

From Working Class to Student Housing: The 200 Block of North Randolph Street



HERE WAS A TIME when many small towns in America had just two principal streets: Main Street and Back Street. So we're told by Winifred Hadsel in her exhaustively researched and entertainingly written book *The Streets of Lexington* (Rockbridge Historical Society, 1985).

In 1778, however, amid the patriotic fervor of the Revolutionary War, Lexington's Back Street was renamed Randolph Street by James McDowell, the county surveyor. McDowell named many of the just-chartered town's streets and lesser roads in commemoration of Revolutionary War politicians and soldiers such as Washington, Jefferson, Patrick Henry, Thomas Nelson and Peyton Randolph — although all those men had scant connection with Lexington, or none.



Randolph

Although it was technically named for Randolph, Mrs. Hadsel notes that for a long time it was generally called Back Street, not only colloquially but in tax and property transfer records.

Peyton Randolph (c. 1721–75) was born and educated in Williamsburg

and became president of every important Revolutionary organization in Virginia. When he was elected to the Continental Congress in 1774, he was unanimously elected president of that, too.



Preston

John Thomas Lewis Preston (1811–90), a founder of Virginia Military Institute and sometimes called its father, acquired much of the land in what are today the 200 and 300 blocks of Randolph Street. Later, John Sheridan began buying properties from Preston. Sheridan (1847–1929), was an Irish immigrant who speculated in land, built a thriving livery business in town, and became a civic leader.



Sheridan

For more than a century, the capstone of Randolph Street buildings was the Sheridan House, at 201 North Randolph, built in 1893. The house burned in 2016, the victim of careless smoking by students, and in 2023, after preservation efforts faltered, the remnants were demolished, to the consternation of local historians.

Sheridan had developed some of his land in the area, called for

unknown reasons Diamond Hill, specifically for the town's African American community, and that became its trademark for much of the 20th century, although it was never monolithic. For a time it was known casually and in some official records as Freedman's Hill.

In the 1970s, Paul M. Penick and others began buying properties in the neighborhood, with a strategy of renting them to Washington and Lee University students. Yet family ownership continues in the block, and not just through inheritance; Black and white families choose to live there among the students. Today that mix is the dominant characteristic of the neighborhood.

This article looks at six homes in that single block of Randolph Street,



The Sheridan House at 201 North Randolph, built in 1891, demolished in 2016

fittingly through the eyes of W&L students, who submitted research papers on the individual houses' history and architectural traits as part of advanced art history courses taught by the late Pamela Hemenway Simpson (who was a president and prime mover of both Historic Lexington Foundation and the Rockbridge Historical Society.)*

* Noting that landlords who rent to students are not prone to making substantial improvements or more than basic upkeep, one student researcher wrote: "While the students are adding to the social history . . . they are definitely not adding to the structural history" [Jennings]. Students sometimes give houses or rooms nicknames like Amityville, The Pit and Blair Witch.

204 NORTH RANDOLPH



THE LOT ON WHICH the house sits was bought and sold frequently after the Civil War. John Sheridan acquired it, without a building on it, in 1911, then sold it to Leo Sheridan, one of his and Sarah Sheridan's six children, in 1915. In 1921 John bought it back from Leo. Meanwhile, a house had apparently been built on it – the as-

essment went up dramatically, by \$1,000.

The house is built of white hollow concrete blocks, called rockface – the only house of that type on the block – and has a clapboard back porch. The front has a porch with four white columns. Inside are a huge foyer, almost large enough to be a room itself; a parlor; a dining room; two bedrooms; and a kitchen.

Alice Harrell, W&L Class of 1990



204 North Randolph Street

205 NORTH RANDOLPH



THE HOUSE HERE was built in 1874 by John Lam, who acquired the land from J. T. L. Preston. (The deed describes the location as on Shields Hill, so-called



205 North Randolph Street

because George Washington Shields, a 19th-century builder, lived in the neighborhood.) Lam, a contractor, likely built the house himself. It was substantially enlarged just before World War I, after it was acquired by Erastus C. Root, a retired cabinet-maker and Baptist minister.

The two-story frame house has a living room, dining room, parlor and two bedrooms. It has a full limestone basement with a separate entrance. A door on the second floor suggests that there was an upper porch at one time. The back porch was enclosed and Palladian windows were added to the second story, perhaps in an attempt to emulate Blandome, the formidable Italianate house.

Carrie Jennings, Class of 1990



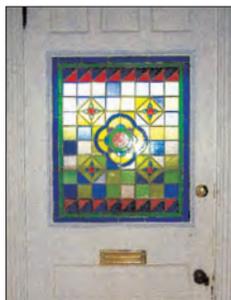
207 NORTH RANDOLPH



207 North Randolph Street

BY LEGEND, William Alexander (1738–96), father of Archibald (president of Hampden-Sydney college and later the first professor at Princeton Theological Seminary), built a frame house in 1796 at the west edge of Lexington, on land that soon thereafter became the new campus of Washington College. Seven decades later, when it came time to build a suitable residence for General and Mrs. R. E. Lee, rather than demolish the modest Alexander house at the corner of the campus, college trustees allowed it to be moved intact to Diamond Hill.

One report suggests that John Sheridan was behind the move. He had been born in 1847, however (emigrating from Ireland to America in 1857), so he would have been no more than 20 years old when the Lee House was begun.



Door

In any event, an 1877 town map shows a house at 207 North Randolph Street, and the residence there today appears to have been built before that date, so the assumption that the house at 207 is the 18th-century Alexander house, moved in 1867 from the college campus, may have merit.

