United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900a). Type all entries.

1. Name of Property
   historic name  Avirett-Stephens Plantation
   other names/site number

2. Location
   city, town  Richlands
   state  North Carolina code N.C. county Onslow code 133 zip code 28574

3. Classification
   Ownership of Property  
     [x] private
     [ ] public-local
     [ ] public-State
     [ ] public-Federal
   Category of Property  
     [x] building(s)
     [ ] district
     [ ] site
     [ ] structure
     [ ] object
   Number of Resources within Property  
     Contributing: 1 buildings
     Noncontributing: 1 sites
     2 structures
     1 objects
     Total: 4

   Name of related multiple property listing: Historic and Architectural Resources of Onslow County, North Carolina
   Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register: 0

4. State/Federal Agency Certification
   As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination / request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.
   In my opinion, the property [x] meets [ ] does not meet the National Register criteria. [ ] See continuation sheet.
   Signature of certifying official
   Date

   In my opinion, the property [ ] meets [x] does not meet the National Register criteria. [ ] See continuation sheet.
   Signature of commenting or other official
   Date

5. National Park Service Certification
   I, hereby certify that this property is:
   [ ] entered in the National Register.
   [ ] See continuation sheet.
   [ ] determined eligible for the National Register. [ ] See continuation sheet.
   [ ] determined not eligible for the National Register.
   [ ] removed from the National Register.
   [ ] other, (explain:)

   Signature of the Keeper
date of Action
## 6. Function or Use

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## 7. Description

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Describe present and historic physical appearance.
Description

The Avirett-Stephens Plantation today consists of an 83-acre tract on the east side of US 258/NC 24 in the Richlands vicinity of Onslow County that is the remainder of a plantation that once numbered 25,000 acres. The irregularly shaped parcel is relatively level terrain except at its northern reaches where the ground drops rather sharply to Chapel Run, a stream that and empties into the New River a short distance east of the plantation and is most of the property's northern boundary. The house that is the heart of the plantation lies in the south-central portion of the property, at the edge of the heavily forested acreage that constitutes the majority of the parcel. Most of the cleared acreage is at the western end of the property, toward the main road and there are two fairly small fields in the midst of the woodland.

A cedar-lined dirt-tracked lane leads through cleared acreage approximately 1,000 feet from US 258 to the vernacular Greek Revival Avirett-Stephens House sited on a gentle rise. The cedars date to the 19th century and replaced elms which originally lined the drive (Avirett, 36). Mature foundation plantings surround the house and numerous large shrubs and trees dot the yard. The earlier house on the site was flanked by large beech trees, and the stump of one remains to the southwest. North of the lane, between the road and the house, there is a 19th-century family cemetery and immediately south of the house there is an antebellum brick cistern. Behind the house, to the east and northeast respectively, are a storage building and well enclosure, both constructed after World War II. According to family records, numerous other resources once surrounded the house: a cotton gin, commissary, tenant house, sugar cane mill and shoe shop in an area now marked by a grove of trees to the southwest; three smoke houses, a garden, and slave quarters on three acres to the east; a 19th-century brick and frame dairy to the northwest; and, near the cemetery, a 19th-century schoolhouse and a frame barn built prior to 1915. Pending archaeological investigations, these areas may be added to the list of nominated resources as contributing sites.

1. **Avirett-Stephens House, 1851**

The two-story, double-pile frame house is a large and austere rectangular, gable-roofed block with a five-bay main facade reflecting a center hall plan. Exterior sheathing is rough-sawn heart pine board and batten, the sills are hewn timbers, and the joists are unworked logs. The house rests on brick piers with pierced brick infill. Interior chimneys with slightly corbelled brick stacks punctuate the rear flank of the roof, which has flush gable ends with narrow, molded
raking boards and a simple molded cornice at the very shallow eaves of the front and rear elevations. A wide two-tiered porch marking the main (west) entrance bay has a shallow hipped roof and four molded box posts with two matching pilasters at each level; structural members are exposed in the ceilings of both levels. The molded second story rail with match stick balusters is original, but the first story porch has lost its railing. A one-story rear entrance porch, a 20th-century replacement, also has a shallow hipped roof and supports of molded box posts. Five vertically ranked sidelights appear at each side of the front and back doors.

