



Isaac Hunter's Tavern

Uncovering and Preserving North Carolina's Lost History

BY HEATHER LEAH

PHOTO: STATE ARCHIVES OF NORTH CAROLINA

When you walk into the lobby of the North Raleigh Hilton, you are walking on the very footprints of our city's founders. Beneath those floors rests the original foundation of Isaac Hunter's Tavern, a modest wooden cabin with a tin roof built in the 1700s that was so loved by North Carolina's most important and influential men that they decided the state capital should be built no more than ten miles away.

In 1788, the North Carolina General Assembly drafted a resolution determining the state's new capital. The unalterable seat of government was fixed within 10 miles of their favorite local haunt: Isaac Hunter's Tavern.

It seems a mystery, then, why such a memorable part of our state's legacy has been lost and, by many, forgotten. The tavern has been shuffled around, torn down and rebuilt, lost in the sands of time then rediscovered—only to again be forgotten.

Soon, however, the public may finally be able to view artifacts and pieces of the tavern, itself. Thanks to the Wake County Historical Society (WCHS) and property owners Dewitt Carolinas, the tavern may

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finally get the historic recognition and remembrance it deserves.

A HISTORIC CHAMELEON IS HARD TO FIND

Piecing together clues from the tavern's history is like putting together a jigsaw puzzle of flapping fish. There are a million different stories, and the oral history changes over time.

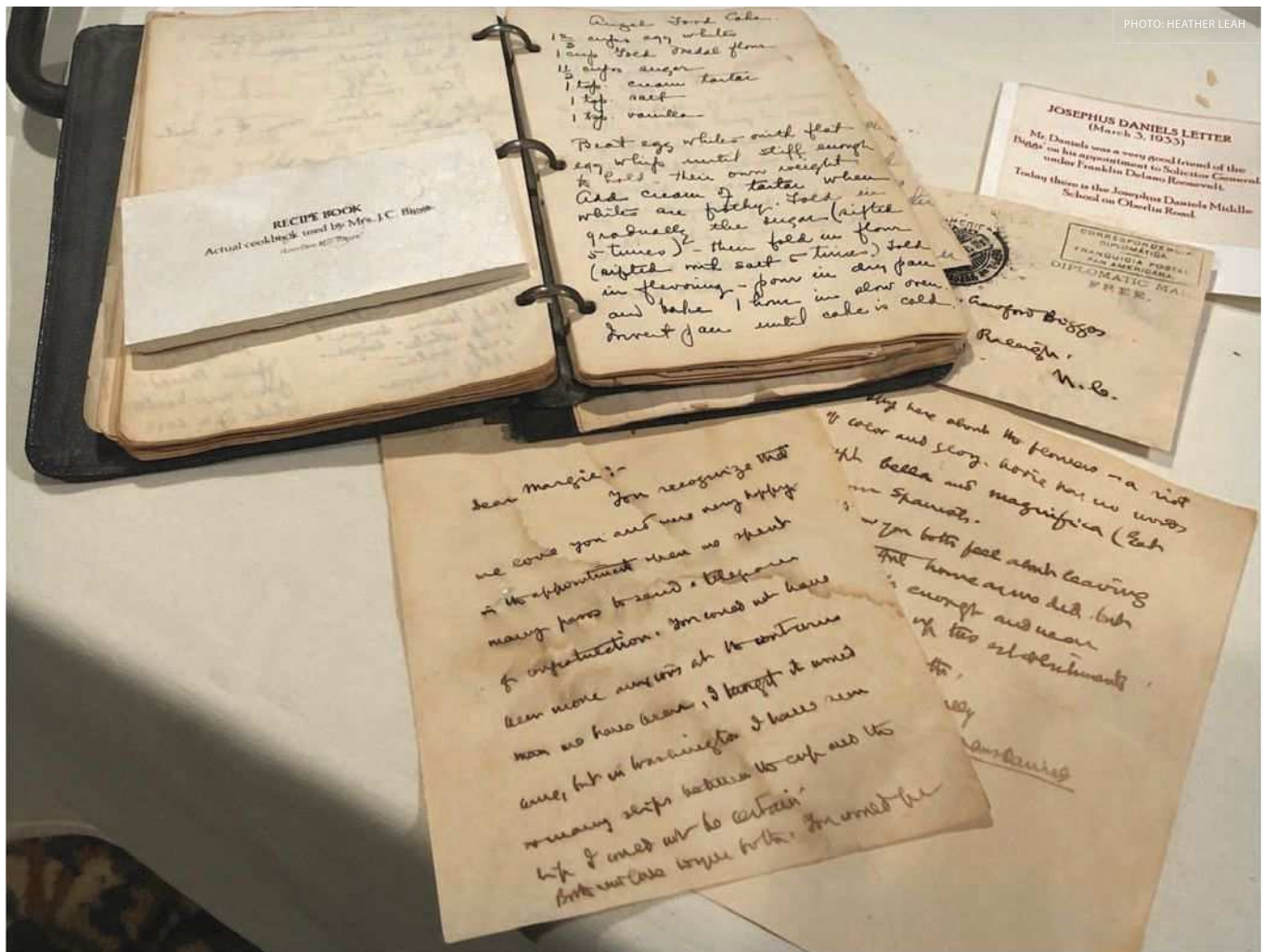
Some Raleigh residents recall the tavern from the 1970s. "It was not much

