

## LOCAL LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

### Henry Moring Robins House, 1924

#### ABSTRACT

The Henry Moring Robins House, built in 1924, was the home of Henry Moring Robins and his family. Robins, a highly-regarded local attorney, served as mayor of Asheboro from 1907-1909. His father, Marmaduke Swaim Robins, was an educator, state legislator and attorney who in 1876 founded the newspaper that would become Asheboro's modern-day daily, *The Courier-Tribune*. Henry Robins built his house on the site of his father's house, which previously was the home of Alfred Marsh, an important figure in the early history of Asheboro. When the Marsh/Robins house was torn down to make way for the Henry Robins house, pieces of its structure were incorporated into the new house. The Henry Robins house was built by Thomas Jefferson (T.J.) Lassiter, a contractor who constructed numerous houses in Asheboro and worked with a local home building supply company to develop bungalow components that could be shipped elsewhere and rapidly assembled. The Robins House is worthy of landmark designation because of its identification with Henry Robins, an important and beloved figure in early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century Asheboro, and his prominent family, who contributed to the historic, cultural and social development of the City of Asheboro (and in particular, to the development of the Asheboro Public Library); because of its association with its builder, T.J. Lassiter, and his status as a successful entrepreneur whose reach extended beyond Asheboro to the southeastern United States; because of its exemplification of the Colonial Revival architectural style mediated by up-and-coming Craftsman influences, and its high degree of architectural integrity; and because its location in the context of two similar, contemporaneous and highly original Colonial Revival houses immediately to its north provides an outstanding example of an affluent neighborhood in 1920s Asheboro. Although the interior of the Robins House contains many fine and original features, this proposed designation covers only the exterior of the house and its lot (see Appendix A: Henry Robins House Site Plan and Designation Boundary).

#### HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND SIGNIFICANCE

The Marsh-Robins farm once occupied about 50 acres in the area now bounded by Worth, Main and Elm streets in Asheboro, North Carolina. Alfred Henry Marsh (1789-1865) was a prosperous local merchant who operated a store on the courthouse square, which was located at the intersection of present-day Salisbury and Main streets. The northwest corner of Marsh's farm was situated about a block to the south of the square. Marsh also was an investor in the Cedar Falls Manufacturing Company, the first textile mill to operate in Randolph County. He established a significant estate, including a family home built in the early 1830s, on the east side of Asheboro's original north-south axis, Main Street.

After Marsh's death, his heirs sold elements of the estate to Marmaduke Swain Robins (1827-1905), a young Asheboro attorney. Robins and his wife, Annie Moring Robins (1853-1928), occupied the Marsh house. During the Civil War, Marmaduke Robins served as private secretary to Gov. Zebulon Vance. After the war, he served multiple terms in the legislature and, in 1876, established *The Randolph Regulator* newspaper, which is still in publication today as *The Courier-Tribune*. His two-room law office (circa 1860), on the west side of Main Street a

block north of the Marsh/Robins house, is a Randolph County Historic Landmark. Because of Robins' stature in the community as well as his physical appearance, he was called by many "The Lincoln of Randolph County." Marmaduke and Annie reared three boys: Henry Moring (1880-1957), Sidney Swaim (1883-1977) and Marmaduke Jr. (1887-1953).

Sidney Swaim Robins, a Harvard graduate and Unitarian minister, also was an author and historian. He penned the books *Sketches of My Asheboro, 1880-1910*, published in 1972, and *A Letter on Robins Family History* in 1954. In the latter, he describes the Marsh/Robins house. He reports that by the time the Robins family purchased the house, the land was worn out. Annie Robins recalled that at the time she moved in, there were cabins extending down the hill behind the house where enslaved people owned by Marsh had lived.

Sidney's brother Henry followed his father's footsteps and became a lawyer. He joined his father's practice in 1903, when the elder Robins' health began to fail, withdrawing from the University of North Carolina law school to do so. When his father passed away in 1905, Henry Robins took over the practice. During Robins' stint as mayor from 1907-1909, the law office served as Asheboro's first town hall. "While it was my law office it was also the place where the commissioners met, the mayor held court, and where most of the municipal business was transacted," he later stated. When Robins was elected mayor, he received all but one of the 64 votes cast. After leaving office, Robins was encouraged to seek a superior court judgeship, but declined in favor remaining an attorney. He was the longtime president of the Randolph County Bar Association and also served on the State Bar Council. He sat on the county and regional draft boards in World War I, and was a University of North Carolina trustee. He served as a director of First National Bank and of Randolph Hospital Inc. In later years, Robins – an avid reader and regular library patron – served on the Asheboro Public Library Board. He passed away on February 18, 1957. On the day of his funeral, city and county offices closed at noon, and local attorneys closed their practices.

