

Berry Brick House
208 W. Queen St.
Hillsborough
Orange County
North Carolina

HABS No. NC-315

HABS
NC,
68-412B
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

HABS
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68-4117
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Historic American Buildings Survey

Name of Structure - The Berry Brick House

Address - 208 W. Queen St., Hillsborough, Orange County, North Carolina. (Lot 54)

Present Owners - Mr. and Mrs. F. Ross Porter
208 W. Queen St.
Hillsborough, N. C.

Present Occupant - Mr. and Mrs. Eric Porter
208 W. Queen St.
Hillsborough, N. C.

Present Use - Private home.

Brief Statement of Significance: The Berry Brick House, besides being a singularly charming house with a storybook quality, is, so far as is known, the earliest brick dwelling house within the town boundaries of Hillsborough. It is associated with the name of John Berry, Hillsborough's native brickmason-architect. Popular tradition has it that young John Berry built the beautiful little brick house for his mother, Mrs. Rhoda Berry, with money he had earned. Indications are that the house may have been built as early as 1805, and young Berry would have been only 7 years old at that time. More likely, Samuel Hancock, the town's leading brickmason at that time, built it for Mrs. Berry.

Date of Erection - Possibly 1805

Architect - Probably none; certainly not John Berry as is popularly supposed.

Builder, suppliers, etc. - Mrs. Rhoda Berry evidently had the house built for herself and her son. The brickmason, Samuel Hancock, probably built it of locally made brick. Hancock may even have planned and designed the house. Later, he and young Berry would seem to have become partners and close friends.

Discussed and described in some detail: Eva Ingersoll Gatling, "John Berry of Hillsboro, North Carolina," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, X (1951), 18-22. See p. 18. (Eva I. Gatling is now Curator of the Museum of the Cranbrook Academy of Art.)

"The earliest building attributed to him (John Berry) is the Berry-McLarty-Porter house in Hillsboro which, tradition says, he built for his mother with money which he had earned. In 1805 Mrs. Rhody (or Rhoda) Berry agreed to buy the lot "whereon she now lives" from William Nash. The same property was transferred by her to her son, John Berry, Jr., in 1814. The house now standing on that lot, recently restored, is a story and a half brick structure, originally having consisted of three rooms and a hall on the first floor and two rooms and a hall on the upper floor; it could have been built as early as 1805. There are indications that the builder was inexperienced as he did not understand the method of building flat arches over the windows and seems to have chipped the bricks to fit.

As the work progressed there was some improvement and by the time the front door was reached a pointed brick was used as a keystone. This pointed brick keystone occurs on other buildings with which he may have been connected".... "Little can be learned of the builder's style from the Berry-McLarty-Porter house" (p. 19).

Original Plan, Construction, etc.

The Berry Brick House stands today as it was originally built except for a small addition at the rear. The house was built on a foundation of native fieldstone (below ground) and brick (above ground). It is a relatively small (37' 8" x 20' 3") rectangle of brick with brick chimneys at either end, 1 1/2 stories tall, with three dormers in the front, two in the rear. The first floor has a small entrance hall with a simple pine staircase rising from the rear. To the left is a large room, 16' x 20' 3"; to the right are two small rooms, each 13' 3" x 9' 10 1/2", each heated by a corner fireplace. Upstairs there are two bedrooms.

Originally, a separate kitchen stood nearby; but this has disappeared. The well-house has been rebuilt on the original design.

Physical History:

Original and Subsequent Owners:

1. March 26, 1787 (Deed Book 4, 47) - Town Commissioners of Hillsborough sell 2 lots, No. 64 and No. 55, on W. Queen St. to Absalom Tatom, for 2 pounds, current money.
2. June 8, 1787 (DB 4, 125-126) - Absalom Tatom sells Lots 54 and 55 to Robison (also Robinson and Robertson) Mumford for 2 pounds. (Note: Mumford was a doctor. The witness to the sale is William Nash.)
3. May 20, 1792 (DB 4, 588) - Robertson, Montfort (i. e., Robinson Mumford) sells Lot 54 to Spencer C. Vaughan for 8 pounds (Note: Spencer C. Vaughn was also a doctor.)
4. No deed exists for any conveyance from Spencer C. Vaughan, but it seems likely that he sold the lot to William Nash.
5. June 13, 1805 (DB 13, 427) - William Nash 'has this day sold a Lott of Land "where on she now lives" to Mrs. Berry for \$10. He will sign a deed when Mrs. Berry gets the number of the Lot and "has a deed wrote" (sic). Nash apparently died before signing the deed. Witnesses: Duncan Cameron and Frederick Nash.
6. March 25, 1814 (DB 17, 201-202) - Margaret Nash, Executrix, and Frederick Nash, Eecutor of the will of William Nash, late of the County of Caswell, now at Mrs. Rhoda Berry's request deed Lot 54 to her son John Berry, Junior (1798-1870). She lived and still lives on the lot and she is to use the land during her natural lifetime "free from the controls, power, rights, and debts of her present husband and of any other husband...she may hereafter marry and after her Death..to the sole use and benefit of him the said John Berry." Witness: James Whitted. Deed reg. in Feb. 1819 after James Whitted's death. William Whitted, jun., and Josiah Turner testify to his handwriting.

