

HISTORY of OAKCREST

829 Foreman Road, Highlands, North Carolina

The original house was built in 1933 on the middle of three lots that were developed by The Highlands Land Company. The builder was Mr. John Blanchard, warmly referred to by many as "Uncle John." He built the home for Elmer and Mabel Whittle of Sarasota, Florida who had purchased the lot in May of 1925. The other two lots had also been sold in 1925 to Elbert and Bessie Gilbert, and James Sullivan and his wife. The Whittles eventually acquired the adjacent two lots. Walter and Becky Munroe, also of Sarasota, had purchased the contiguous lot to the southwest and had constructed a home there prior to 1933. Interestingly, all four couples were from Florida and no doubt were looking for a place to escape the heat of the summers before in-home air conditioning was available. Mr. Blanchard was from New England, an engineer by education, but a master ship builder by heritage, as his father was in that profession. Mr. Blanchard and his wife migrated to Highlands in the late 1920s. They settled in this area near the confluence of the Cullasaja River and Mill Creek that formed Mirror Lake. Mr. Blanchard built several cottages in the neighborhood including his own home, "Snug Harbor," located on Blanchard Court. This Foreman Road house was probably the largest. The primary material was Chestnut wood, as blight had killed the trees and there was an abundance of Chestnut wood available at reasonable prices. He also used heart pine for the flooring and some paneling, which was considered a luxury wood even then, but was still relatively available.

The style of the house was, and remains, "New England Salt Box," basically a two-story square with a 12' by 12' bedroom wing on each side. A few years later a third wing was



added to the back, which contained another bedroom, a third bath, and a combination woodshed and tool room, which opened to the outside. The original kitchen contained a wood stove vented into the brick chimney that was used for cooking and was plumbed with a reservoir for heating water. The windows with hand-rolled glass panes were preserved or reused during the later renovation whenever possible and allowed by code. The windows

were designed to slide into the walls, allowing for maximum ventilation. The "eyebrows" over the windows that permitted them to be open during rainfall were replicated on the large addition on the north side. The original carriage house/garage was located to the south of the house near the road. It was built entirely of Chestnut wood. During the subsequent renovation it was the source of several large beams and many wide heavy timbers that served as flooring that were reclaimed and re-planed for use in the interior of the rebuilt house. For several years during the 1970's and 1980's Highland's Santa Claus stored his sleigh, when not in use, in the garage!

The current owner's family purchased the property in September of 1945 from Dr. James L. Armstrong and his wife, Jean, from Miami, Florida. The Armstrong's had purchased the house from the original owners, Mable and Elmer Whittle in April of 1944. Nicholas and Mildred Hodsdon from Coral Gables, Florida, happily summered in the home until the late 1990's. Nicholas, who was an attorney, had been brought up in Boston, Massachusetts and spent summers either on Cape Cod or in the woods of Maine. He moved with his physician father and family to Miami in 1920 at the age of 16. He and



Mildred, formerly of Texas, married in 1932 and prior to World War II the Hodsdons returned to New England for their vacations. During the war it became impossible to get transportation back to New England, due to gas rationing and ongoing public transport being used by the military. The Hodsdons discovered Highlands and began coming to the area by train and bus in about 1941. The topography, vegetation, and the wildlife were very reminiscent of Maine. Upon purchase of the house they painted it Maine barn red to honor both Mr. Blanchard's and their own connection to Maine and New England. They named the home "Oakcrest" as it sits atop the crest of a hill and is surrounded by many massive oak trees. For the past 70 years, four generations of the family have lived and thrived in the cool and nurturing environment of the Highlands woods.

RESTORATION and RECONSTRUCTION

The present owner inherited the property in 2000 and during the years of 2001 and 2002 undertook a massive reconstruction of the home. Whenever possible the original materials were salvaged and reclaimed. The builder was Ralph Thomas, who was doing some wonderful projects in Highlands at the time. He was blessed with a talented crew of skilled craftsmen who relished working with the now rare reclaimed woods. The original siding had been hewn on a circular saw, so a



mill was located to replicate that process on the new siding which was required for the additions. The three wings were removed and replaced with new larger wings. The central two story core of the house was reinforced with steel beams. The entire roof was removed and replaced with a pressure treated shake roof, allowing the ceilings to be insulated and vaulted. The brick fireplace and chimney, which the native workman referred to as a "Georgia fireplace" because the bricks were apparently imported, was cleaned and rebuilt. The upstairs dormitory style space was reconfigured to provide two bedrooms and two baths. The original brick piers under the house were retained and a stone skirt was installed between them and under all the additions. The house was completely rewired, re-plumbed, and all walls, ceilings, and floors were properly insulated. With the exception of two antique claw foot tubs that were salvaged, all new antique reproduction hardware and plumbing fixtures were used in the four baths and the powder room. Two zones of air conditioning and forced air LP gas heating systems were installed, as well as two separate water heaters. All utilities were placed underground.



The dining room and sunroom wing was added. The front wall of the dining room is part of the original house so the windows are original, as is the bay window, which was "bumped out." The "master wing" in the back was new construction as was the large two-story garage wing and upstairs second master suite. The original heart pine floors were refinished in the living room and the upstairs. The new upstairs wing's pine floors were salvaged from the sub-flooring of the kitchen and the other wings which were removed. Arkansas pine flooring was used in the other new areas of the home as they closely match the heart pine. All the Chestnut cabinets, paneling, and wainscoting are reclaimed wood. The clear heart pine wainscoting in the large upstairs bedroom was originally the dropped ceiling in the upstairs dormitory. Gas logs have now been installed in both the living room and master fireplaces. The living room fireplace can easily be returned to wood-burning with a gas lighter if preferred.

A decorative cupola, complete with a copper whale weathervane brought from Nantucket, window boxes, and a separate shed with a workshop were added. A large deck with a gazebo was constructed in the back overlooking Mirror Lake. A path lined with stones leads to native boulder steps down to a landing and small dock with a row boat, a canoe, and a decorative pergola at the lakeshore. An underground system of drains was installed to take the water away from the house and the gutters which are covered with gutter guards. The large



circular drive is poured concrete with a stamped and stained decorative brick pattern border. A stone walk leads to the front door and there are large stepping-stones to the back entrances. The area around the house is landscaped with native and hybrid shrubs and blooming Perennials. The 25 hemlock trees near the house were treated for several years to protect them. They are currently thriving and beautiful.

It is the fondest hope of the current family members that another family will find as much joy, peace, happiness, and satisfaction being surrounded by these warm wooden walls, tranquil landscape, and majestic trees, that they have had the privilege of experiencing.