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# *Greene County* Magazine

The Powell - McMullan House

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*The Powell-McMullan House*  
*by Kevin and Leta O'Connor*



The Powell-McMullan House began as a two-story, hall-and-parlor, frame with beaded weatherboards dwelling, built circa 1800. Around 1842, it was more than doubled in size and re-trimmed in the Greek Revival architectural style. The house is named for its owners during these two periods.

The house has survived with remarkable integrity. With the exception of a standing seam roof, the appearance of its front exterior is virtually the same as in 1842. Its interior is well preserved and retains most of its original features: floor to ceiling beaded sheathing with hand-wrought rosehead nails, pit-sawed timbers, and mortise and tenon joinery. The house's setting is picturesque; resting at the foot of Saddleback Mountain, the South River flows across the property's frontage. It is a charming example of a traditional Piedmont Valley homestead. In 2002, it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places and the Virginia Landmarks Register.

## Origins

The Powell-McMullan House is located at the northeast corner of a 330-acre parcel surveyed for Mark Stowers in 1753 with the patent granted to him in 1762 for land in what was at the time Orange County.<sup>1</sup> Mark Stowers transferred the parcel in 1763 to his future son-in-law, John Powell, in connection with the contract of marriage.<sup>2</sup> Five years later, John and Frances (nee Stowers) Powell sold the property to James Powell, John's older brother.<sup>3</sup> In 1770, James Powell (born ca. 1725) gave his daughter Ruth (born ca. 1745), married to Abner Breeden (born ca. 1735), the north 100 acres of the parcel.<sup>4</sup>

That Ruth and Abner Breeden resided on the property given to them is documented by the will of James Powell, made July 15, 1776, where James Powell references that he has given Ruth "that peace [*sic*] of land where she now lives on."<sup>5</sup> Further, the 1785 Orange County Heads of Families lists Abner Breeden as owning one dwelling with nine occupants.<sup>6</sup> However, based on the architectural elements of the Powell-McMullan House, it is likely that the original structure was not built until the end of the eighteenth century.

After her husband's death, Ruth and her son James sold the house and 100 acres to Ruth's brother Lewis Gordon Powell in 1806.<sup>7</sup> Cuthbert Norman, a farmer, and his wife, Sophia, bought the house on 1¾ acres from Powell in 1819.<sup>8</sup> They sold it to Jeremiah McMullan in 1842.<sup>9</sup>

The early inhabitants of the Powell-McMullan House are representative of other early Piedmont Valley settlers that were primarily of English, Scotch, Welsh or Irish descent. The majority of the earliest settlers to this region were native Virginian colonists who, attracted by land opportunities, migrated westward.<sup>10</sup> This was the case with both Ruth Powell's and Abner Breeden's ancestors, who had been settled in Virginia since at least 1700. The Powells emigrated from Wales and the Breedens from Scotland.<sup>11</sup> A few early residents did emigrate directly to the Piedmont Valley, as was the case of John McMullan, Sr., the grandfather of Jeremiah McMullan. John McMullan, Sr., arrived from Dublin, Ireland in 1760;<sup>12</sup> a tailor by trade, he made the first uniform for Gen. George Washington.<sup>13</sup>

### Jeremiah McMullan

James McMullan, Sr., son of John the immigrant, had one daughter and six sons, the youngest son being Jeremiah (born Nov. 2, 1815.)<sup>14</sup> In February 1842, Jeremiah McMullan purchased the Powell-McMullan House and the aforementioned 1¾ acres for \$71.73.<sup>15</sup> A few months later Jeremiah's father died, and Jeremiah's sister, Elizabeth Housworth inherited the land immediately to the north of Jeremiah's property. Jeremiah's brother, James Jr., inherited the land bordering Jeremiah's to the south and west.<sup>16</sup> Jeremiah bought from his sister the adjacent strip of land (approximately ¾ of an acre) "in the tale race of McMullan's Mill, and near its junction with the S. River."<sup>17</sup> His property now formed a rectangular shape on the South River very near to the same 2½ acres of land with the house today.

