

Leslie-Alford-Mims House, Wake Co., NC

The Wake County, NC, local historic landmark that is the subject of this article was once owned by George Benton Alford, the uncle of AAFA's first President, Lodwick Alford, AAFA #11. George Benton was born and died in Holly Springs, a town he helped redevelop after its devastation following the Civil War. He was the first of the seven children of Green Haywood Alford and Rebecca Jones. "George Benton Alford, 1845-1924," was published in *AAFA ACTION* December 1990, pp. 32-33, 54. It included two short biographies of George, one published in the early 1900s and one shortly after his death on 5 April 1924. We also published a biography of his father, "Biography: Green Haywood Alford," *AAFA ACTION*, March 1989, pp. 22-23.

Note from Lodwick Alford: George Benton Alford was generally called Benton. His brothers and sisters always spoke of him as "Bent," while friends spoke of him as "G. Bent."

Historic House Declared Landmark

By Shirley Hayes, Staff Writer

NEIGHBORS

Southwest Wake County, NC
Week of Oct. 2-Oct. 8, 1996

The handsome Leslie-Alford-Mims house which stands at the heart of Holly Spring and has figured into much of the town's history, has been designated a historic landmark in Wake County.

Final action granting landmark status to the 26-room Greek Revival styled mansion, built about 1840, came Tuesday night when the Holly Springs town board approved a request from the Wake County Historic Preservation

Commission to designate the house a local historic landmark.

Dan Turner of Fuquay-Varina, who describes himself as the unofficial historian of southern Wake County, was commissioned by Edwin Mims, present owner of the property, to request the historic site classification. Turner has also submitted an application and documentation to have the Leslie-Alford-Mims house placed on the National Register of Historic Places. He said the state's review committee will decide in January whether to refer the application to the U.S. Department of the Interior for a final decision.

The Leslie-Alford-Mims house stands on a 13.33-acre tract of land which includes the five natural springs and holly trees from which the town took its name.

While the sprawling, white mansion is well-known to longtime Holly Springs residents and even to many newcomers who could hardly miss so stately a mansion so centrally located, few residents, old or new, have ever been inside the house.

Mims, 78, a silver-haired man with a courtly manner, lives a quiet life in the big house. He has never married.

For many years he ran a store, first a dry store and later an antique shop, about a block from his home. These days he helps out at Larry Dewar's florist and antique store on Main Street.

Mims is grandson of the second owner of the big white house, George Benton Alford and his second wife, Texanna Alford. He remembers his family moving into the big house to live with his grandmother when he was eight or nine years old.

Mims left Holly Springs to attend colleges, first in New York City, then in California. His interests were in liberal arts, English and music. He subsequently lived in Florida before returning to his home town and the big house where his mother still lived around 1950.

Throughout its history the Holly Springs community has experienced periods of prosperity followed by periods of decline. Always the Leslie-Alford-Mims house has figured prominently in the times good or bad.

The house was built around 1840 by Archibald Leslie of Scottish descent, described by Turner as "a prominent Holly Springs businessman and tailor."

At that time the community of Holly Springs stood at the crossroads of Fish Dam and Avent Ferry roads.

Leslie married Isabelle Rogers, the daughter of a prominent local family, built a house and a store and established a tailoring business at the crossroads.

According to Turner's history, a bustling village which came to be known as Holly Springs grew up around the store. Leslie also served as postmaster from 1849 until 1859.

"As a successful business man and as one of the leading citizens of the area, Leslie built a substantial house which would reflect his status in the community," Turner writes.

Turner continues:

"By 1860 the village of Holly Springs consisted of five stores, a large church and a Masonic lodge, all surrounded by a community of prosperous farmers; the Civil War ended this period of prosperity. In April 1865, Sherman's

army reached Holly Springs and created havoc in the village, roaming the countryside in foraging parties.

"Col. W.J. Palmer of the Union Army appropriated the Leslie home for about two weeks as headquarters of the Fourteenth Army Corps.

"As with the rest of North Carolina, Holly Springs was devastated by the war and

Reconstruction which followed. The impact was exacerbated by construction of what became the Seaboard Air Line Railroad through the neighboring hamlet of Apex,

drawing business and residents away from Holly Springs. By 1871 Holly Springs was described as a "deserted village."

Then came the colorful and wealthy George Benton Alford who moved his mercantile business from Middle Creek Township to Holly Springs and was instrumental in beginning an economic revival in the town.