more than a shack," says Robert Leah who drove past the landmark every day on his way to work. "It was dilapidated. You'd only know it was important if you were a student of North Carolina history," he continues. "Inside, it was all set up like a horse stable, with stable walls built over old-timey wallpaper."

Many never realized its historic value. Some even debate on which side of the road the tavern used to stand. Like an historic chameleon, the tavern seemed to change roles, appearances, and location as necessity dictated.

In 1914 when the Hardimont Plantation took ownership and developed the land, Isaac Hunter's Tavern became a tenant house. New owner J.C. Biggs moved into the Hardimont House in 1922, and a site plan from 16 years later reveals he moved the tavern about 100 yards behind his estate. Later, it was transformed into a stable.

In 1969, the tavern again became a hot topic when it was brought to the forefront of Raleigh history by the WCHS. *The Raleigh Times'* headline read: *It May Be Isaac Hunter's Tavern? Is Shack the Original?*



Historians were unsure whether or not they had discovered the actual tavern. Centuries of change had left it with very little obvious evidence. However, an in-depth survey revealed the structure to be the original; it had simply been moved from its original foundation.

Photos show the tavern was on the brink of collapse. The tin roof is still visible, as well as a quaint brick chimney. Historic photos from the State Archives of North Carolina are some of the last remaining photos of the building intact. You can even see the stable walls built inside what clearly used to be a living area, with vintage wallpaper decorating the horses' stables.

HOPES DASHED TO RESTORE THE TAVERN

Records from Arthur J.P. Edwards, a survey and planning specialist from the State Department of Archives and History,

describe the layout of the original Isaac Hunter's Tavern and provide a visual snapshot of its appearance in the 1700s: "The original room division seems to have been of the hall-parlour variety with two connecting rooms, each having an

"I was going to save it. I went out there one day with someone to look at it, and when we got there it was gone."

entrance door from the front. The line of the partition wall is determined by the mortises in the ceiling beams, which are finished with a heavily beaded soffit. The expected cornice boards are applied with handmade T-headed nails [...] and appear to be original to the building." In summary,

Edwards says the structure was a "rapidly deteriorating [...] relic from the earliest years of the settlement of Wake County."

A North Carolina Historic Sites survey reveals the WCHS had hopes of preserving the tavern as a museum. They wrote in the survey that they hoped to purchase and restore the building. For the first time in many decades, Isaac Hunter's Tavern had some hope of remaining a protected piece of history for all of Raleigh to enjoy.

They estimated a budget of \$50,000 would be necessary to restore the tavern, with the purchase price indicated at "no cost." However, a letter written in 1970 from T.W. Mitchell, president of the WCHS at the time, to John Griffin who was slated to help with potential restoration, vaguely references a "very sticky legal situation." For one reason or another, the restoration never took place, and the tavern was lost in time once again.

And for decades, many people assumed it was gone for good. By the 1970s, it would easily have been unrecognizable, a ghost of its former glory. These changes are part of why the building so easily slipped past historian's radar—while the house of Isaac Hunter's contemporary rival, Joel Lane, was preserved. "One day I drove past, just like I always did," says Leah, "and the land was bulldozed, with yellow construction equipment everywhere. They were building a Hilton. The tavern was gone."