Jeremiah kept a journal from 1836-1862 that has been published by the Virginia Conference Historical Society of the United Methodist Church.<sup>18</sup> When Jeremiah's father passed away, he left him other property worth about \$1200.<sup>19</sup> He wrote in his journal, "Being somewhat exalted I had dreams of becoming very rich. And to realize my expectations as speedily as possible I engaged in the mercantile business."<sup>20</sup> Jeremiah opened a store with his partner, Rev. Thomas R. Dunn, under the name "Dunn & McMullan."<sup>21</sup> The store is said to have been located in the Powell-McMullan House itself.<sup>22</sup> Jeremiah continued the business for several years, but eventually gave it up, finding it "neither pleasant nor profitable."<sup>23</sup> He would later reflect, "God saw that riches would ruin me and now I see it also. *I thank God that I did not succeed*, for it would have been the means, probably of the eternal loss of my soul. I sold out my store and returned to my former occupation, school teaching and, I am happy to say, to my former enjoyment in Religion."<sup>24</sup>

Jeremiah received his county license as a minister with the Methodist Episcopal Church on December 11, 1845.<sup>25</sup> The following year he was appointed a trustee in the construction of the South River Methodist Church, located less than a mile from the Powell-McMullan House.<sup>26</sup> In 1847, he became a missionary with the newly formed Blue Ridge Mission for the counties of Greene, Rockingham, Page, Shenandoah, Madison and Rappahannock. As a missionary he was allowed "to make his own field in the mountains and adjacent territory not occupied already by the Methodists."<sup>27</sup> There were no churches or meeting houses where his services were most needed, so he preached outdoors where the "heavens were our covering, the woods our walls, and granite stones our seats."<sup>28</sup> Within a year, Reverend McMullan had a congregation of 210 spread over 22 preaching locations.

Jeremiah sold the Powell-McMullan House in October 1850 for \$525 to Daniel Brown, a carpenter, and his wife, Martha Jarrell Brown.<sup>29</sup> This substantial increase in the sales price of the property from what Jeremiah had paid supports the belief that Jeremiah expanded the house and added its Greek Revival architectural elements. Earliest land tax assessment records for Greene County (1856) valued the two and ½ acres at \$546.25, with \$500 of this amount attributed to buildings.<sup>30</sup>

One month after selling Powell-McMullan House, Jeremiah was voted a full member and itinerant minister for the Virginia Conference Methodist Episcopal Church, South.<sup>31</sup> Jeremiah's assignments included Hanover, Mecklenburg, and Albemarle circuits in Virginia, and Princess Anne and Hertford circuits North Carolina.<sup>32</sup> He passed away on August 19, 1873, and is buried in the Boydton Presbyterian Cemetery in Boydton, Virginia.<sup>33</sup>

### **The Tannery**

In 1858, the Browns sold the house to Bazaleel P. Runkle and his wife, Mary E. C. Runkle (the daughter of Rev. Jeremiah's brother Neal McMullan).<sup>34</sup> They operated a tannery on the property until early 1900.<sup>35</sup> A McMullan family member recalled seeing the 5 foot high water wheel adjacent to the house.<sup>36</sup>

After the Runkles' death, Virginia Piper, their daughter, bought the property in 1913.<sup>37</sup> She also acquired the adjacent 114+ acres that had been bequeathed to Elizabeth Housworth, Jeremiah's sister.<sup>38</sup> Piper transferred the two tracts totaling 118 acres to Rueben K. Moyers in 1932<sup>39</sup> and he sold the land to C. F. Collier in 1937.<sup>40</sup> Daniel Devereaux purchased the house with 2½ acres from Ivy Collier, C. F. Collier's son, in 1973.<sup>41</sup> Devereaux extended the rear of the house, adding a bath, utility room and increased kitchen area. He sold the house in 1994 to Jeff and Charles Schuyler.<sup>42</sup> The current owners, Kevin and Leta O'Connor, have had the home since 1998.

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<sup>1</sup> Orange County Deed Book 12, p. 162; Virginia Land Office Patent Book 34, pp. 949-950.

<sup>2</sup> Orange County Deed Book 13, pp. 353-355.

<sup>3</sup> Orange County Deed Book 15, pp. 12-14; fraternal relationship established from Eugene Powell, *John and Ann Powell of Culpeper Co., VA*, [www.geocities.com/~jcrosswell/powellfc.html](http://www.geocities.com/~jcrosswell/powellfc.html).

<sup>4</sup> Orange County Deed Book 15, p. 255; birth information from Powell, *John and Ann Powell of Culpeper Co., VA*.

<sup>5</sup> Orange County Will Book 2, pp. 502-503.

<sup>6</sup> Heads of Families-Virginia 1785, Orange County, List of Zach Burnley, p. 97.

<sup>7</sup> Orange County Deed Book 23, p. 504-506.

<sup>8</sup> Orange County Deed Book 28, pp. 73-74.

<sup>9</sup> Greene County Deed Book 2, pp.30, 38-40.

<sup>10</sup> Woodie Brown Parrot, "Prelude to a Town", *Greene County Magazine (Vol. 10, 1993)* (Greene County Historical Society, 1993), p. 8.