Henry Robins amassed a sizeable estate. He and his wife Margaret Lee (Maggie) Erwin Robins (1879-1954) placed the estate in a trust, with earnings going to their only child to survive to adulthood, Margaret Erwin Robins (1913-1998). Henry's will stated that if Margaret did not use the principle of the trust, it would go after Margaret's death to the Asheboro Public Library Corporation Inc. (now the Asheboro Public Library Foundation). Margaret was a member of the library corporation from 1935-1937. She received a Ph.D. in psychology from the University of California at Berkley, and worked for the state of California as a clinical psychologist. When she passed away in 1998, the substantial trust came to the Asheboro Public Library Foundation, where it has been invested to support the Asheboro library. Henry Robins also left his prodigious book collection to the library; it included his father Marmaduke's collection of now rare books, which are on display in the library's Randolph Room, and a core collection of law books that became the Randolph County Law Library.

When Marmaduke Robins died in 1905, his wife Annie inherited and continued to reside in the Marsh/Robins house (See Appendix B, Chain of Title). In 1916, interest in the house was divided among Annie and her three sons. In 1920, Henry Robins obtained full title to the house from his mother and brothers. Annie Robins continued to live with Henry and his family until her death in 1928.

In 1924, the Marsh/Robins house was torn down to make way for Henry Robins' new home, which was built on the foundation of the older house. "The passing of this landmark brings sadness to the hearts of many of the older residents of the town who have been entertained in true Southern style in the Robins home, but as the times advance, the old must give place to

the new and more modern architecture of the day,” Asheboro’s *Courier-Tribune* newspaper reported in an article on March 6 about the removal of the older house.

The new Robins house was built in the Colonial Revival style by Thomas Jefferson Lassiter, a local contractor born in nearby Farmer. Lassiter built many homes in Asheboro, including the slightly earlier and similar Colonial Revival residence of Walter A. Bunch, who would become another mayor of Asheboro, next door to the north of the Robins house. Lassiter also was known for his expertise in the Bungalow style house, and developed an enterprise with Asheboro’s Home Building and Materials Company in which complete houses were produced, shipped all over the southeast, and assembled under Lassiter’s supervision. Shortly after completion of the Robins house in 1924, Lassiter relocated to Florida, where he worked as a contractor and real estate broker, and later became involved in the citrus industry. He was killed in a car wreck in Fort Pierce, Florida, in 1957.

The house remained in the Robins family until the death of Henry Robins in 1957, when it was acquired by Dr. Hugh Fitzpatrick (1921-2000), a prominent Asheboro physician, and his wife Rachel (1920-2008). In 2007, the house was purchased by its current owners, Dwain Lee Clark and his wife Lois Ann Clark. A detached garage was added behind the house in 1950. Additions include an L-shaped galley kitchen attached to the rear of the house, joined to a carport extending past the north side of the house. Based on receipts from a building supply company found in the house, the homeowner believes that the additions were constructed in 1964 (see Appendix C, Floor Plan). While the 1964 date is likely accurate for the carport, it is possible that the kitchen extension was added earlier, even at the time of original construction. The Walter Bunch house next door to the north (built by Lassiter), and a similar Colonial Revival house to the north of the Bunch house (also built by Lassiter), have similar but not identical extensions. The brick foundation of the Robins house appears uniform under the main house and the extensions. Confirmation that the extensions are original, however, is problematic without destructive investigation. The east-facing rear façade also includes a modern deck and staircase extending from the kitchen addition before it joins the carport. In recent years, the Clarks have worked to restore the house to a state closer to its original condition, and have removed aluminum siding to reveal the 1924 clapboard.

