

HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL DEVELOPMENT
OF ALEXANDER COUNTY

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by
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Alexander County, almost trapezoidal in shape, encompasses a 255 square mile area in the northwestern section of the North Carolina piedmont. Carved from Caldwell, Iredell, and Wilkes counties in 1847, the evolution of the county represents a broad range of North Carolina's historical development. The small rural county harbors aspects of the agricultural, industrial, and resort development that characterize the state as a whole. From the earliest days of settlement, the central and southern portions of Alexander with gently rolling hills and fertile lands, supported a population primarily of yeoman farmers who lived in relative isolation from the rest of the state and nation. The northern portion of Alexander, dominated by more rugged terrain, supported the development of fruit orchards in the late 19th century. The houses of the county mirror traditional architectural forms of predominately frame construction which characterize North Carolina's agrarian economy. The central portion of the county briefly supported the tourism industry during the early 20th century, however, only historic photographs survive as evidence of the typical resort architecture of era. The textile, and lumber mills that have come to characterize much of this area did not noticeably alter the economy of Alexander County until the 1920s. The prosperity associated with this early industrialization is found primarily in the domestic and commercial buildings of Taylorsville. All of these principal themes of Alexander County's development are manifested in the historic buildings found across the county.

The county is characterized by a gently rolling topography with well rounded hills and long low ridges running to spurs of mountains in the northern part of Alexander. Boundaries include Wilkes County to the north, Iredell County to the east, Catawba County to the south, and Caldwell County to the west. Fruit orchards on the peaks and ridges, and dense forest land dominate the more rugged terrain of the northern part of the county. Agricultural land dominates the remainder of the landscape. There are four major water sources in the county: the Catawba River is the largest and forms the southern boundary between Alexander and Catawba County; and the Lower Little, Middle Little, and South Yadkin rivers flow in a general north to south direction.

The small, rural county supports a diversified economy with agriculture the primary contributor. Alexander is one of the few counties that has experienced an increase in the number of farms in the last decade. Poultry, milk, apples, and beef are the major commodities produced. They are supplemented by wood products, wheat, oats, Christmas trees, textiles, furniture, and sand.

The county, with a current population of 24,999, is demographically distinguished by small towns and rural settlements. Taylorsville, the county seat, is the largest population center with 1,089 residents.¹ Hiddenite, Millersville, and Stoney Point are the only other communities of any size in the rural county.

Early Settlement (1750-1840)

Settlement began to take place within the present boundaries of Alexander County during the early 19th century but a few families and hunters were scattered in the area as early as the 1750s. Rising land costs, higher taxes, and scarcity of available farmland in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia stimulated migration southward into piedmont North Carolina and Alexander County where land was cheap and plentiful. Immigrants and sons of immigrants traveled down the "Great Wagon Road" and proceeded west by settling the fertile watershed valleys of the Yadkin and Catawba rivers, gradually moving up the tributaries and creeks as the best bottomland was taken. The groups that predominated in the southward movement down the Wagon Road and formed the majority of Alexander County's original population were Ulster Scots and Scotch-Irish, and Germans. People of English, Welsh-English, Irish, Scotch, and Huguenot extraction migrated from central Virginia and South Carolina also seeking less populated and less expensive farmlands.

Early settlement centered along the fertile bottomlands of the rivers and tributaries which course through the county, a characteristic settlement pattern of North Carolina. Early settlements included Elk Shoals Creek, where John Ireland had one of the earliest land surveys conducted in 1751 for 640 acres; South Yadkin River settlement, established around 1768-1778 by families such as the Houstons, Milligans, and Campbells; and Lower Little and Middle Little rivers, where early settlement occurred between 1772 and 1780. By the end of

the Revolutionary War in 1781, there were around 10 families living on Elk Shoals Creek, 40 families along the South Yadkin River, and approximately 56 families who owned land along the Lower Little and Middle Little rivers.²

The economic state of the area prior to the formation of the county in 1847 was characterized by self-sufficient farming and did not change drastically until the introduction of industrialization in the early 20th century. Settlers cleared and cultivated the land, built their homes and farms from the virgin forest, and depended upon the bounty of the land for food, clothing, and medicines. If there was any excess produce, it was used to barter for the few things that could not be raised from the soil or gathered from nature. This type of Spartan agrarian existence was perpetuated by many factors. Among these factors was the county's geographic isolation within the region and within the county itself.