Penetration is symmetrical but irregular to the extent that the pairs of windows toward each gable end on the rear and lower main facade are closer to each other than to the central bay. The front and rear fenestration is identical except that the upper front facade has six evenly spaced bays, including a window and door sheltered by the upper tier of the porch. In the gable ends, the closer spacing of the western windows indicate the different sizes of the front and rear rooms. Except for four windows in the gables, all windows are large double-hung sashes that are six-over-six on the front and side elevations and nine-over-six on the rear. In the broad gables of the habitable attic, there are two six-over-six full-sized windows at the center flanked by small four-over-two windows tucked into the outer corners.

A post-1940 one-story, gable-roofed wing at the north side of the house replaced the separate 1851 kitchen (believed to have been destroyed by fallen limbs) connected to the house by a breezeway (Kesler, interview). It matches the older section in its brick foundation and board and batten sheathing, but reveals its younger age in the tripartite picture window in its north gable end. A carport is attached to the back of this wing.

Interior decoration is restrained, characterized by typical Greek Revival detail including delicate molded door surrounds, four-panel doors, and simple pilastered mantels against plastered walls. The narrow stair to the second story has an unusual solid plank railing that resembles a wainscot and a square newel post with a delicately molded, square-centered cap. The staircase rises from the front of the center passage, which is partitioned to create a fifth room to the rear. All of the first floor mantels are original and stained except the southeast room mantel which is painted white. One of the first floor fireplaces retains faint traces of its original marbleizing at the surround. The loom-woven, red and green floor covering, which in the 19th century was underlain with broom straw, is original to the southwest (music) room (Kesler, interview).
The rooms on the second story retain their original graining not only on four-panel doors but on window moldings and sashes as well. Graining is especially well preserved in the northwest bedroom. Here, one door displays a solid mahogany grain, while graining on the another door appears to be maple, with light blond panels surrounded by darker graining on the stiles and rails. In this room, the fireplace surround is painted black with a delicate marbleizing.

The plank-railed stair continues on to the third floor, which the author was unable to inspect. The second floor landing newel post cap differs from the one on the first floor: here, the rounded sides of the cap slope up to a diamond-shaped center.

2. Cistern, antebellum. This barrel-vaulted brick cistern probably was built prior to the Civil War and may have served the original plantation house which burned in 1851.

3. Cemetery. Located at the edge of dense woods, the cemetery is divided into two distinct sections: a walled area filled with towering hardwoods and a mowed section shaded by a large dogwood. A deteriorated stuccoed brick wall with sandstone coping contains an unknown number of graves believed to be those of the Avirett family. No stone markers are evident and numerous wooden markers, perhaps for slaves, rotted away in this century. The unfenced portion of the cemetery contains approximately thirty stone markers for members of the Stephens, Simmons and Venter families, including marble obelisks and urns on pedestals. The marker for Kitty Simmons (d. 1897) is inscribed with a dove and Mary Stephens's (d. 1899) depicts New Jerusalem.


5. Storage Building, post-1940 (non-contributing). Small one-story, gable-front, board and batten building with exposed rafter ends, a door in a gable end, and a small multi-paned window on each side elevation.

6. Farmland. With the concentration of cleared areas near the main road and dense pine forest covering the majority of the property, the 83-acre tract retains the basic 19th-century characteristics of the plantation worked by John Avirett, Sr., and Christopher Stephens. Cultivated fields that are now planted in corn along the road and near the house as well as two small fields surrounded by forest attest to the cultivation of crops, while the much larger area of pine forest
recalls the turpentine production that was a mainstay of this plantation. A comment by Avirett's son that Chapel Run went through fields suggests that the tract's specific pattern of forest interspersed with fields may not have been in place prior to 1890. While much of this pine forest may be later growth, it is symbolic of the plantation's once vast stands of longleaf pines, most of which were removed from the Onslow County landscape during the late 19th and 20th centuries. The farmland is especially important because it is the entire portion of the original 25,000 acre plantation that has remained associated with the plantation seat and recalls the agricultural importance of the property.
8. Statement of Significance
Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