Viewed from the southwest corner of its lot, the house sits on the crest of a hill in Asheboro’s oldest neighborhood. Two distinctive, low stone walls front the south and west sides of the property at the intersection of Main Street and a side street, Marmaduke Circle. The stones that make up the wall were salvaged from the Marsh house’s three stone fireplaces. The front yard includes an original willow oak that is estimated to be over 150 years old. Several large pecan, hemlock and holly trees also are present on the property. Two other Colonial Revival variants built in the same era sit between the Robins house and Worth Street. On the west side of Main Street are earlier vernacular houses and the rear quadrant of the palatial, Classical Revival Charles W. McCrary House, also a Randolph County Historic Landmark.

## **ARCHITECTURAL ANALYSIS**

The Robins house is designed in the distinctive Colonial Revival architectural style. The Colonial Revival style emerged in the early 1800s. There are many identifying features which typically include a gabled roof, clapboard siding, a symmetrical façade, centered entrance, multi-paned windows and a side porch or sunroom. The Colonial Revival style was the domain of

fashionable architectural firms and was the favorite for large homes of wealthy clients. Colonial Revival style homes were extremely popular from 1900 to 1950.

The Colonial Revival style developed as an expression of the reinvigorated spirit of American nationalism spurred on by the Centennial Exposition, held in Philadelphia in 1876. Recalling the straightforward, balanced design of Georgian and Federal buildings, with their symmetrical window placements and pronounced entrances, Colonial Revival homes are truly among the most popular and enduring styles in American architecture.

The Robins House features a symmetrical front façade with a centrally-placed, enclosed pedimented entrance with a French door entering into a formal living room and center hall with stairs. Distinctive multiple-paned casement windows with transoms light the lower floor. These are original; the homeowner reglazed each by hand (the upstairs windows are replacements but retain the appearance of the original ones, and the homeowners have kept and stored the original windows). The south façade includes a sunroom that originally was a sun porch; it was enclosed during the ownership of the Fitzpatricks between 1957 and 2007 (perhaps in 1964, when the carport was added). The sunroom windows are clearly modern but do not detract from the house's historical appearance. The footprints of the original columns supporting the sun porch roof are visible on the floor, which is original. The north façade features a second floor sleeping porch which retains its original beadboard ceiling, as does the sunroom. The original clapboard siding was exposed in 2016 with the removal of aluminum siding.

The galley kitchen at the rear of the house, whether added contemporaneously or more recently, and the carport are subservient and do not detract from the original core of the house.

The interior includes a front library, formal dining room and parlor with a coal burning fireplace, and features plaster and lathe walls, poplar woodwork and picture mold.

Although definitively a Colonial Revival structure, the Robins House was built at a time when Craftsman and English Cottage design had taken root nationwide. Indeed some detailing – such as the enclosed vestibule at the front – could suggest either a Colonial Revival reference to New England designs, or a Craftsman reference to cottage design. The latter is more likely the case, given the clear Craftsman influence in the two Colonial Revival houses to the north. The triple-casing windows suggest a clear Craftsman reference.

The Robins House sits in at the south end of a row of three highly similar Colonial Revival houses built for prominent residents in the same period – the Dr. J.V. Hunter House (ca. 1915), the Walter A. Bunch Jr. House (1919) and the Robins House. The Hunter and Bunch houses each show significant Craftsman influence – deep eaves and hip roofs; wide, deep porches; and, in the case of the Hunter House, exposed rafters under the eaves. Earlier houses on both sides of Main Street to both the north and south reflect a more classic Colonial Revival style. Asheboro at the time was undergoing an explosion of residential development as the modern concept of subdivision began to take hold. In subdivisions envisioned for the less well-to-do, bungalow and cottage style houses predominated. The Hunter, Bunch and Robins houses appear transitional between an era of individualized construction and era in which the economies of building houses with a common plan – as evidenced by the bungalow kits T.J. Lassiter developed with the Home Building and Materials Company – prevailed, even for the houses of prominent community members.

The National Register of Historic Places considers seven factors to determine if a building retains its architectural integrity: location, design, workmanship, materials, association, feeling and setting. Although local historic landmarks do not have to meet National Register standards, it is useful to consider a proposed landmark against those standards.

