

Judge Biggs, Issac Hunter, One Fire, and a Lot of History

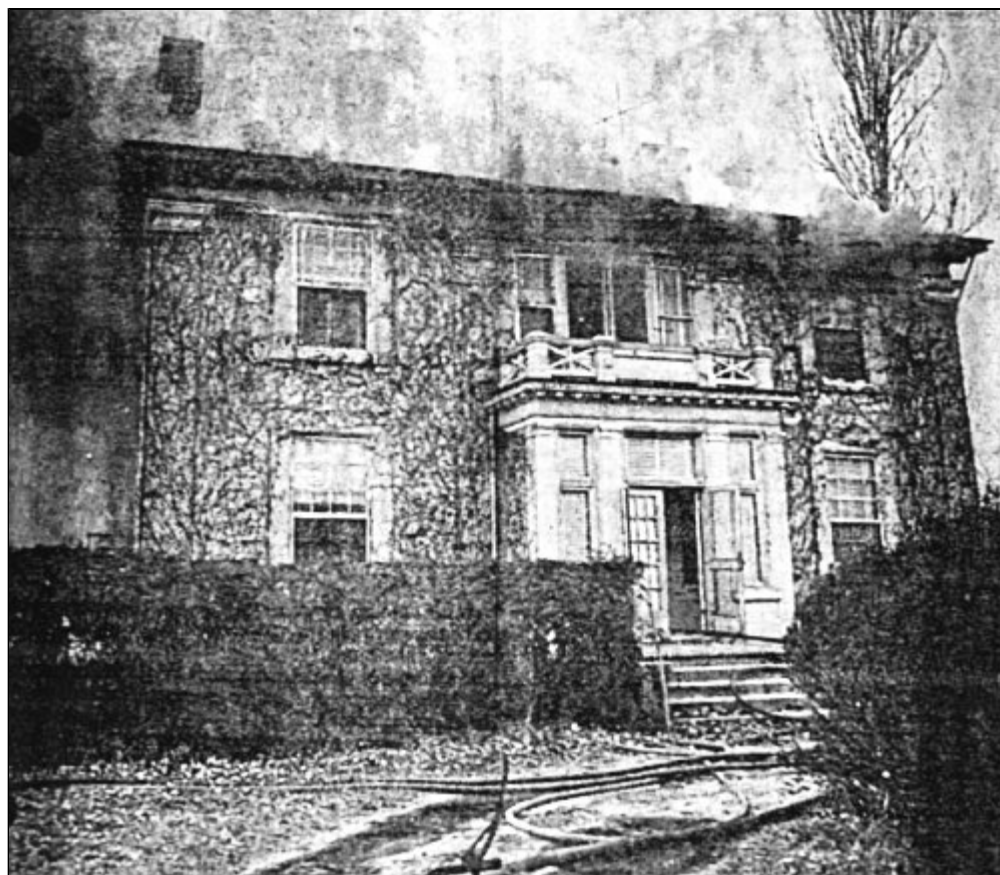
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Recently found this *Raleigh Times* story in my files from Monday, December 6, 1976. About a fire at the vacant Biggs Estate the day before. The two-story house was located on the west side of [then] Old Wake Forest Road, at the intersection of [then] New Hope Church Road. (Today, that place is the North Raleigh Hilton at the intersection of Wake Forest Road and St. Albans Drive.)

The \$250,000 mansion was the residence of the late J. Crawford Biggs. Once Solicitor General under President Franklin Roosevelt, "Judge Biggs" was a law partner of J. Melville Broughton, the former North Carolina Governor and United States Senator. His house was called the Biggs Place and was formerly a country [manor] named Hardimont. It was built in the 1920s (also said the story) by a "Frenchman." More on those points in a moment.

The house had been vacant since the estate was auctioned that October. The furnishings were recently sold and the house was scheduled for demolition. The fire started in the rear of the kitchen on the first floor. Flames then extended through an elevator shaft to the second floor, attic, and across the roof.