DEWITT CAROLINAS UNCOVERS THE TAVERN

Historian J.C. Knowles is quoted as saying, "I was going to save it. I went out there one day with someone to look at it, and when we got there it was gone." Obscured by trees and overgrowth, however, the tavern secretly rested in undeveloped land for years. When Dewitt purchased the property in summer of 2017 for future expansion, they began working with the WCHS to identify and protect this landmark.

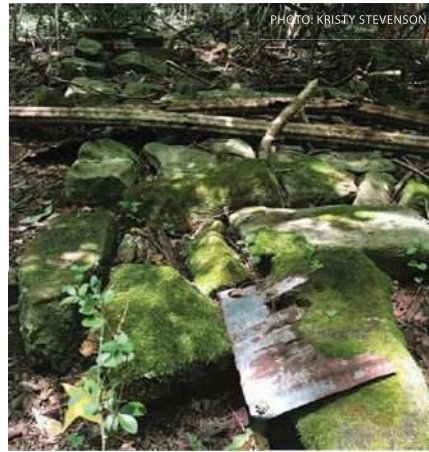


PHOTO: KRISTY STEVENSON

In August 2017, the local newspaper once again rang out with headlines about a freshly-discovered Isaac Hunter's Tavern. This time, local history lovers Benj Edwards and Mark Turner had been searching for the site, unwilling to believe it had simply disappeared. Turner worked alongside Betsy Hunter Amos, a seventh-generation niece of Isaac Hunter, to determine the tavern's fate. Turner chronicled his explorations and discoveries



PHOTO: KRISTY STEVENSON

on his website. A few years prior when the woods were still owned by a large family of inheritors, Edwards had also been hunting for the tavern. Even then, nothing but the iconic tin roof and some boards with square nails remained, laying atop an uneven stone foundation.

Turner and Edwards also discovered a remaining segment of the wagon trail, once a major stage road cutting across North Carolina. "It was the last surviving segment



PHOTO: HEATHER LEAH

PUNCHED-OUT TIN LANTERN
Circa 1700-1800

Representative of a type of Lantern called a "Paul Revere Lantern"

ASSORTED BOTTLES

Seen are a variety of medicine and ink bottles, dating from 1880 - 1920. Two were found on the original Tavern site. One was found in a nearby creek and the other under a barn on the plantation property.

The Tavern's Footprint on Raleigh

If you trace the outlines of the history of Isaac Hunter's Tavern, you'll find much of Raleigh's own modern history reflected in the footprint.

The Original Wake Forest Road

Before the city of Raleigh even existed, Isaac Hunter lived in pretty much the middle of nowhere—just a swath of undeveloped land and Carolina pines sandwiched between the tiny townlets of Bloomsbury and Millbrook. The modern day Wake Forest Road in front of the North Raleigh Hilton actually runs parallel to the old stagecoach roads. Until recently, passersby could see segments of earth where the ground is rutted up in odd places, signifying where the old stage roads used to run.

Dan Hopping, president of the Sons of the Revolution, knows a lot about the tavern's influence on modern history. "Until the 1930s, you could still see the original roads people used before cars. By 1789, the western North Carolina population exploded with people coming down the Great Wagon Road, which was a buffalo trace—the buffalo reliably walked the same path, leaving the ground hard and packed in a hundred-yard wide path," says Hopping.

With the population booming in the western part of the state, there was great demand for the central government to shift inland from New Bern. Several cities, such as Fayetteville and Charlotte, were much larger and more well-established than anything Wake County could offer, especially considering Raleigh didn't exist yet. Despite the sparse surroundings, the tavern sat at a convenient crossroads of two major stage thoroughfares: Louisburg and Forestville Roads. This later became Wake Forest Road.

"The North Carolina delegates who lived out in Hillsborough and Morganton had to travel all the way to New Bern, which was a week's journey. Most of them stopped at Isaac Hunter's Tavern," says Hopping. The site offered clean beds, quality food, and fine spirits for the weary travelers.

And so, the legend goes: even though more well-established cities were considered for the capital, the delegates loved Isaac

Hunter's Tavern and enjoyed the liquor and camaraderie there so much, they determined the state capital should be within 10 miles of the cabin site—and thus built the city of Raleigh.

Isaac Hunter's Rivalry with Joel Lane

In the 1700s and 1800s, alcohol seemed to play a major role in some of the big decisions that created the city we know today. "Isaac Hunter owned 1000 acres of Wake County; Joel Lane owned about 3000 acres," says Hopping. "And they both wanted the capital to be on their land, because whoever got the capital would get rich."