- **Location, feeling and setting.** The Robins House sits in its original location, which itself is historic given its association with the Alfred Marsh/Marmaduke Robins homeplace. The surrounding houses retain much of their original appearances, and while some have been modernized, no modern houses have been built in the immediate neighborhood. The neighborhood is Asheboro's oldest, and in proximity to the old Courthouse Square where Marmaduke and Henry Robins had their law office. The yard of the Robins House is expansive and contains several older trees, and is defined on its southwest corner by a stone wall laid at the time of the construction of the house. While not on the scale of the McCrary houses around the corner on Worth Street, the Robins House is clearly that of a community leader of the era.
- **Design, workmanship, materials.** The solid Colonial Revival design with elements of Craftsman style reflect the aesthetic of builder T.J. Lassiter, constructing a house that is a step up from his more ordinary bungalows. Lassiter's workmanship is evident in such features as the original siding, triple casement windows and interior woodwork.
- **Association.** The house is associated with Henry Robins, a highly-regarded attorney and an important community leader whose family had a significant impact on the development of Asheboro.

Based on National Register standards, the Henry Moring Robins House retains its architectural integrity.

## SOURCES

“Landmark of Asheboro Being Torn Down,” *The Courier* (Asheboro, N.C.). 6 March 1924, 1.

“Memorial Honors Robins,” *The Courier-Tribune* (Asheboro, N.C.). 4 July 1957, 1.

“Portrait of ‘Lincoln of Randolph’ Unveiled,” *The Courier-Tribune* (Asheboro, N.C.). 31 May 1956, Fourth Section, 6.

“Rites Are Held Wednesday for H.M. Robins.” *The Courier-Tribune* (Asheboro, N.C.). 21 February 1957, 1.

Robins, Sidney Swain. *A Letter on Robins Family History*. Asheboro, N.C.: Randolph County Historical Society, 1954.

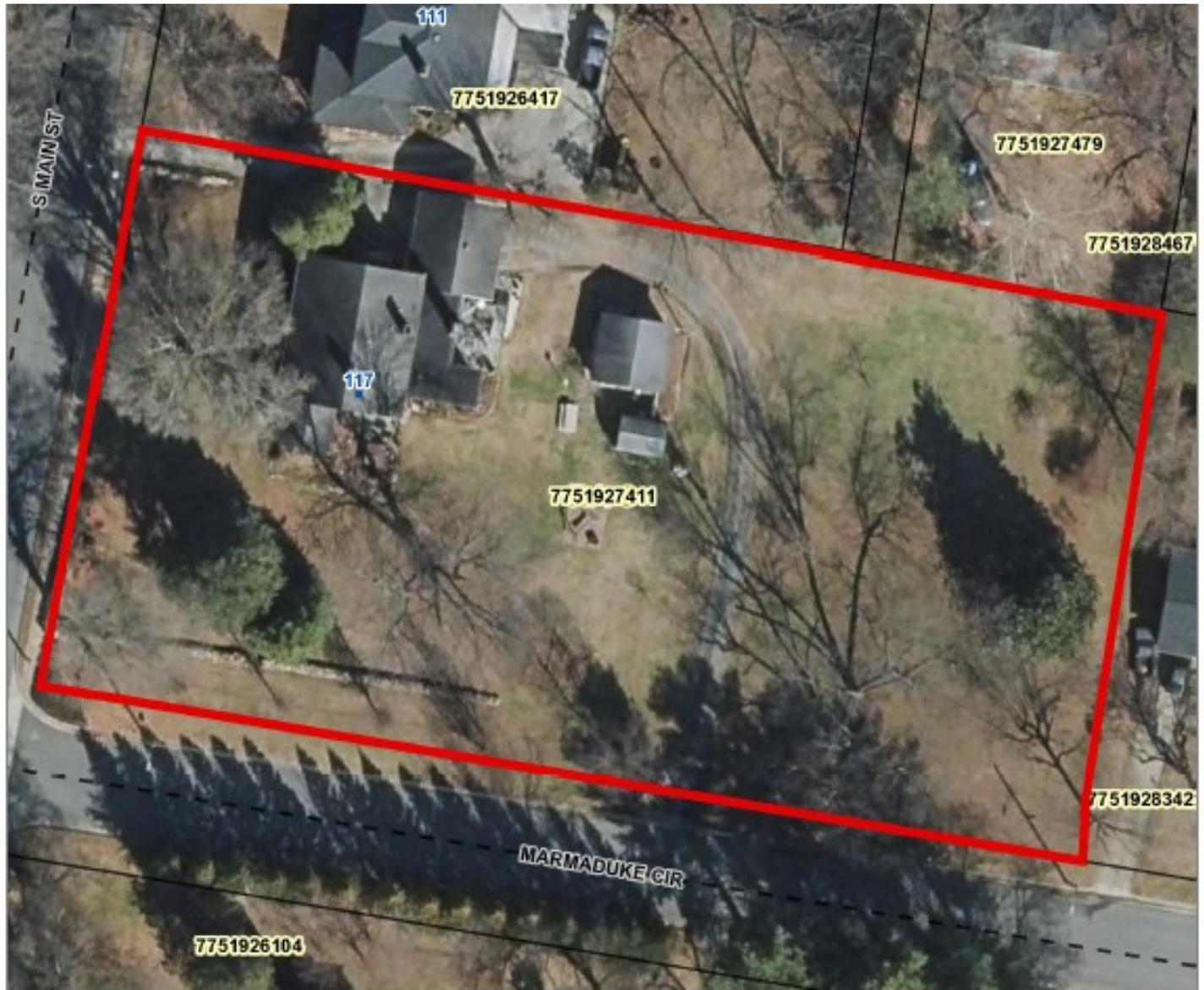
Robins, Sidney Swain. *Sketches of My Asheboro, 1880-1910*. Asheboro, N.C.: Randolph County Historical Society, 1972.