It was reported about 3:45 p.m. Two engines, two ladders, one rescue, and about eighteen firefighters answered the call. Firefighters battled the blaze for about three hours. Two rooms, two porches, and part of the attic were destroyed. Those were details from the newspaper, but let's dig deeper. There's much, much more to this story.



Raleigh Times photograph

Hardimont

The Biggs Estate was built by Andre L. Causee (the aforementioned "Frenchman") circa 1914. He acquired the property ten years earlier, and designed and built a huge country manor that he named The Causee Place. He later renamed the place Hardimont.

Causee sold the property in 1919 to Raleigh developers Daniel Allen (see: Dan Allen Drive) and A. J. Honeycutt. They advertised the Hardimont as "the most desirable suburban home in our knowledge." The house also served as a temporary home for the Carolina Country Club in 1921. Click to enlarge:



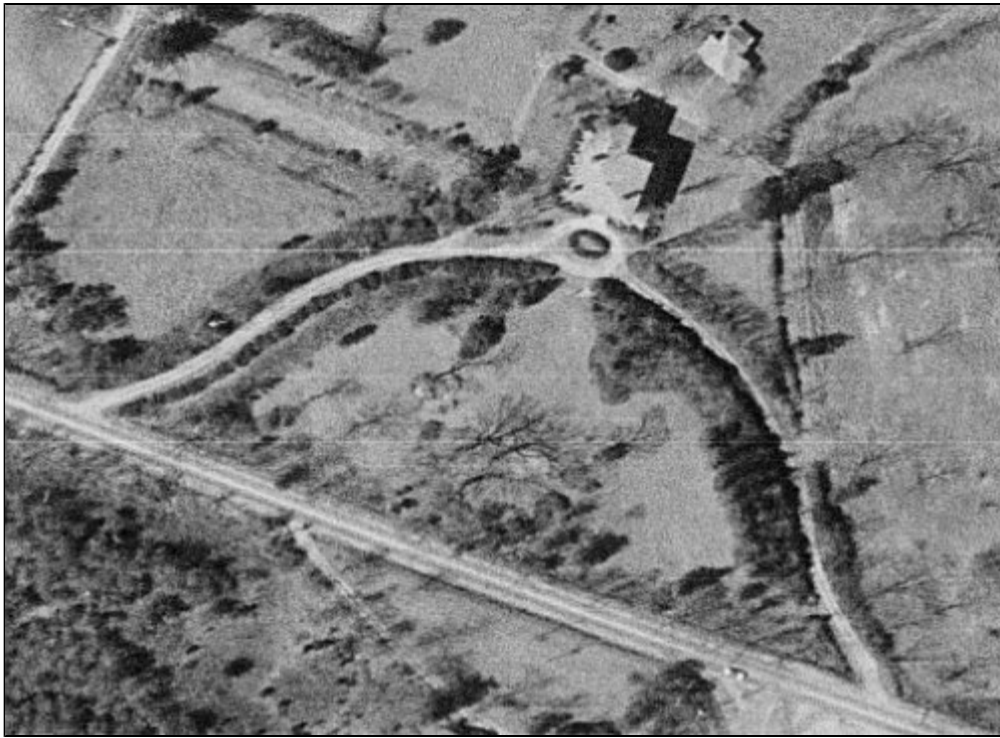
The house was sold to James Crawford Biggs in 1922. He and his wife Margie were "major figures in Raleigh society."¹ They entertained many notables at Hardimont, such as Franklin D. and Eleanor Roosevelt, Adlai Stevens, and William Jennings Bryan. Their house was known as a location for "elegant parties and dinners" that sometimes included "silver service for up to 500 people."²

Isaac Hunter's Tavern

Wait, you say, isn't this right around where [Isaac Hunter's tavern](#) was located? The meeting place that led to the creation of Raleigh and Wake County some two hundred years ago? Yes!