While the commissioners were meeting in Wake County, Hunter tried to sell them land, as did Lane. "One night, Joel Lane put the delegates up at his tavern instead of Isaac Hunter's. He plied them with punch," says Hopping. This alcoholic punch was also known as the Cherry Bounce, which has become Raleigh's official cocktail. Apparently, Joel Lane's punch was even tastier than Isaac Hunter's, because very suddenly the decision was made to purchase Lane's land. Imagine: if Isaac Hunter had crafted the more

delicious beverage, our county seat might be centered outside the beltline at Wake Forest Road instead of in the downtown Raleigh area. And perhaps Isaac Hunter's Tavern would be as well-preserved as the house of his rival, Joel Lane.

A Modern Day Watering Hole

For bar owners like Zack Medford, the tale of Isaac Hunter's Tavern is inspirational. "I love the fact that the city of Raleigh—a desolate, empty swampland—was founded based on its proximity to the legislator's favorite bar."

Medford opened his own Isaac Hunter's Oak City Tavern on Fayetteville Street nearly nine years ago, an homage to the piece of history he'd loved since childhood. Just like the original tavern, Medford's bar is renowned for its Cherry Bounce, the sugar, fruit, and dark liquor drink Joel Lane used to sway delegates.

And just like the original, Medford's bar has also been moved down the street from its original location. ☺





of carriage trail between Raleigh and Wake Forest,” says Edwards. “The stage road ran parallel to Wake Forest Road. Isaac Hunter’s Tavern sat on the crossroads,” says Turner. The road was a major carriage path in pre-revolutionary North Carolina, and it’s the primary reason Isaac Hunter’s Tavern was so successful. Any legislators making their way to the current capital in coastal New Bern had to pass the tavern.

For decades, the site seemed to quietly decay, forgotten in the woods, seemingly destined to someday be bulldozed as unnamed pile of rotted lumber. Little did Raleigh know that Dewitt and the WCHS had already discovered the hidden treasure—and had plans to honor the historical significance.

PRESERVING THE TAVERN’S REMAINS

What remains of the tavern today is little more than a small foundation of stones, a few sticks of lumber with pre-revolutionary square-head nails—and several modern beer bottles that prove some are still using that land as a personal tavern.

Brenda Holloman, president of the WCHS says, “There used to be an old brick fireplace.” Now, there are a bunch of

broken bricks scattered along the forest floor. Turner recalls seeing an old concrete bench, which may have been a castaway from another time, but is not likely part of the original tavern. However, given that the structure played many roles—watering hole, tenant home, and stable—there are potentially several generations of artifacts that could have been uncovered there.

Many hardworking history lovers have played a role in trying to keep the tavern’s history from fading. In fact, when BRH Associates bought the land to build the Hilton in 1982, Linda Ray (whose husband was a managing partner) and Beth Crabtree worked together to create the most comprehensive collection of tavern history in existence. The North Raleigh Hilton still has this exhibit, including artifacts from the tavern, as well as hand-written journals from the families who owned the property throughout history. Due to hotel renovations, the exhibit has temporarily been taken down; however, designers are already planning the new display case, which should be available for public viewing by this fall.

Steven Beattie, director of pre-development at Dewitt says, “We are excited about the findings on our property and plan to

preserve and honor the historic remains of the tavern.” According to Beattie, Dewitt hopes to excavate the tavern’s remnants before developing the land. While the property will be built upon, historic items will be saved. Working alongside Dewitt, Holloman has been collecting artifacts, examining the tavern’s remains, documenting everything with photographs, and will likely assist in the excavation of the site.

Beattie says they are not certain exactly how they will utilize the artifacts; however, he suggested several possibilities including an exhibit, a memorial garden, or even building a replica of the tavern.

Isaac Hunter’s Tavern is a testament to how quickly and easily even critical pieces of the past can be lost if we forget about them for too long. History lovers have ensured that although we couldn’t save the tavern, itself, perhaps exhibits from Dewitt and the North Raleigh Hilton can save its memory. 🍷

Heather Leah is a third-generation Raleighite, passionate about exploring the forgotten and hidden history in her community and keeping it alive through storytelling. She’s given lectures at the City of Raleigh Museum, appeared on CTM’s Southbound, and runs a history segment on ABC11 WTVD. You can find more of her work at www.candidslice.com.