

House In The Horseshoe Now State Historic Site

BY PEGGY HOWE

A brave Moore County woman defended her home with a pillowcase, saving the lives of her husband and children, and thus began the illustrious 200 year history of a house.

During the waning days of the Revolution, Whig (American sympathizer) Phillip Alston had gathered a band of 25 friends to defend his home against the expected attack of the dreaded Tory (British supporter), David Fanning.

At dawn on Aug. 5, 1781, Fanning's men advanced in three parties, taking the sentries by surprise, and startling the defenders still asleep on the porch of Alston's plantation home, built in the horseshoe bend of the Deep River.

Shots rang out and penetrated the walls. The frightened Mrs. Alston perched her two young children atop a small table and shoved it into the large fireplace opening, the only place safe from the shots blasting through the clapboard house.

After watching several unsuccessful attempts to take the house, Mrs. Alston realized with horror that the attackers meant to burn her home by setting fire to a nearby oxcart and rolling it up to the house.

To save her family, Mrs. Alston, with perfect composure, tied a white pillowcase to a staff, opened the front door and stepped out. Fanning met her halfway and was informed that all in the house would surrender if he promised none would be injured. Fanning, admiring her courage, agreed. The men surrendered and were immediately released.

So is told and retold the story of the Moore County "House in the Horseshoe."

The house, now a state historic site under the direction of the state Department of Cultural Resources, is the site of a public reenactment of that skirmish each summer. The bullet holes, still marking the walls, are pointed out to visitors, as well as are the handsome woodwork and architectural details inside and out.

The architecture is that of coastal lowlands, a two-story frame house with gable roof and



HOUSE IN THE HORSESHOE — The Alston House, where a Revolutionary War skirmish took place, is now a State Historic Site.

chimneys at each end. A full-length shed porch shades each side.

Phillip Alston, described as Moore County's first aristocrat, built the house about 1773 and it became the focal point of stirring scenes—military, political and social—including its most well-known episode above.

Alston had a distinguished military career, but his life was marked by a string of nefarious activities. In 1790 he sold the house in the river bend and moved out of North Carolina.

In 1798 the famed "House in the Horseshoe" became the property of Gov. Benjamin Williams, a man of "irreproachable character," beloved by all, contrary to the atheistic Alston. Governor Williams enlarged the house by adding two wings with kitchen and master bedroom. He renamed the estate "Retreat," and with his other holdings, became Moore County's first large-scale cotton planter, as well as a four-term governor.

Williams' career was distinguished. He served as a colonel under George Washington, as a member of the first board of trustees of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and in the national Congress at Philadelphia.

He died at Retreat on July 20, 1814, in his 63rd year and is buried in the family cemetery nearby. Mrs. Williams survived her husband by three years and is buried beside him.

Their son, Benjamin William Williams, inherited the House in the Horseshoe and lived there alone until his marriage in 1820 to Mary Chalmers, daughter of Charles and Mary Chalmers of Fayetteville. A year later she died, probably in childbirth, and is buried in the Williams cemetery.

The governor's son was married a second time, to Mary McBryde, but the Williams name was terminated since the only son, Benjamin Charles Williams, married but had no children.

After the death of Benjamin Williams, in 1845, Mary McBryde and her second husband, Dr. Charles Chalmers, were occupying the House in the Horseshoe. Dr. Chalmers died in 1858 and his wife Mary in 1857.

The house then changed owners several times. One owner who bought the house about 1910, tore away the two wings built by Governor Williams and destroyed the outbuildings. The house was purchased and restored by the Moore County Historical Society in 1954, and the 1955 General Assembly appropriated funds to reimburse the historical society. The house in the Horseshoe then belonged to North Carolina.

Visitors are welcome Monday through Saturday, 9 a.m.-5 p.m. and Sunday, 1-5 p.m. Admission is free.

The House in the Horseshoe State Historic Site is located near Carthage.

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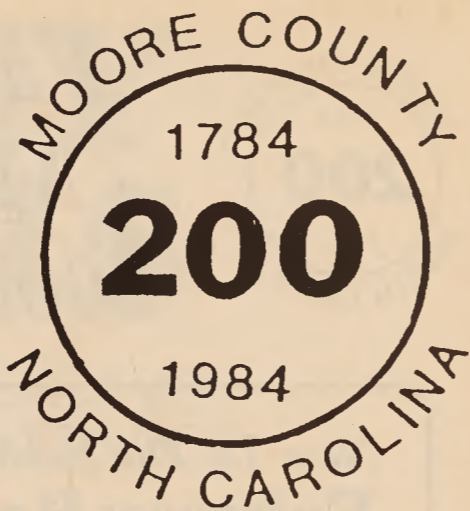
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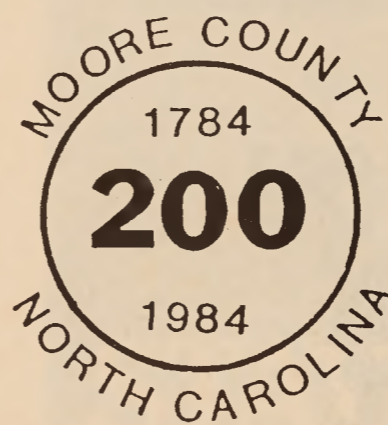
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