

LOCAL LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT
Marmaduke Swaim Robins Law Office ca. 1860
131 North Main Street, Asheboro, NC

LOCAL LANDMARK SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY

The Marmaduke Swaim Robins Law Office, a two-room wooden building built around 1860, is the last surviving building on Asheboro's nineteenth century courthouse square. It is currently the oldest building in old Asheboro. Extensive alterations were made to the 14x28 foot building about 1910. A wall that separates the office from a combination law library / consulting room, where bookcases and filing shelves were built around the walls, was torn down during this 1910 renovation. The buildings mortis-and-tenon construction is very sturdy and highlights large pieces of wood designed to fit together much like "Lincoln Logs" secured by wooden pegs. This type of construction allowed for buildings of this Antebellum time to be constructed quickly while maintaining its strength and durability. Inside, markings can still be seen where the dividing wall and bookcases were located. The original building had a fireplace and six windows.

Marmaduke Robins purchased the office lot on August 21, 1874. Mr. Robins was quite active during the Civil War years, as private secretary to Governor Vance, as treasurer of the State Literary Fund (comparable to Commissioner of Education), as a captain in the Home Guard and as Editor of a newspaper, The Raleigh Conservative. Mr. Robins founded and edited the Randolph Regulator newspaper in Asheboro in 1876. The newspaper's name later changed to the Courier and is still published today as the Courier Tribune.

Mr. Robins died in 1905 and his son Henry Moring Robins used the law office as his office to practice law. Mr. Henry Robins served as Mayor of Asheboro from 1907 to 1909, and the law office was used for town meetings. The building was altered and gutted around 1910.

The Randolph Bar Association began an effort to preserve and restore the law office building around 1990. At some point in the law office buildings history it was moved 40 feet from its original location on Main Street. The building was moved back to its original site where it was painted and restored by volunteer work of the Randolph County Bar Association. The building sets on a 2.1 acre site owned by the City of Asheboro. The Asheboro / Randolph County Public Library, along with parking and landscaped water fountains, also is located on this site.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND SIGNIFICANCE

Summarized from Architectural History of Randolph County, 1985, Lowell McKay Whatley, Jr.

The Randolph Room, Asheboro/Randolph Public Library

The Randolph Guide Newspaper, The Bicentennial Report, 1976

This two-room frame structure is the last survivor of the small office buildings and commercial structures which clustered around Asheboro's nineteenth-century courthouse square. Sash saw markings on the mortise-and-tenon structural members indicate a construction date prior to the Civil War; extensive ca. 1910 alterations which gutted the building to produce a woodshed and garage make more exact dating difficult. The office originally fronted the street at its present location perched about six feet above the street. Paired come-and-go steps led up to a small porch sheltering the entrance into the office itself. A partition separated this room from the combination law library/consulting room where the bookcases and filing shelves were built around the walls.

Marmaduke Swaim Robins purchased the office lot on August 21, 1874. He had been seeking new quarters since dissolving his fourteen-year partnership with Samuel S. Jackson on August 1. Jackson's father-in-law, Jonathan Worth, gave the partners his clients and caseload upon leaving Asheboro in 1862 to serve in state government. That same year Robins was elected to the House of Commons from Randolph County and served for a short period during the term as Speaker of the House. He subsequently served four more terms in the state legislature. Robins was quite active during the Civil War years, as private secretary to Governor Vance, as treasurer of the State Literary Fund (roughly comparable to Commissioner of Education), as a captain in the Home Guards, and as Editor of a newspaper *The Raleigh Conservative*. This last position provided experience he put to good use when he founded and edited *The Randolph Regulator* in Asheboro in 1876. The name of this newspaper was later changed to *The Courier* and is still published today as *The Courier Tribune*. After the death of Marmaduke Robins in 1905, the office housed the law practice of his son, Henry Moring Robins, until completion of the new courthouse and the adjacent Lawyer's Row offices in 1909. From 1907 to May, 1909, Henry Robins served as mayor of Asheboro, and the office was the site of the town commissioners meeting, the Mayor's Court, and the transaction of municipal business. In 2010, the building was recognized as a Cultural Heritage Site by the County Historic Landmark Preservation Commission. The building currently sits at its original site on property owned by the City of Asheboro.

STATEMENT OF HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

The Marmaduke Swaim Robins Law Office , ca. 1860, meets local historic landmark criteria as it represents identification with a person who significantly contributed to the cultural, historic, law, educational, and economic development of the City of Asheboro and Randolph County. The unique location of the law building represents an established and familiar visual feature of the City of Asheboro and Randolph County.