☐ nationally  ☑ statewide  ☐ locally

Applicable National Register Criteria  ☑ A  ☐ B  ☑ C  ☐ D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions)  ☐ A  ☐ B  ☐ C  ☐ D  ☐ E  ☐ F  ☐ G

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions)

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Significant Person
N/A

Architect/Builder
Unknown

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

Summary

The Avirett-Stephens Plantation is located in Onslow County near the headwaters of the New River and the town of Richlands. The 83-acre parcel containing the Avirett-Stephens House, cemetery and associated support structures is the remaining, relatively intact portion of an antebellum complex that originally comprised 25,000 acres. The well-preserved vernacular Greek Revival house is the earliest known example of a board and batten-sheathed dwelling in Onslow County; it also is important for its unusually sophisticated interior decorative painting. Built in 1851 by John A. Avirett (c. 1797 - c. 1863) after an earlier house on the same site burned, the house served as the seat of one of the largest turpentine producing plantations in North Carolina. Avirett was the second wealthiest planter in Onslow County prior to the Civil War and one of the wealthiest turpentine farmers in the state, which led the South in the antebellum production of naval stores. Life on the plantation was described, in somewhat idealized form, by Avirett's son, James Battle Avirett (1837 - 1912) in The Old Plantation: How We Lived In Great House and Cabin before the War. In 1857, John Avirett sold the house and 10,000 acres to Christopher Dudley Stephens (1810 - 1890) and moved to Goldsboro, where in the 1860 census he was listed as a "broker." Stephens was a prominent merchant, farmer and civic leader in the Richlands areas who continued to operate the farm until his death. The Avirett-Stephens Plantation reflects the historic contexts Naval Stores and Lumber Production in Onslow County, 1734 - 1938 and Agriculture in Onslow County, 1734 - 1938, and the property types Vernacular Dwellings, for its overall form and exterior treatment, and Stylish Dwellings for its interior decorative painting.

☐ See continuation sheet
The following contexts supplement the Multiple Property Documentation Form, "Historic and Architectural Resources of Onslow County, North Carolina":

Agricultural Context

At the time the house was built by John Alfred Avirett, Sr., in 1851, he was among the premier turpentine planters in North Carolina, a state that lead the South in the production of naval stores (Perry, iii). Avirett, with 25,000 acres and 125 slaves to his credit, was the second wealthiest planter in Onslow County and among the largest turpentine planters in the state (Gwynn, vol. I, 701; Perry, 150-151; Johnson, 5). Longleaf pine forests, from which the resins to be distilled as turpentine were extracted, comprised some 22,000 acres of the estate, known as "The Rich Lands" (Avirett, 64). Other cultivated crops included corn, wheat, oats and rye (Johnson, 6).

Christopher Dudley Stephens, who purchased almost half of Avirett's acreage surrounding the homeplace in 1857, continued to farm the property after the Civil War. Beginning in the post-bellum period, Onslow County's turpentine farmers increasingly turned to other income sources and Stephens was no exception. On the cultivated land, Stephens followed the established practice of diversified agriculture, continuing to raise a variety of crops and livestock and introducing cotton as a mainstay of his production. Cotton yields rose steadily in Onslow County in the decades after the Civil War, from 881 bales to 5,775 bales in 1920 (Pezzoni, ibid.).

Architectural Context

The Avirett-Stephens House is the earliest known example of a board and batten dwelling in Onslow County, predating the Murrill House (c. 1860), built in the Gum Branch area on the east side of the New River. The basic floor plan of the house, with its center passage, sizable front rooms and small rear rooms, is fairly common to Onslow County. Despite the plainness of the exterior, the house is sophisticated in terms of interior architectural details. The two-toned graining common to raised panel doors and windows throughout this house built for John Avirett has a stylistic counterpart in the house built for his son, John Alfred Avirett, at Catherine Lake around 1855. The two-tone graining seen in both structures is unique in present-day Onslow County (Pezzoni, interview).
Historical Background