“T.J. Lassiter, Randolph Native Killed in Wreck.” *The Courier-Tribune* (Asheboro, N.C.), 19 August 1957, B10.

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# Appendix A: Henry Moring Robins House

## Site Plan and Designation Boundary



REID	44708	OWNER ADDRESS2	
PIN	7751927411	OWNER CITY	ASHEBORO
TAXED ACREAGE	1.14	OWNER STATE	NC
PROPERTY DESCRIPTION	S MAIN ST;E	OWNER ZIP	27203
DEED BOOK & PAGE	002038/02460	LOCATION ADDRESS	117 S MAIN ST
PLAT BOOK & PAGE		LOCATION ZIP	ASHEBORO,27203
OWNER	CLARK, DWAIN LEE (CLARK, LOIS ANN)	DATA REFRESHED	2/9/2020
OWNER ADDRESS	117 S MAIN ST		



*Disclaimer: This map was compiled from recorded deeds, plats, and other public records and data. Users of this data are hereby notified that the aforementioned public information sources should be consulted for verification of the information. Randolph County, its agents and employees make no warranty as to the accuracy of the information on this map.*

Map Scale  
**1 inch = 50 feet**  
 2/10/2020

## Appendix B: Chain of Title, Henry M. Robins House

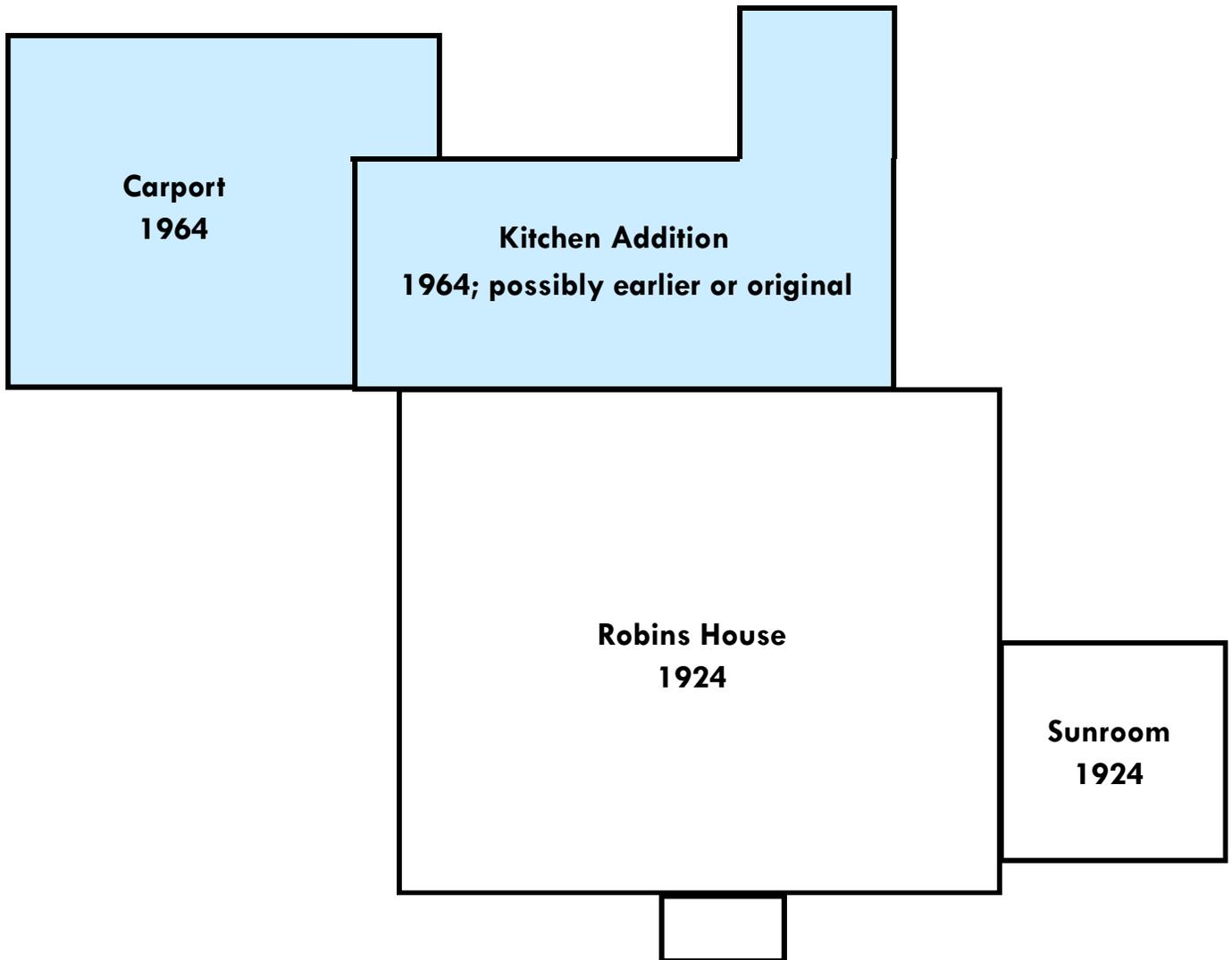
Henry Moring Robins House  
117 S. Main St.  
Asheboro, NC 27203

### Asheboro Township, Randolph County

2007	DB 2038/2460	Rachel L. Fitzpatrick, widow, to Dwain Lee Clark and wife Lois Ann Clark
