



The Norris House Remembered

By Mary Hunter Schaub

The railroad that runs in front of the Norris House site was begun during the Civil War to allow Chatham County coal to be supplied to the Confederacy. After the war, its purposes were revised to the peaceful pursuit of commerce. The first substantial local enterprise to make use of the railroad was the large lumber firm founded by J. McC. Ellington. Around 1840, he built a house near the railway line, at what is now 100 South Elm Street. As he prospered, he joined with other prominent citizens to develop the rural land into what became the town of Apex. In November, 1880, Mr. J. A. Norris moved to Apex from the Fuquay area because he needed reliable rail access for his lumber and turpentine business. He bought the Elm Street house from Mr. Ellington, and added on the distinctive tower-centered front section, making what we remember as the Norris House.

A 1959 Raleigh Times article reports the Norris House to be "one of the oldest in this area (and) built of heart pine." Mr. Norris "spent many months getting it ready for his family." His wife died when the ten children were very young. Mr. Norris cared for them with the faithful assistance of Uncle John, an African American servant who was both cook and butler. The banquet-sized dining table regularly accommodated 18 or more, and the fine food and gracious atmosphere caused the Norris House to be known locally as "Hospitality Hall." In those early days, Mr. Norris built two large "summer houses" on the spacious front lawn. These were welcoming shelters for visiting businessmen or friends whose horses were cared for in the lot behind the main house. The picket fence bordering the front lawn was built soon after the Civil War by a Yankee soldier working his way back north. Mr. Norris gave him room and board and a small weekly wage while he constructed the fence. There was a hand-carved gate between posts topped by massive carved knobs.

A 1949 article by Mabel S. Lassiter provides wonderful details on the house. The main section was two stories high, with nine rooms, three halls, and four first-floor porches. In the Victorian tradition, the porches were decorated with delicate

ornamental woodwork. The central tower rose to about a four-story height, crowned by a shingled cupola. Stairs gave access to the tower's third floor, and then ladders allowed the venturesome to ascend into the cupola where two porticos were enclosed with balustrades. Directly above the symmetrical second story windows, a pair of matching squared dormers flanked the tower. The large center entrance hall was hooded by a gothic arch, and opened into a diagonal hall that extended across the entire house. It was enclosed by "huge beveled doors whose locks still hold the original keys." A breezeway connected the distant kitchen with the servants' quarters. In its prime, the Norris House was lavishly furnished. Many of the pieces were made from black walnut grown on neighboring tracts of land. Attention on one's entry was immediately drawn to the massive walnut newel post supporting the stair railings. A six-inch walnut cornice edged in gilt crowned the top course next to the ceilings, and that decorative design was repeated over the tall, slender windows. These floor-length windows were fitted with interior shutters with movable slats. Miss Maude Norris told Mabel Lassiter, "In those days, there were no screens, so people just walked in and out the (first floor) windows as they would through doors. Too, more light came through windows reaching to the floor surface." The walls were white plastered, and there were eight fireplaces with handmade mantels. Two large brick chimneys extended above the roof level and across about two-thirds of the windowless end walls of the house's front section. Old masters' prints framed in gilt and walnut decorated the walls. There was a profusion of marble-topped tables and old-fashioned hat stands. Among the handmade chairs was a "quaint high-back rocker in constant use for over half a century, constructed with a space to fit the head and the curve of the shoulders." An antique oil lamp with frosted rose glass shade was suspended from the ceiling by slender brass chains.

Not all of these grand relics of the past are gone. A splendid photograph taken by Buddy Holland in the late 1960's shortly before the Norris House was destroyed hangs above the Maynard Pearson House mantel in what is rightly termed "the Norris parlor." That parlor's furniture comes from the Norris House, as do all the dark shutters and two porch balusters. Maude's pedal-operated sewing machine is also on display. A Wheeler and Wilson, a forerunner of the more famous Singer, it was the first sewing machine in this area. Maude was a gifted