

Black Artisans; featuring the  
Matthewsons: a historical  
perspective

by

Rodney Debrew

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Featuring The "Matthewsons"  
A Historical Perspective

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By  
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English Composition 152  
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02-22-1995

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## The Building Industry (1850-1900)

During the latter part of the Eighteenth-century, North Carolina's builders were in great demand for their services. Prior to that time, this area was considered as slow and was even called "The Rip Van Winkle State" (Bishir 131). There were several factors that held back growth: the effects of the Civil War were probably the greatest.

Thanks due in part, with the inventing of the railroad and the steam engine, farmers were able to improve on their production, harvest time, and means of transportation. All of these advancements brought on economic prosperity and a demand for more modern, stylish, building projects.

People throughout the state were starting to upgrade their towns and communities; they wanted the architectural equivalent of famous places that they had seen or heard about. The use of masonry was considered very progressive: the towns of Raleigh, Yanceyville and Tarboro boasted of using brown-stone trim from newly discovered Piedmont quarries (Bishir 137). No less gratifying, were the larger and different designs of homes that were being built in the state.

Many of these homes were equipped with the finest materials that money could buy: some homes included structural and decorative iron works. The advent of such amenities as indoor plumbing, gas lights, and steam-heating drew notice in the press (Bishir 138).

### The Slave's Role in the Building Trade

The history of the Antebellum South and its relationship with the Negro slave was one of variance (Franklin 75). North Carolina overall, was not a major slave populated state. There were lots of small farmers and a few slave-holders. According to John H. Franklin, North Carolina was quite lenient with its slaves, compared to border states (75). It was virtually impossible for slaves to move around or enjoy the freedoms that whites had.

There were opportunities for a slave who had acquired skills in building. Some were very successful; the masters would hire them out to work for contractors. This was a common practice in the mid-Eighteen Hundreds. It was a very lucrative venture for the masters, because the slaves made money for them. The slaves were allowed to keep a small portion of their wages; from that portion they had to cover their own living expenses. Consequently, the slave artisan was able to enjoy freedom of movement: it was a welcomed relief from daily field work.

In Catherine W. Bishir's book, Architects and Builders in North Carolina, she records a slave artisan's reflection of his efforts, in the building of Wilmington's massive city hall-Thalian Hall:

"I remember all the bricklayers, they was all colored. The man that plastered the City Hall was named George Price, he plastered it inside...Yes'm, they was slaves, mos' all the fine work'round Wilmington was done by slaves. They called'em artisans. None of'em could read, but give'em any plan an'they could foller it to the las'line" (186-87).

### Origin of Free-Black Artisans

It was a rare thing to find free Blacks before the Civil War but there were some throughout the South. Usually, free Blacks were the offspring of a white man and slave woman or mulattoes. Through these circumstances many blacks were able to acquire their freedom.

During this era, Blacks could not move around freely or learn skills without the sponsorship of Whites. This practice made it possible for many Blacks to attend the North Carolina apprentice system, "the principal educational institution for free Negroes and many Whites," (Franklin 209). Free Blacks and slaves learned and excelled in various skills such as carpentry, bricklaying, roofing, and plastering.

In 1860, free Blacks made up 4 percent of the population in North Carolina but "they composed about 10 percent of the free men in the building trades" (Bishir 182). This suggested that Blacks were working extensively in the building field. Most free Black artisans could read at some level; a few better educated blacks had their own businesses. All were knowledgeable and skilled in their crafts. Some Black artisans were trained in apprenticeship schools; while others were taught by fellow artisans. It is apparent that Black artisans played a major role in the architectural development of the mid-Eighteenth Century era.

### The Family Origin (1830's)

George Matthewson was one 5 brothers Mack Donald, Hilliard, Frank, Henry, and a sister named Mariah. They were the son's and daughter of John H. Mathewson, a white man and Rachel Pender a slave woman. At the birth of each of their children, John gave Rachel each child's freedom papers.

Even though the dates are uncertain, George and the others were given parcels of land on Wilson Street, South of 64 bypass. George, however, desired a parcel located on Church Street. The deed indicates that he purchased the lot, that the house now sits on, from J. H. Baker, in 1869. A lot on Panola Street was added in 1876; it was purchased from John S. Dancy for the sum of \$100.00.

George married Catherine Dancy in June 21, 1863. She also was the offspring of a white man, Frank Dancy, and a slave woman, Helen Lloyd. They were married in Calvary Church. This was George's first marriage. They had two children, Stanley and Georgia. In the year 1870, Stanley was 17, and Georgia was 5. Catherine's death is listed as 1914. George married again; this time to MaKeniza J. Brown in February 25, 1916. Her age was listed as 55 years. George was an early member of the St. Paul AME Church. He was known as a civic leader in the community.

The extra (t) in some of their last names is very interesting; it was rumored that the brothers use it as a symbol of their independence. It may just have been a misspelling that they allowed to continue. From my observations, it appears that it started around 1876.

