## 1. Name

**historic** Alphonso Calhoun Avery House

**and/or common** Avery-Summersette

## 2. Location

**street & number** 408 North Green Street

**city, town** Morganton

**state** North Carolina

## 3. Classification

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## 4. Owner of Property

**name** Melvin C. and Mary R. Summersette

**street & number** 408 North Green Street

**city, town** Morganton

**state** North Carolina

## 5. Location of Legal Description

**courthouse, registry of deeds, etc.** Register of Deeds

**street & number** Burke County Courthouse, 201 South Green Street

**city, town** Morganton

**state** North Carolina

## 6. Representation in Existing Surveys

**title** Burke County Historic Sites Survey

**has this property been determined eligible?** yes X no

**date** 1983-1984

**depository for survey records** North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Western Office

**city, town** 13 Veterans Drive, Asheville

**state** North Carolina
7. Description

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Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

Even with its decidedly vernacular flavor, the c. 1876 Avery-Summersette House remains as one of Burke County's earliest and best examples of Victorian-era domestic architecture. It was one of the first significant in-town houses to be built after the Civil War and its irregular massing, Italianate design elements and relatively ornate interior details were all a distinctive break from the simple and restrained folk traditions which dominated western North Carolina antebellum architecture.

The house is sited at the center of a one-half-acre lot just northwest of Morganton's courthouse square and commercial district. Originally, the house faced the main turnpike (Yellow Mountain Road) which led from Burke's county seat westward to Tennessee, but now, due to later street changes, it is sited sideways between North Green and Jefferson Streets.

The surrounding neighborhood consists of late nineteenth-century frame houses with miscellaneous Victorian-era details or early 20th-century houses of Colonial Revival or bungalow styles.

The mass of the two-story, brick house is roughly defined as a U-shape with a 2-1/2-story, squarish, brick tower filling the space between the ells, giving the whole the approximate, but vernacular, form of the 'Italian Villa style. The facade consists of the central tower flanked by gabled ells, the one on the south projecting farther forward than that on the north.

The gabled roofs are covered with scallop-edged metal shingles (many of the original wood shingles survive beneath). The eaves are open, with the rafter and purlin ends exposed. The walls are constructed of red brick laid in an 8:1 common-bond pattern with flush mortar joints, penciled with white. The partial cellar walls are also brick, five courses thick at the base and reduced to three courses at ground level. Corbelled brickwork is used to form a water table, flat corner pilasters, corbel tables along the facade gables, and slightly-peaked window heads with shoulders supported on brick consoles. These window heads occur on the facade and south elevation; elsewhere the windows have simple, splayed, brick lintels.

The physical evidence indicates that the projecting north bay is actually an earlier (probably 1840-60) frame house that was incorporated into the existing structure. This older section appears to have been 1-1/2-stories (later raised to two) with a hall-and-parlor plan and a central chimney. This part of the house is sided with simple clapboards (some original, some new) on the rear and north elevations and a brick veneer, matching the brick of the rest of the house, on the facade and wrapping around the northeast corner. During recent renovations, the framing of this section was shown to be of hewn beams with pegged mortise-and-tenon joints labeled with Roman-numeral carpenter's marks.

The tower is topped by a Mansard roof with concave sides and a flat deck which has surviving physical evidence of now-gone cresting. Each side of the tower roof has a gabled wall-dormer with an arch-topped, 2/2-sash window.
The rectangular window opening contain 4/4-sash windows, double-hung and counter-weighted, except for those on the first-floor facade which are floor-length and consist of fixed upper sash and double-leaf casements on the bottom. A five-sided wooden bay-window projects from the first-floor of the south elevation and features a bracket cornice and panelled spandrels below the windows.

The facade-width porch has a metal-shingled hip roof, brick-pier foundation and tongue-and-groove deck. The posts are square-in-section with chamfered edges; they are finished with simple, ovolo-molded caps and bases. Between the posts, and attached below the porch's boxed cornice are flat, segmentally-arched wooden skirts which give the porch an arced look. These skirts spring from curvilinear scroll brackets which are attached to the sides of the posts. The shed-roofed, rear porch is similar but simpler in detail; the south end bay of the rear porch was enclosed at a later date and serves as a sunroom.

One of the most notable features is the impressive entry door: it is a rather fashionable Italianate type consisting of arch-topped double leaves. Each leaf has a long glass panel topped by a tear-shaped glass panel both etched with rectilinear, urn, and foliate designs. The hardware includes embossed brass knobs and acorn hinges.