Hardimont was located on the same site. In fact, the house sat directly behind the old tavern. Hardimont was a stone structure with a huge semi-circular driveway framed with boxwoods. The yard was called the "grove" and was populated with three (?) trees named the Lafayette Oaks.³

The road bed of the old Stage Road was incorporated into the driveway. There were also "lovely formal gardens" behind the house. Here's an aerial view from 1965:



The tavern building was originally located in the front yard, called the "grove." Around 1936, the judge moved the tavern building to behind the house. (It was moved about 100 yards.) The structure might've served a caretaker's residence, and was later used to house livestock. Though it was spared by the fire, it was demolished when bulldozers cleared the land. (Yup, it survived from 1769 to 1981. You can imagine the resulting outcry, notably among preservations and historians, when the thing was destroyed.)

Only a covered well remained in the front yard, also from the era of the tavern. (Subsequently demolished, of course.) The well was still in use and had served every resident on the property for nearly two hundred years. Also surviving was a horse mounting stone used at the tavern and that was kept near the front door of the Biggs Estate. It disappeared when the grounds were cleared.

Here's a picture of the tavern building in 1969 by Charles Clark. They're from the Survey and Planning images, General Negative Collection, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, NC. [See more photos.](#)⁴



Old Roads and New Roads

Let's look closely at that aerial photograph, which we've also annotated. The mansion is clearly visible along with the tavern building far behind the main house. There's the original sections of the Beltline on the far left. And Old Wake Forest Road obvious as a diagonal across the image. (The picture is rotated with north to the right.)

The image was supplied by Elizabeth Hunter Amos, via Dan Hopping (a member of the Sons of the American Revolution), via the [North Carolina Geological Society](#). Ms. Amos is Isaac Hunter's niece, seven generations later. She's is also a primary source for this blog post.

We've also seen this photo in this [Mark Turner blog post](#), which contains this nifty [Google book excerpt](#) in the comments, about the tavern's location. Click to enlarge:



Property Owners

What's the complete history of the property? Before 1760, King Charles II granted the Earl of Granville approximately half of North Carolina. On July 21, 1761, Theophilus Hunter acquired 584 acres. On March 2, 1762, Issac Hunter acquired those 584 acres. Over his lifetime, Hunter

influenced quite a bit of the development of what's today called North Raleigh. He built mills along Crabtree Creek and also owned and raced horses. By the time of his death in 1823, he had sold or given away "virtually all his land."⁵

Owners of various amounts of acreage directly surrounding the tavern site included Issacs' daughter Elizabeth's husband William Camp (1802), James Brewer (18??), prominent merchant Benjamin S. King (18??), Wake County Registrar of Deeds and merchant Richard Smith (1837), philanthropist John T. Pullen (18?? and who was president of Raleigh Savings Bank and founder of the church that bears his name), and Pullen's brother-in-law and National Bank of Raleigh president Charles H. Belvin (1892).

They were followed by Edward L. Green (18??/19??), Thomas Howle (1903), A. L. Causee (1907), A. L. Causee Jr. (1907), Hardimont Plantation Inc. (1914), A. L. Causee (1919), Daniel Allen (1919), A. J. Honeycutt (1919), J. C. Biggs (1922), and finally the North Raleigh Hilton (1981)

Judge Biggs used to give talks about Isaac Hunter. One of his hobbies was horse racing, and Hunter had a race track on his property. Biggs claimed that when they first moved into Hardimont, old slaves either told him or showed him that the old track could still be seen in the woods. Alas, it's location was not recorded and historians still don't know where it was.

(Horse racing was so popular at the time that Legislators passed a law prohibiting the activity within ten miles of the Capitol, while they were in session. As if the races would be too distracting to get any work done.)⁶

Historical Display

Those owners and their dates of ownership are listed as part of splendid historical display in the lobby of the hotel. The display is also a primary source for the information contained in this blog post, including the mansion photo and the recreated annotated aerial photo. Click to enlarge:



Garden Bench

One surviving artifact from the Biggs Estate was a cement bench from the gardens. It was last seen (two years ago) sitting just inside the woods behind the North Raleigh Hilton. Slightly toward the St. Albans side. Explorations by Yours Truly, however, were unable to find the thing (so far).

