

Owner Discusses Home's Future

Cherry Hill Preservation Aim Of New Foundation

By KAY HORNER
Staff Writer

If you stand with Edgar Thorne on the lawn of his ancestral home, Cherry Hill, and gaze intently at the front door, you can almost see George Alston's widow lift the hoops of her skirt and sashay out to greet you.

The Italianate house in the Warren County community of Inez has been in Thorne's family since it was built in 1858. It has been Thorne's permanent home since 1978.

He actually purchased the house in 1965 and began spending summers there about 10 years ago.

A retired art history teacher who has served on the faculties of the University of North Carolina, the University of Virginia, and the University of California at Riverside, Thorne and his sister, Mrs. Elizabeth Johnson, who lives with him, were raised in the community of Airlee outside of Littleton.

But Thorne glosses quickly over inquiries about his own background to get to the important part of the interview — Cherry Hill, a house that at one time was the focal point of a tobacco and cotton plantation of several thousand acres sloping down to the fork of Shocco Creek and Fishing Creek.

"They wanted to live high on the ridge among the oaks with the farm on the lowland," Thorne noted.

The "they" Thorne referred to are Southerners of the mid-nineteenth century in general, and the Alston family in Warren County in particular.

The widow of George W. Alston, an uncle of Thorne's whom he describes as several times removed, had the house built in 1858, about nine years after her husband's death. Alston had planned construction of the house, and Thorne suspects that his widow's delay might have been to gain the counsel of her three sons, who were minors at the time of their father's death.

Alston's son, George, Jr., inherited the house after the death of his two brothers. At his death in 1916, no settlement was made of the estate. After his wife's death in 1948, the house was passed down to their eight children.

In 1960, Thorne, who had inherited two shares of the estate, began to purchase the undivided interest of the children, his uncles and aunts.

"I bought the first thinking I'd never get another," Thorne said recently in an interview at his home.

But he prevailed and in 1965, when his uncle, Ed Faulk Alston, who lived in the house, died, Thorne was able to buy the remaining shares.

The house was in good repair when Thorne acquired it, and he gives credit for that to the aunts and uncles who maintained it — Jennie C. Alston, Carrie Alston, Ed Faulk Alston, Sol Alston, and their niece, Marina Williams.

"It was maintained through difficult times," Thorne said. "But it's not in too bad repair considering it has never had a formal restoration."

Thorne hesitates to say he is restoring the house, fearing that the word "restoration" implies an overnight effort that produces a slick showpiece rather than a home.

"We want to retain the character of the home as

always lived in," Thorne said. "We don't want it to look like a magazine illustration with a perfectionist, machine-turned look."

But the evidence of a little painting and sanding is apparent here and there.

Thorne is doing much of the work himself, including repair and painting of the plaster walls.

One room was given a facelift with the help of a professional plasterer, but Thorne is now trying a technique where he simply covers the cracks in the plaster and then the whole wall with joint compound and does the painting himself.

A brickmason has been called in to work on the foundation, and Thorne pointed out that bricks could be removed from one corner of the house without jacking it up and without the subsequent sagging that a 20th-century homeowner might expect.

A recent tour of the house began much as a summer afternoon visit to Cherry Hill might have begun over a hundred years ago, with lemonade in the sitting room.

The doors and windows were opened wide, inviting a gentle breeze to circulate through the house.

"The big windows were made for entertaining," Thorne explained. "People then had a zest for entertaining, and it was usually done in the summer. The windows provided the light and the circulation of air."

Four large doors, which appear to be windows, on the front of the house are a stylish precursor to the modern, sliding-glass door. They slide into pockets in the wall, providing ventilation through the louvered shutters, which can be opened to provide access to the porch.

Much of the original furniture is still in the house, and it seems almost unbelievable that the draperies in the parlor never fell prey to that custom the true historian finds so deplorable — redecorating.

Made from raw silk, most likely from Paris or Brussels, the draperies have survived the years intact with significant wear only on the areas exposed to the sun.

The house has its concessions to the practical. The main hall circular staircase is broad to allow for the ladies' hoop skirts, but the staircase at the rear of the house is narrow accommodating only young boys and servants.

The kitchen originally was outside, along with three other utility buildings. When it was moved inside, two petitions, since removed, provided pantry space for the family's staples including barrels of flour, lard, and other cooking necessities.