1957	DB 649/617	H.M. Robins to Hugh Fitzpatrick and wife Rachel L. Fitzpatrick.
1920	DB 190/271	Annie M. Robins, Marmaduke Robins, and Sidney S. Robins and wife Frances L. Robins, to Henry M. Robins.
1916	DB 159/589	Annie M. Robins (widow of Marmaduke S. Robins) to Sidney S. Robins, Marmaduke Robins and H.M. Robins, "in consideration of the conveyance to her of a one-fourth undivided interest... and for the sum of one dollar...."
1873	DB 37/563	Lucien H. Sanders and wife Martha M. Sanders, George W. Thompson and wife Cornelia E. Thompson, and Benjamin Moffitt and wife Martitia E. Moffitt (heirs of Alfred H. Marsh), to Marmaduke S. Robins.
1865		Alfred H. Marsh dies intestate; heirs Cornelia (wife of George Thompson), Martha (wife of Lucien H. Sanders), and James A. Marsh. Writ of dower to widow Sallie Marsh, 1866. Sallie Marsh d. 1872.
1830	DB 19/136	James Elliott to Alfred H. Marsh.
1827	DB 16/86	John Henley Sr. to James Elliott, five lots in the town of Asheborough.

# Appendix C: Henry Moring Robins House Floor Plan

*Original and Additions*





# The Henry Moring Robins House, 1924



*Northwest facade*



*Southwest facade*



*South façade showing rock wall made of chimney stones from former Marsh/Robins house*