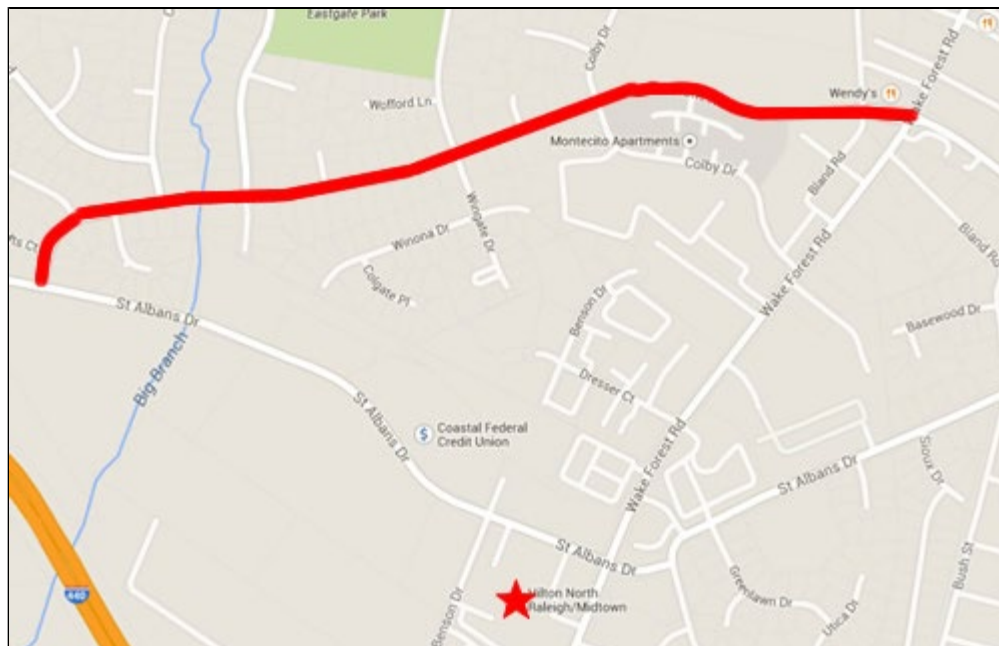
Here's what that area looks like today. Three corners of the property, panoramic style. Click once or twice to enlarge:



Hardimont Road

Seems a safe bet that Hardimont Road, located just north on Wake Forest Road, was named for the aforementioned manor house. Someone else can dig through old Raleigh road maps, and figure out when that road was built and/or named. Believe that happened around 1980.

As for the previous New Hope Road, now named St. Albans Drive, that road was originally named Chicken Farm Road. (Slang for a military corrections facility? Something from the Civil War years?) Believe it changed names in 1935. St. Albans was named for a school that Judge Biggs attended.



More Information?

Google finds this listing of holdings from the University of North Carolina, North Carolina Collection: "Chiefly deeds and other legal and financial papers, circa 1940, relating to James Crawford Biggs' 'Hardimont' estate in Raleigh, N.C., and other real estate interests. Included are two property maps and a sketch. And Includes a map and sketch, 1929, related to the development of the grounds of the James Crawford Biggs estate." Those sound intrigue but require a trip to Chapel Hill.

Closer to home is the Elizabeth Reid Murray Collection at the Olivia Raney Local History Library in Raleigh. Recently deceased, Wake County's longtime historian compiled volumes of historical information about the people and places of Raleigh and Wake County. Set aside a couple hours (or days or weeks) and a visit. We've blogged about Ms. Murray before as she instrumental in researching and documenting the history of the Raleigh Fire Department.

