

## **The Colonial Inn: Its History and Significance**

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*Originally published in the Hillsborough Historical Society Journal, Winter 2004, pp.99-107*

For almost two centuries the Colonial Inn, as the building at 153 W. King St, is affectionately yet mistakenly called, has been central in Hillsborough's social and architectural history. Built during the late Federal period, it began as a hotel to accommodate travelers to the county seat.

By the second half of the twentieth century, the inn had evolved into a widely known restaurant establishment visited by thousands of tourists over the years and grew to become one of the corner stones of the town's tourism economy. Yet, it is its role in the collective memory of the community that seems to ring loudest among Hillsborough residents.

At once the embodiment of historical fact and legend, the Colonial Inn holds a special place in the hearts of the people of Hillsborough and many others across the state whose fond memories include Sunday dinners, wedding receptions, retirement parties, and tours. A brief outline of the inn's long history follows below, but gives only a glimpse of the significance of the Colonial Inn locally.

Hillsborough, established in 1754 as the seat of Orange County, was once populated with inns and taverns from its earliest beginning. These establishments, whether called taverns, ordinaries, or inns provided much-needed accommodations for travelers who oftentimes came great distances and stayed several days to conduct legal business.

Built in 1838, the Colonial Inn typifies the early 19th century hotels established to serve travelers conducting business in county seats in North Carolina. However, over the years, many of the Hillsborough inns disappeared or were converted to residences much like their counterparts in other towns across North Carolina such as Yellow House (Pittsboro) or Bums Inn (Wadesboro). Others, like the Wright Tavern (Wentworth) are now open to the public as house Museums, a common new use among the few remaining line examples.

Unlike the Colonial Inn, other inns still standing across the state were built as rural stagecoach stops such as Brummel's Inn in Davidson County, or resort hotels such as Jarrett House in Dillsboro, or Woodfield Inn in Flat Rock. The Colonial Inn is the only remaining example in Hillsborough, and among but a few in the state, built expressly as a hotel for travelers to a country seat that has continued to be operated as an inn.

Like many inns of its period the Colonial Inn consists of a wood frame, two-story structure built on a stone and brick foundation featuring a prominent two-story porch, stretching across the front facade, and comprising a collection of architectural features acquired over time. It represents various developments of vernacular architecture in Hillsborough in the early and late 19th century, and the common process of updating, expanding and adapting buildings over a long period of time.

Much of what is known of the inn on Lot 15 results from very thorough research conducted by local historian Mary Claire Engstrom. During the 1960s, Mrs. Engstrom immersed herself in historic property deeds, letters, and documents to unearth the long and, at times, complicated history of this and many other sites in and around Hillsborough.

Despite pervasive local lore of eighteenth century origins, Mrs. Engstrom confidently concluded that evidence indicates the inn was constructed in 1838. Isaiah Spencer from Hyde County built the original building, consisting of the present lobby and east dining room, in 1838. It was known locally for many years as "Spencer's Tavern," but was advertised as the "Orange Hotel." The inn kept the name Orange for fifty years;

later names include “Strayhom’s Hotel” (c.1870), the “Occoneechee Hotel” (1888-1908), “Corbinton Inn” (1908-1924), and “The Colonial inn” (1924-present).

Richison Nichols purchased the inn from Spencer in 1841. In its earliest form, the inn was of the late Federal/early Greek Revival style, yet quite understated, as was typical in Hillsborough. During the period it was owned by Nichols, he expanded the inn to the west and south and extended the prominent one-story porch across the front and out to the street, incorporating the sidewalk in the public right of way.

As architectural historians Catherine Bishir and Michael Southern point out in *A Guide to the Historic Architecture of Piedmont NC*, this type of public porch was once common in North Carolina, but has seemingly disappeared. Nichols was also probably responsible for the rear addition located beyond the lobby door and reconfiguring the interior lobby stair.

Nichols sold the inn (Lot 15) in 1856 to the Hillsborough Improvement Company made up of the three Stroud brothers, Alfred, Henry, and Cave. Stroud family history has it that Henry’s wife saved the inn from looting by Union troops by displaying her husband’s Masonic apron. Upon seeing the apron, a sympathetic Union officer who was a fellow Mason protected the site from destruction.

The Strouds lost ownership of the inn in 1868 through bankruptcy, a fate shared by many in the years immediately following the Civil War. The inn’s ownership and management becomes unclear and perhaps a little complicated during the 1870s.