Numerous water powered mills along the streams and rivers of the countryside developed as extensions of the agrarian economy. These early grist and flour mills were used to grind corn and wheat. Andrew Steel had a grist mill as early as 1778 on the Lower Little River as did the Bradburn family in 1793.³ These primitive mills were built wherever a water source could be dammed to form a pond and an overshot, undershot, or a tub wheel was constructed to harness the power of the water.

As settlers continued to move into the area, the population consisted principally of yeoman farmers and a few merchants who owned few or no slaves, and under 1000 acres of land. Shortly

after the turn of the century there were some land owners such as Benjamin Austin who owned at least 1000 acres, but a separate class, identifiable by its influence on local political, economic, social, and architectural tradition is lacking in the early history of Alexander County. There were large landowners in the area but unlike neighboring counties such as Caldwell, an affluent planter class is not definable by a particular geographic region of the county, nor surviving domestic dwellings, nor political, social, and economic influences attributable to a small class of early to mid 19th century county residents.

Antebellum Alexander (1840-1861)

The antebellum period (1840-1861) saw the formation of Alexander County in 1847, and the county seat of Taylorsville was surveyed and laid out in the same year. The small, rural county did not share in the economic development and prosperity that characterized other parts of North Carolina and the nation. Alexander County remained a landscape dominated by isolated, small farmers growing primarily corn and other small food crops. Early tax lists indicate that most farms in Alexander County were representative of the state norm which averaged to be 369 acres in 1850.⁴

The population of the county had grown to 6,022 by 1860, a 15% increase since the first county population census in 1850. Only about 600 slaves were living in the county at this time indicating that slave labor was not a strong factor in the socio-economic development of the county.

Rural Architecture (Earliest-1861)

Just as Alexander County's isolation and fertile soil promoted agricultural self-sufficiency, the county's remoteness and abundant timber resources encouraged its builders to follow local architectural traditions. The buildings erected prior to 1861 were, in both exterior and interior plan, vernacular. This is to say that the buildings did not reflect the fully developed architectural high styles popular in the nation's large cities, but instead followed a set of local customs rooted in traditions that were generations and sometimes centuries old. The simple but powerful influences of classicism and the environmental conditions of the North Carolina piedmont modified these traditions to create a set of building types indigenous to Alexander and the surrounding counties.

A variety of influences produced the range of vernacular building forms available for buildings. First, there were the domestic building traditions of England, Ireland, and Germany that the early settlers brought with them to North Carolina. Among these were two-room, or hall-and-parlor, interior arrangements that were common in 16th and 17th century England and Ireland; and the Continental plan house, a two-story dwelling with a three-room plan comprising one large room and two smaller chambers on the first floor that had its origins in medieval Germany. The three-room plan is also known as the Quaker-plan because William Penn advocated its adoption by Pennsylvania's early settlers. A second important influence on the development of vernacular architecture was the revival of classical

architecture in England during the late 17th and 18th centuries. While most builders of modest means could not copy the details of the classically inspired Georgian style, many began to apply the style's symmetry to their dwellings.⁵

A final force that shaped the area's building forms were the physical conditions and settlement patterns south and west of Philadelphia. In Pennsylvania and Maryland, German, Scotch-Irish, and Welsh-English alike had discovered the advantages of log construction.⁶ These three groups lived adjoining each other for several decades before the movement to North Carolina began, and through contact each group appears to have borrowed those building practices of its neighbors best suited to local conditions. By the time the German, Scotch-Irish, and English started moving down the "Great Wagon Road", they had developed a common vocabulary of building, expressed in frame and brick as well as log construction, that they carried to their new environment.

The county's few surviving pre - Civil War houses fall into a small number of building forms. The dwelling of the earliest settlers were most commonly single-pen, log houses with an enclosed stair ascending to a second story loft. Unlike neighboring Caldwell County which has few surviving log houses of the late 18th mid 19th century, Alexander County retains a small sampling which are still used as domestic dwellings.

