



after the Declaration was supposedly proclaimed, the Resolves laid down ground rules for local government that excluded the British.

Davidson, who became a major in the Revolutionary War, lent his horse to his cousin, Gen. William Lee Davidson, only to see it come home riderless after the Battle of Cowans Ford four miles north. The general, for whom Davidson College is named, had been killed in the battle. John Davidson survived the war, and he and his wife Violet prospered at Rural Hill, which eventually was the home of five more generations. In the 1800s, it reached 5,000 acres and was a self-contained community with grist mill, brick-making facility, sawmill, blacksmith shop and schools for white and African American children.

In 1992, the last three direct descendants to live there sold it to Mecklenburg County to be preserved as a historic site. Two years later, the county leased it long-term to the Catawba Valley Scottish Society, with instructions to carry out that mission. With the help of hundreds of volunteers, the society restores and re-creates historic buildings on the site, invites the public in for tours, and sponsors special events highlighting U.S. and Scottish history.

“It’s a very major site,” says Ed McLean, Rural Hill executive director. “It can be used for interpreting three centuries in this county: the 1700s (homestead), 1800s (plantation) and the 1900s (farm).”

Remnants from all three eras remain: a planting of boxwoods thought to date to the 1700s, columns of the late-1700s plantation house, which burned in 1886, a mid-19th century well house and ash (soap-making) house of plantation-made brick, and the 20th century farmhouse built around the plantation kitchen.

### **Today’s working farm**

Rural Hill is a working 21st century farm as well. McLean points out the fields of hay and corn that the society’s farm manager, Eddie Ferguson, tends with the help of volunteers. With history in mind, they use farm equipment

# Rural Hill

**A haven of Scottish and Scots-Irish heritage helps an urban area understand its rural roots**

*By Hannah Miller, Photos by James J. Shaffer*

You don’t have to wear a kilt to be in step with North Carolina history, but in the southern Piedmont, it doesn’t hurt if you do.

The Scots and Scots-Irish immigrants who largely settled the area, many of them following the Great Wagon Road south from Pennsylvania, left a huge imprint on the region. In Mecklenburg County, the seven Presbyterian churches that the pious Scots farmers established by 1770 still thrive, as does their Davidson College, founded in 1837.

“They said everybody had to be able to read the Bible for themselves,” says Keets Taylor of the Catawba Valley Scottish Society. “They brought that historical interest in education to this country.”

In most cases, their farms have been divided and sold, and now sprout housing developments and highways in

this fast-growing region served by the EnergyUnited Touchstone Energy cooperative. But 16 years ago, Mecklenburg County took steps to preserve one such farm, Rural Hill off Neck Road and the Catawba River in north Mecklenburg.

### **The Davidson Farm**

Mecklenburg County would have been hard-pressed to find another farm so drenched in history. This was the 1760 homestead of Maj. John Davidson, a Scots-descended transplant from Pennsylvania who was a leader in the area’s pre-Revolution ferment. He is thought to be one of the signers of the controversial Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence of June 20, 1775 (many historians doubt its existence) and the generally-accepted Mecklenburg Resolves. Coming 11 days

from the 1940s and '50s, including a Ford tractor, Allis Chalmers tractor, hay baler and corn picker. Keets Taylor, who preceded McLean as director, says that volunteers have loaded "hundreds and hundreds of bales of hay" over the years.

"We feed 'em good, we treat 'em good," she says. "We give them respect, and lots of chocolate." (EnergyUnited supplies electricity to the farmhouse, where she and others cook for the volunteers.)

The hay feeds more than two dozen Highlands cattle—"Scottish coos" if you were in Scotland—that regard pasture visitors placidly from beneath extra-shaggy brows. (Photo, this page.) After some 17,000 October visitors finish tramping through the Amazing Maize Maze (the farm's cornfield), the corn is stored for the farm's chickens.

