A Brief Summary of Davidson County History
By Anne M. Edwards

Davidson County is rich in history from its early occupation by the Sapona tribe to the melting pot of settlers originating from Europe. However, many Davidson County communities and buildings from the 18th and 19th centuries, like Yadkin College, Newsom, and Browntown, are now gone. When these landmarks vanished, so did interesting, remarkable, and unique features of Davidson County. Unfortunately, once these landmarks are gone, they cannot be replaced. It is easier in hindsight to look back and wish that more measures had been taken to protect these historical assets, but the reality is that the county must proactively pursue protection of historical resources now if there is to be any hope of protecting them for the future. Historic districts add character to the community and provide a sense of community pride in taking care of and preserving the best of what we have. Decisions concerning notable buildings from this century also need to be made, so that steps may be taken to preserve those for future generations. Finally, some thought should be made toward providing enticements for new buildings that will add character and distinction to the county.

Prior to the 1700’s, the only Indian tribe of size or significance described in actual occupation of what is now Davidson County was the Sapona Tribe. The main Sapona village and trading fort was thought to be located on the eastern side of the “Great Sapona” River, now known as the Yadkin. High Rock Lake now covers the village site (Historical Gleamings of Davidson County, NC by the Heritage Research Committee of the Davidson County Bicentennial Committee, printed in 1977). The Saponas migrated eastward and then northward in the early 1700’s, and for the next several decades, the area was thought to be mainly used as hunting grounds for nearby tribes of Indians.

White settlers first began to arrive in the 1740’s and 1750’s. All early settlements built a meeting-house as soon as possible and the communities grew up around a church. The first settlers were Germans, English, and Scotch-Irish who migrated down from Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania via “The Great Road” to the Yadkin River Valley region. Even though Eastern North Carolina had many established settlements and cities, few eastern North Carolina residents ventured west of the Cape Fear River.
Farms were small to medium self-sustaining farms. Very few of the farms had slaves – most were too small and typically produced only enough to sustain their own families. Settlers were described as thrifty and hard-working.

**Cultural History of Davidson County**

**Early Folk Art and Cabinetry History:** Early Davidson County residents were skilled craftsmen whose work was primarily confined to practical endeavors. Early folk art survives in the form of hand carved furniture and decorative in-lays that can be seen in the chimneys of older homes. However, the most notable craftsmanship can be seen in carvings on gravestones in the area. Of all the immigrants to the Piedmont area of NC, the Germans produced the most visually recognizable decorative art, and their folk art survives in gravestone carvings. Some of the older cemeteries in the county include Pilgrim (1757), Becks (1787), Beulah (1788), St. Lukes (1788), Bethany (1789), Emanuel, (1813), Abbotts Creek (1755), and Jersey Baptist (1756). These cemeteries have the best representational folk art gravestone carvings in NC. The designs on many of these early gravestones are pierced or cut through the stone. No pierced grave markers are known to exist outside of Davidson County (*An Architectural History of Davidson County*).

It is believed that the makers of these stones were a group of early Davidson County cabinetmakers known as the Swisegood School from the Browntown/Abbotts Creek area of the county. Some of the pierced gravestones remain in good shape despite the fact that they are carved from soapstone, a soft rock containing talc that could be easily carved with a knife. Others have been damaged by vandalism and careless mowing practices.

By 1765, there were six small and thinly settled communities within what is now Davidson County:

- **Jersey Settlement** – Located along the banks of the Yadkin River in the present Cotton Grove Township. Established by Scotch-Irish who immigrated from New Jersey via the Shenandoah Valley region of Virginia. Jersey Baptist Church was established in 1755.
- **Abbotts Creek** – Located in Northeast Davidson and settled in the early 1750’s and the Baptist church was established in 1753. Early settlers included Germans, English, and Irish who immigrated from Maryland and Pennsylvania.
- **Leonhardt’s (Leonard’s) Church** - Now known as Pilgrim was established in 1753 between Abbotts Creek and Leonard’s Creek. This area was settled by German Lutherans and Reformeds from Pennsylvania.
- **Friedburg** – Located in the extreme northwestern corner of the county was settled by German Moravians who immigrated from Maryland around 1754. This community was established primarily because of the
proximity to the already established Moravian communities of Bethania and Bethabara to the north. The county’s first school was established at Friedburg in 1770.

- **Becks Church** – Located a few miles south Pilgrim was established by German Lutherans and Reformeds around 1765.
- **Fredericktown** - A another German settlement in the northern part of the county established in the 1760’s. Fredericktown was later called Possumtown, and now goes by the name of Bethany. The first Bethany church was German Reformed and Lutheran (union church).
- **Other early churches in Davidson County include**: Lick Creek Baptist (1787), Beulah (Sauers) Reformed (1788), St Luke’s (Sandy Creek) in Tyro (1790), Pine Woods Friends, now Methodist (1795), Emanuel Lutheran & Reformed (1813), First Presbyterian in Lexington (1827), New Friendship Baptist (1827), Fairgrove Methodist (1828), Liberty Baptist (1828), Greer’s Chapel (Old Chapel) Methodist 1828, Canaan Methodist (1831).