Among the earliest houses of the county is the James Robinette Homestead, a late 18th century, single-pen log house which illustrates the practice of adding frame wings to enlarge

an earlier house. Although the William Austin House appears to be a 20th century residence from the outside, surviving inside is the interior of a well-finished, late 18th century, single-pen house. Original wide, hand-planed boards with a beaded edge, a boxed stair with wrought iron hardware on the door, and a primitive mantelboard illustrate a fine late 18th century finish. The Joshua Johnson Cabin and the Jolly - Fincannon Cabin constructed by the mid - 19th century are also representative examples of single-pen log houses and illustrate the common construction method of half-dovetail corner notching. Another notable pre - Civil War house is the Barnes Log House (ca. 1856), the only two-story, log house known to survive in the county.

The single-pen log house appears to dominate the rural landscape of Alexander County up to the mid - 19th century, however, the Frederick Mock House (ca. 1836), a traditional two-story, single-pile house of masonry construction, illustrates the arrival of the long delayed architectural changes in Alexander. The Mock House overlooking Elk Shoals Creek in the southeastern section of the county is the oldest brick house in the county as well as a rare example of substantial early 19th century domestic architecture. The John Clinton Pritchard House near Hiddenite is a rare and particularly fine example of a hall-and-parlor plan house. The interior finish of the mid - 19th century farmhouse reflects the rare skill and mastery of the carpenter/builder John Pritchard and is an

unusually refined example for the county as well as the region.

Rural Alexander (1865-1920)

Although some of the county's records were burned between 1861 and 1865, Alexander escaped the Civil War with little property damage; however, the economic system, as throughout the South, was thrown into turmoil. In the South, the effects of war altered land use patterns, forced a reorganization of the labor force, placed more persons in competition for available land, and created a monetary crisis that resulted in the sale of portions of larger estates. In rural Alexander County many of the changes brought during the Reconstruction period little affected the county.

Agriculture continued to be the basic economic pursuit for county residents as with most North Carolinians. The new farm tenancy system did not alter farming practices in the county to any great extent. Statistics show that the relatively small non-white population in 1860 was absorbed into the county population by 1870 indicating that the majority of freed slaves remained in the county, possibly working for their old owners for wages or as tenant farmers. The reduction in the average farm size in North Carolina from 316 acres in 1860, to 142 acres in 1880, and finally to 101 acres by 1900 was also representative of the trend in Alexander.⁷ As farm size decreased, the number of farms increased, and North Carolina continued to be characterized as a state of small farmers as it had been since early in the 19th century. Despite its many handicaps, agriculture quickly reached its prewar volume of

production. By 1870 the production of cotton and oats had recovered, and corn, hogs, milk cows, beef cattle, and tobacco soon followed. In spite of its quick recovery in volume of production, post 1865 agriculture throughout the state experienced a general economic depression.

Alexander's agrarian economy had always been primarily self-sustaining yet by the 1880s individual farmers were growing cash crops of tobacco and cotton on a small scale. The fencing in of cattle and other livestock, a state law since 1879, was not adopted on a county-wide basis in Alexander until 1892. The northern part of the county began early development of the apple orchard business which would develop into a major agrarian industry by the 1920s.⁸

Statewide industrial growth and expansion in three major industries - cotton textiles, tobacco, and furniture began in earnest after the Civil War. Though lacking in coal, iron, and capital for the development of mechanized industry, the state had a mild climate, abundant and easily developed water power, cheap and plentiful labor, and the proximity to the raw materials of cotton, tobacco, and lumber. Alexander County possessed many of the necessary features in attracting industry to the county. Cotton textiles, lumber and furniture would develop and contribute to a diversified manufacturing and agricultural economic base for the county, but not until the early 20th century.

By 1900 the influence of the railroad which had arrived in the county in 1884 was being felt. The population had doubled

from 5,220 in 1850 to 10,960 in 1900. Taylorsville experienced growth from 180 people in 1880 to 413 by 1900. Diversification of the economy began as early as the 1880s with the introduction of the mining industry but the major industries of textiles, and lumber, developed after the turn of the century.

