United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form

See instructions in How to Complete National Register Forms
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

1. Name

historic Mills-Screven Plantation

and/or common Hilltop

2. Location

street & number South side SR 1506, opposite jct. with SR 1509

city, town Tryon

state North Carolina code Polk

city, town Tryon vicinity of

3. Classification

Category

district

X building(s)

structure

site

object

Ownership

public

private

both

Public Acquisition

in process

being considered

N/A

Status

X occupied

unoccupied

work in progress

Accessible

X yes: restricted

yes: unrestricted

no

Present Use

agriculture

commercial

educational

entertainment

government

industrial

military

private residence

religious

scientific

transportation

other:

4. Owner of Property

name Mr. and Mrs. David Terwilliger

street & number P. O. Box 996

city, town Tryon vicinity of

state North Carolina

city, town Columbus

state North Carolina

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Polk County Courthouse

street & number

city, town Columbus

state North Carolina

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title N/A

has this property been determined eligible? yes no

date

federal state county local

depository for survey records N/A

city, town Columbus

state North Carolina
The Mills-Screven Plantation House, more commonly known today as Hilltop, stands on a rise in the center of a wooded, eleven acre tract just northeast of the mountain resort town of Tryon. The structure is distinguished by its exterior and interior Federal/Greek Revival finish, but it is especially noteworthy for its usual size; it is possibly the largest antebellum house in western North Carolina. Though the house has received some modern alterations, particularly on the interior, it retains its overall form and much of its historic finish and detail.

The size and complexity of the structure suggest that it was developed in more than one stage of construction, though the consistency of the finish obscures the exact nature of the expansion. Whatever its building chronology, the house had achieved its present configuration probably no later than the 1840s. The house is built on a long rectangular plan, under a gable roof set on an east-west axis, and rests on a fieldstone foundation. It is covered in plain weatherboard, with narrow corner boards framing the elevations. The first floor windows are generally of nine-over-nine sash, set in plain (possibly replacement) surrounds; second floor windows are six-over-six in identical frames.

The south, north, and west elevations are all treated with equal importance, if differently, and because of the setting and approach, no side could be considered the "front." The formal south elevation presents a long seven-bay facade, slightly asymmetrical, with a two-tier, three-bay, pedimented porch centered on the elevation. Fluted columns, probably mid-1920s replacements, support the porch on both levels, with a simple balustrade connecting the posts on the second level only. The tympanum of the pediment is finished with wide flush board sheathing. The entrance under the porch is a double-leaf, eight-panel door set in a fine Greek Revival surround. This is composed of symmetrically molded frames, elongated corner blocks with Greek key ornament, and a center plate above the transom with a low-pitched pyramidal panel. The transom contains diamond pattern panes.

The irregular eight-bay north elevation is fronted three-fourths of its width with a one-story shed roof porch, which is flush with the east gable end of the house. This is supported by a row of seven massive square-in-section, tapered posts. The central entrance under the porch closely resembles the south entrance, though it is enlarged to include sidelights, with the panes of the sidelights and transom divided by a pattern of narrow horizontal and vertical muntins. A second, modern glazed door opens on the porch on the right side. Beyond the right end of the porch stands an exterior, double shouldered brick chimney, now stuccoed. This is the only exterior chimney on the house, the second being an interior chimney between the two easternmost rooms.

The three-bay west gable end, which is the first view of the house seen by a visitor coming up the drive, is dominated by a monumental, full-height, Neo-classical portico supported by fluted columns. Documentary photographs show that an earlier porch here had two tiers similar to the south porch, with square-in-section posts that matched those of the north shed porch. The present portico was a mid-1920s reworking of the
original porch; the original pediment was retained over the new columns, and a fanlight ventilator added to the tympanum of the pediment. The central entrance under the portico is identical to that of the north side. The second floor level was altered to provide French windows opening onto small wrought iron balconies located above the first floor windows.

The two-bay east gable end is simply finished, with a modern door and window on the first level. A one-story kitchen addition located here was removed in a 1970s renovation.

The interior has been modernized in recent years, though it retains its Federal/Greek Revival woodwork, much of which appears to have been derived from the early nineteenth century builders' guides published by Asher Benjamin. The basic plan is one of three large rooms, with a stair hall dividing the west and center rooms. Horizontal board sheathing covers the walls on all but the modernized east rooms of the first floor. Board floors remain in the west room, but the rest of the first floor has received a modern brick floor of old brick. Mantels vary in form, though all are of a transitional Federal/Greek Revival character and are related to Benjamin's designs, with such features as half-round pilasters, corner blocks (one with Greek key ornament), center plates, and molded shelves. Original doors that remain are the two vertical panel or four panel Greek Revival types. The open stair in the hall has been widened and its position altered in previous renovations. A second stair rises along the south wall from the east room to a hall on the second floor above; this stair is said to have led from the first floor center room to the second floor east room originally. Unfortunately, a previous owner removed all paint from the walls and woodwork and sandblasted the mantels in an early 1970s renovation, leaving exposed bare wood throughout the interior.