The Family Origin (continued)

The family cemetery is supposedly, located about 1 mile South on highway 111, on the North side and within a 100 yard radius. George and his mother, Rachel are believed to be buried there. I regret that more information was not obtained; some information was not clearly established and therefore, withheld. I may try to find more in the future. The Matthewson family has a remarkable history; I trust, sincerely, that the integrity of their name and history was upheld.

### The Matthewsons: As Artisans

It has been established that George, Mack Donald, and Hilliard Matthewson were craftsmen. George's son, Stanley, and Mack Donald's son, Mansfield, were craftsmen. George Harrison, who was a direct descendant of Mariah, was also a craftsman. It is rumored that Frank Matthewson left this area for Boston and Henry Matthewson's pursuits are unclear. I'm sure there were others in the craft but this was not substantiated.

The extent of their building practice is not clear, but it appears that they were well established. Mack Donald Matthewson built the house that is located at 518, E. Saint James St. His son, Mansfield, is credited for building the house just across the street at 529, E. Saint James St. Courthouse records indicate that the family was very successful; several family members accumulated substantial amount of land, located near MacMillan Drive and beyond.

George Matthewson is credited for building the house on 414, E. Church St. He is also credited for building the old Masonic Lodge on 415 Panola St. George assisted in building the old town hall. It is obvious that George was a skilled artisan: For example, He had one of the town's first cisterns, with a force pump in the kitchen.

## The Matthewson House: Interior

A closet addition to the original bedrooms was built at the turn-of-the-century, as the first indoor bathroom. Elaborate, Victorian wallpaper and floor coverings were used, but the room was confined to commode furniture as it had no pipes. Later, perhaps in the 1920's, this room was converted to a closet when a new bathroom, with plumbing was installed in the rear.

The bedroom was restored in early 1985. A paint analysis enabled the original Victorian color scheme to be used. The one exception was the fireplace. Although, original to the 1869 construction, it was painted black in the 1890's to imitate marble.

The "stenciled" room was enclosed about 1940. At that time, the floor was raised and a bedroom window was turned 90° then moved to the new exterior wall. A bookcase was installed in it's place. The rug was stenciled in early 1985, based on oil-cloth designs available in the 1890's. It's size matches a former rug tacked over the same area.

The kitchen has been restored using historic paint colors. The white 1930's sink unit was formerly located in front of the windows; its removal left a space suitable for a table and chairs. New cupboards followed guidelines given in a 1909 pattern-book, by Gustav Stickley. In about 1920 the two, low-roofed kitchen addition ells were added. At this time two brackets were removed from the bay window and installed inside the kitchen. The gap left on the bay was then filled with two brackets, taken from the gazebo: one of these, thinner than the others, is still visible. The original brackets are replacements for decayed ones (usually tear-shaped).

## The Matthewson House: Interior (continued)

The room just off the screened porch and kitchen contains the one of two cisterns. It is still there and contains clear, fresh water filled from the cement-covered brick rain filters on each side of the bay window. The filters were filled with pebbles, sand, and charcoal to keep out leaves and debris. An over-flow was built in so that excess water drained into the second cistern, under the bay.

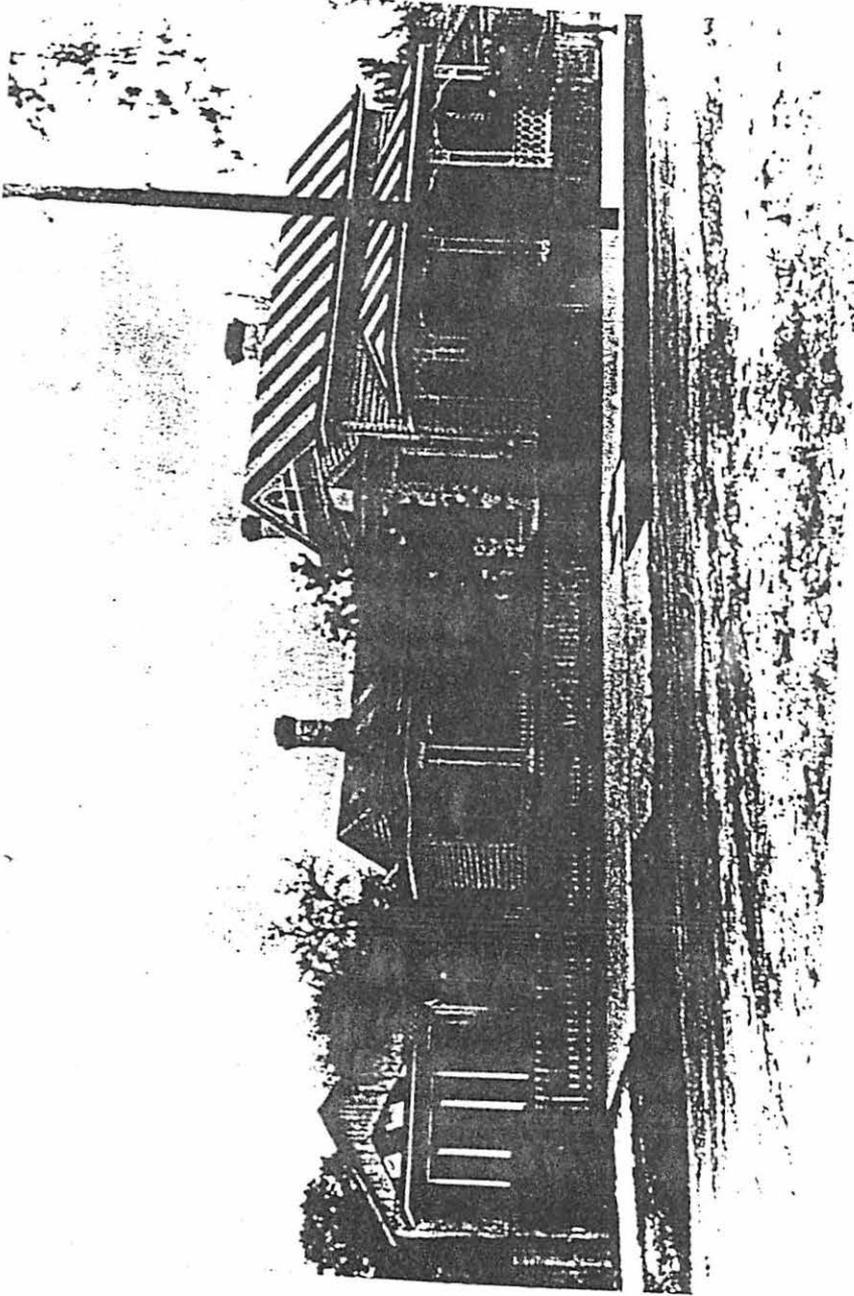
Other water was carried away from the house, unobtrusively, through the use of boxed-in gutters. At the front, downspouts emptied onto the concrete walks which were constructed at a slight slope. Water ran down and out to the street, through the base of the fence.