The interior follows a double-pile plan with a wide, central hall accessible through an entry foyer located in the tower base. The ground floor contains a small and large parlor, dining room and kitchen; upstairs are four bedrooms and a modern bathroom (located in the second floor of the tower). The rooms generally have spacious dimensions with high ceilings (11'-7"). The walls and ceilings are plastered except for the two upstairs bedrooms in the older section which have flush, tongue-and-groove board walls and ceilings. Most rooms have a 10" pine baseboard with a beaded top edge (or an applied walnut molding strip in some first-floor rooms). All the floors are of medium-width heart pine.

The doors have raised panels, mostly two long panels over two short, with brown Bennington-type or embossed, brass knobs. They are generally of pine (some painted wood-grain) enframed by flat surrounds with unadorned corner blocks. The surrounds are pine upstairs, walnut in the downstairs' hall and tiger-maple in the parlor and dining room. A notable exception to this door treatment is the double-leaf, arch-topped door between the hall and foyer which resembles the main exterior door; this interior door originally had etched glass and is topped by a semi-circular fanlight.

The window surrounds are flat, some with a thin edge-molding. The window openings in the parlors and dining room have deep, splayed, maple reveals which originally had moveable-slat interior shutters which now only survive in the bay window on the south side.

The hall is dominated by an impressive 180°-degrees-turn cantilevered stairway; it is finished in a typical Italinate style with a heavy octagonal newel post with a cylindrical
base, a donut-shaped top and gouged-line decorations. Each tread has two turned-and-octagonal balusters: one of walnut, darkly-stained, the other of chestnut, lightly-stained.

Each of the eight major rooms contains a fireplace connected to one of two interior brick chimneys. Five of the eight mantels are original. The mantel contained in the kitchen of the older section of the house reflects simple post-and-lintel designs of the antebellum era with a rectangular shelf, flat frieze and flat pilasters. With the exception of the dining room mantel, all the remaining mantels (including three salvaged from elsewhere but compatible in style and one pine) have simple post-and-lintel designs with friezes and pilasters which are either flat, chamfered or given an applied wide symmetrical molding. The notable dining-room mantel is walnut and is of a more fashionable Italianate design with a curved-edged shelf supported on brackets and decorated with elongated oval panels applied to the frieze and pilasters.

The remaining ornament is contained in the south parlor: a highly ornate, foliated, plaster medallion graces the ceiling and a picture molding twelve inches below the ceiling adorns the walls. The alcove-opening to the bay window is enframed by a graceful semi-elliptical plaster arch which springs from two plaster consoles incised with floral designs. (Identical consoles which serve as wall-shelves also flank the foyer door.)

The kitchen is modern but sensitively adapted to the original fabric and features handcrafted, glass-panelled wall cabinets.

The only other building on the lot is a 20th-century frame garage reportedly sited near where the original detached kitchen house was. In 1982-83 the house received major sympathetic restoration by the present owners after a period of gradual decline and today serves as a highly visible success story in Morganton's historic built environment.
Situated on a half-acre city lot, just west of Morganton's commercial district, the c. 1876 Avery-Summersette House was one of the county's first substantial houses to be built after the Civil War. Its irregular, picturesque massing and Italianate detailing were a break from the generally more restrained and simpler building traditions that had characterized Burke County architecture up to that time. The house served as the residence of Alphonso Calhoun Avery until his death in 1913, and its substantial and fashionable character, although frequently vernacular in nature, reflects the aspirations and social status of its owner. Avery was a descendant of a prominent Burke County family; he established legal, military and political careers highlighted by an eight-year term as an Associate Justice of the North Carolina Supreme Court. The recently restored house serves as a visible reminder of Avery's life.

CRITERIA ASSESSMENT

B. Associated with the life of Alphonso Calhoun Avery, North Carolina Supreme Court Justice and member of a prominent western Carolina family.

C. One of the first Burke County houses to adopt the picturesque irregular massing of the Victorian-era and design features of the then-popular Italianate style; the house was and is one of the county's very few residences to adopt early-Victorian modes.
The circa 1876 Avery-Summersette House was built for Alphonso Calhoun Avery (1835-1913) and served as his in-town Morganton residence until his death. Avery was a descendant of a prominent North Carolina family which was among Burke County's first settlers. His paternal grandfather, Waightstill Avery (1741-1819) was the first of the family to come to North Carolina (in 1769), living in various parts of the state before settling in Burke, a western county which is a geographical transition between the piedmont and the Blue Ridge Mountains. Waightstill's ancestors immigrated from England to Massachusetts in the 1630s, later making Groton, Connecticut, their home.