The second floor plan general follows the first, with an added partition in the center room creating a hall along the south wall ending at the top of the secondary stair and providing access to all three rooms. Modern baths and closets have been added to the second floor rooms. This level retains its original floors, baseboards, and mantels, which are a variation of those on the first floor.

Four nineteenth century outbuildings remain on the property. A stone springhouse to the south side of the main house bears the date 1850 inscribed in the lintel above the door. Near the springhouse is an unusual basin hollowed in rock, which tradition holds was fashioned by the Indians. To the east of the main house is a guesthouse composed of two outbuildings, one frame and one log moved next to it, renovated by the owners. The frame section is said to have been a slave cabin, and features a stone and brick chimney. To the west are a double pen log crib, and a larger twentieth century frame barn.
8. Significance

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Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

Sited on a large wooded tract and surrounded by several nineteenth century outbuildings, the Mills-Screven Plantation house, also known as Hilltop, is one of the largest and most unusual antebellum residences in western North Carolina. The precise dates of construction of the two-story, porticoed house remains unclear; it was possibly built for John McIntire before 1839, or for Govan Mills shortly after that date. Its size and the complexity of form and finish suggest that it was an earlier house expanded with extensive transitional Federal/Greek Revival additions by Mills after his acquisition of the property in 1839. Govan Mills, a successful planter, was a descendant of Ambrose Mills (the British loyalist who was hanged by patriots after the Battle of Kings Mountain) and a member of one of the wealthiest and most influential families in the region. After he died intestate in 1862, that portion of the property containing the house was held in estate until 1885, when it was purchased by Theodore Thomas Ballenger, a businessman, mayor of Tryon, state senator, and one of the builders of the Oak Hall Hotel in Tryon. Ballenger sold the property in 1909 to John Cleveland, who gave the house to his daughter Frances upon her marriage to William James Screven. The Screvens replaced the east double porch with a full-height Ionic portico, and made other changes. The property remained in the Screven family until 1973. The house has been rehabilitated and maintained by two separate recent owners.

Criteria Assessment:

A. Associated with the development of the antebellum planter society of Polk County in the foothills of the Blue Ridge in western North Carolina.

B. Associated with the life of Govan Mills, a wealthy planter and member of one of the most powerful families of western North Carolina, and Theodore Thomas Ballenger, a business and political leader of Polk County.

C. Embodies characteristics of the antebellum architecture of western North Carolina, particularly with the fine quality interior and exterior detail of transitional Federal/Greek Revival character. In terms of sheer size, it may be the largest antebellum house in western North Carolina.
Sometime between the first decade of the nineteenth century and the year 1842 Govan Mills established his residence on a plantation near the Pacolet River in what is now Polk County. The land on which he settled was owned by his father John Mills who had purchased vast tracts in the area, beginning around 1800-1810. Some evidence suggests that the structure which came to be called the Govan Mills House (now located in the town of Tryon) was already standing on plat of land that John Mills purchased from one John McIntire in 1839. The deed which transferred the McIntire property was for hundreds of acres and included "the mansion [sic] house." This building may have been the dwelling which later became the Govan Mills House, although local tradition claims that the Mills family built the structure. In any event, according to the 1842 will of John Mills, Govan Mills lived in a residence on the property of his father who gave him legal ownership in the will. Architectural features as well as the time of the land purchases by John Mills indicate that the mansion house was built sometime after the turn of the century, probably in the period 1820-1840.

Govan Mills was a member of a large and influential family. He was a descendant of the British loyalist Colonel Ambrose Mills who, along with eight other Tories, was hanged by American patriots for his participation in the Battle of King's Mountain during the American Revolution. The father of Govan Mills came to Pacolet River area from the vicinity of Green River in what was then Rutherford County. One of Govan Mills's brothers held various offices in Polk County government and was a leader in securing the creation of Polk County from Rutherford first in 1847 and then again in 1855. (In 1849 the state legislature rescinded the first act creating Polk, but the law of 1855 reestablished the county.) Another brother Dr. Columbus Mills served in the state senate in 1846, 1854, and 1856. He introduced the legislation establishing the County of Polk, and the county seat of Columbus is named in honor of him. Dr. Mills also served as a Confederate surgeon during the Civil War. The community of Mills Spring near Green River is named for the Mills family who settled in the area in large numbers, and the first meeting to create Polk County was held in the home of Marville (sometimes spelled Marvil) Mills. County courts met and records were kept for time in the home of George J. Mills until a permanent courthouse was constructed in 1859. Both men held offices as county officials.