*East façade showing L-shaped galley kitchen addition, 1964*



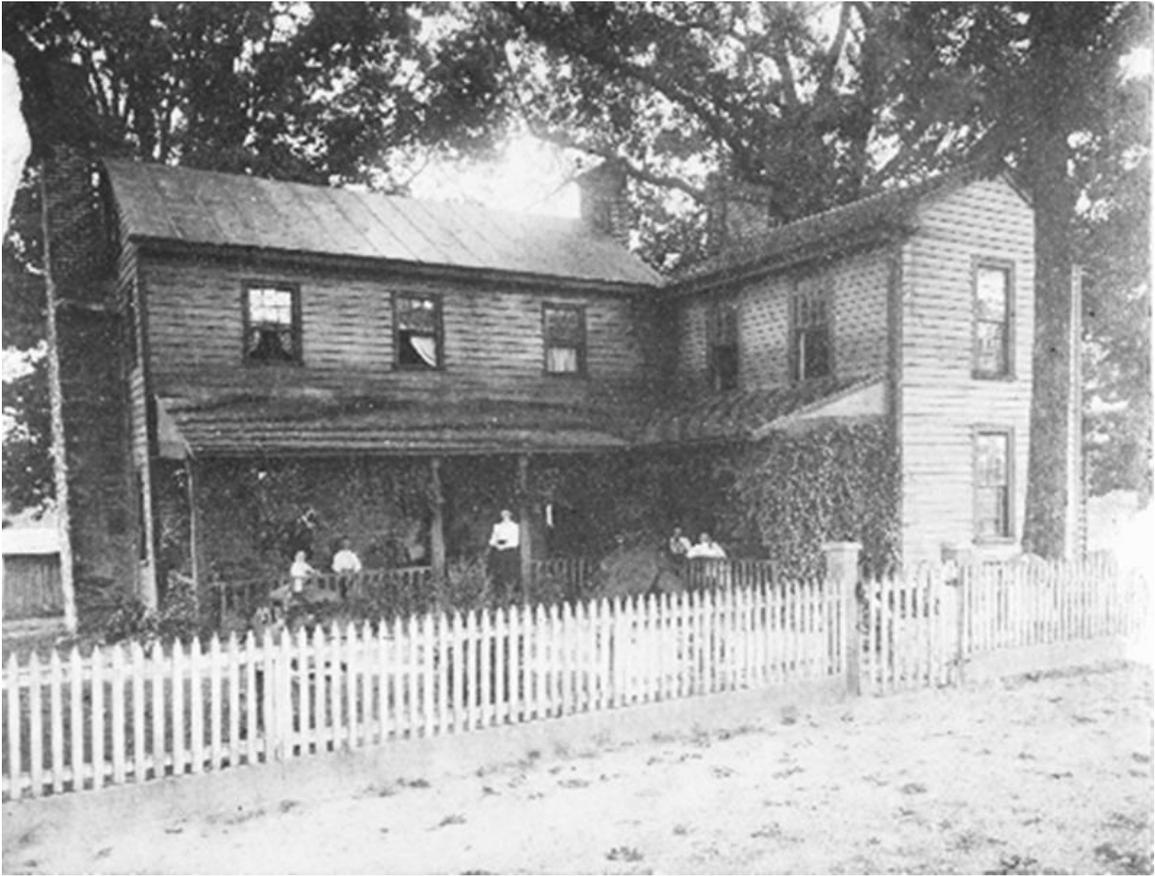
*South façade showing modern deck and staircase, and start of 1964 carport extension*