The trying days of the Reconstruction era following the War Between the States may have been even more difficult had it not been for the wisdom and fearless outspoken talk and writings of Marmaduke Swaim Robins of Asheboro. For 50 years, Marmaduke Robins was the most outstanding lawyer in Asheboro and an outspoken chronicler of the times.

Born on August 31, 1827, Robins attended schools in the Asheboro area and after teaching for a few years he entered the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, graduating with high honors in 1856. He studied law under the famous Judge Battle and was licensed to practice on December 30, 1856. Because of his debts, accumulated during schooling, he could not immediately enter the practice of law. He had a profound interest in astronomy and mathematics and because of his high grades was offered a position on the Harvard staff of the "Nautical Almanac". However, Robin turned down the offer because he had given his word to the superintendent of Middleton Academy near the Town of Franklinville that he would join the faculty there. He taught at Middleton and later at Science Hill and Washington, N.C. before returning to Asheboro to practice law. He was licensed to practice law in December, 1860.

Robins entered into law practice with Samuel Spencer Jackson, a son-in-law of Jonathan Worth. Worth had turned over his practice to Jackson earlier. At the outbreak of the Civil War, Marmaduke, a bachelor at the time, was selected to stay at home and look after his parents and sisters.

Robins was elected to the State House of Representatives in 1862 and as a freshman legislator served several months as Speaker of the House. He was re-elected to the State Legislature for four more terms, serving in the State Senate in 1876, 1887, and 1885, and in the House in 1883. For a period Robins was also private secretary to Governor Zebulan Vance, wartime governor; and also was editor of "The Raleigh Conservative" newspaper. During the final days of the Confederacy Robins was treasurer of the State Literary Fund which was the beginning of public education in North Carolina.

Robins also served as Captain of the Home Guard in Randolph County, commanding troops who were responsible for rounding up deserters. Once, Robins narrowly escaped death when he was ambushed by a deserter near Franklinville. After the Civil War, Robins was regarded as the central figure in public life in Randolph County. He came within a few votes of being nominated to Congress. On another occasion he missed being elected judge by just a few votes.

On February 2, 1876, Robins founded the "Randolph Regulator" which was a weekly newspaper which had as its motto: "Government was introduced for the good of the governed". This newspaper became the forerunner of the currently existing "The Courier Tribune" newspaper.

A history of the Robins family, written by Sidney S. Robins, states two reasons why Marmaduke Robins was the leading lawyer in Randolph and Moore Counties: Foremost, because of his intimate knowledge of the law; and secondly, because his fees were so small it was hard on the other lawyers. Robins also served as Clerk of Court.

There were many editorial tributes to Marmaduke S. Robins upon his death on June 27, 1905. "Plain, outspoken, and fearless" was the description in one obituary. Another stated: "He stood for what he believed to be right at all times and denounced dishonesty

and corruption in office and elsewhere at all times." The Raleigh News and Observer stated: "No honester man ever lived in North Carolina than Marmaduke Robins".

ARCHITECTURAL INTEGRITY

Sustained efforts to maintain the architectural integrity of the Marmaduke Robins Law Office began in 1979. At this time, the Randolph County Historical Society obtained the assistance of John C. Larson, Director of Restoration, Old Salem, Inc. Mr. Covington inspected the building and provided the Historical Society with a detailed letter expressing his opinion of the architectural wealth of the existing building. Mr. Larson's comments included his amazement that the building has survived and is in remarkably good condition. Offices, shops, and other free standing outbuildings are usually demolished. Mr. Larson emphasized that this particular office building, the last of its type in Asheboro, could make a significant statement on the architecture activities of this time period. Although some new clapboard has been added, restoration of the original windows and door locations is feasible in 1979. Mr. Larson made note that not only does it appear that the exterior of the building could be accurately restored, but the interior is also in such good condition that the location of doors, partition walls, and bookcases could also be established with great confidence. It appeared that with the exception of the baseboard samples all of the architectural details were still in place somewhere in the office building. Particularly important was the one original window and the two paneled door located on the east side of the office. With the information that the office building has to give, Mr. Larson wrote that accurate restoration of the highest order should be very possible.

In 1989, the Randolph County Bar Association adopted the restoration of the Robins Law Office as a community service project that would focus attention on the neglected legal and governmental heritage of the Old Courthouse Square in Asheboro. To maintain the architectural integrity the Bar Association contracted with Building Contractor Brian Provancha for work necessary as a result of the relocation to the original site. The work included stabilizing the building as required for moving; installing a 2" X 10", 16" on center floor system; installation of plywood subflooring; closing in and securing building for controlled access; installing concrete footing and foundation; steps; and finish grade for proper drainage. On June 12, 1991, the building was moved to its present original location.