**Other Early Communities in Davidson County:**

**Yadkin College** – area settled in 1770 by a Pennsylvania German settler named Frederick Walser. He established a church and a school. In 1852, one of his descendents, Henry Walser, decided that the region needed an institution of higher learning. He donated land, $500, and he himself set to work building a kiln and making bricks. The college was opened in 1856 as Yadkin College, a Methodist institution. This was one of the area’s first colleges and was, for years, a primary establishment of higher learning in the area. In the early 1860’s, more than three-quarters of the students volunteered for the Confederate Army, so the school closed and was used as a storage house for tobacco. The school reopened in 1867 but had been vandalized during the war years. Leaders restored the school. In 1878, Yadkin College became one of the first coeducational colleges in the South.

In 1881, the college completed an impressive new building - 5 story tower, 92 windows, classrooms, auditorium, and a library. The new building was one of the most outstanding college buildings in the state. Financial burdens began to take a toll on the school, however, and in 1924, Yadkin College closed. Some years thereafter, the county declared the building unsafe, and demolished it.

In 1875, the Town of Yadkin College was incorporated with approximately 150 permanent residents. Many fine homes were located in the Yadkin College community. Architectural records show about 15 large homes.
built in the 1850’s – 1870’s still standing, with about half in need of restoration. All homes are in private ownership.

**Browntown** – community in Northeastern Davidson County incorporated in 1843 with a population of about 800 (*Building the Backcountry, An Architectural History of Davidson County, 1987*), making the community almost as large as Salisbury (population of 1080) and Charlotte (population of 1060). Note that at this time, Lexington had a population of somewhere around 300, and Thomasville was not yet incorporated, so Browntown would have been one of the largest settlements in the county, and one of the top 15-20 largest in the state in the mid 1800’s. Some of the county’s earliest and best known cabinetmakers were from the Browntown community and these cabinetmakers were thought to be responsible for early folk art carvings on gravestones within the county. Browntown was located on an early road between Salisbury and Guilford Courthouse. However, in 1849, the famous plank road was built between Fayetteville and Salem, and it bypassed Browntown to the east. Without direct roads, the town slowly died. Today there is no visible location of the town.

**Newsom** – located in the southwest corner of the county, this area was first settled in the 1770’s by a landowner named Nixon Newsom. The area grew when the Winston-Salem southbound railway came to the area in 1908. By the early 1910’s, the town boasted a post office, a railroad (passenger) depot, 2 general stores, a factory, a lumber mill and a quarry. The town existed for about 50 more years until the completion of the Tuckertown Dam in 1963 flooded most of the area previously known as Newsom. Few remnants remain -- said to be only a few brick footings sometimes visible at the edge of the lake.

Just north of Newsom was the hamlet of **Bain** which at one time consisted of stores, a post office, a cotton gin, and a saw mill. There are no visible remnants of Bain today.

**Arnold** was a crossroad community on the main road between Winston and Lexington. Between 1888 and 1901, the community had a post office, a large general store, and numerous residences. In 1890, a 3-story tobacco factory was built in Arnold, competing with the other large tobacco factories in Durham (Duke) and Winston (Reynolds). The business closed in the early 1900’s, and Arnold ceased to be a thriving community in about 1915 when the new highway linking Lexington and Winston (US Hwy 52) was built and bypassed the community. Locals generally consider Arnold to now be part of the Welcome community.

**Conrad Siding**, later known as Jimes, later known as Lake, was settled by the Conrad family in the area between Lexington & Thomasville. The settlement had a post office established in 1881, a railroad stop, telegraph office, a school, and a general store. The post office closed in 1914 and the community began to lose its nucleus. Today there is a road named “Lake Road” that runs through that general area and named for the former village. There are no visible remnants of the village.
Healing Springs – the earliest post office in southern Davidson County was established in 1834 in Healing Springs. Indians were said to have used the waters from these “healing springs” to cure ailments. Around the time of the revolutionary war, white settlers flocked to the area for the healing waters. The area attracted numerous visitors between the 1840’s and the early 1900’s. Early visitors tell of a tavern and cabins to serve the needs of visitors to the springs. The only visible remnants of Healing Springs “resort” today are several rock shelters.

Yadkin River Crossings – In 1868 map of Davidson County shows nine ferries or bridges crossing the Yadkin River to the west (not including the railroad bridge). Early crossings (from north to south) included

- Fultons Ferry in Yadkin College
- Clicks Crossing – vicinity of the Tyro community
- Point Ferry – where the South Yadkin River joins the Yadkin River
- Browns Ferry – approximately 2 miles north of the railroad
- Looks Bridge – about 1 mile north of the railroad
- Another ferry less than a half mile south of the railroad bridge (not named on map)
- Trading Ford – near where Potts Creek empties into the Yadkin River
- Hicks Ferry – just south of where Swearing Creek joined the Yadkin River
- Stokes Ferry – right at the Montgomery County line.

Today there are only five access bridges crossing the Yadkin – US Highway 64, US Highway 29, Interstate 85, Bringle Ferry Road, and Highway 49.