The small community of Hiddenite developed around the mining industry and was confined to the small area east of Taylorsville. The industry has continued sporadically over the years. Hiddenite and emerald gems were found as early as 1879 in the soil of the J. W. Warren farm but it was W. E. Hidden, New York mineralogist, who identified the gems and organized the Emerald and Hiddenite Mining Company in 1881. Many fine gems have come from the area including the largest uncut emerald crystal ever found in North America (1,438 carats), and the Carolina Emerald, a 13.14 carat gem valued at \$100,000.⁹

The cotton textiles industry was attracted to the area around the turn of the century and was instrumental in drawing some people away from the farms. Among the early cotton mills were Alsbaugh Cotton Mill at Millersville, and Moore Cotton Mill both operating by 1903; and Dickey Worsted Spinning Company built around 1908 in Stoney Point. Also operating in the early years of the 20th century were 4 cotton gins.¹⁰

Alexander County's abundance of forest land spurred an early and continuing lumber industry primarily in the timberlands of the northern part of the county. W. T. Nelson Lumber Company was one of the first lumber yards established shortly after 1900.

The mineral character of the water in the central part of Alexander proved an incentive for the establishment of several summer resort hotels. There was an early resort built by Thomas Boyd during the mid - 19th century located in the Ellendale vicinity. Little is known about this resort west of Taylorsville but two other hotels were established in the early 20th century and operated into the first and second decades of the 1900s. All Healing Springs, six miles north of Taylorsville, perhaps the largest, was built in 1902 (burned in 1982), and Davis White Sulphur Springs in the Hiddenite vicinity opened in 1905 and operated until 1923 (burned in 1925). Documentary photographs indicate the hotels were typical of resort architecture of this period. Large frame buildings with extensive wrap-around porches characterized both hotels. These hotels were family owned operations and had little impact on the architectural, cultural, or economic development of the county.

Rural Architecture (1870-1920)

The forty year period following 1870 reflects the influence of a strong, almost completely self-sustaining agrarian economy which was experiencing difficult economic times, the continued geographic isolation perpetuated by poor roads and only minimal railroad development emphasises why Alexander lagged behind its neighboring counties in architectural development. A large portion of the houses included in the survey represent this time period.

The two-story, single-pile dwelling or "I-house" persisted in dominating architecture in Alexander County as well as in most of piedmont North Carolina. Although smaller, one-story frame houses with hall-and-parlor and central hall plans were also built. These farmhouses, usually three bays wide, were constructed of light nailed frames instead of earlier heavy mortise-and-tenon framing establishing the technology to easily alter the traditional form; all appendages to a traditional house created a popular L-shaped or T-shaped house. The roof is no longer flush with gable ends but overhangs. Chimneys are smaller and thinner, with single, stepped shoulders but still attached to the exterior gable ends or rear of the house. In Alexander County, a popular chimney treatment was a fieldstone base with an inset brick stack. The addition of one or three gables placed symmetrically on the front facade is a regular feature of the traditional house constructed after 1880. The gables were often embellished with machine-made turned, sawn, and shingled ornament. Occuring consistently in domestic architecture in Alexander County constructed from the late 18th century and into the second decade of the 20th century, the preferred interior finish is boarding. Hand planed boarding persisted into the 1880s when it was replaced by machine-made tongue and groove boarding and wainscotting. Only in the 1920s did plaster walls become an alternative interior wall material.

The most widespread and enduring architectural style in the state was the Greek Revival style. In North Carolina comparatively little was built after 1830 that did not reflect some of its characteristics, however, the economic and geographic isolation of Alexander delayed the introduction of the style in the rural county until the 1870s, just as its appeal began to wane in neighboring counties such as Caldwell. The Greek Revival style house usually exhibits boxy proportions with a low-pitched hip roof, squarish windows with larger panes of glass in a six-over-six double sash, and a central entrance framed by sidelights and a transom. A center hall with two rooms on each side of the hall was the common interior plan. Frequently gabled or pedimented porches adorned with classical columns or posts embellished these structures. These houses, however faintly, reflected the architecture of ancient Greece. Interiors were simply finished. Rooms were spacious, plaster walls and wide baseboards replaced wainscoting, doors developed two or four flat panels, and symmetrically molded surrounds with cornerblocks replaced the two- or three-part door and window surround. Mantels imitate a post and lintel form of Greek construction.

The use of Greek Revival styling in Alexander is confined to the conservative application of the style to traditional house forms. The Mintz - Liney House retains a center hall interior plan, a characteristic Greek Revival style entrance, and also has part of an original two-tier gabled portico. Another house which illustrates the acceptance of the style in

the northern part of the county is the Louis Foote Davis House with its vertical, two panel doors. The Robert Lackey House features typical post and lintel mantels and two panel, Greek Revival doors.