Waightstill had a distinguished political and legal career; some believe he may have drafted much of the Mecklenburg Resolves (1775), and he was a delegate to several Provincial Congresses which were responsible for the formation of the State government of North Carolina. Most notably, he served as the state's first Attorney General (1778). During the 1780s he established a plantation along the Catawba River in Burke County (four miles east of Morganton) which he called Swan Ponds. Waightstill's landholdings were large and he owned as many as 75 slaves in the early 1800s; although there was little difference in temperament and social status between Waightstill and his counterparts in the eastern part of the state, there were too few aristocratic planters in Burke County to form a class comparable to the east. Nonetheless, Waightstill established the basis of a political and economic power for his family which would greatly aid his grandson A. C. Avery's own career.

Alphonso's father, Isaac Thomas Avery (1785-1864) was Waightstill's only son; Isaac engaged in politics and concentrated on expanding and improving the estate of Swan Ponds. He owned thousands of acres of grazing land in Mitchell and Avery counties where he raised cattle and horses, more than any other western North Carolina farmer. By 1850, he was Burke County's largest slaveholder with 142, and in 1848 built an impressive Greek Revival plantation house at Swan Ponds in order to "meet the demands of hospitality" and which served as a "seat of politics, arts and sciences" for the region. Issac's wife was Harriet Eloise Erwin, daughter of William Willoughby and Matilda (Sharpe) Erwin, both members of prominent families. They had twelve sons and four daughters; six of the children died in infancy.

A. C. Avery was born at Swan Ponds in 1835, the fifth son. He spent at least part of his younger years learning farming skills and spent his summers with his family at their Yancy County mountain retreat. He apparently enjoyed a healthy and happy childhood, receiving his early education at home until he attended Bingham Academy in Orange County, N. C. He graduated at the top of his class of the University of North Carolina in 1857 with an A. B. degree. Immediately after graduation, Avery spent two years in charge of his father's stock farm in Yancy County.
Avery began his legal career by studying law under Richmond M. Pearson (who later became Chief Justice of North Carolina) at Logtown, was licensed in 1860, and began a practice in Morganton in 1861. In February 1861, on the eve of the Civil War, he married Susan Washington Morrison, daughter of Rev. R. H. Morrison of Lincoln County (who was the first president of Davidson College, a connection that would later influence Avery's career).

His career, which had just begun, was cut short by the war. Avery and four of his brothers rushed to join the Confederate cause out of idealistic feeling of "overweening pride and steadfast sense of loyalty"; however, the war was to have a devastating effect on the family - three brothers were killed outright, a fourth died of wound complications several years after the war, and the father Isaac died in 1864, reportedly of grief over the loss of his sons. Avery's elder brothers were all beginning to establish successful political, agricultural or legal careers and each advanced in the military before their deaths.

A. C. Avery's military record was distinguished: he served as a commander to Company E, 6th Regiment of North Carolina, served on the staff of his brother-in-law, General Daniel H. Hill and was promoted to Major in 1862. In the western campaigns, he was on the staffs of Gens. Breckinridge, Hindman and Hood but in 1864 he was granted a leave of absence due to his brothers' deaths. He was then transferred to the Department of North Carolina at Salisbury where he began to organize a battalion to defend the State's western lands but the attempt was doomed and Avery was captured by Gen. Stoneman's Union Troops at Salisbury in the spring of 1864; after a short confinement in Tennessee, he was released in August.

Avery returned to Swan Ponds plantation, much of which he had just inherited from his father's and brothers' estates. He began a private law practice in Morganton in 1865 and was one of only four lawyers who both practiced and lived in Burke County. Despite the devastation caused by the war to his family, Avery quickly became one of the county's most prominent citizens, primarily because of his antebellum social and political connections. He was elected to the State Senate in 1866 (the last to be solely white-elected), where he originated and secured passage of an act to extend the Western North Carolina Railroad to Old Fort, N. C. from where it had been halted by the war just inside Burke's eastern border. His Senate career was short-lived however because his party, the Conservative Democrats, was swept out of power in 1867 by the newly-formed Republican Party which held sway during the Reconstruction era. Ironically, it was another Burke County man, Republican Governor Todd Caldwell, who was partially responsible for preventing Avery's return to the Senate in 1868.
There is some evidence that Avery then became involved with the Ku Klux Klan in western North Carolina, although the extent of his involvement is not known for certain.24