Some items in the house are from Old Cherry Hill, which stood about 300 yards behind the present home. Among these are four crystal decanters, all with stoppers, a fact Thorne singles out as unusual.

"I guess we owe that to post-war temperance," Thorne quipped, referring to the era when tee-totalling was more fashionable than toddies.

"The stoppers would probably have been broken had they been used."

The original Cherry Hill was the home of Lt. Col. William Alston and his wife, Martha Hardee. He was a delegate from Bute County to the Provincial Congress at Halifax on April 4, 1776 that framed the Halifax Resolves.

As Thorne tells it, Alston bequeathed "the plantation whereon I now live" to his wife for her natural life and hence to his son, Medicus, who predeceased his mother. The homeplace was then divided into five lots and left to her children.

In 1824, two lots were sold out of the family to Richard Hines who later sold them to Charles Urquhart and others.

Thorne's family again came into possession of the property in 1838 when George W. Alston, nephew of Lt. Col. Alston, purchased the two tracts which the deed referred to as "The Cherry Hill Place."

The house came into disrepair with the years, and Thorne guesses that the desire for a larger home for entertaining led to the abandoning of that house and the construction of the present one. As a child, Thorne remembers only one wing left standing, used for hay storage.

The present house has been attributed by some to Jacob W. Holt, a builder in the Italianate style who was responsible for the construction of quite a few Warren County homes during the boom period of the 1850s to 1870s.

But Thorne begs to differ on the basis of a record of payment of \$4,000 to John Waddell, who at one time worked with Holt.

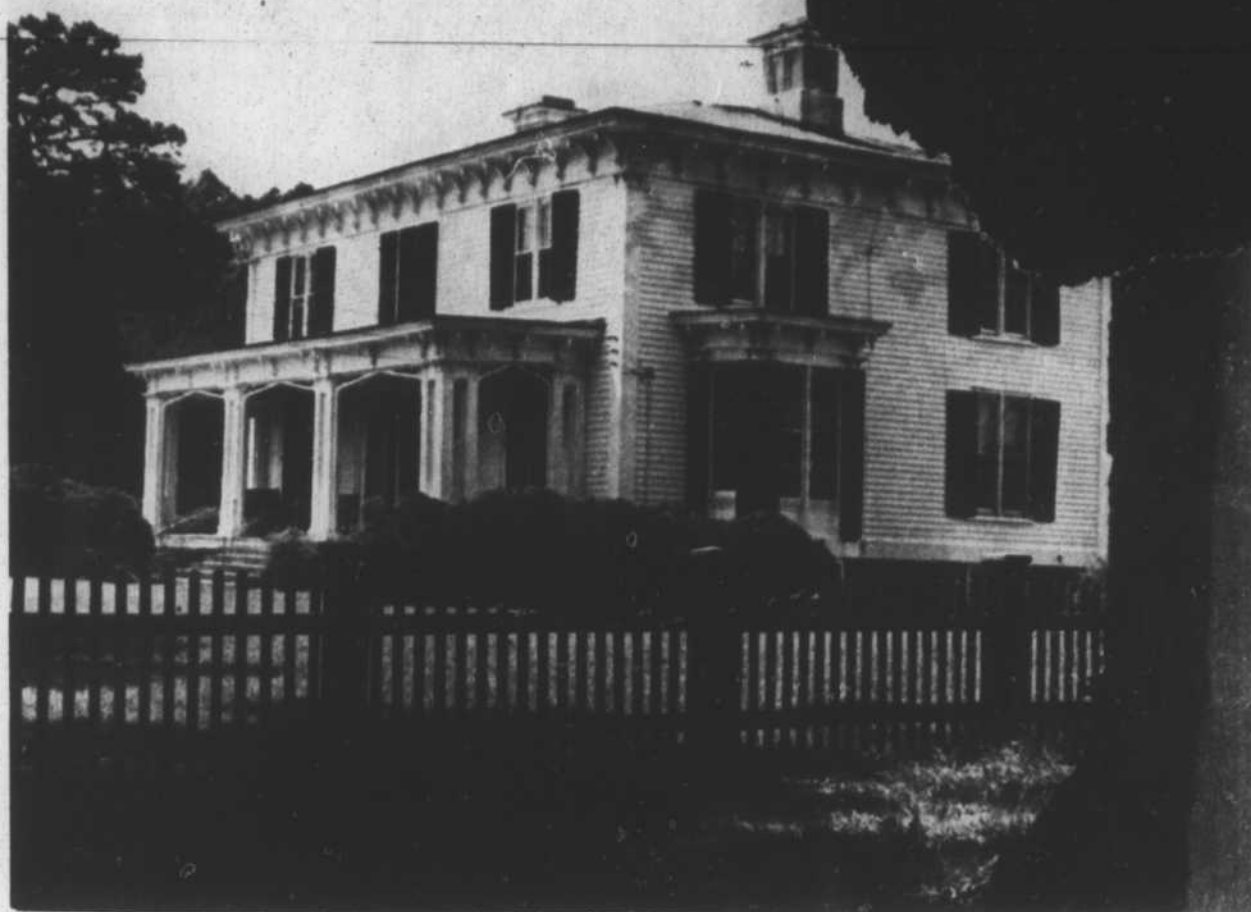
The census of 1850 shows Waddell as a member of the Holt firm, but the census of 1860 describes Waddell as working independently in the county.

