

To: Friends of Old Apples
From: Tom Brown

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Apple Search---2025

This past year it was appreciated that a little less caution was needed because of epidemics, but I still got every protective vaccine available and wore a mask in very crowded settings. There was simply too much to do to not put forth every effort to be as healthy as possible; plus anything I caught could be passed to others.

I took 2024 "off" from grafting apple trees so I could concentrate on and complete long-delayed family projects. I will be 84 in October and I did not need to keep indefinitely delaying these very important projects.

There was a little time for "apple searching" during the year and no significant personal finds were recorded. There are still important old apple varieties out there; people contacted me who have Peerless, Ohio Nonpareil, and Milton apple trees. They were generous in offering me cuttings for grafting.

I would like to share one of my significant projects before I started looking for old apples.

A Historic House---When I married Merrikay in 1984, I was divorced living in a historic home in "downtown" Clemmons, NC, situated on a 0.45 acre lot; a home I had purchased in 1970. It was the finest house in the village when constructed. The house had been built by a Doctor Casstevens right after the Depression and reportedly much work was done on the house by people who had unpaid medical bills and they donated labor to help repay the Doctor. It was a two-story house with a tall peaked roof. It was a spacious house with a great room arrangement: the first floor featured 9 foot plastered ceilings, a formal living room with a fireplace, dining room, den, large kitchen with a breakfast nook, half-bath, a spacious angled hallway serving as front and west side entrances, and off the dining and living rooms was a screened-in porch, which opened to a flagstone patio. Upstairs was reached by a wide stairway and featured four bedrooms and two full bathrooms. The baths were interesting as they featured porcelain fixtures and tile of colors from the era: black in half-bath and for the full baths, one was peach colored and the other lavender. There was oak hardwood flooring throughout the house and every room featured old-time plastering. The chimney for the living room fireplace was faced by a unique round stone found about seven miles away to the northwest.

Doctor Casstevens' used the basement as his first office. It had a separate entrance which served two large rooms and two smaller rooms; all had plastered walls & ceilings plus pine flooring.

Outside there was a separate two-car garage with a finished room upstairs with a rafter ceiling and knee walls. The back yard was fully fenced.

There were other "residents" which also called the house their "home". Behind one of the west-facing upstairs decorative shutters lived a colony of bats. Flying squirrels frequented the unfinished attic and on rare occasions got into the living part of the house; it was a real challenge to shoo them out a doorway. Also, the house was haunted by an infrequently appearing non-threatening "ghost"; see my 2009 newsletter for details.

There were some challenges to this wonderful house all due to the era when it was built. The heat was from radiators and an oil fired boiler which had been converted from an earlier coal fired boiler. Only one person in the county worked on this type of heating system. After he retired I had to make any needed repairs with him giving me advice over the telephone. The house had no central air conditioning. It was difficult and expensive to heat because there was no insulation in the walls and all the windows used single-pane glass. The attic was insulated with rolled-out insulation; cotton attached to a Kraft paper backing. I once took some of the cotton insulation outside to do a burn test to see if flame retardant had been added. When I touched it with a flame, it did not slowly burn but exploded; no flame retardant had been added to the cotton. I quickly proceeded to remove the cotton and replaced it with roll fiberglass insulation.

The clapboard wood siding required frequent painting and on the west end a 30 foot ladder would not reach all the way to the peak of the house for painting purposes; the bed of a pickup was needed to boost the ladder's height. Cleaning the back gutters was a very tedious, slow project due to their two-story placement and the fact that shrubs were in the way at most places where the base of the ladder needed to be placed.

The road in front of the house was the second busiest one in the village. Often I had to back out when a car was in the one driveway turn-around spot. Safely backing into the busy highway was always a very iffy

thing because just as you got to the place for ideal final traffic viewing there were two large trees to the right and a long row of mature trees to the left, obscuring the view of oncoming traffic.

A New House Is Needed---Merrikay and I wanted a more modern house, one that was well insulated and with central heating & air and preferably on some acreage where we could enjoy nature and walk around a little. We decided to build a house where we could specify the design and all the features as opposed to purchasing an existing home. While driving around, I saw a 3.1 acre lot for sale along a road a mile out of the village of Clemmons. It was rectangle shaped and our house would have been located near the road. We did purchase the lot. Later a person who owned 2.9 acres behind that property informed us that her property was for sale. We purchased the additional acreage which allowed location of a future home to be built 700 feet off the highway (Bullard Road). The six-acre property contained a beautiful stream (Panther Branch) and a small swamp, where frogs “sing,” and it was completely covered with a mature hardwood and pine forest. At dusk one evening, while on our new property, I heard two owls repeatedly answering each other; this made me even more excited about eventually living there. [When we were purchasing the properties, I had no idea that I would later become interested in rare apple varieties.]