The Gothic Revival, a style inspired by medieval architecture that became popular in the nation's large cities during the 1840s, failed to gain widespread acceptance in the North Carolina piedmont before the Civil War. The irregular forms and the complex steeply pitched roof lines that characterized the style were alien to the symmetrical building traditions of the region. This style was quickly accepted in North Carolina as appropriate for church architecture, especially in rural areas where the most simple country church was likely to have triangular heads over the windows (a vernacular version of the gothic arch). However the influence of the style on domestic architecture is rare, especially in this region. Gothic stylistic elements on Alexander County's churches did not occur until after the turn-of-the century and the county's domestic architecture appears little influenced. The only example of restrained Gothic Revival styling of domestic architecture in the county is the Melvin Childers House (ca. 1880). The traditional house features a Gothic Revival fleur-de-lis motif ornamenting the bargeboards and eaves of the dwelling.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century ushered in the Queen Anne style. A style noted for its irregular floor plans and rooflines, deep wrap-around porches, aversion to

smooth wall surfaces, and abundant use of elaborate sawnwork details. This style never achieved much popularity in rural Alexander County. The most sophisticated example, and one of the few Queen Anne style houses in the county is the Jim Lucas Mansion built around 1900 and enlarged around 1910. The focal point of the Mansion is the two-tier, wrap-around porch ornamented with elaborate sawnwork.

Dominating this period of architecture in the countryside was the Queen Anne derived, Folk Victorian style. This style is defined by ornamenting the ever-popular traditional house form with Queen Anne details. The primary areas for the application of this Victorian detailing are the porch, cornice line, and gable ends of the dwelling. Most Folk Victorian houses exhibit some Queen Anne detailing but are easily differentiated from true Queen Anne examples by the presence of symmetrical facades, and by their lack of use of textured and varied wall surfaces characteristic of the Queen Anne style.

Among the more impressive Folk Victorian houses in the county is the Columbus Herman House (ca. 1880) with floor length windows, wood shingled gables, and jig-saw cut trim along the eaves. The Little-Bell House (ca. 1900) illustrates a common porch treatment of a one-story, full facade porch with a two-tier entrance portico. The I. A. Barnes House (ca. 1880s) and the Yarber Williams House (1898) are examples of the increasingly popular L-shaped house ornamented with modest Victorian detail.

The Colonial Revival style resulted from the renewed interest in classically derived stylistic elements in the early twentieth century. The use of Colonial Revival elements such as slender columns and entablatured window surrounds are seen as exterior features more often on houses built in the county after 1910, but reserved Colonial Revival elements were often used on the interior finish of turn of the century houses.

Further evolution of the rural house was witnessed after 1905 when the one- and two-story, double-pile house, sheltered by a hip or pyramidal roof, became a popular form. This type had first come to North Carolina about 1850.¹¹ By adding gable projections, clipped bays, and bay windows, the asymmetrical form characteristic of the Queen Anne style was achieved; and by retaining a symmetrical form and adding classical porch and window treatments, the Colonial Revival style was achieved. Often elements of both styles were combined to create an eclectic house. Among the farmhouses of this type are the J. Will Alexander House (1901), the Melchor - Patterson House (ca. 1900), and the Jefferson Crouch House (ca. 1909).

It was during the early twentieth century that the architecture of the county began to reflect the improving economic prosperity of the area. Taylorsville began to distinguish itself architecturally and economically from the rest of the county but several handsome Colonial Revival houses were erected in the countryside as well. The C. E. Mills House (ca. 1910) and the T. C. Barnes House (1917) each with a patterned slate roof and Colonial Revival styling reflected the improving economy of the county.

Farm Outbuildings

The outbuildings of Alexander were built of log or frame construction. In most cases the outbuildings of log construction predate those of frame construction. Among the outbuildings on a farm were usually a livestock barn, smokehouse, granaries (also called wheat houses), corn cribs, the springhouse, chicken house, pig styes, blacksmith shop, additional miscellaneous storage buildings, and tobacco barns. Log construction of outbuildings remained popular in Alexander County at least thru 1890 and was replaced by light - frame construction around 1900. The most popular method of notching the logs appears to be the half dovetail method.