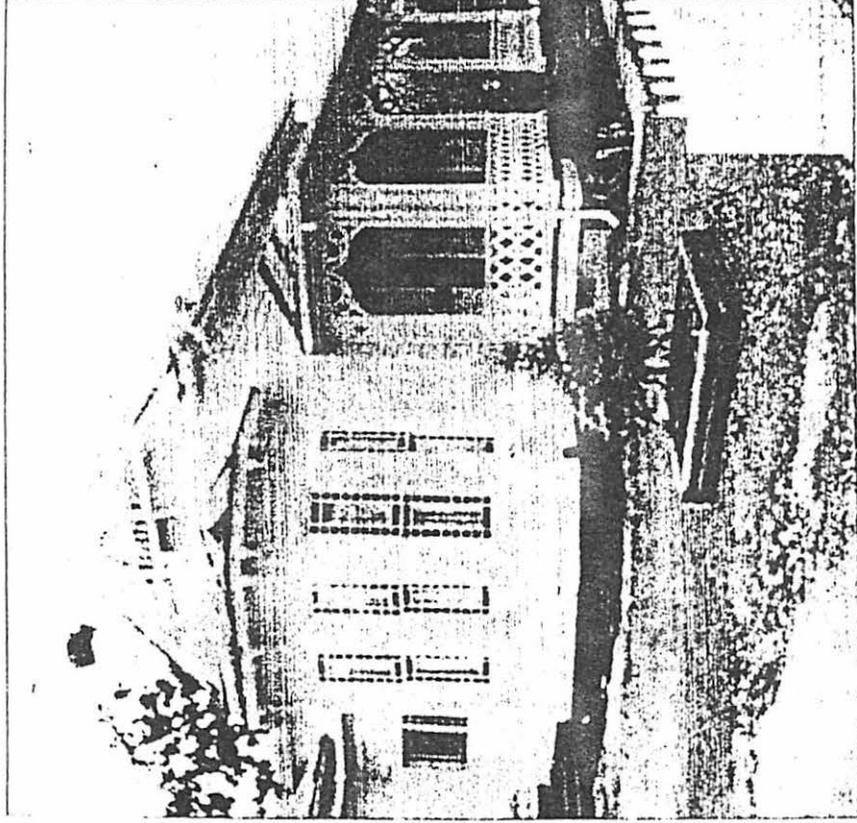
## The Matthewson House: Exterior

The Matthewson House was built in the year, 1869. It consisted of the front three rooms, minus the bay and stained glass, with the "stenciled" room being a porch. The front porch, presently, is the original. The original roof was three feet lower than the present one; it was made of wood shingles that still may be seen in the attic.