*North façade*



*Detached garage, circa 1950*

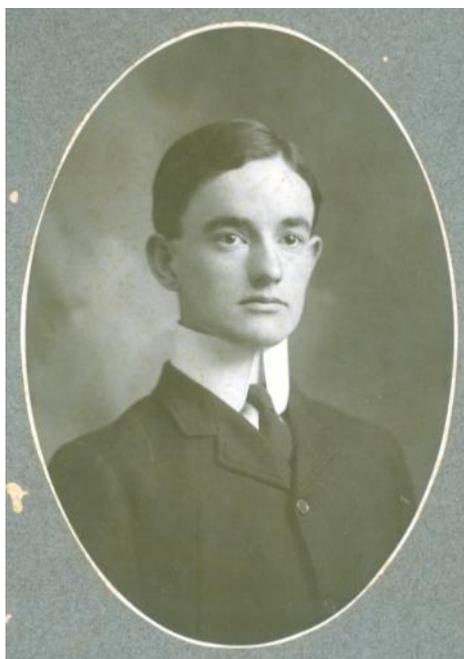
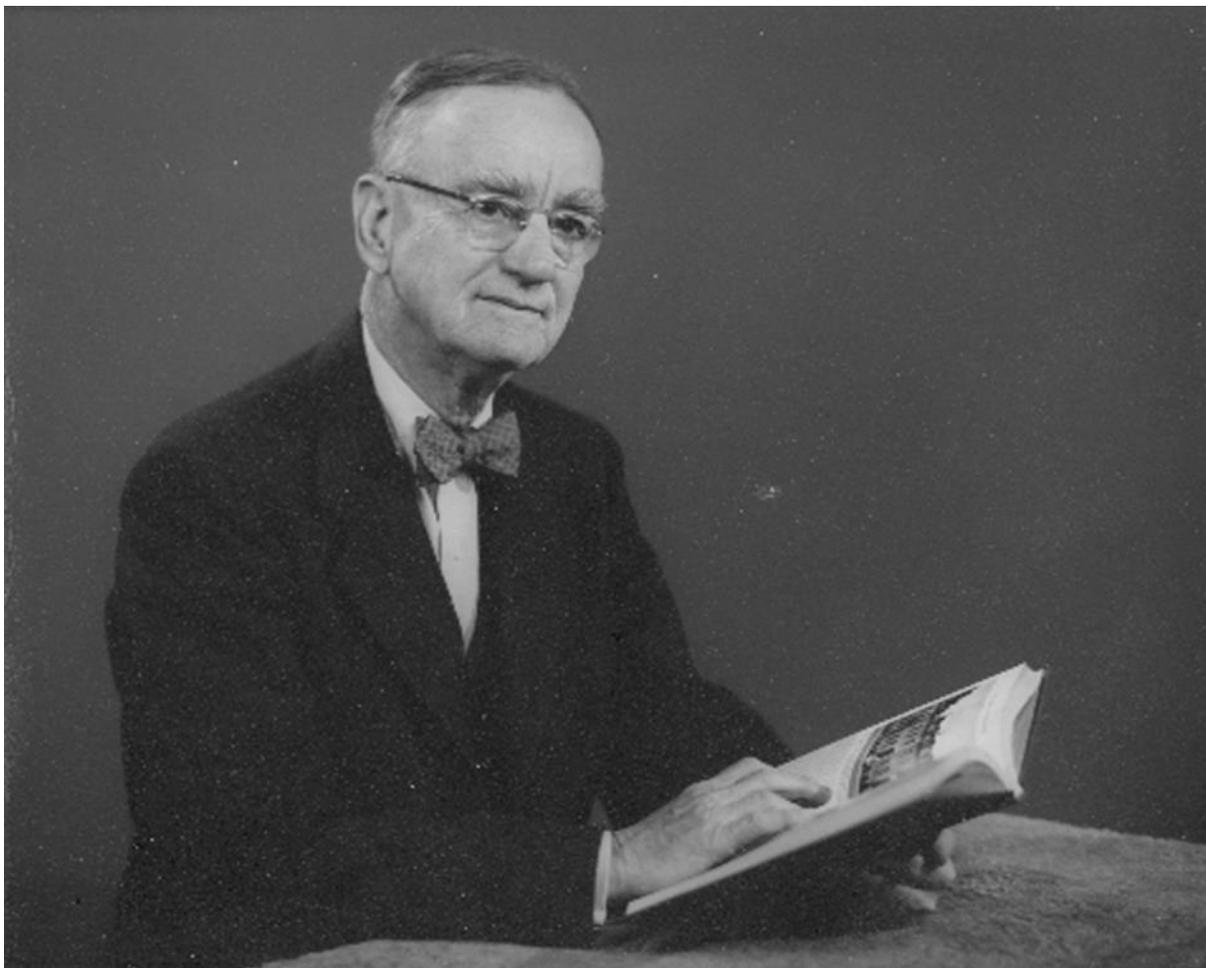


*Alfred Henry Marsh House ca. 1832, later Marmaduke Swaim Robins house*



*Attic beam in Henry Robins house; material salvaged from Marsh house shows Wallpaper from earlier era.*

# Henry Moring Robins, 1880-1957



# Robins Family



*Henry, Sidney and Duke (Marmaduke Jr.) Robins with their mother, Annie Moring Robins at the Marsh/Robins house, 1905*



*Marmaduke Swaim Robins and Annie Moring Robins*



*Henry Robins (left), with his siblings and their spouses*