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# Greene County Magazine

**The House at South River Farm**

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## THE HOUSE AT SOUTH RIVER FARM

By Emily McMullen Williams

The South River Farm, Leisure Acres Farm, the McMullen Home Place, the Brick Mansion, or simply "The Brick" are all names or terms used for the home and farm now owned by James and Anne Reel. The Reels purchased South River Farm from James and Mary Holden in the summer of 1995 and retained the same name.



THE HOUSE AT SOUTH RIVER FARM, circa 1992

Past and present owners are as follows:

- \* 1854-1873 (19 years) James, Jr. and Fannie Walker McMullen
- \* 1873-1909 (36 years) Jeremiah Newcombe/Sara Dulaney McMullen
- \* 1909-1938 (29 years) John Neal & Sarah Cornelia McMullen
- \* 1938-1943 (5 years) Newcombe P. & Frances Estes McMullen
- \* 1943-1987 (44 years) Charles & Jessie McMullen Walter
- \* 1987-1995 (8 years) James & Mary Holden
- \* 1995-present: James & Anne Reel

James McMullen, Jr., grandson of the immigrant, John McMullen, built the house in 1854. The grandfather left Virginia in 1797 for Georgia, leaving his oldest son, James, Sr. (father of the builder and original owner), in Virginia. James, Sr. married Edith

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Kendall and became owner of the Kendall Homestead. Named after his father, James, Jr. was born on the Kendall Homestead, inherited part of that, and later acquired the Winslow farm where he and his wife, Frances (Fannie) Walker McMullen, built the large brick pre-Civil War home.

Like their father and grandfather Beasley, James and John McMullen acquired additional land, John along Turkey Ridge toward Lydia and James across south River. Family records indicate the Winslows and Kendalls were among the very earliest settlers. Thus "what was" the old McMullen brick Homeplace (now Reels) sits on "what was" the Winslow property and not part of the old Kendall Homestead.

We know that James McMullen and Henry B. Winslow were involved in the community because they were ordered, after being sworn before the magistrate, to review the road from near South River Meeting House to where it intersects with a road leading from Stanardsville to the Conway River, and report to the court "truly and impartially if the said road shall be opened."<sup>22</sup>

Along with eight other McMullen families, James McMullen gave generously to South River Church as recorded: "We the subscribers promise and bind themselves on or before November next to pay to Rev. James F. Fennell, or his order, the several sums annexed to our name for the repairing of South River Church under our hands this 8th day of June 1859."<sup>23</sup>

The U.S. Census of 1850 and 1860 verify the prominence of James McMullen and his brother, John, as outstanding gentlemen farmers in both farm value and personal real estate as well as number of slaves. James closely trailed his older brother on each account.

Little else is known about the builder. At his death in 1873, family records saved by B.A. McMullen, oldest son and administrator for his father and now in the possession of the writer, include several pages of the division of farm machinery and household items among family members. Oral history does relate the story that confederate money was placed behind the walls of the house and family records indicate items bought and sold in the "current money of the State of Virginia."

A brick found in the partially excavated basement by the Walters (5th owners) indicates the house was built in 1854. Incidentally this was the same year the McMullen Post Office came into being. To justify a post office, the application form required a report of the population to be served; and Neal McMullen, pending postmaster, indicated at least 50 families within two miles.<sup>24</sup> The prominence of this new brick house could have increased the chances of getting a local post office.

Oral history by a former slave in her old age tells how the slaves made the clay bricks at the bottom of the hill at a spring and baked them in the sun. After all the bricks were made and dried,

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the slaves formed a long line from the spring to the building site, passing the bricks in the same way as a water bucket brigade. Thus each slave handled every brick.

The basic design of the main structure has remained the same through the years. It is simply a four-over-four design with a central hall from the front porch to the small back porch. From the upstairs hallway, double doors opened onto the upper level of the porch. A small room at the top of the stairs was originally a library, common in its day for the farmer esquire. Each of the eight rooms has a fireplace. The four bedrooms on the second floor have closets with hanging space in the center and shelves on one side for storage space.

The first kitchen with a dining room above it was made of brick, but was not as structurally sound as the main building. Oral family history tells that this structure was torn down in 1906 and the brick were used for the construction of a building at the Blue Ridge Mission or Training School. A high standing one story frame attached kitchen replaced the two story structure and the adjoining room in the main building became the dining room.