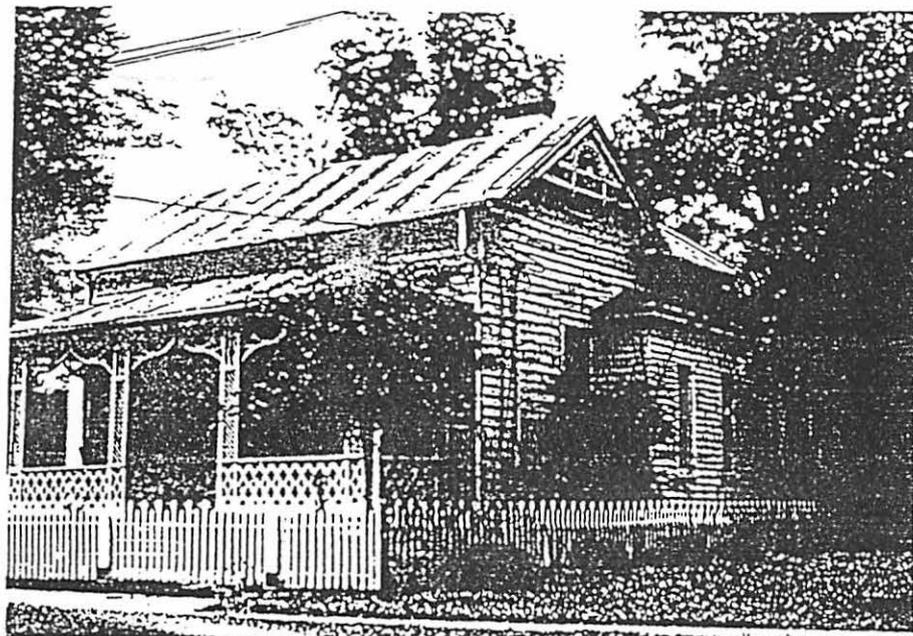
Outbuildings were constructed in the back yard in 1869, as well. The dairy house and gazebo, the last originals in Tarboro, still stand. The kitchen foundation is visible in front of the dairy, and the smoke house steps remain beside the dairy. The privy foundation is located behind the gazebo. In 1869, an additional feature, a fish pond, was placed to the right of the front, formal gardens. It's construction of brick covered with cement has never needed repairs.

In the 1890's, the house was dramatically altered. The bay was added to the parlor and three rooms were added to the rear. The side porch was altered to become L-shaped. All stain ruby and cobalt glass was installed, having been supposedly imported from Ireland. The house contains 728 panes of glass, with 635 of them stained. Even hinges and sash fasteners reflected the new Victorian look that George desired. The major feature to change was the roof. It was raised three feet and covered in tin, then striped. The exterior, of the house and the fence were faithfully restored, recently to their original colors of red and white; this was based on a paint analysis and a 1921, photograph, discovered just recently.