In 1875, Avery was elected as a Conservative delegate to the North Carolina Constitutional Convention which revised the State's constitution and consolidated the Democrats' power; the following year he was a Democratic presidential elector.25

At this time, 1876, it is believed that Avery moved his family from Swan Ponds to Morganton, probably to be closer to his practice.26 Because the county's records prior to 1865 have been lost or destroyed and a search of deed records for the decades following the Civil War do not give any pertinent evidence, it is not known from whom Avery acquired the land where he built his house. Two possibilities are feasible however: it is known that his grandfather Waightstill owned two town lots in Morganton, one of which Avery may have inherited; it is also possible that he acquired part of his brother William Waightstill's (1816-64) estate which included an in-town red-brick 1847 house which stood two short blocks northwest of Avery's house, and which has only recently been destroyed.27 Starting in 1876, Avery began to sell off portions of Swan Ponds and from then on regarded Morganton as his home.28 The house he had erected incorporated into it an older, existing 1-1/2 story structure which a tradition, that is unsubstantiated by any known written record, says was a building associated with his brother's Morganton estate.

Avery's new residence (the nominated property) was built in an irregularly-massed Victorian-era mode incorporating then-popular Italianate details. It is not known where Avery got the plans, but it is not unlikely that the house is a local interpretation of a design published in one of many contemporary architectural plan books. It is also feasible that Samuel Sloan, a notable Philadelphia architect, may have had some part in designing the house because he is known to have been in Morganton at just this time to visit the building site of the Western North Carolina Insane Asylum which he designed.29 Samuel McDowell Tate, an acquaintance of Avery's, was largely responsible for bringing the Insane Asylum project to Morganton, and some believe that Sloan was responsible for the remodeling of Tate's Greek Revival house into a more fashionable Second Empire style residence. Some design similarities between Tate's and Avery's houses can still be seen today. Avery's residence was one of Morganton's first substantial houses to be erected after the war and was apparently intended not only to serve as a fashionable residence, but also as a symbol of Avery's position and a continuation of the family's social traditions begun by Waightstill Avery. A. C. Avery was known to have entertained a great deal at the home and the almost ceremonial nature of some of the house's rooms is appropriate to this function. When the Averys moved into the house, the family included seven children (another had died at childbirth).

Avery's career advanced rapidly shortly after his move to Morganton: in 1878 he was elected as a judge of the Superior Court and he rode the circuit of the Eight District for ten years until 1888.30 During this time he became a member of the First Presbyterian
Church at Morganton and became a ruling elder in 1879 continuing for 24 years. In 1886 his wife died and three years later he married Sarah Love Thomas (1861-1953), daughter of Col. W. H. Thomas (a prominent western North Carolina politician) and granddaughter of Robert Love, founder of Waynesville, N. C. Thus Avery once again connected himself with prominent North Carolina families.

The height of Avery's legal career came in 1888 when he was elected as an Associate Justice to the State's Supreme Court, an office he filled for eight years. As a Supreme Court Justice, he filed over 500 opinions and was known as an advocate of individual rights, and state regulation of the railroads which, until decisive court rulings, were exempt from taxes and wielded inordinate power.

While serving on the Supreme Court, Avery received honorary degrees from both the University of North Carolina and Trinity College; Trinity (later Duke University) moved to Durham in 1892 and Avery became Dean of the Law School and taught law there that year. In 1897, at age 62, Avery retired from the Supreme Court and returned to a private law practice in Morganton where he also taught a law class. He had kept ties with his hometown, becoming a vice-president in 1889 of the Morganton Land and Improvement Company.

In his final years, Avery was an avid amateur historian, writing numerous articles on local history, his civil war experiences and the definitive biography of Confederate General D. H. Hill.

Avery died at his home on June 13, 1913 after two weeks of complications from diabetes mellitus; he was survived by his wife and four children (out of a total of eleven, three by his second wife). Several of his children had distinguished careers including: Gladys Tillet, who founded the State's League of Women's Voters, was the keynote speaker for women at the 1944 Democratic National Convention in Chicago and was appointed as a delegate to the United Nations in 1961 by President Kennedy where she served on numerous committees; Isaac Ervin Avery, who was a highly respected journalist who wrote a regular column for the Charlotte Observer and was vice-consul general to Shanghai (1894-1898); and A. C. Avery, Jr. who was a two-term mayor of Morganton. Avery's widow continued to live at the Morganton house until the late 1920's when she moved to Charlotte where she lived with her daughter, Gladys. The house was sold to J. D. Alexander and H. M. Walton, who were involved in Burke County real estate; they rented the property to Dr. Eldred Randolph until the 1950's. Randolph moved to Morganton in 1927 and eventually became principal of Morganton High School for 12 years, organized a local YMCA Chapter, was an active Boy Scout leader, and served as the first curator of the N. C. Museum of Minerals on the Blue Ridge Parkway until 1959.