Turner writes of Alford that he was a civic minded individual, serving at various times as a justice of the peace and county commissioner. A progressive business-

man with a dream of making Holly Springs into an industrial city, he is credited with being largely responsible for the village becoming something of a boom town

at the turn of the century.

Alford bought the imposing Leslie house and enlarged it, more than doubling the floor space, in 1876. He enlarged a second time in 1900.

He loved to entertain, Turner's research has indicated. So in remodeling his home he included a ballroom with a small gallery for an orchestra.



The Leslie-Alford-Mims house about 1900, in a rare, snowy scene. The oldest part of the building dates back to 1840.

"If there is another house of the period in Wake County that has a ballroom, I don't know about it," said Turner.

The oversized porte cochere was planned to accommodate four carriages arriving at once for the fancy balls the Alfords held.

According to Turner, Alford "had his hand in every pie around." Among his

numerous business interests were a general mercantile store, a sawmill, a cotton gin and the Holly Springs Land and Improvement Company which, among other things, was to

build and operate cotton mills.

In 1899 he founded the Cape Fear and Advertising Company which published the Cape Fear Enterprise, which Turner writes was "the voice of Alford's single-minded attempt to build up the town."

In 1898 he and 20 other prominent men in the community received a charter of incorporation from the General Assembly for the Cape Fear and Northern Railroad. Alford was its first president.

Alford also sought to capitalize on the area's natural beauty and

resources by developing the springs into a resort. The large 1900's addition to his home was designed as guest



Ed Mims, the house's owner, in front of the columned porches that show the influence of the Greek Revival style.

quarters to accommodate visitors to the springs.

Alford was a Confederate veteran, having served as a private in Company I, 41st Regiment North Carolina State Troops (3rd Regiment, North Carolina Cavalry). It was his leadership of the local United Confederate Veterans troop and his devotion to keeping alive the achievements and sacrifices of the 41st regiment that Alford earned his honorary title of colonel. And it was Alford who erected the handsome monument to the Wake County Confederate veterans in front of his house. [The monument was unveiled on 25 Oct 1923, less than six months before his death.]

Alford died in 1924 and was buried in the family cemetery by the springs. The house continued to be occupied by his widow Texanna Alford, until her death in 1938. The house then was inherited by her daughter, Delcie, who lived there for many years with her husband Marcus E. Mims. It was after Mims' death that Edwin Mims returned to Holly Springs to live in the big house with his mother.

Their son, Ed Mims, has preserved the house in its 1900's condition. About the only change, according to Turner, was the addition of bathrooms in the 1950's.

Turner said true value is added to the house as a historic site because almost no changes have been made in its basic structure and design through the years.

He said the original house and the 1876 addition as well as the 1990 addition are each faithfully representative of the periods in which they were constructed.

All of the historical research on the Mims house was done by volunteers.

Turner expressed appreciation to staff members of the North Carolina Division of Archives for technical assistance: Steven Massengill, head of the non-textural materials unit and James Sorrell, registrar, who is an Alford family descendant.

Past Visible in Holly Springs

By Treva Jones, Staff Writer

THE NEWS & OBSERVER
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Holly Springs—Hang a right off N.C. 55, the main drag through the once sleepy southern town of Holly Springs, and there at 100 Avent Ferry Road is a sight out of time.

The Leslie-Alford-Mims House, a Greek Revival style house named for the succession of families who have owned it since it was built about 1840, crowns a low hill. In a town where new housing developments are popping up like spring dandelions, the house is a tangible piece of town history.

On its grounds are the five natural springs for which the town was named. A war memorial monument with familiar local names graces one side of the front yard. A slightly sagging porte-cochere—like a carport for horses and carriages in a bygone era—stretches out to the side. Now draped with rambling wisteria, it recalls days when the house was a center of social and political life.

"I want to see it preserved," said Hubert Edwin "Ed" Mims, 78, the current owner and only resident of the sprawling 32-room house.

To that end the Leslie-Alford-Mims house recently was listed as a Holly Springs Local Landmark Property by

the Holly Springs Town Board, on the recommendation of the Wake County Historic Preservation Commission. That, in itself, made a little history. The house is the first local landmark property designated in Holly Springs.

And a listing on the National Register of Historic Places, an honor conveyed by the National Park Service, is in the works and should be announced within a few months, said Robin Quinn, Wake County preservation planner.

The historic designations won't guarantee that the house won't ever be razed, but they will make people more aware of the house's historic status.