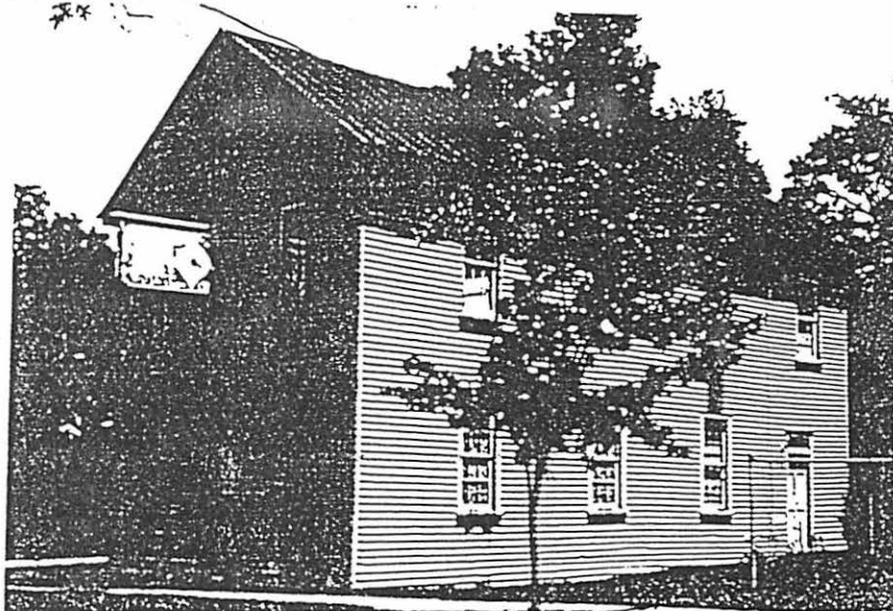


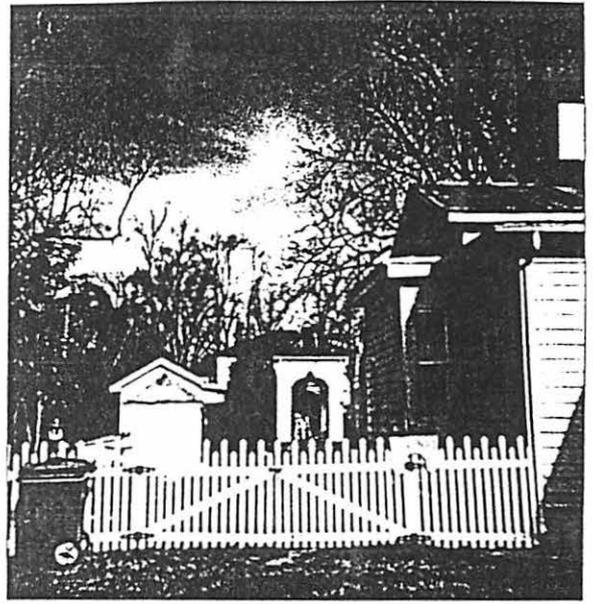
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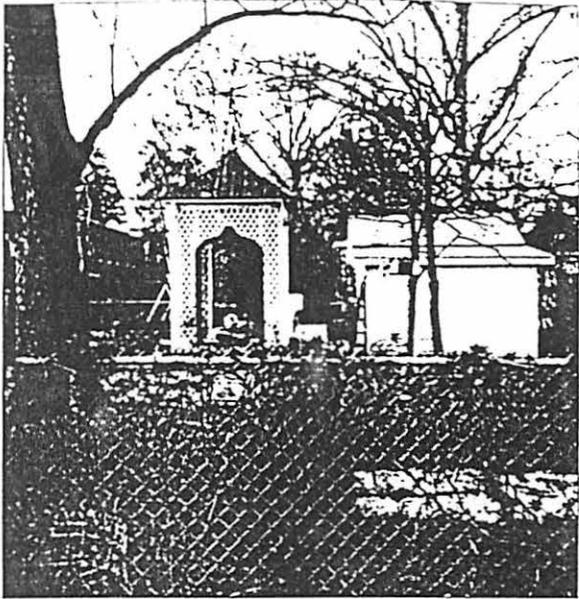


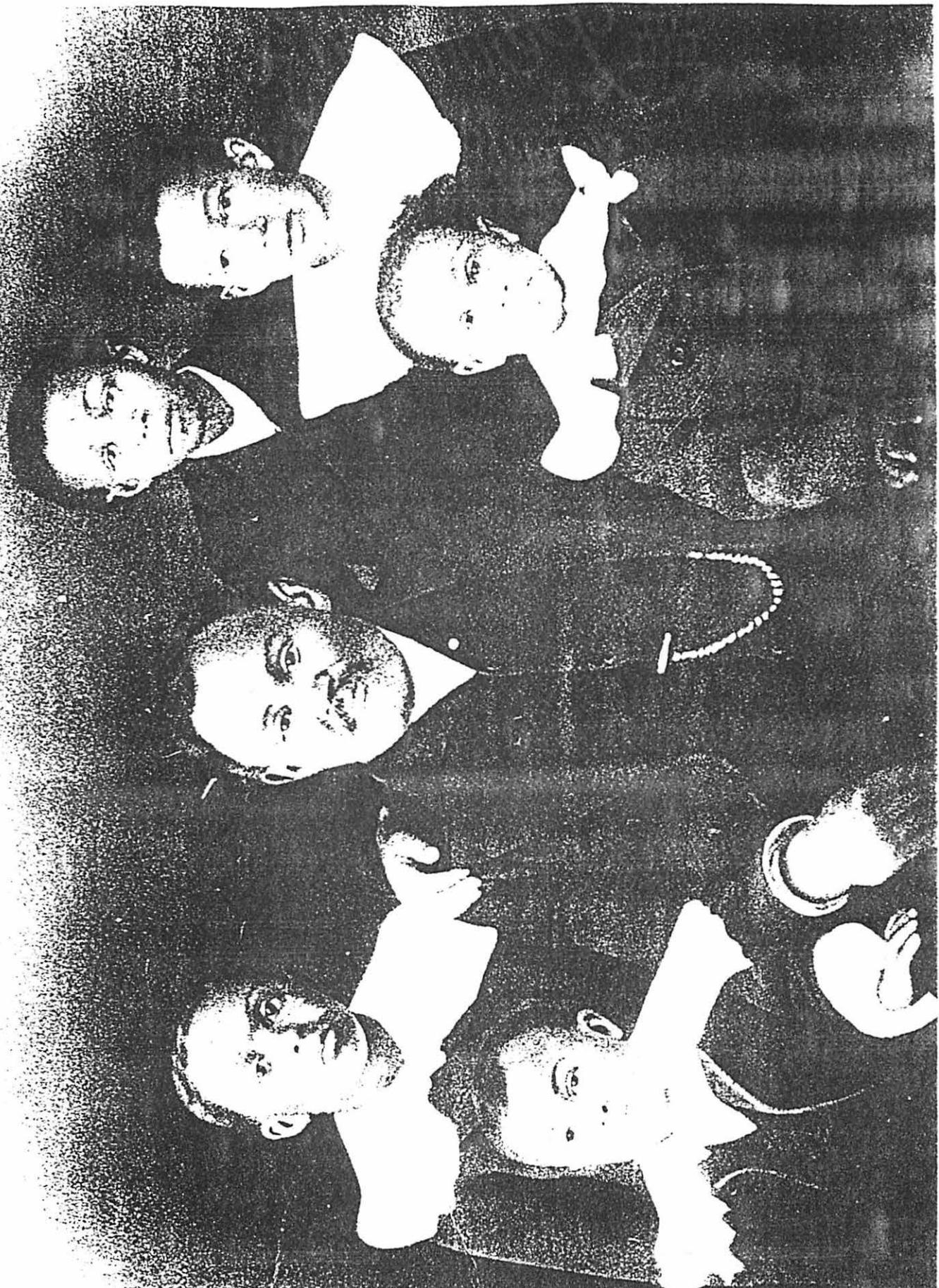
# 43 Mathewson House  
414 Church St.