The Avirett-Stephens House was built for John Alfred Avirett, Sr., (ca. 1797-ca. 1863) and his family on the site of their house (date unknown) which burned in February, 1851. The earlier house, described by Avirett's son, James Battle Avirett (1837-1912) in his book, The Old Plantation: How We Lived in Great House and Cabin Before the War, must have been striking: three stories plus an attic, 60 feet square, and weatherboarded, with broad wraparound double piazzas and floor-to-ceiling windows (p. 37). Certainly it was a very valuable house, worth an estimated $6,000 when it burned (Wilmington Commercial, 1851). According to family history, Avirett built the replacement house plainly so that they could move into it quickly, probably doing so within the year (Pezzoni interview with Kesler).

Despite its austere contrast to the earlier house, the Avirett-Stephens House incorporates significant elements that relate it to the house that burned. Both were built as large double-pile structures, although the earlier house had an unusual cruciform hall organizing the four rooms of equal size on each floor (Avirett, 37-38). Both houses had a kitchen attached by a breezeway, but the kitchen built for the earlier house was at the south end, as indicated by the cistern believed to have been built prior to 1851 and located south of the current house.

The location of the kitchen to the original house is important, for on it hinge the locations of most of the plantation's antebellum food-processing structures. "Standing on the kitchen piazza and looking east" an observer would have seen much of the food support system for the plantation (Avirett, 39). A quadrangle about two acres in size contained a well at center, three smokehouses, backed by storage areas for potatoes and oysters; poultry houses, and storehouses for flour, coffee and groceries. Continuing on the east was an area of about one acre, containing a large garden, weaving rooms, and six servants' quarters (ibid., 39-40). These features remained in place until they gradually deteriorated or were otherwise removed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It is hoped that archaeological investigations will be undertaken and that they will precisely locate these features and add to our understanding of plantation and large post-bellum farm life. Despite the current lack of archaeological investigations at the site, the written records of these resources enhance the remaining physical evidence seen today.

The Avirettts had been a leading landholding family in northern Onslow County since well before the Revolutionary War (Gwynn, vol. 1, pp. 777-778, 839). John Alfred Avirett, Sr., served one term as a
representative in the North Carolina General Assembly, in 1836, and was Onslow County sheriff during the 1830s and 1840s (Brown, 427). In 1850, according to the census of that year, Avirett's household included his wife Serena, 48 years old; sons John Alfred, Jr., 21, and James Battle, 15; and daughter Caroline, 12. John Avirett, Sr.'s huge plantation of approximately 25,000 acres, known as "The Rich Lands," comprised some 22,000 acres of pine forests, or turpentine "orchards," and the remainder of the land was cleared for cultivation of crops and raising of livestock. Avirett planted primarily corn, wheat, oats, and rye and maintained a large herd of swine. His son claimed that 500 hogs were slaughtered and cured annually. The plantation extended on both sides of the stage road from Wilmington to New Bern (Avirett, 29, 39, 64; Johnson, 6).

John Alfred Avirett, Sr., was Onslow County's largest landowner and one of the area's leading naval stores producers during the antebellum period. James B. Avirett placed his father's turpentine production at 30,000 barrels and $60,000 per year, perhaps peak figures (Avirett, 68-69). In any event, John Avirett's plantation was very productive, for the 1850 census records that his turpentine orchards yielded $12,500 worth of crude turpentine. Furthermore, his two Catherine Lake distilleries, operated by his son John, Jr., produced $35,000 worth of spirits of turpentine and other products (Census of 1850, Industrial Schedule, Onslow County). Although the distillery required few laborers to keep it operating, large turpentine plantations needed large work forces, as indicated by his use of 50 workers in 1850; in 1855 most of his 125 slaves worked in the pine woods (Bellamy, 342). It was on Catherine Lake, near the distilleries, that John Avirett, Sr., built his summer house, which also served as a base for the supervision of the distilleries (see National Register nomination for the Catherine Lake Historic District). Whereas that house in its stylishness and location reflects Avirett's industrial successes, the Avirett-Stephens Plantation recalls the larger, agricultural base of his operations and of the county generally.