It was purchased at public auction around 1870 for \$2,600 by local real estate investors Henry N. Brown and C. M. Latimer. However, their ownership of the inn was cut short in 1872 due to bankruptcy, as well. Though owned by Brown and Latimer until 1872, a photograph dated 1870 shows the Collins, Daves and Shepherd families posing in front of the inn with “Strayhorn’s Hotel” printed on the photo.

It is possible the Strayhorns ran the inn for Brown and Latimer, since various members of the Strayhorn family were active in real estate on this block about this time and owned Twin Chimneys across the street off and on from 1852-1885. In her papers in the Southern Historical Collection at UNC, Mary Strayhorn Berry (mother of Harriet Berry Morehead) states that she was born in Twin Chimneys and that her father William F. Strayhorn owned the inn and that a Mr. Stroud ran it for him. However, no Orange County deed showing ownership by William Strayhorn was found.

The inn’s early appearance was that of late Federal and early Greek Revival styles - very different from what we see presently.

[A] 1870 photograph shows 6/6 sash windows, much shorter in length than those of today. The door and window arrangement in the photo is also different from its current appearance. Wood shingles covered the roof and elegant Doric columns supported one-story porch.

After a few months ownership by a New York investor, David C. Parks bought the inn for \$1,890 in December 1872 and owned it until 1885, when he sold it to Pogue for \$3,000. David Parks and his brother Charles were very active in local real estate from the 1870s to the early 1900s buying, remodeling, and selling several properties during this time.

In 1888 David Parks re-purchased the inn along with other buildings on the block including the Pogue’s house on Lot 18 to the west (the present-day Inn at Teardrops at 175 W. King St.), a small cottage on the corner of W. King and S. Wake Streets, and Twin Chimneys across the street. By 1889, Parks had combined these buildings into a hotel complex he called the “Occoneechee Hotel.” It was during this time that the inn received its most

extensive change in appearance when in 1889 Parks commissioned the “Reubin Rink Decorating & House Furnishing Co.” of Kernersville, N.C. to remodel several of his buildings, among them the buildings that made up the Occoneechee Hotel complex.

Jule Gilmer Korner, a.k.a. Reuben Rink, was an interior designer and painter best known for his ubiquitous advertisements of Bull Durham Tobacco for the W.T. Blackwell Company and later for the design and construction of his own home in Kernersville - “Korner’s Folly.” Two years earlier Julian S. Carr, Blackwell’s partner and president of Durham Tobacco Company, hired Korner to paint the ceilings of “Somerset Villa,” his new mansion in Durham.

A few years later, Carr would hire Korner once again to remodel his residence at “Occoneechee Farm” on the outskirts of Hillsborough, the former home of James Hogg called “Poplar Hill.” Carr bought the property in 1891 and created quite a stir when he remodeled the house so dramatically. However, by then Hillsborough was no stranger to Korner’s work.

Between the years 1889 and about 1900, Korner was responsible for the renovation of at least seven buildings in Hillsborough - one of them the Colonial Inn, at the time a part of the Occoneechee Hotel complex. Outside of Korner’s Folly, few if any buildings remodeled or designed by Jule Korner are known to exist outside of Hillsborough. The Colonial Inn is one of the few remaining examples of this eccentric artist’s architectural work.

Korner changed the window frames and doors on all three buildings associated with the hotel, as well as other Parks family properties in Hillsborough including the Burwell School and the William Whitted House, both on N. Churton Street. Korner probably also added the second floor of the piazza, elaborate porch details, paired porch supports; and paired eave brackets to the inn.

Twin Chimneys served as Parks’ residence (c.1900-02), while the inn was used only for sleeping rooms. The Parks-Richmond House, which Korner embellished with a rounded-arch door with teardrop lights, provided office, dining room and kitchen functions.

In 1908 new owner Thomas A. Corbin added a large two-story wing to the west side of the inn and renamed the hotel “Corbinton Inn,” It seems the Corbins and H.L. Aker of Washington, D.C. who owned the inn for less than a year, sold off the other W. King St. buildings associated with the inn during Parks’ ownership.

By the time W.L. Foushee purchased the property for \$1,000 in 1921, it was whittled down to only the single building on Lot 15. Apparently it was the Foushees who christened the hotel the “Colonial Inn,” for it appears with that name on the 1924 Sanborn Map.