Building A New Home---I designed and then drew plans for the house, a 1,400 sq. ft. single-story house to be built on a sloping lot with two car garage occupying half of the basement and with finished rooms in the other half; of course this depended on good waterproofing for a dry basement area. My education in college engineering drawing made me confident that I could design a good floor plan for the house.

Our first need was to find a contractor who would build the house and I knew of no one. I was talking to someone at “work” about the planned home and he said that there was someone in their community who had recently constructed some nice houses. I drove to the associate’s home in an adjoining county and near it saw the exterior of several homes the man had constructed and they looked good to me. I did contact the builder and he said that he would act as my home construction contractor for a fee of 10% of the cost of the house; this sounded reasonable to me; so then I had secured a person who could build the house. A bank that he knew of was suggested for a construction loan and they were agreeable to supplying the funds for building the house. As it got within a few days of closing on the home loan; the “contractor” informed me that he actually did not have a contractor’s license and that I would have to get the building permit myself. I was very unhappy and apprehensive that he had informed me at the very late date that he was not licensed, but since I had seen some of the houses on which he had coordinated the construction and I knew of no other immediate contractors; I decided to proceed with him and I got the building permit myself. I would have never considered the person if he had initially informed me that he did not have a contractor’s license.

It troubled me that the “contractor” often worried about the house’s chimney location which was designed to come through the peak of the roof sixteen feet from the west end of the house; it sounded like he had only constructed houses with the chimney located on the long side of the house and was intimidated by any other chimney placement.

The first requirement to start building was to get a long road into the site and to clear out a footprint for the house. The “contractor” had secured a site preparation person, from his community, for this work--- removing trees, pushing out and leveling a 900 foot road, preparing the building site, and disposing of the trees and stumps removed. The site preparation person started on the driveway and then we had many rainy days. He stopped driveway clearing because he said it was too muddy at his preferred landfill. So we had to wait until the landfill site dried out. But the rain continued and we had to wait many more weeks before he could be persuaded to resume his road clearing work. [Surely there were alternative debris disposal sites but the site preparation person could not be persuaded to consider alternatives.] Eventually he got back to work and pushed out the long driveway and cleared and leveled the house building site.

Interruptions---We sold the historic Clemmons house and were living at an apartment in Winston-Salem until the new house could be built. Before any of the house construction had started my wife and I were at a Red Lobster restaurant in Winston-Salem having dinner on May 1989. Then we heard a loud wind noise and the lights went out. A very powerful storm had passed which did extensive damage from Charlotte to Durham.

The next day we drove out to see if our property had any wind damage. Along the way we saw 16 inch Oak trees which had been snapped in two. On arrival, our worst fears were realized; 65 trees were lying across our long driveway. Within a week the driveway was cleared; I had a chain saw and with the help of Ron Hileman and his son Greg and their chain saws, the clearing went rapidly.

Finally it was back to house building, starting with staking off the house location. A couple of evenings later I got a call from the "contractor's" wife; he was "ill" and had to quit. She mentioned that another contractor from his area who could resume the contractor responsibility for the usual 10% of the building cost. He was probably well qualified, but I never contacted him; I was very weary with building people from that small area. I decided that since I had the building permit, I would act as the contractor myself.

Getting Started---In thinking back, this was a monumental decision to make for a person who had never built a house. I did have two friends who had previously built homes, Harvey Young and Robert Brawley, and I knew that they could make helpful suggestions. I also thought of it as an interesting once-in-a-lifetime experience. I did not tell the bank about my decision to be the contractor, concerned that they might revoke my loan.

The friends were very helpful because they recommended to me well qualified craft people; Robert: two bricklayers, plus advice, and Harvey: electricians, plumbers, wood floor finisher, and a sheetrock person.

I was working full time and could not typically be at the site except on weekends and after 5:00 pm M-F.

The first needed work was to get a trench dug for the foundation, which I think that it was to be 8" by 16" for the poured concrete. For their backhoe, the brick layers did not have a 16" digging bucket, but instead one 24" wide; so they dug a trench 12" x 24". Not knowing when they would start work and finish, I did not have a concrete truck lined up to pour concrete later the same day; I was planning on doing that two days later---bad choice. That night there was a heavy rain and the foundation trench was filled to the top. It took me a couple days of bucket and other container dipping to remove all the water. I was then left with a trench with soft sides, so I dug it out more, resulting in a trench 16" x 30". Once concrete was poured and with rebar added; lots of effort had been expended but I had a very substantial foundation.