In February, 1857, Avirett sold his plantation house and 10,000 acres to Christopher Dudley Stephens for $25,000. The tract is described as including the "mansion house" and included Doctor's Bridge, the New River, and Chapel Run (Onslow County Deed Book 28, p. 99). Just a few days later, Avirett sold another 10,000 acres "together with the turpentine distilleries and fixtures" to Council Wooten of Lenoir County for $20,000 (Deed Book 28, p. 86). Avirett and his family moved to Goldsboro (Wayne County), where he is described in the 1860 Census as a "broker." All of the Aviretts except James were in residence in Goldsboro at the time of the 1860 Census. It is unclear
why Avirett made the move; his turpentine orchards continued to be profitable for decades (Pezzoni, interview). No records of the burial of Avirett or his wife have been found in Wayne County, and it is possible they were interred in the earlier, fenced portion of the cemetery next to the Avirett-Stephens House.

Christopher Dudley Stephens (1810-1891) was a prominent merchant, farmer and civic leader with ties to both Swansboro and Richlands (Heritage, item 727). Stephens served as one of Onslow County's wardens for the poor and during the Civil War he was authorized to borrow $30,000 on behalf of Onslow County to provide for indigent families (ibid.; Manarin, 26). He served on the first Board of Commissioners established in Onslow County after the Civil War, taking the oath to uphold the Constitution in 1868. That initial board divided the county into townships and school districts, drew jurors for superior court, and made provisions for the poor. He served as chairman from 1870 to 1872 (Onslow County, Minutes, unpaged). Stephens also was a principal stockholder in the Wilmington, Onslow and East Carolina Railroad when it was chartered in 1885 (N.C. Sessions Laws, 440).

The 1860 Census lists Stephens as having 1,000 acres of improved land and 7,000 acres of woodland valued at $25,000; his personal estate was valued at $21,700. The Stephens household consisted of Stephens and his wife, Mary (1821-after 1870), four young women who apparently were his daughters, and two men, both listed as farm laborers. The daughters were Mary (1839-1899), a seamstress who never married; Catherine (1845-1897), also known as Kitty, who married a Simmons; Ann Melissa (1848-1869), who married J. A. Smith; and Caroline (b. 1850 or 1851). Of the two men, John B. (b. 1842) was listed as having attended school in 1860 and probably was a son, but William's identity remains uncertain. The census notes that his livestock was valued at $2,500 and included eight horses, eight mules, ten milk cows, two oxen, fifty-three other cattle, sixteen sheep, and 175 swine. Of his crops, corn was the greatest, consisting of 11,500 bushels in 1859. He also produced twenty-one bales of cotton, 100 bushels of peas and beans, 150 bushels of Irish potatoes, 100 bushels of sweet potatoes; made 100 pounds of butter; sheared twenty pounds of wool, and slaughtered $650 worth of livestock.

After the Civil War, Stephens continued to operate the former plantation. He apparently was able to weather the disruptions to local agriculture caused by the war and Reconstruction; at one point he employed Italian labor to work his fields because so many blacks had left the county (Morris, "Richlands"). According to the 1870 Census, in that year Stephens's household included only his wife Mary,
his daughter by the same name, and two black farm laborers; one of his daughters had died and the rest had married. While his real estate remained at 8,000 acres valued at $25,000, the cash value of the farm was placed at $15,000. In comparison to the 1860 statistics, he had roughly the same number of horses and cattle, but the number of swine had declined to 100 while the sheep had increased to forty-four. His corn crop had dwindled considerably, to a yield of 2,000 bushels, as did his output of peas, beans and potatoes. He paid $1,500 in wages in 1870, apparently to tenants on his farm.