William L. Price (1869–1948), butler to Custis Lee while Lee was president of Washington and Lee University, bought the house and lot in 1893. Custis Lee is said to have lent Price the \$755 purchase price. Price and his heirs lived there until 1998. It remains a private residence today.

The house has been substantially altered, although it retains a number of pre-Civil War characteristics, such as wooden pegs used to secure the attic frame. A new wall and paint (covering plaster) obscure some of the original details. Rooms upstairs were added at some point, with porches perhaps turned into interior rooms. In the course of the renovations, ornate arches seem to have been added, and fireplaces may have been ordered from a catalogue. In short, it became a collage of styles.

Amanda Askew, Class of 2008

208 NORTH RANDOLPH



T. L. PRESTON still owned the lot at 208 North Randolph in 1877 when DeWitt Clinton Masters built a house on it, although Masters bought the land soon after. The house, which has had 11 owners in all, blacks and whites alike, is an outstanding example of Lexington's 19th-century vernacular (amateur) building tradition as well as the progression of middle-class housing in town.

The original building was a simple two-story house in set on a brick foundation and laid out in the locally popular I-form. Its architecture is predominantly Gothic Revival, not unlike the Manse on White Street, but with touches of Federal and Victorian style as well. The Manse and 208 both closely resemble A. J. Downing's drawing of a farmhouse in his 1847



Bannister



Moulding



208 North Randolph, top; A. J. Downing's country cottage in his 1847 book *Cottage Residences*

book *Country Residences*. Once Masters owned the property outright, he added a rear section, assessed at \$400, twice the cost of the original construction. Today's front porch is a replacement, not original.

Stylistic features such as the moldings around the doors and windows tie 208 to other houses on the block (and throughout Lexington). Another interesting design feature is the



Gable window

arched sash windows in the front and rear gables.

The house, in earlier years owned by white families, was bought by Gustavus

Jackson in 1905, a barber at his brother's shop on Jefferson Street. Jackson and his wife lived in the house until their deaths in 1959 and 1964, when it returned to white ownership. Today it is rental stock aimed at Washington and Lee students.

Caroline B. Amport, Class of 1998

209 NORTH RANDOLPH



THE HISTORY of this house is mired in uncertainty. Col. Preston and his wife, Margaret Junkin Preston, known as the poetess of the Confederacy, owned the land from at least the 1860s and in 1875 sold it to Edward Hefrin, a stonemason and Irish immigrant. The deed mentions no structure, but neighborhood tradition and the



209 North Randolph Street

house's architectural style both indicate that it has been there a long time.

In 1941 the house was acquired by sisters Bessie and Katie Grinstead, who rented it out, and by the late 1960s it had evolved into student housing. In 1978, however, it was bought for use as a private home, in contrast to much of the neighborhood, and resold in 1982 for the same purpose, which continues today.



Knob and plate

Architecturally, like some others in the block, 209 is a plain I-style house with a large room on each side of a central hallway and bedrooms on the upper floor. Also like others in the block, it has a full limestone basement. Simple in its main elements, it has some interesting flourishes on the front porch, with a Federal door; side and top windows; and a fancy doorknob plate inside and out.

Dating the house precisely is an impossible task. The chimney has

"1795" painted on one brick, but it's farfetched to believe it is that old, given its style (and its location, which would have been inexplicably remote then). The I-style architecture and Federal ornamentation narrow the likely period of construction to the decades of the 1820s or '30s, when they were predominant design traits in Rockbridge.

Kathleen Kelly, Class of 1991

216 NORTH RANDOLPH



ESEMBLING others architecturally in the neighborhood except smaller, the house at 216 North Randolph was built before 1877, when land records first note a building on the land and owned by Jacob V. and Matilda B. Hazelwood Grinstead. (See the next page.) They left it to their unmarried daughters Bessie and Katie (who later also bought 209 North Randolph, directly across the street). The sisters owned the house until 1969, after which it changed hands in 1972, 1974, 1986, 1989 and 1992.

In that last year it became a rental house for W&L students and was passed down by members of Lambda



216 North Randolph Street

Chi Alpha fraternity for more than a decade until women students rented it and announced their plan to paint the inside pink.

The original cottage-style house was expanded, probably in the 1950s, giving it the characteristics of a roomier bungalow.

Jacqueline Dibiasie, Class of 2009

THE GRINSTEADS

The Grinstead family owned more property for longer in the 200 block of North Randolph than anyone since J. T. L. Preston.

Jacob Valentine Grinstead, the patriarch, was born near Abingdon, Va., in 1847, moving to Lexington after the Civil War. A contractor as a young man, in middle age he studied law at Washington and Lee University and in 1895 became “an industrious and energetic member of the Lexington bar,” as the Rockbridge County News wrote in his obituary.

Matilda Bowyer was born in Fincastle in 1845, and married Jacob Grinstead in 1868, moving with him to Lexington. She died in 1914 in their home on Randolph Street.

The Grinsteads had four daughters. One died in infancy and one married and spent most of her life in Atlanta. Bessie (1878–1966) and Katie Grinstead (1886–1967) never married and lived in Lexington, where they managed the family real estate holdings, which included rental properties on Diamond Hill and downtown.

FOR RENT — Large house on
Randolph Street. Bungalow on
Ruff Lane and House on Maury
Street for rent. Bessie Grinstead.
1-10 1t*

*Classified advertisement
in the Lexington Gazette,
January 10, 1962*