# 44 Masonic Lodge  
415 Panola St.









*Miguel Domínguez y sus hijos*



1920  
Mack Donald Mathiason



1924  
Maustfield Mathewson



Wack Donald  
Matthewson  
BUILT this  
in upper left  
corner. 1820



Mansfield  
Matthewson  
BUILT this home  
in upper right  
1824

fish pond located  
on the left side facing  
mansfield home.

town hall

At a called meeting March 18, 1889 the commissioners set April 22 for an election at the couthouse on the matter of building a new town hall, cost of which was not to exceed \$10,000.

Were also to vote on whether the town would put \$7,000 in a light plant, ~~has no cost for which was no more than \$7k~~

RESULTS

Town Hall- 186 yes and ~~32xxxx~~ 36 no.

Light plant- 187 yes and 39 no.

(page 250 town minute book)

APRIL 2, 1890- S. S. Nash said water commission had authorized Mr. Haywood to bore for water at the town hall with an agreement of "no water, no pay". Water was found at a cost of \$50.

March 18, 1891- scenery was received from Ed Zoeller.

Monday, May 12, 1890-Commissioners held their first meeting in the new town hall, although it was not completed. At that meeting W. S. Clark was elected mayor over W. E. Fountain by a vote of 4 to 1.

On May 30, 1890, the commissioners authorized ~~Ed~~ George Matthewson to stucco the town hall and Ed Zoeller to <sup>✓</sup>paid it. No cost given. But cost of hall estimated at between 10 and 11 thousand.

On June 18, 1891- Ed Zoeller was employed as scenery shifter for the opera house at a cost of \$3 per night.

Town Hall Controversy - final deed from H. R. Micks March 1, 1897. final payment made & Feb. 24, 1897

Page 416 lists deed conveyed to Micks.

2 town hall

"would again begin work on the town hall next week".

At the Sept. 25, 1889 meeting the building committee estimated it would cost \$11,091.16 to complete the building in full.

On Nov. 12, 1889, the building committee reported that \$6,996.58 had been spent on the hall. A breakdown of the funds paid out showed the following:

Line, \$402.64; bricks, \$2,442.85; work of masons, \$1,050; work of others, \$1,100.87; stone, \$542.63; galvanized iron, ~~\$363.31~~ \$361.31; lumber, \$1,000; bolts, etc, \$94.28.

At the same time it was estimated that to complete the building costs would be: lumber, \$250; brick (now laid and to be laid) \$1,250; balance of bill on galvanized iron, \$450; trimming, \$130; plastering, \$250; carpenter work and labor, \$400; sash, doors and blinds, \$550; slating, \$410.

The building committee ~~xxx~~ at the time composed of George Howard, O. C. Farrar and W. E. Fountain.

*On April 2, 1891, C. Hayward to bow for water of town hall. - water found - cost \$50*

On May 12, 1890, board met in the new town hall for the first time. At that meeting the graded school was allowed to present a concert in the hall. Committee was ordered to furnish suitable furniture for the mayor's office.

*Nov. 30, 1890 - Geo. Mathewson to stucco hall. Ed. Zoller to paint it.*

July 31, 1890- Brick masons and carpenters on town hall discharged. Work will be about finished this week.

Oct. 23, 1890- Com. J. W. Gant died yesterday. Commissioners ordered that town hall be suitably draped in memory of Gant.