There is no record that cotton was a major crop during Avirett's tenure, but the census records and a horse-powered 19th-century cotton gin, perhaps installed shortly after he bought the property and no longer standing, indicate that cotton became increasingly important to his operation, despite the fact that there is no cotton listed in the 1870 agricultural schedules. By 1880, the year of the most recent census for which agricultural schedules are available, Stephens had sixty acres producing 47 bales of cotton. His yields of corn and sweet potatoes also were up markedly to 30,010 bushels from 450 acres and 800 bushels from eight acres, respectively. In addition to sixty sheep and lambs, forty-four milk cows and other cattle, and eight-five swine, he had introduced a poultry operation and planted three acres in apple and peach trees. He also sold twelve cords of wood, sheared 100 pounds of wool, and made 200 pounds of butter. In 1879, Stephens paid wages for labor by forty whites and forty blacks. These figures, as well as the numerous tenant houses, commissary, schoolhouse, and other support structures that he added, attest to the prosperity of Stephens's farm.

Christopher Stephens died in 1891, survived by his second wife Julia A. Stephens (1833-1907); both are buried in the family cemetery, as are his daughters. Stephens and his second wife had two daughters, Julia and Chrissie Caroline (1878-1960). To Chrissie Caroline, Stephens willed the house tract of 83 acres and additional acreage north of Chapel Run. In 1896 Chrissie Caroline Stephens married Roland Vance Venters (1876-1949) and the two continued to farm her share of the former plantation. Lottie Venters (b. 1903), the second of their six children, was deeded the 83-acre house tract and the remainder was divided among her siblings. Lottie Venters married Bernie Barton Kesler (1902-1985) in 1927 and they had one daughter, Elizabeth Carol Kesler Arthur. Lottie Kesler continues to occupy the house and has made provisions for it to pass upon her death to her daughter.
Previous documentation on file (NPS):
☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
☐ previously listed in the National Register
☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings
  Survey # ____________________________
  Record # ____________________________
☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering

Primary location of additional data:
☒ State historic preservation office
☐ Other State agency
☐ Federal agency
☐ Local government
☐ University
☐ Other

Specify repository:

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of property ______ 83 acres

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See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

The nominated property is all of parcel 39, map no. 45 of Onslow County tax maps.

See continuation sheet

Boundary Justification

The boundary encompasses all of the land historically and presently associated with the compound at the heart of the Avirett-Stephens Plantation.

See continuation sheet

11. Form Prepared By

name/title  Mary Ellen Polson, consultant; Claudia R. Brown, National Register Coordinator
organization State Historic Preservation Office  date  April 1989
street & number 1916 Market St.; 109 E. Jones St.  telephone 919/343-8328; 919/733-6545
city or town  Wilmington; Raleigh  state North Carolina  zip code 28403; 27605
Avirett, James Battle. The Old Plantation: How We Lived in Great House and Cabin before the War. New York: F. Tennyson Neely, 1901.


Kesler, Mrs. Lottie V. Interviews by Dan Pezzoni May 1988 and 8 September 1988.


Manarin, Dr. Louis H. "Onslow County During the Civil War." Paper prepared for the Onslow County Museum, 1982.


_______. Minutes of Commissioners, 1868-1878. One volume. In the Onslow County Register of Deeds Office. Jacksonville, N.C.


Onslow County Museum. Xerox from a copy of an 1847 map from the Peter B. Smith File, N.C. Archives.


Wilmington Commercial, The. 12 February 1851, pages unnumbered. New Hanover County Local History Room microfilm files.
## National Register of Historic Places

### Continuation Sheet

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Avirett-Stephens Plantation
Richlands vicinity, NC

The following information pertains to all photographs:

1. Avirett-Stephens Plantation
2. Richlands vicinity, North Carolina
3. Dan Pezzoni
4. May 1988
5. North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh, NC

A) Avirett-Stephens House, rear elevation, to the southwest
B) Avirett-Stephens House, to the south
C) Avirett-Stephens House, detail of front porch, to the east
D) Avirett-Stephens House, first-floor mantelpiece
E) Avirett-Stephens House, staircase from first floor
F) Cistern, to the north
G) Storage Building, to the southeast
H) Cemetery, to the northeast
I) Field at front of property, to the southeast
Avirett-Stephens Plantation, Richlands vicinity, NC

SKETCH OF RESOURCES
(no scale)
7 = photographs