The inn apparently went without maintenance for a period of time because its next owner, Col. Paul A. Henderson, was lauded by the community for his substantial rehabilitation of the inn following its purchase from Foushee in 1946. Henderson kept the name Colonial Inn and continued to operate it as a hotel with a number of boarders, but added a high-end, fine dining restaurant.

Apparently the restaurant was not very successful and the Henderson family appealed to the county’s Board of Equalization and Review to reduce the tax assessment from \$21,750 stating “the project had always been a financial loss and was being operated largely as a service to Hillsboro.”

It was during the tenure of its next owners Mr. & Mrs. Charles Crawford (1952- 1969) that the inn became known for its restaurant and successful operation. Mrs. Crawford stated in an October 6, 1968 article in the Raleigh News & Observer that they served on average one hundred people a day and that it is “the Rice Diet in

Durham that drives most of the notables to the Colonial Inn” causing her to ponder how any diet could benefit from a meal at her establishment.

Although the Crawfords continued to offer overnight and extended stay accommodations, “[i]t’s the restaurant part of the inn that’s the breadwinner.” The Crawfords enclosed the “innyard” for a large dining hall and added on to the back of the easternmost rear wing expanding the kitchen. These changes allowed for the greater volume of diners the inn became accustomed to for the rest of the century.

In 1969 the Crawfords sold the inn to James J. and Maxine Freeland. Mr. Freeland added a large banquet room onto the back of the Crawford’s addition, creating a space familiar to many visiting tour groups and wedding reception guests.

Curiously, the original date of construction kept moving further and further back into the 18<sup>th</sup> century with each new owner - first Col. Henderson advertised it as “serving guests since 1790,” then a mid-twentieth century postcard suggested a date of 1782, and eventually “since 1759” appeared on menus, signs and other promotions during the robust years of the Crawford’s.

According to Hillsborough historian Mary Claire Engstrom, and corroborated by Orange County deed books and other documents, evidence surrounding the Colonial Inn dates the building to 1838 despite local lore that it was built in 1759. The lot upon which the inn now stands (Lot 15) was purchased as a vacant lot in 1803 by Henry Shutt who built a house located to the extreme western part of the lot where he lived and operated a hatters shop- not at all where the present inn sits.

Mrs. Engstrom reported that foundation ruins of the Shutt house were visible for much of the 20th century. The lot was offered for public sale in 1820 and changed hands a few times before being purchased by Isaiah Spencer late in 1837.

Several inns did exist surrounding the lot on which the Colonial Inn stands, which may explain the confusion. In addition, the deed books clearly indicate that an inn or tavern did not exist on that lot until Spencer constructed his hotel in 1838.

A letter from William A. Graham to his bride Susan details his efforts to find for them a house in Hillsborough in 1837 and his resulting purchase of a house from Mr. Spencer, “he having bought other lots and being about to erect a hotel.” [Dec. 20, 1837]

On October 18, 1838 an ad for the new hotel appeared in the *Hillsborough Recorder*: “The subscriber would respectfully inform the public that this large and commodious establishment, situated on the street leading directly west from the Court House is now open for the reception of travelers and Regular Boarders. Having erected this building especially for a hotel, no expense or pains will be spared to give it character abroad; his customers may thereafter rest assured that his accommodations will be good,”

One month later, the *Hillsborough Recorder* reprinted an article from the *New Bern Spectator* that: “A gentleman who recently paid a visit to Hillsborough, informed us that a good Hotel, long a desideratum in that place, has been established by Mr. Spencer. Our informant speaks so highly of the accommodations and comforts enjoyed in this well-regulated establishment, that there can be no doubt of the proprietor’s success.”

Indeed, there were several ordinaries, “tippling houses,” taverns, and inns along King Street in Hillsborough throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries including the two King taverns with stable yard (which became the Parks-Richmond House) to the West of the Colonial Inn on Lot 18, Josiah Watts’ tavern to the east of the present inn on Lot 12, Faddis’ tavern on E. King St. across from the courthouse, Union Hotel on Churton

St. at W. Margaret Lane, Courtney's tavern, and Wm. Reed's ordinary both on E. King St. to name a few. However, not until 1838 did any inn exist on the present inn's location.

Regardless of the name of the inn and the period it evokes, the Colonial Inn remains the only antebellum hotel in Hillsborough, and one of a very few in the state, which still exists. It stands testimony to each period of ownership and has lasted through successful times, wartime, and harsh economic times. It is one of those rare historic landmarks everyone agrees should be preserved and passed down to the next generation.

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