Jan. 26, 1891- Committee ordered to correspond and advertise for

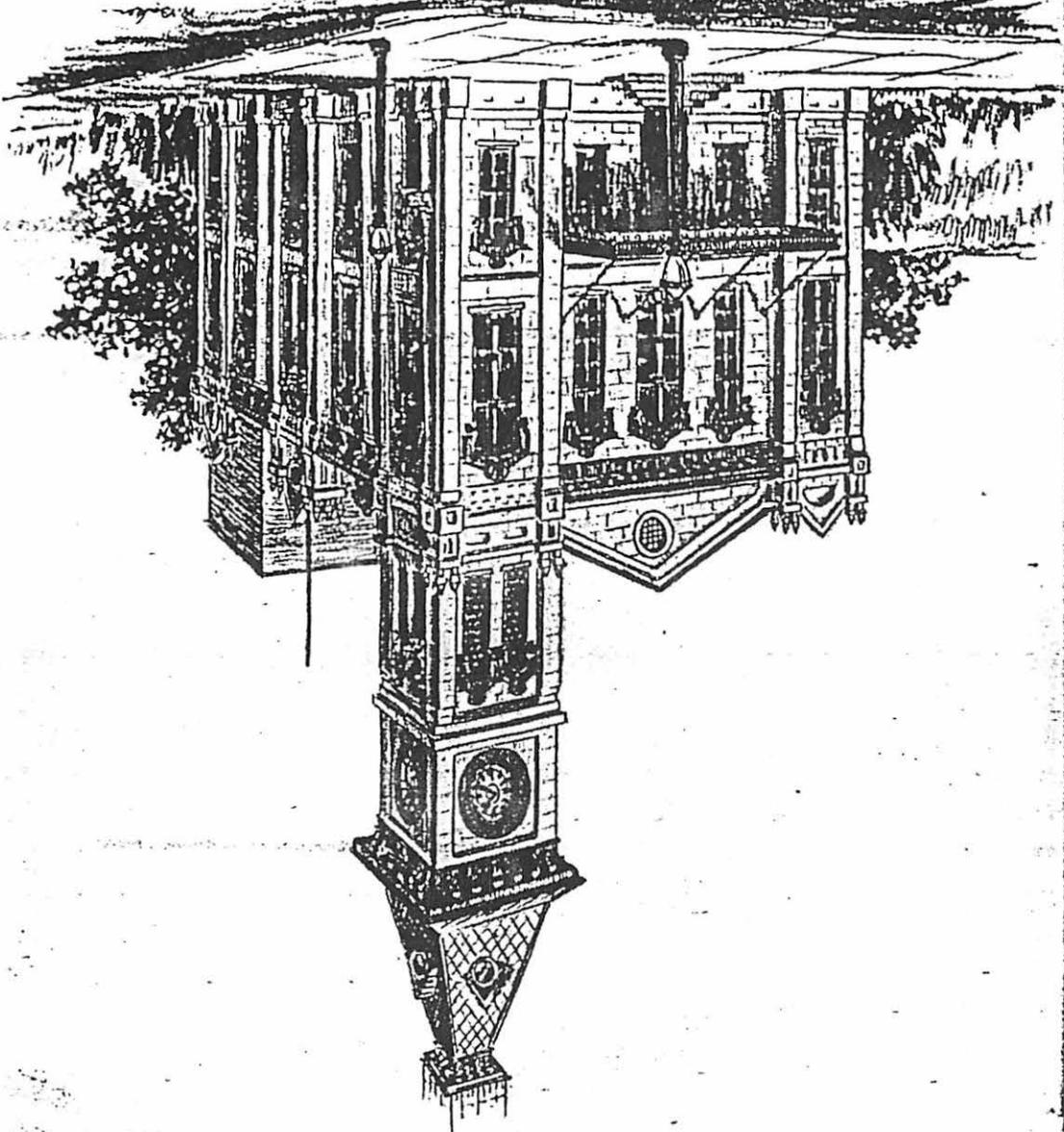
There were no elaborate ceremonies conducted here when the cornerstone of the present town hall was laid in August of 1889, and as a result no one today knows the exact location of a tin box which was embedded in the structure.

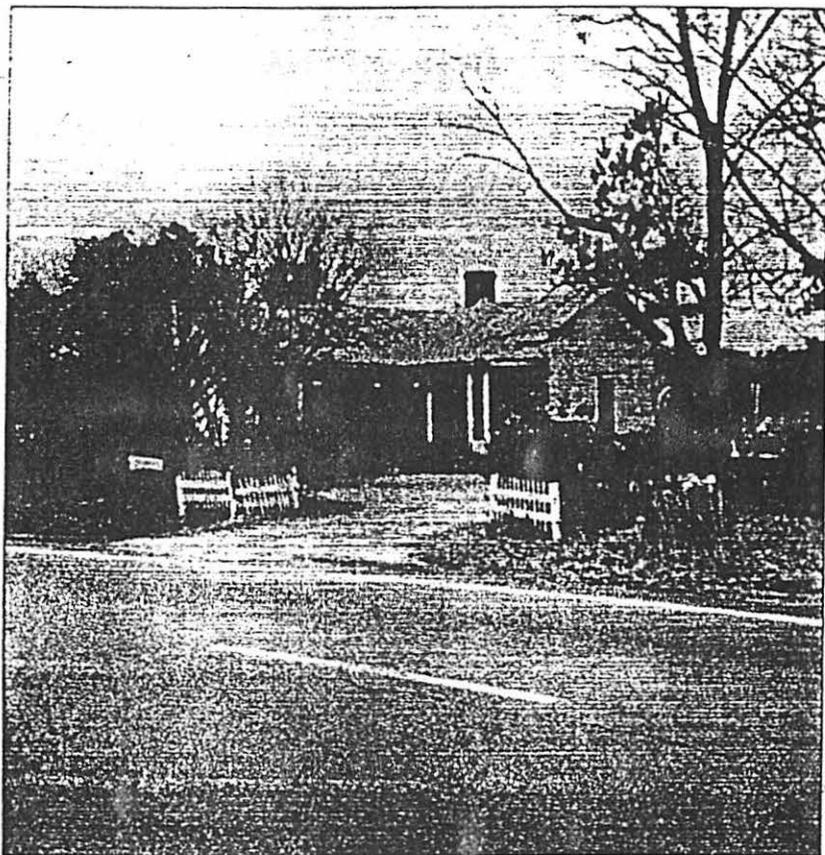
An old newspaper account stated the box containing "town ordinances for several years, a copy of the Carolina Banner, several copies of the Southerner and other local papers and a record of some of the other late enterprises of the town", was embedded in the brick and mortar.



