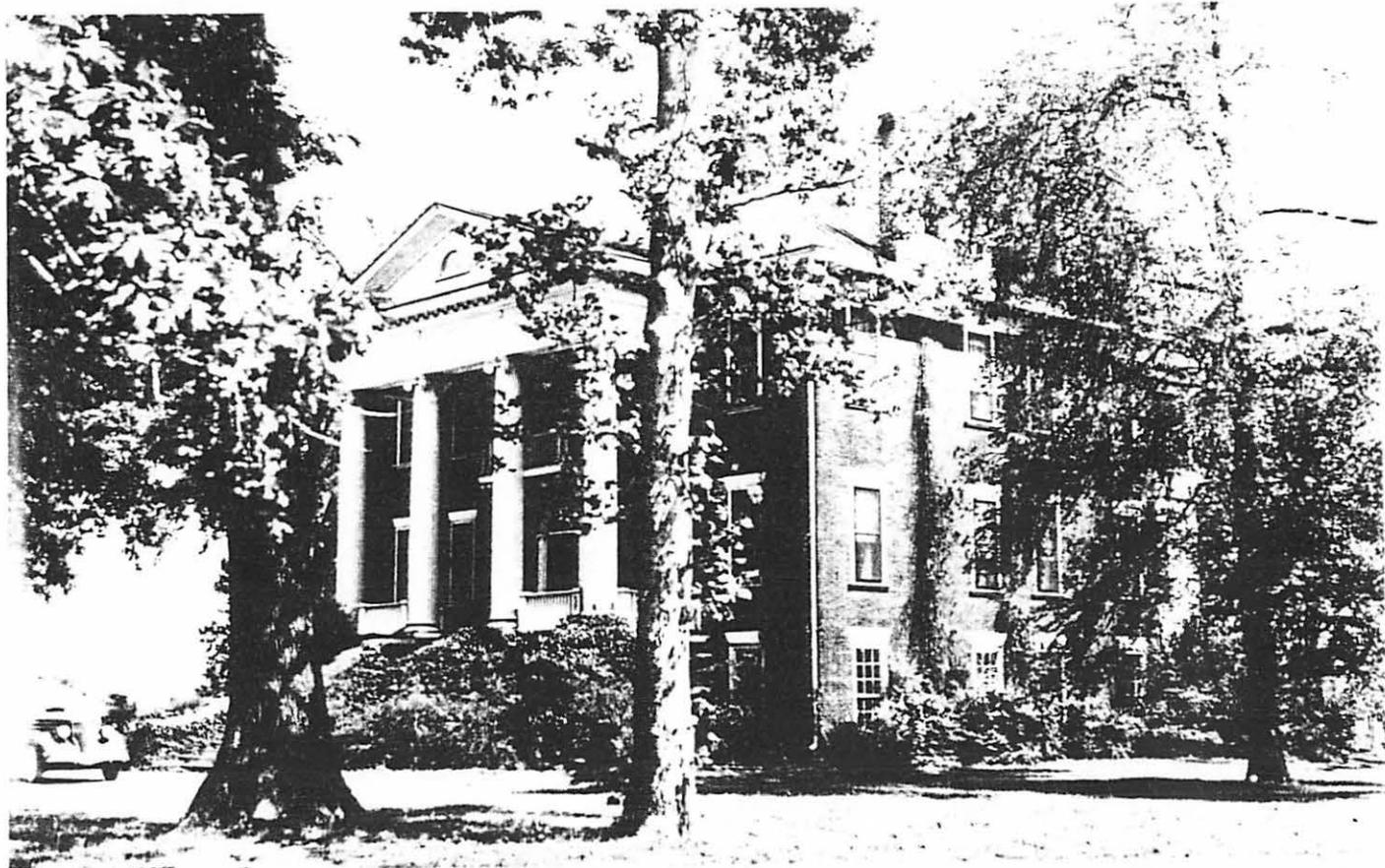
*Director, State Department of Archives and History
and
State Liaison Officer for Historic Preservation*

February 18, 1971

Date



"Stonewall," before 1900



Stonewall, July 1940. (Thomas T. Waterman, photographer; courtesy, Library of Congress, Historic American Buildings Survey.)

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