THE HOUSE AT SOUTH RIVER FARM, circa 1950

Also in the early 1900's the double front porch was beyond repair and was replaced by a single height porch which extended almost the full length of the house. Such a porch design fits the period.

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Charles and Jessie McMullen Walter added electricity, running water and an upstairs bathroom, in what was the library in previous generations. They dug out more of the basement and divided the full length hallway to conserve heat during the winter. In the back part of this hallway, the Walters installed a bathroom and laundry room. The Walters tore down the large high-standing dilapidated frame kitchen and replaced it with a much smaller kitchen, adjoining pine paneled office and porch. They removed the white picket fence surrounding the house and replaced some of the outbuildings. However, many of the outbuildings were not needed by the Walters and thus not rebuilt. Vivid memories of the outside by the last McMullen born at the McMullen Homeplace included the location of the buggy garage, ice house, numerous hen houses, brooder house, turkey house, corn house, granary, horse stable, cow shelter and pony den. Numerous fruit trees during the 1920's and 30's included apple, cherry, damson, peach, pear, plum and quince. The original barn is still standing. Farm crops were corn, wheat and hay. The Walters grew tobacco and other crops and replanted the large apple orchard. The name they chose was Leisure Acres Farm and later The South River Farm.

While the Walters did what was necessary for general upkeep to serve their lifestyle, James and Mary Holden turned the house into a show place. Working with Paul Sweet, an architect from Charlottesville, they tore down the back additions (kitchen, office and porch) and extended the full back side of the main house enough to add a screened back porch, sitting alcove and bathroom on the main floor. The Holdens expanded the basement under the new addition. A large master bathroom was added off the dressing room on the second floor, as well as an enclosed porch. Stabilizing the entire main back wall for this excavation was a tedious undertaking for fear of the original wall collapsing. However, their goal was achieved and the project was successful. The shallow rear addition on all three levels gave the additional needed space. From the outside the new addition is painted to match the trim and its simple mass blends so well with the original that it looks as if it has always been there.

Using an old photograph as a guide, the Holdens replaced the long front porch with a double story porch similar to the original. The double doors on the front second story porch, which had been closed off to accommodate the one level porch, were reopened and refinished by the Holdens to cool the upstairs bedrooms and to make the second story porch accessible for sitting and viewing the breathtaking mountain scenery.

Inside the original house, work done by the Holdens included: moving the dining room to the adjoining front room and changing what was the dining room into an elegant modern kitchen, adding new heating and air conditioning systems, new chimney-lined fireplaces while retaining original mantels, rewiring the electrical system, replacing gutters and windows, restoring several doorways that had

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with an exit door to a new patio on the west and installing wainscot in the main hall. Mary Holden used her interior decorating skills to reflect the design of a fine 1800's Central Virginia farm house.

Outside, the Holdens added a pond, swimming pool with bath houses and extensive landscaping, including full grown boxwood by the vegetable garden, roses around the graveyard, trees along the long driveway and on-going flower gardens around the patio and pool. They turned a generally utilitarian building into a guest cottage and workshop and attached a greenhouse.

Upon purchasing The South River Farm in 1995, the Reels' goal was to make the interior resemble that of a Southern Antebellum mansion. They wanted to capture the spirit of gaiety, happiness and laughter that they imagined took place in the home over the last 150 years. To do this, they retained Interior Designer John Spearman, ASID, of Atlanta, Georgia and Charleston, South Carolina. In keeping with the vivid colors of Tidewater Virginia during the period, and to enhance the old brick, they chose Charleston red wall paint for the center halls and dining room. The reds are similar in color with a subtle difference. In the first floor hallway two matching reproduction English chandeliers have been installed as well as additional wainscoting. Huge Flemish period reproduction chandeliers now hang in both the dining room and upstairs hallway.

To obtain additional wall space, the Reels split the first story mortise and tenon doors into pairs. Keeping the same look, they also added protective Williamsburg-approved storm windows to all windows and doors.

The unique original hand railing, made from a butternut tree, is being refinished. Because the butternut tree is thin and tall, its trunk is very desirable for handrails.