Haywood Dixon, daguerreotype, ca. 1854. Dixon was a slave carpenter in Greene County; the daguerreotype depicts him with his carpenter's square. (Private collection, courtesy of William L. Murphy, Jr.)

*Town Hall  
Danbury, North Carolina  
1890-1962*





Rachel Pender lived here 1830's  
at one time. Hwy 111 south  
1/4 mile from E. C.C. on the left.

THIS IS A PERMANENT RECORD. PHYSICIANS SHOULD STATE CAUSE OF DEATH IN PLAIN TERMS, SO THAT IT MAY BE UNDERSTOOD BY ALL. STATEMENT OF OCCUPATION IS VERY IMPORTANT. SEE INSTRUCTIONS ON BACK OF CARD.

North Carolina State Board of Health  
BUREAU OF VITAL STATISTICS

**CERTIFICATE OF DEATH**

1 PLACE OF DEATH  
County Edgecombe Registration District No. 332229 Certificate No. 1

Township N 01 Ward 2

City or Town Princeton (If death occurs in a hospital, or other institution, give name instead of street number.)

2 FULL NAME Stanley Mathewson

PERSONAL AND STATISTICAL PARTICULARS			MEDICAL CERTIFICATE OF DEATH	
3 MALE OR FEMALE <u>Male</u>	4 COLOR OR RACE <u>col</u>	5 SINGLE, MARRIED, WIDOWED, OR DIVORCED <u>married</u>	16 DATE OF DEATH <u>Oct 15 1919</u>	17 I HEREBY CERTIFY, That I attended deceased from <u>Oct 12 1919</u> to <u>Oct 15 1919</u> and that death occurred on the date above stated, at <u>6:00 a.m.</u>
6 DATE OF BIRTH	7 AGE <u>About 64</u>	8 OCCUPATION <u>Brick Mason</u>	The CAUSE OF DEATH* was as follows: <u>Cerebral Hemorrhage from injury to head</u>	
9 BIRTHPLACE <u>Tarboro Ne</u>	10 NAME OF FATHER <u>Isaac Mathewson</u>	11 BIRTHPLACE OF FATHER <u>Edgecombe C</u>	12 LENGTH OF RESIDENCE (If at Hospital, Institution, Transient or Recent Residence) At place of death... yrs... mos... da. In the State... yrs... mos... da. Where was disease contracted, if not at place of death? <u>Former or usual residence</u>	
13 NAME OF MOTHER BEFORE MARRIAGE <u>Catherine Stacey</u>	14 THE ABOVE IS TRUE TO THE BEST OF MY KNOWLEDGE <u>Malvina Mathewson</u>	15 PLACE OF BIRTH OF MOTHER <u>Edgecombe</u>	18 PLACE OF BURIAL OR REMOVAL <u>Princeton</u>	
19 SIGNATURE OF REGISTRAR <u>H. Battle</u>	20 UNDERTAKER <u>McCame</u>	21 ADDRESS <u>Tarboro</u>	DATE OF BURIAL <u>Oct 17 1919</u>	

Malvina - daughter of Stanley Mathewson  
Princeton  
Dec 29, 1977

Hayward	Son	B	M	Dec	1892	17	A	19	0	North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina	
Mary	Daughter	B	F	Jan	1885	14	A			North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina	
Walter	Son	B	M	Dec	1897	12	O			North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina	
Richard	Son	B	M	May	1890	10	A			North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina	
Miss Nancy	Daughter	B	F	April	1884	66	YHL	2	0	North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina	
Miss Hattie	Born	B	F	Oct	1829	70	YHL	0	0	North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina	
Thompson	Daughter	B	M	Sept	1897	62	M	35		North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina	
Katherine	Daughter	B	F	Feb	1897	63	M	35	3	2	North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina
Anna	Daughter	B	F	Nov	1866	33	A			North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina	
John	Son	B	M	Dec	1849	50	M	16		North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina	
Julius	Son	B	F	Nov	1848	57	M	16	4	3	North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina
Rosa	Daughter	B	F	May	1889	11	A			North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina	
Charley	Son	B	M	Oct	1890	9	A			North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina	
John	Son	B	M	Dec	1859	60	M	17		North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina	
Anna	Daughter	B	F	Jan	1861	34	M	17	5	4	North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina
Arthur	Son	B	M	April	1885	15	O			North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina	
Elija	Daughter	B	F	May	1899	7	A			North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina	
John	Son	B	M	Nov	1895	4	A			North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina	
Henny	Son	B	M	Dec	1899	5	A			North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina	
Frank	Son	B	M	Nov	1849	50	M	21		North Carolina	North Carolina	North Carolina	

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