Eventually, McLean says, they'll have Durham cattle like the Davidsons raised. "We will have a selection of animals that will be historically correct both to the Scots and to the Davidsons who would have been on this farm."

A corn crib, chicken coop and pole barn are already up. A root cellar is being dug, a blacksmith shop with forge is being created, an herb garden with historic plants is being planned for spring, and another cow barn will be readied for the hoped-for Durham cattle. Long-range plans call for the expansion of the Davidson family museum, now in one room of the farmhouse, into a freestanding cultural center. Last on the plan's wish list is a re-creation of the plantation house.

Volunteers swinging old-fashioned broad axes spent hundreds of hours the last three years building a two-room log cabin typical of those of the 1700s. (Photo, page 18.) "There's not one nail in the walls," proudly says volunteer Roy Pickett. Built in Appalachian, half-dovetail style, it was finished last year. The cabin's chimney and hearth were fashioned from rocks collected at the farm, and those left over wait nearby for the next project. "They don't say 'thrifty Scots' for nothing," observes Pickett.

The cabin's walls were chinked with native mud by children attending a Rural Hill event. "We made a formula out of the mud," McLean recalls. "Just like the olden days."

The cabin was inaugurated Jan. 1 during a traditional Scottish "walkabout" by society members and the public. Scottish farm communities once a year checked their towns' boundaries to make sure they remained intact, McLean explains. At Rural Hill, the three-mile walk, called First Footin', wound past the fieldstone-enclosed Davidson burial ground and a restored one-room school that served the Davidson children. Another school, the circa-1898 Bethesda School for African American children, is awaiting restoration. It was moved to Rural Hill from another Mecklenburg site where it was threatened by development.

The farm, so isolated that you can still hear birdsong and smell new-mown hay there, is an anomaly in fast-

growing Mecklenburg. A recent report says that the Charlotte metro area lost one-third of its farmland in the 20 years between 1987 and 2007.

Asked what value Rural Hill represents to an area where so many residents are newcomers, Keets Taylor says, "Where you've been determines who you are. It is the collective memory of a community that creates the richness of living in a community."

Rural Hill could extend the richness of that heritage for generations to come. "We hope to add to that colorful pageantry by working with the school systems and the people of the community," Taylor says, "to showcase some of those great people who helped get us where we are." 📍

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## Public activities at Rural Hill

Group and self-guided tours can be scheduled anytime. Special events will include the Loch Norman Highland Games April 18-20. Muscular, kilts-clad laddies will heave bales of hay and heavy poles in the Scottish Heavy Athletics competitions. Kilts-clad lassies will compete in Highland dances, and the assembled Scots descendants, bearing clan colors, will worship on Sunday at the Davidson burial ground.

**May 17-18** Smoke and battle cries will rise from fields as re-enactors re-trace the Revolutionary battles of Cowans Ford and Weitzel's Mill. Boy Scouts of Bethel Presbyterian Church's Troop # 72, which helps Rural Hill with various events, especially enjoy the annual event, says Scoutmaster Rick Monroe. "They get a chance to walk around and talk to the re-enactors."

**Sept. 11-14** Young thrill-seekers will seek their way through the Amazing Maize Maze. Last year, 17,000 would-be explorers wandered paths that formed the shape of the Liberty Bell. History-based clues hidden in mailboxes enabled them to solve a crossword puzzle. And they got an extra bonus: the chance to name a new Highlands calf. From among names like "Sugar Lips," "Bubbles," "Angus McTavish" and "All Beef Patti," officials blindly drew "Maizey." Submitted by three classes of Charlotte's Metro School for developmentally challenged children, it's the perfect name, declares McLean.

**Nov. 7-9** Eagle-eyed black-and-white Border Collies will herd flocks of milling sheep toward the farmhouse during the semiannual Rural Hill Sheep Dog Trials. Spectators will sip cider and soft drinks, listen to Celtic and Appalachian music and send the kids off for wagon rides.

### For more information:

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