Among the barns included in the survey, the central passage with single or double-pens on each side is the most common plan. The double-pen log barn consists of two log pens of equal size on either side of a passage way as at the Lawson Monday farm. The mid - 19th century, single-pen log barn of the John Clinton Pritchard farm is a fine example as well as one of the earliest. Another interesting barn is found at the I. A. Barnes House and appears to be the largest log barn in the county. The substantial expansion and over-building of barns often obscures the central log core in many early barns.

Only one tobacco barn was included in the survey, but examples are scattered over the rural landscape. Log construction dominates the tobacco barns. The one at the Sherrill-Blankenship House was built in the 1880s and has diamond corner notching and shed wings. Other log outbuildings included in the survey were smokehouses, and workshops.

Light-framing introduced around 1900 was quickly adopted in the county. The gable front frame barn is by far the most visible in the rural landscape. The larger frame barn still followed the central passage plan. A frame barn built around 1900 for Sherman Davis in the Mount Olive vicinity is an unusually stylish example with round arched windows, and louvered blinds. During the first decade of the 20th century gambrel roof barns also supplemented the gabled barn as illustrated at the C. E. Mills House.

Rural Church and School Architecture

The Baptists, Lutherans, Methodists, and Presbyterians were strong supporters of schools and academies, and established small churches and schools as the first projects of a community. Often the church house was also the schoolhouse. None of the early church buildings survive.

The state school system was greatly improved in 1853 and although there was much popular indifference to public education, the number of small, frame, one-room schoolhouses dotting the landscape increased. The quality of education received from these early public schools is questionable. Private academies, subscription schools where there were no public schools, and private tutors continued to minister to the education needs of the county and state. The Alfred Sherrill School, a one-room, log school house erected around (ca. 1864-1870) earliest surviving rural school house in Alexander. By 1903 there were 59 schools located in the county (51 for white students, and 8 for non-white students).¹²

In the 1920s and 1930s there was a surge of interest in education possibly due to improved roads that made bus transportation feasible and new public education laws passed by the General Assembly. Additional brick schools were constructed, and old ones were improved or abandoned.

Rural Commerce

The country store was an important public social center as well as a commercial center for the population of Alexander as well as other rural areas. Here the country folk for miles could meet to exchange jokes, and learn the news of the neighborhood. These stores were located at a crossroads, at junctions of two creeks, or near bridges. The storekeeper's house was usually across the road or next door to the store. The country store had been a tradition in Alexander since settlement began and was still a vital link in the community in 1903 when at least 17 such stores were scattered over the countryside.¹³ The Vance Campbell Store operated during the early 20th century is now a residence but retains its original form. The gable front frame building at a rural crossroads, and the traditional I-house standing across the road typify the siting of these rural centers of commerce and socialization.

The local mill was also an important part of the rural landscape. The mill might grind corn or wheat or convert rags to wrapping paper or newsprint or spin cotton into coarse thread but it was always located near a power source and served as a gathering place for area farmers. Linny's Mill is the only water powered mill still in operation in the county.

A mill has been on this site since 1836 but the present feed mill and overshot water wheel were placed in operation around 1937.

Alexander County (1920-Present)

Alexander County's economy was following the prosperous trends of the state and nation by the second decade of the 20th century. Interest in improving and building roads, the development of hydroelectric power, and continuing economic expansion brought the county a similar boom time that Caldwell County had been experiencing since the early 1900s.

Agriculture continued as the primary occupation in the county. Prominent developments in the production of apples occurred after 1920 and improved the fruit orchard industry in the northern part of the county.¹⁴ Farmers also began diversifying from the old row crop economy of corn and wheat by increasing production of beef, dairy products, and poultry. Corn was still the main crop grown in the county with 35% of the county's cropland devoted to its cultivation in 1928. Corn was grown primarily as a food and feed rather than as a cash crop and was used almost entirely where it was produced. The major cash crop in Alexander during the first quarter of the 20th century was cotton with 19% of the county's farmland devoted to its production.¹⁵

Alexander County's industrial development produced corresponding expansion on the retail trade of Taylorsville. The town's population grew from 413 in 1900 to 2,000 by 1924. The first bank was established in 1919 as the Merchants and Farmers

Bank, and the architecture of the commercial and residential areas of the town began to change.