If demolition is threatened, the commission requires a 365-day delay, to give owners and preservationists time to look for buyers or find an acceptable alternative.

Also, the local landmark designation will require the owner to have exterior changes reviewed by the commission or its preservation planners.

That satisfies Mims, who said the house will be inherited by his nephew. And it pleases Dan Turner, the architectural consultant who researched the history and prepared the documents needed for the designations.

"The county is changing so much," Turner said. "So much of our heritage is being erased before our eyes."

Turner said getting the historical designations for the house is an important step for Holly Springs.

"There are a lot of new residents, as well as long-time residents, that are interested in preserving the heritage of the town," Turner said.

For Mims, now a semi-retired storekeeper, there has been little change. He keeps the interior of the house the way it was when his mother died nearly 30

years ago. Being the private individual that he is, he doesn't invite strangers in to look around.

Outside, the house has undergone changes since the first section was built about 1840 by Archibald Leslie, a Holly Springs businessman and tailor. Leslie married the daughter of a local family, built a country store, and established his tailoring business there at the crossroads of Fish Dam and Avent Ferry Roads, near the group of five natural springs. He built the house for his bride, and the town grew up around the store.

The three-story house has columns supporting first- and second-story porches and a widow's walk on top. The first floor includes a ballroom with a small alcove for musicians. The house was reportedly the scene of many grand parties. The community was devastated by the Civil War and Reconstruction, and a railroad went through neighboring Apex, drawing activity away from Holly Springs. After Sherman's soldiers came through in 1865, the Leslie home briefly was taken over as an Army headquarters, Turner learned in his research.

In 1875, George Benton Alford moved a mercantile business to Holly Springs and started an economic upsurge. He bought the house and added an east wing and a kitchen. About 1900, he added the West wing and portecochere, to accommodate visitors to the springs.

Alford, who helped get Holly Springs incorporated in 1877, was an entrepreneur, running a store, a sawmill, a cotton gin, and a land improvement company. He founded a company that published a newspaper, and he helped form a railroad that later became the Durham and Southern.

A Confederate veteran, he led a local veterans group and erected the war monument in front of the house in 1923.

When he died in 1924, Alford was buried in the tiny family cemetery by the springs. His widow lived in the house until she died and her daughter, Delcie Mims inherited it. Delcie Mims or members of her family have resided there since.

The Rest of the Story

By Lodwick Alford
Past President, AAFA

The newspaper articles about the old Leslie-Alford-Mims House are very interesting for what they do not tell. First there is controversy about when the house was first built. The clipping says it was built about 1840. But I have a brochure prepared by the official Wake County American Revolution Bicentennial Commission which says it was first built about 1817.

George Benton Alford, the owner of the house for many years, was my oldest uncle and at the time of his death in 1924 he had two grown children. But he did not have a will! My understanding is that NC law at that time was very clear that the widow of a man who died intestate got all his property and his children got nothing. The widow was his second wife, Mrs. Texanna O. Collins, who had four children by her first husband. His two children by his first wife, Charlotte Ann Olive who died in 1897, got absolutely nothing.

Following his death in 1924, his children sued for a portion of his property. There followed a bitter court battle, but in the end a jury had to follow the law and his children came away empty. It was a sensational case in Wake County with great interest and newspaper headlines.

In 1960 the last of Uncle Benton's children died, Green Haywood Alford

II, who left me the walking stick handed down from my great, great grandfather James Lodwick Alford. [See "Wakefield's Walking Cane," AAFA ACTION September 88, p. 13.] Haywood's older sister Mattie had died in 1955 and is buried there in Holly Springs. Neither one had any heirs.

It is not clear how just one of Texanna's children, Delcie Collins Mims, got possession of the property. In 1977 when I first started to visit NC for family research, with a brother and a sister we visited Ed Mims in Holly Springs. Needless to say, the Mims and Alfords had not been friendly over the years, and Ed was wary of us. But over the years I gradually won his confidence and the last time I went up to NC he even showed me inside the old house. It was interesting because my father had visited there many times after he came to Georgia in 1885.

If the children of Uncle Benton had inherited the house and neither of them left any heirs, perhaps I would have gotten possession of the old house as I did the walking cane. Alas, it was not to be. Thus did this old historical house pass out of the hands of the Alford family. PITY!

Update, June 1999: The house is now on the National Register of historic houses as well as the state and county list of historic places. It is projected to be restored to its original state with work to begin in the near future. Edwin Mims is still living and has not yet deeded the house over to his nephew but that is expected shortly. ♦

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