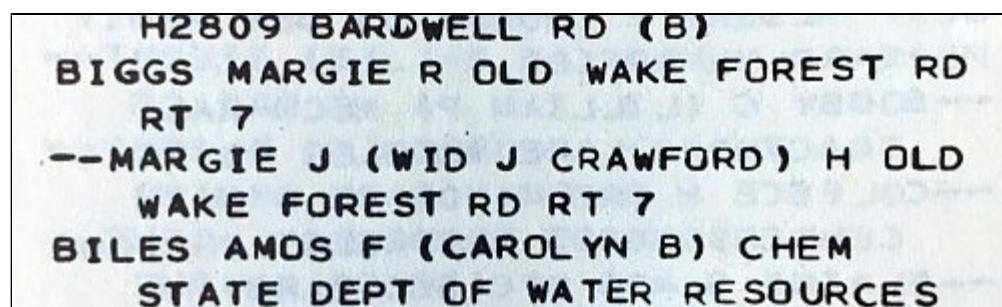
There's also this [blog posting](#) by John Woestendiek from August 2010. Some forty years ago, he spent a year living in a small house located between the Biggs Estate and another mansion. "Both of which looked like they could've been plucked out of 'Gone with the Wind'." He (incorrectly) cites the construction date as 1907, but correctly cites that the Biggs family lived there from 1922 to 1975.

Sources

- Elizabeth Amos Hunter oral history.
- Historical display at North Raleigh Hilton.
- [Mark Turner blog post](#), October 12, 2010.
- [North Carolina State Archives on Flickr](#).
- [OhMiDog blog post](#), August 10, 2010.
- *Raleigh Times*, December 6, 1976.
- etc.

Footnotes

¹Margie Biggs was famous for her gourmet cuisine. She was also well-educated. Her day jobs included teaching Latin at Trinity College (located in Randolph County until 1890, then in Durham and then named Duke University in 1892). Judge Biggs died at age 87 in 1960. She continued living at Hardimont until 1975. Here's a Raleigh Suburban Directory listing for her from 1963:



²Recalls Ms. Amos: "My mother went to a party held at Hardimont and saw the massive silver closet that you could walk into. She also recalls seeing the tavern, run down and overgrown with vines, out behind the formal gardens that were behind Hardimont. It looked much like the last pictures of it.

³The trees surrounded the tavern site on three sides. One of the trees was felled by a storm around 1930. That was -the- Lafayette Oak, the one where the last surviving French general of the Revolutionary War--the Marquis de Lafayette--was said to have rested before proceeding to Raleigh in 1825. [Here's a Wiki page](#) about his visit to the United States.

⁴Was this building the tavern, the whole tavern, and nothing else? Or was the original building bigger? Some speculate that Issac Hunter had a separate plantation house from the tavern. This seems logical, as he had a large family. They (and their guests) couldn't have managed in a structure the size of the tavern building at the time of its demolition. There's also thought that that tavern building might've been a bit bigger as well.

⁵Hunter and twenty other lineal descendants were buried at Quail Corners. The family plot, two miles north, was located on land formerly belong to Isaac and Jacob Hunter. The graves were relocated to Oakwood Cemetery when the shopping center was constructed on that site.

⁶What was the size and shape of such a track? Says Ms. Amos, most colonial race tracks were straight, and hence the need for quarter horses to rack one-quarter of a mile. Later tracks and those in Virginia were more likely to be round, and were used to race imported thoroughbreds.

We ran across the bench last year (2013) and possibly know where it is, if interested.

Jay Bird - 11/12/14 - 22:19

Dang, interesting. Shame to see progress destroying history.

Olson - 11/14/14 - 01:05

Here's an EXCELLENT story about the tavern, and the explorers that have finally found its location, at the old Biggs' home site,

<http://www.newsobserver.com/news/local/c..>

Legeros - 08/19/17 - 14:33

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preferred)

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What are the FIRST TWO LETTERS of the word 'fire'?

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Hide email: Yes, hide my email address.

Small print: All html tags except and <i> will be removed from your comment. You can make links by just typing the url or mail-address.