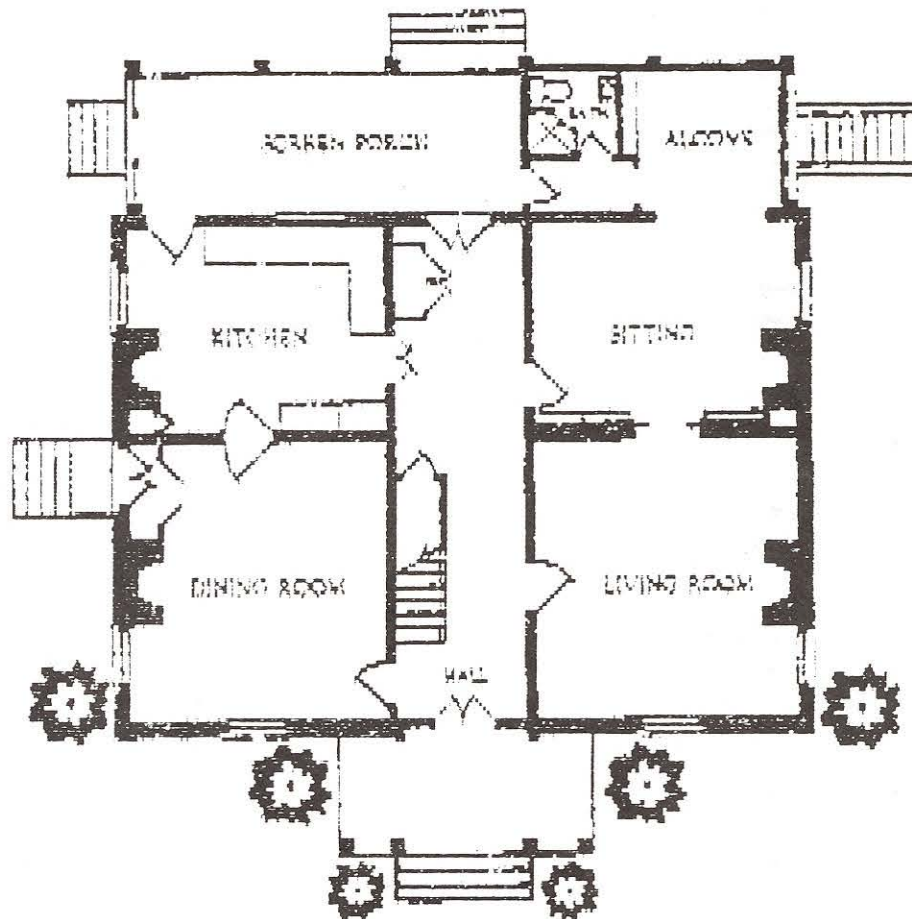
Focusing their attention on the fireplaces, the Reels created additional warmth, both physically and aesthetically. As one enters each room, a charming fireplace catches the eye and serves as a year-round focal point. The Reels replaced the fire boxes and surrounds with slabs of Kentucky honed slate. They installed Federal Period mantelpieces as advised by Ray Devers, a local designer in that period. Careful selection of color and style make each fireplace unique. For instance, the fireplace in the back upstairs bedroom, which opens onto a screen porch overlooking the pond, is a design of small vivid blue tiles with matching beading. This special type of tile has recently become available for residential use. The fireplace in the adjoining room has a vertical and horizontal brick surround supplemented by gold finials. The mantel design augmenting this brickwork is like the old row houses in Baltimore. Extensive plaster work was done around the rebuilt fireplaces. In addition, ceiling fans were installed and some rewiring was done.

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Historically, the style of the house is perhaps best classified as a classic Revival. During the period of its construction Greek Revival was past its heyday in the cities, and Gothic Revival and Italian Villa styles had entered the scene. The simple moldings and the lack of fluting on window and door surrounds are more indicative of the Tuscan Order of the Roman Revival style implemented by Jefferson and the University of Virginia. There was a craft legacy left in Central Virginia in the skills brought to the area by those who came to build the University. These skills were passed on to subsequent generations and are reflected in many residences and public buildings throughout the area built from the 1830's until the Civil War.

We do not know the name of the original architect (if there was one) or builder. However, in local mills, skilled workers or the owners and foremen, had access to pattern books and cutting blades to form moldings based on those used at the University.

FIRST FLOOR PLANS



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1. June Court 1849, family records as kept by B.A. McMullen, Later Justice of the Peace.
2. Family records as kept by B.A. McMullen.
3. A copy of the original application provided by Carolyn McMullen, former postmaster in Elberton, GA.