Govan Mills ran a vast plantation of thousands of acres in the area of present-day Tryon. He produced a variety of crops and raised considerable livestock. He owned 33 slaves in 1860, a sizable number for western North Carolina. He also operated a tannery which served the surrounding community. Mills died intestate in 1862, and at that time the value of his plantation was estimated to be "at least ten thousand dollars." At his death the county court ordered the sale of the Pacolet River property in order to settle the estate. The administrator, however, did not sell the portion of the plantation containing the mansion house until 1895 when Thomas Theodore Ballenger purchased the tract.

Ballenger was a citizen of some standing in Polk County. He was born in 1853 in South Carolina. In 1876 he married Anna Garrison whose family owned considerable land in the Pacolet River Valley including part of the Govan Mills plantation now known as the Hunting Country. After his marriage Ballenger settled in the Tryon vicinity and
engaged in the lumber business which proved profitable after the Railroad arrived in Tryon in the 1870s. In 1881-1882 Ballenger and his father-in-law John W. Garrison built Oak Hall Hotel, "the construction of which marks the beginning of Tryon as a resort." Ballenger operated the hotel but soon sold it and opened a general store which later became part of the mercantile business run by his nephew, B. L. Ballenger. Theodore T. Ballenger also served as the mayor of Tryon in the late nineteenth century and in the state senate 1903 and 1907. While in the legislature he was appointed a trustee of North Carolina State College (now North Carolina State University) and served in that capacity until 1923. He died in 1935.8

He had sold the Govan Mills House to John Cleveland in 1909. Cleveland had purchased already 1800 acres of the "Govan Mills place" in 1888. In 1917 Cleveland sold the tract of "500 acres more or less" then known as "Hill Top Plantation" to his daughter Frances who had recently married William James Screven.9 The Screvens renovated the porch by tearing away the double porch and installing large Ionic columns. The Screven family owned the house until 1973 when they sold it to Stephen Spratt, an antique dealer. Spratt uncovered many of the original features including fireplaces, walls, and floors. He has recently sold the house to David L. Terwilleger who still owns it.10
FOOTNOTES

1 Rutherford County Deed Books (microfilm), Archives, Division of Archives and History, Raleigh, North Carolina, Deed Book 24-26, p. 267, hereinafter cited as Rutherford Deed Books.

2 Rutherford Deed Book 41-42, p. 647.

3 Rutherford County Will Books (microfilm), Archives, Division of Archives and History, Raleigh, North Carolina, Will Book E, 87.


6 Eighth Census of the United States, 1860: Polk County, North Carolina, Slave Schedule, 89; Industrial Schedule, 119; Polk County Estate Records, Govan Mills, 1862, Archives, Division of Archives and History, Raleigh, North Carolina.

7 Polk County Deed Books (microfilm), Archives, Division of Archives and History, Raleigh, North Carolina, Deed Book 12, p. 151, hereinafter cited as Polk Deed Book.

8 Patton, Sketches of Polk County, 72-75.

9 Polk Deed Books 35, p. 323; 8, pp. 86, 90.

10 Thermal Belt News-Journal (Columbus), September 2, 1976.
9. Major Bibliographical References

See continuation sheet

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of nominated property 11.07 acres

Quadrange name Inman, S. C.

UMT References

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Verbal boundary description and justification

The nominated property is an 11.07 acre parcel bordering SR 1506 (see enclosed plat) and includes the house, its outbuildings, and the acreage that remains in association with the house and its landscaping.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Michael T. Southern, Survey Specialist
Janet Hutchison, Archaeology Assistant Joe Mobley, Researcher
organization Archaeology and Historic Preservation
Section Survey and Planning Branch
date April 9, 1981
street & number N. C. Division of Archives and History telephone 919-733-6545
109 E. Jones Street Raleigh state North Carolina 27611

city or town

12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

___ national    ___ state    X 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

title State Historic Preservation Officer date January 4, 1983

For NPS use only

I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register date

Keeper of the National Register

Attest: date

Chief of Registration


*Thermal Belt News-Journal* (Columbus), September 2, 1976.

Mills-Screen Plantation (Hilltop)
S. side SR 1506, opp. jct. w/SR 1509
Tryon, North Carolina
Polk County
Inman, S.C.-N.C. Quadrangle
Scale 1:62500
11.07 acres.

UTM References: Zone 17
A: E 388275 N 3897775 B: E 388575 N 3897725
C: E 388575 N 3897550 D: E 388225 N 3897675