Thorne surmises that Waddell had become an independent builder by 1857 when, according to family tradition, the house was begun.

Thorne's aunts remembered hearing their father talk about Waddell. In fact, one recalled hearing her father say that Waddell gave him his first pocketknife.

The fact that they never heard their father mention Holt seems evidence enough for the family that Holt was not the builder of the house.

But the style of the house and the tudor motif are admittedly Holt's influence on the architecture of the county.



The future of this 19th-century Italianate home in the Warren County community of Inez is bright with the prospects of cultural and educational events,

thanks to the efforts of Edgar Thorne, whose ancestors built the home.

(Staff Photo by Kay Horner)

In addition to his interior restoration work, Thorne also hopes to restore some of the outside area to its original state.

Although there are no photographs of the two gazebos that once graced the front lawn, Thorne has verbal descriptions and rebuilding them is one aspect of his master plan.

He also wants to see the sidewalk, now only wide enough for the passage of one person, returned to its original width, equal to that of the front steps.

Thorne describes his aunts and uncles as "extremely hospitable" people and he recalls seeing the walk bustling with guests making their way to the house.

"Cherry Hill was the family center, especially on Christmas and special occasions," he said.

Of course, anyone who might begin to wax nostalgic about the good old days and how pastoral Cherry Hill must have been will get a reminder that the lawn, for one thing, probably looks better now.

"Remember, the grass was kept cut by cattle and horses grazing, and no doubt there were many more weeds then," Thorne explained.

Cherry Hill lost 26 trees in 1954 when Hurricane Hazel came through, and a root fungus has caused the loss of one of the old, stately boxwoods that add such charm to the house. Thorne fears he may eventually lose all the boxwoods that border the house.

A concern that the house be maintained in the

future led to the recent establishment of the Cherry Hill Historical Foundation.

"The rapid decline and loss of old homes made me want to preserve this one," Thorne commented. "Private ownership of rural homes is difficult. So often the houses are abandoned and given over to vandals."

Thorne hopes Cherry Hill will always serve a function and be a cultural and educational center for however large an area it can radiate to.

Although the house and 14 of its 450 acres has been deeded to the foundation, Thorne and his sister will continue to live there as long as they want and to maintain the house.

The primary purpose of the foundation is to work toward a maintenance fund for the future.

Serving on the Board of Trustees of the foundation are George Blackburn and Mrs. George Harvin of Henderson, Mrs. Mason Hawfield of Littleton, Thorne and Mrs. Johnson.

The first of the foundation's activities will be an exhibition of quilts and a quilt workshop in October.

Concerts, lectures, and other events will be announced later. A Christmas tour is also on the agenda.

Because of Thorne's efforts, it appears that Cherry Hill, unlike so many of its contemporaries, has prospects of gracing Warren County for many more years.

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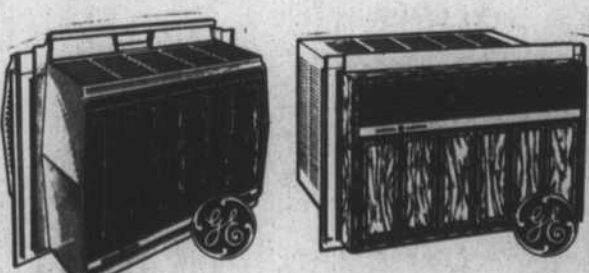
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