7. March 1, 1870 - Will of John Berry proved (dated Feb. 28, 1859) - Will Book H, p. 29. "I give, devise, and bequeath to my daughter Elizabeth Berry the House and Lot in Hillsborough known as my Homestead of Brick House Lott" and 5 slaves, one bed and furniture, one cow and calf, and \$2000.
Note: John Dorry had ca. 1844 built a spacious home, "the John Berry Home", on St. Mary's Rd. Probably the Brick House was rented for some interval here.)
8. April 10, 1909 - Will of Elizabeth Berry (1840-1909) proved Will Book I, p. 350 - Her entire estate is to go to her sister Maria Berry (1843-1923) with one half of the income to go to her niece Ella E. Bell. "Upon the death of my Sister Maria, I devise to my niece Ella E. Bell my brick house with all the lot of about four or five acres upon which it is located..." A codicil of Sept. 11, 1905, states, "Owing to some trade for lot 159 of my brick house in the town of Hillsboro at (the) time my will was written I did not will it. I this day give it to my niece Carrie R. Bell." Thus, in 1923, the Brick House became the property of Ella E. Bell, daughter of Caroline Berry (1845-1924) and Benjamin Hardesty Bell (1857-1909), and the granddaughter of John Berry.
9. June 9, 1936 (DB 104,253) - Ella E. Bell, single, sells Lots 53, 54, and 55 to F. S. and Betty Suttle McLarty for \$100, etc.

See Flat Book 2, p. 49 for a plat of the three lots showing position of the Brick House on Lot 54. Note that these lots are described as 172' x 300' when the town lots of Hillsborough are 165' x 264'. Presumably right-of way on W. Queen and N. Wake Sts. is included here.
10. June 25, 1943 (DB 118, 143 1/2) - F. S. McLarty and Betty S. McLarty sell Lots 53, 54, and 55 to F. Ross Porter and Margaret Porter.

Notes on Alterations and Additions: The Berry Brick House was restored by F. S. and Betty McLarty in the years 1936-1943. They removed a front porch which had obscured and spoiled the lines of the beautiful little house, revealing a classic white doorway with 4 very tiny square lights in the transom. The McLartys moved bedroom walls over the rear hall in order to make room for a bathroom on the second floor. A lean-to, shed-roof type kitchen, screened porch and dressing room were added at the rear of the house. Otherwise, the Berry Brick House seems to be in its original state.

The front door has 8 panels which is unusual for this area. The house is an extremely simple one in every way. The pine staircase has slender, square spindles. There is no paneling and no decoration of any kind except for the remarkably beautiful narrow windows (4/4) on either side the corner fireplaces. A crown molding in the right front room is probably an addition.

There is an interesting outcropping of rock in the basement near the foot of the basement stairs which looks as though some other foundation may have rested there.

Although the present occupants have no information about it, it would seem that the Berry Brick House has been coated with red paint some time in the 19th century. (This was a common practice in Hillsborough.) The exterior has now mellowed to a remarkably lovely soft rose-red color which blends beautifully with the white trim of the house.

Historical Events Connected with Structure: Young John Berry, Hillsborough's self-taught brickmason-architect, spent his boyhood at the Berry Brick House, and that gives the house a considerable local significance. The house is the earliest brick structure (so far as we now know) still standing in the Town of Hillsborough, earlier than any of the brick public buildings. (The ruins of a brick schoolhouse remain just within the eastern boundary of the town, and a brick kitchen of ca. 1797 stands just outside the boundary line.) It is a puzzle just why brick was not used more generally in early Hillsborough, but the fact remains that it is a town of wooden structures. The Berry Brick House is a notable exception.

Early Views: None

Sources of Information: (1) Deed Books and Will Books of Orange County in the Orange County Courthouse, Hillsborough, N. C. (2) Article by Eva Ingersoll Gatling, "John Berry of Hillsboro, North Carolina," Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, X (1951), 18-22. (3) Interviews with Mrs. Bedford B. Forrest and Mr. and Mrs. Eric Porter. (4) Notes on Samuel Hancock from Orange County Deed Books and from Sessions Books of the Presbyterian Church, Hillsborough, N. C.