After the Randolph's tenancy, the Alexanders, who gained sole ownership of the Avery house in 1935, divided the residence into four apartments which were rented out until the present owners, Mel and Mary Summersette, bought the property in June 1982 and meticulously restored the house to its original appearance.

Despite A. C. Avery's many achievements in law and politics, his house remains as the only remaining visible reminder in Burke County of his notable life.
FOOTNOTES


7Heritage, p. 82; Phifer, "The Averys", pp. 140-144; Seventh Census of U. S. 1850; also Census of Burke County Sched II, Slave Inhabitants, 1850; Russell E. Dancy. William Waightsstill Avery: Biography of a National Democrat (Winston-Salem: Wake Forest University, thesis), p. 8, 9.


9Heritage, p. 83


14Avery, History of Presbyterian Churches, p. 87; Phifer, "The Averys", p. 333.


United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service  
National Register of Historic Places  
Inventory—Nomination Form

Continuation sheet  SIGNIFICANCE  Item number  8  Page  six


18 Heritage, p. 79; News Herald, June 14, 1913.


20 Burke County Records: Deeds, Book A, pp. 207-211.

21 Phifer, Burke p. 145.

22 Phifer, Burke pp. 154, 155.

23 Laws of N. C.: 1866-67 c. XCIV, s. I; c. XCVII, ss 1-4; also Phifer, Burke p. 414.

24 Phifer, "The Averys", p.335 cites Josephus Daniels in a Raleigh News & Observer article, April 12, 1933; also Phifer, Burke, p. 333.


26 Phifer, "The Averys", p.336-337 also interview with Miss Eunice Ervin (2/23/84) who cites memories of her mother Laura Ervin.

27 Phifer, "The Averys", p. 306, Dancy, p. 19; also Burke County Tax Lists for 1818 (Raleigh: at State Archives and History).

28 Burke County Records: Deed Bk. E, many entries.

29 National Register Nomination for Western Carolina Insane Asylum; North Carolina Division of Archives and History; 1977. Item 8, pp 1-2.

30 News-Herald, June 14, 1913; Phifer, Burke, p. 146; Heritage, p. 78-79.

31 Phifer, "The Averys", p. 335; Avery, History of Presbyterian Churches, p. 44.


34 Heritage, p. 79; Phifer "The Averys", p. 336; also Supreme Court Reports (Raleigh: 1889-1896).
SIGNIFICANCE


36 Phifer, Burke, p. 155.


38 News-Herald, June 13, 1913; Phifer, "The Averys" p. 337.

39 Congressional Record - Senate, July 24, 1968, p. 23017; News-Herald, "Burke Native is called #1 Feminist", June 7, 1968; Phifer, Burke, p. 302; Heritage, pp. 77, 81.

40 Burke County Records: Deed Bk, 57, p. 305; 90, p. 541; 66, p. 57; 77, p. 133; 621, p. 53.

41 Heritage, p. 574-75.

42 Burke County Records: Deed Bks. 621, p. 53; also interview with Mary Summersette, Morganton, 2/20/84.
10. Geographical Data

Acres of nominated property: 456
Quadrangle name: Morganton South, NC

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Verbal boundary description and justification:
The nominated property includes the lot defined as Lot #3, Block 3, Map 48-6 in Burke County Tax Supervisor's Office, approximately 137' x 155' and includes the house and garage. See map.

List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries:

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11. Form Prepared By

name/title: James Randall Cotton, Preservation Consultant
organization: N. C. Division of Archives and History
date: March 21, 1984
street & number: 13 Veterans Drive
telephone: (704) 298-5024
city or town: Asheville
state: North Carolina
28805

12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

national  state  local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature: William P. Prince

date: April 12, 1984

For NPS use only:
I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

Keeper of the National Register

Attest: Chief of Registration

Asheville Citizen, "Colonel Waightstill Avery---", September 30, 1928, p. 3.


Burke County Records: Deed Books, Marriage Records, Death Records.


Congressional Record -Senate, July 24, 1968, p. 23017.


U. S. Census Records, 1850.