<sup>11</sup> Karl W. Braden, "The Braden, Breeden, and Breeding Families of Old Virginia" (Winston-Salem, NC, 1988), p. 1.1; personnel communication with Eugene Powell.

<sup>12</sup> Woodie B. Parrot, "A History of John McMullan, the Patriot", *Greene County Record*, July 29, 1976.

<sup>13</sup> John McMullan Family Record in *Bible Records, Louisiana Genealogical and Historical Society Be it Known and Remembered (Vol. 4)* (Louisiana State Historical Society, 1966), pp. 161 - 198, as submitted by Mrs. Kathryn Watkins, State Librarian for DAR, at [www.shifletfamily.org/PS/GAps.html](http://www.shifletfamily.org/PS/GAps.html).

<sup>14</sup> Emily McMullen Williams, "Community of Family", *Greene County Magazine (Vol. 11, 1994)* (Greene County Historical Society, 1994), p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> Greene County Deed Book 2, pp.30, 38-40.

<sup>16</sup> Greene County Will Book 1A, pp. 1-11.

<sup>17</sup> Greene County Deed Book 2, pp. 193-195.

<sup>18</sup> *Virginia United Methodist Heritage (Vol. XXV, No.1, Spring 1999)*. Bulletin of the Virginia Conference Historical Society of the United Methodist Church (Richmond, VA: Printing Services, Inc., 1999).

<sup>19</sup> Jeremiah McMullan, "The Journal of the Reverend Jeremiah McMullan 1832-1862", *Virginia United Methodist Heritage (Vol. XXV, No.1, Spring 1999)*, p. 9.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* p. 15.

<sup>21</sup> Greene County Chancery Order Book 1, pp. 84-85.

<sup>22</sup> Daniel Devereaux (previous owner) interview with Dulaney Kendall McMullen (1901-1983) on August 2, 1975.

The following is an excerpt from Daniel Devereaux's hand-written notes:

1. Concerning our house. He had always heard it was built by Jeremiah McM ('Jerry'), brother of his great grandfather, James McM. Jerem. McM was supposed to have had a store in this house. He remembers the tannery which was operated by 'Brazeel' Runkle. There was a channel in front of the house and a water wheel between our house and the store. The water wheel was about 5' high, and was used for grinding bark. He remembers coming to the house when he was a boy, and remembers a large double door leading into the living room.

- <sup>23</sup> Jeremiah McMullan, "The Journal of the Reverend Jeremiah McMullan 1832-1862", p. 10.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid. p. 15.
- <sup>25</sup> Greene County Court Order Book 3, pp. 248-249.
- <sup>26</sup> Greene County Deed Book 3, pp. 189-191.
- <sup>27</sup> Jeremiah McMullan, "The Journal of the Reverend Jeremiah McMullan 1832-1862", p. 11.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>29</sup> Greene County Deed Book 4, pp. 87-88, which refers to the house as "New Erection."
- <sup>30</sup> List of Land within the District of John N. Sorville, Assessor for the County of Greene in the Year 1856, under name of owner Daniel S. Brown.
- <sup>31</sup> Jeremiah McMullan, "The Journal of the Reverend Jeremiah McMullan 1832-1862", p. 12.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid. pp. 27-31.
- <sup>33</sup> Munsey Adams Moore, *Cemetery and Tombstone Records of Mecklenburg County Virginia* (Chase City, VA: Munsey Moore Publishing, 1982), pp. 23, 29.
- <sup>34</sup> Greene County Deed Book 4, p. 669; Greene County Marriage Record Vol. 1, p. 178.
- <sup>35</sup> Greene County Deed Book 10, p. 279; Greene County Deed Book 11, pp. 266-267. The 1860 and the 1900 Federal Census of Greene County, VA, lists Runkle's occupation as tanner. In Mary Runkle's will of 1904, she bequeaths to her husband "my dwelling house, tanyard and barn", Greene County Will Book 2, pp. 309-310. By the time of the 1910 Federal Census, Bazaleel is retired. Mary dies in 1911, and he in 1913. Greene County Will Book 2, p. 310; Greene County Deed Book 17, pp. 110-111.
- <sup>36</sup> Note 22 above.
- <sup>37</sup> Greene County Deed Book 17, pp. 110-111.
- <sup>38</sup> Greene County Deed Book 13, pp. 249-250.
- <sup>39</sup> Greene County Deed Book 22, p. 336.
- <sup>40</sup> Greene County Deed Book 23, p. 230.
- <sup>41</sup> Greene County Deed Book 67, pp. 134-135.
- <sup>42</sup> Greene County Deed Book 327, pp. 261-262.