Taylorsville

The 1920s was a prosperous decade for the small town of Taylorsville. The county seat, incorporated since 1851, was not only the center of the county's government, but the location of much of the early industry of the county. A small business district developed around the centrally located court house and by 1924 there were five churches, one hotel, and six industries located within the town limits. At the turn of the century Taylorsville was typical of many small rural towns with unpaved streets and one-and-two-story frame buildings making up its commercial district. There were masonry buildings as early as 1870 as illustrated by the Rock Store, and some brick buildings such as the Masonic Building (ca. 1909) and the Alexander County Jail (1913) but the majority of the commercial brick architecture was developed after 1920.

The business district experienced its greatest growth with relatively little geographic expansion during the 1920s. Taller and deeper one-and-two story brick buildings which reflect the building styles of typical early 20th century commercial architecture of towns all over North Carolina were erected. Brick buildings lined the streets of the court house square usually with flat facades ornamented with modest brickwork in the cornice. Like many other towns, Taylorsville has lost much of its commercial architecture as some buildings have been torn down or irretrievably altered.

The domestic architecture of the town began to develop differently from that in the countryside by the late 1920s. For the first time brick was a common building material and houses were more sophisticated examples of current architectural styles. The need for modest housing for mill workers and increased substantial housing created a diversified housing inventory in the town. The Wade Campbell House (ca. 1926) reflects the prosperity of the times with its masonry facade, tile roof, and Colonial Revival styling.

Domestic Architecture (1920-1940)

The adoption of the bungalow style, which emphasized low exterior profiles and irregular interior plans, marked the final break with the county's traditional house building practices. The bungalows erected in rural Alexander were modest and simply detailed expressions of the idiom. They incorporated the style's basic elements: one or one-and-a-half story houses with gable front or side gable roofs, usually with engaged porches, exposed rafters and triangular brackets. There are some brick but the majority are weatherboarded, usually with woodshingles in gables and doomers. The interiors are informal and usually finished in a restrained Colonial Revival manner.

The style is distinctive in its use in Taylorsville. The brick houses such as the Walter Watts House (ca. 1920s) and the Henshaw House (1939) are notable examples of the style.

Alexander County (1929-Present)

The Great Depression that began in 1929 affected Alexander County as it did other parts of the state. Many businesses closed, farmers lost their farms, and companies and businesses went bankrupt. Mills and factories ran only part-time and some closed entirely. The county population a 50% increase, only slightly from 12,932 in 1930 to 13,434 by 1940. Virtually all building stopped and would not resume until after World War II.

The county has experienced a 50% increased in population during the thirty year period beginning in 1960. The long delayed arrival of the furniture industry which had played such a key role in the growth of Caldwell County since the late 19th century was a primary factor in this increase. Agriculture is still the major economic pursuit of county residents. The countryside is covered with poultry buildings, dairy farms, pastures, and apple orchards. There are 658 farms in the county with an average size of 91 acres. A strong agrarian economy that has dominated the county since its organization is facing a changing time. Many farms, especially in the southern portion of the county, near Lake Hickory are being sold for housing developments as the farmers retire.

Footnotes

1. Alexander County Population Census 1983. Alexander County Court House.
2. W. N. Watt, "History of Alexander County" in The Heritage of Alexander County, North Carolina. Volume 1, (Winston-Salem: Hunter Publishing Company, 1986), pp.2-10.
3. Ibid.
4. Hugh T. Lefler, History of North Carolina, (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, Inc., 1956), p.391.
5. Doug Swaim, "North Carolina Folk Housing", in Carolina Dwelling, ed. Doug Swaim, (Raleigh: North Carolina State University, School of Design, 1978), pp.31-39.
6. Ibid.
7. Lefler, History, p. 391.
8. Watts, "History of Alexander County", p.24.
9. Ibid. p.32.
10. Ibid. pp.60-62
11. Swaim, "North Carolina Folk Housing", p.40.
12. Sara Allen, ed. The Heritage of Alexander County. Volume 1, (Winston-Salem: Hunter Publishing Company, 1986) p.26.
13. Ibid.
14. Lefler, History, p.646.
15. Huntington Hobbs, North Carolina. An Economic and Social Profile, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1958), p.102.

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