The 1991 relocation and stabilization was performed in a professional manner and all the alterations were recorded with measurements, drawings, and photographs currently maintained by the Randolph County Planning Department; Randolph County Historical Landmark Commission; and the City of Asheboro Planning Department.

The following is a summary of some of the historical research performed to insure architectural integrity and accurate historical function:

In 1971, Sidney Swaim Robins wrote an autobiographical book entitled "Sketches of My Asheboro". Sidney was the son of Marmaduke Robins. In the book, Sidney wrote about his father's law practice, and mentioned in passing that his father's office was now serving as a garage. Local historian Mac Whatley was in the process of making a model of Civil War Asheboro at this time as part of a school project at Harvard. Whatley wrote to Sidney Robins and asked for more information about the law office. In January, 1973,

Sidney Robins wrote a letter back to Whatley which is now maintained in the records of the Randolph County Planning Department; Randolph County Historic Preservation Commission; and the City of Asheboro Planning Department. Sidney Robins also included with the letter a sketch layout of the law office building as he remembered. In 1973, Whatley took pictures of the building which are included in this landmark report. Sidney Robins wrote in his letter that the building had originally set "high up" above the street. The building had been altered to make it into a model -T garage, with the south end opened up. Originally, the south end was a windowless bookshelf wall. The outline shadow of that bookshelf can still be seen on either side of the wall. The original wall had been opened and a header put up for a set of double doors. The floor joist system had been removed and concrete poured for the garage floor. The single interior partition had been removed at that time, but the shadow of it was very visible. It was not a structural partition, but just one board thick, as was done in many structures of that period. The fireplace mantel had been removed and the fireplace opening boarded up; new weatherboards on the north side covered where the chimney and windows had been. One original exterior door remained on the west side; a door opening on the east side had also been boarded up but was visible. There was some indication of a porch roof over the west side door that had been attached to roof rafter system. In 1991, the building was moved to its original location and to insure structural integrity the western sill which had been cut out for the garage was restored. The new sill was cut to the same size, and dovetailed in place to match the original. One original cross brace on that end was restored and another was reconstructed to match. Weatherboard was used to match east and west sides which still had original weatherboards. The interior floor system was reconstructed for stability, cutting tenons on each joist to fit into the original pockets. A plywood floor was installed over this for stability. The interior partition was not restored, but temporary braces were installed for stability. A crane was used to lift the entire building from the garage site which was about 40 feet west to the new concrete block foundation. A cedar shake roof was installed, which largely matches the original shakes which survived under the later 5-V metal roofing. New windows were milled to match the one surviving old window, and were installed in original interior trim locations. The interior was paneled with wide horizontal flat tongue-and-groove boards, painted a Prussian blue color. Door and window trim was simple unmolded 1" thick lumber. Several pieces of 5 ¼ "pine floor boards about ¾" thick were found during the reconstruction work which are believed to be the original floor boards. None of the interior trim was reproduced, nor were the fireplace or the porches.

It is difficult to know with any assurance what this building looked like prior to its purchase by Marmaduke Robins in 1874. Since it was within 150 feet of the courthouse, it may have always been a law office. Marmaduke went into partnership in 1874 with Samuel Jackson, who was Jonathan Worth's law office partner and son-in-law. It is possible that this building was Jackson's office and previously Worth's law office. It is also possible that this building was originally built to be John Milton Worth's doctor office. Dr. Worth lived at the NE corner of Worth and Cox Streets which is now the location of the public library. Doctor's offices of the time were raised up from the ground to provide privacy and to make the buildings cooler. None of the other offices or outbuildings on this property were raised above the ground. The existing law office has

very similar open eave rafter framing used in the Dr. John Worth residence, ca. 1854. This may provide a good indication of the original date of construction being ca. 1855.

MAPS AND PHOTOS

A Geographical Information System (GIS) air photography map, (produced by the Randolph County Planning Department) of this property reflecting the structure and its relation to nearby streets and other buildings is included with this report. Digital photographs (including a compact disk) have been prepared by the County Planning Department reflecting exterior and interior features. Photographs also include landscape features and physical setting.

HISTORICAL RESEARCH CERTIFICATION

Historical data used for this report will be reviewed in public hearing by the Randolph County Historic Landmark Preservation Commission. A final record of approval will be reflected in the official minutes of the Commission.



Hal Johnson

Chairman, Randolph County Historic Landmark
Preservation Commission

11-10-11

Date