A characteristic of the masonry work and later the house framing was that the craft people came with no materials. All that had to be ordered by the contractor and be available when they arrived. I had calculate the amount needed and have on hand the brick, block, sand, mortar, rebar, wall ties, and lintels for the door openings (garage and personnel) and basement window openings.

There is one masonry related incident that I will always remember. I was sitting on the completed basement wall with the two masons and they were both drinking Cheerwine (a regional non-alcoholic soft drink); they offered me a Cheerwine. I picked up a can and took a very big swallow, yuck; I had picked up the wrong can, it was their chewing tobacco spit can.

Search For A Framer---The house framer that Harvey had previously used had retired, so I had to find a framer myself. I inquired and inquired and I would even stop when I saw a sign in a yard which said FRAMING (of course it was picture framing). Finally I found a recommended house framer and we met in Lexington, NC and agreed on a framing price with the house plans spread out on the hood of his pickup.

For the framing I had to purchase and have available: nails, lumber, sheathing, plywood, roof truss, doors widows, Tyvek (an outer wrap which allows home moisture to escape), roofing felt, etc.

I was particularly proud of the fact that none of the building materials got wet. When the lumber and roof trusses arrived, I would put them up on blocks, not touching the ground and I covered them with plastic. Then it did not rain during the framing period, so everything stayed dry. The windows and doors were stored off site until needed.

It was an exciting time to see the house walls, flooring and roofing being completed; all of a sudden I could see a real home being completed. The framing went quickly and smoothly. The framers were not too happy that I had ordered 2x6's for the exterior walls, wanting greater insulation thickness as compared to the normal 2x4's, the extra thickness (added weight) made the walls harder to rise after constructing the wall horizontally on the floor. Another bonus of a 2x6's wall was that the house weight was not just on the exterior brick but partially on the interior blocks. For the house ends I got the framers to add another floor joist close to the house end to transfer some weight onto the blocks.

I wanted a house that I could afford to heat and cool. There were 16" of blown-in attic insulation. The windows were the best I could purchase: double pane with Low-E glass and filled with Argon (more energy efficient & lower

noise) and the windows also had an integral storm window. For the heating/cooling a high efficiency heat pump was installed; a dual-fuel system which included propane for heating during colder weather.

I should have been checking the windows while they were being installed because many did not operate smoothly and I had to go back and reposition them in their framed openings. This took about two weeks of my part time effort.

A Dry Basement---The house was basically a "ranch house", 29' by 48'6", built into sloping terrain with a full basement, half a garage and the other living quarters with hardwood floors. It was important that the basement be very dry. The exterior waterproofing, done by myself: starting with a thick coating of Surewall (a surface bonding cement that includes fiberglass fibers) applied to the foundation concrete blocks and then big headed nails were used to attach a heavy rubber-like membrane with a thick Kaolin clay coating (the clay forms a waterproof barrier). Then to prevent puncture during backfill, a series of fiber boards were leaned against the basement exterior wall. An exterior foundation French drain was installed on three sides of the home. After the passage of 35 years, our basement is still completely dry.

Freedom to Construct as Desired---Since we did not have to please a regular contractor we added every feature desired. In the living-dining area we installed a Finnish Tulikiva soapstone stove, a high efficient masonry heating source, wood burning; the stone was from a re-opened soapstone quarry in Virginia, near the fictional Walton's Mountain site.

All the floors, except the kitchen and upstairs bathroom and vanity area, were hardwood which I had milled and I installed with a flooring nail gun loaned to me by Harvey; downstairs had Walnut flooring; the master bedroom, hallway, and walk-in closet had Black Locust flooring, the living-dining area had Red Oak flooring with a 16" border of three hardwoods. The Red Oak came from a very large tree that the wind storm blew down on our property. Other notable woods in the home: Mesquite kitchen cabinets, Cherry bath and vanity cabinets, and Chestnut Oak cabinets for the master bedroom. Also, a dining room table made of English Oak and Honey Locust. Master bedroom nightstands were made of Sourwood and there was Sweet Gum wood for the office cabinets. Plus a couple more woods were used.

We paid to have granite counter tops in the kitchen. Some of it was not cut to the correct size so when the newly cut pieces were available, I installed it myself, making sure it was done correctly. I also installed a granite counter top in our two sink vanity and for my office desk top. The downstairs half bath had 6" granite flooring tile I installed (36 types).

We splurged on Gaggenau kitchen oven & cooktop. The toilet and sinks were Ifo from Sweden; all still working well. **Oops, Not Again**--- To save money, I decided to install the long water line from the road to the house. A friend had a tractor with a trencher, but was only available to do the trenching on a Sunday. The next day after work I purchased the plastic water pipe; on my way home there was a downpour. On arrival I found that the powdery soil had washed into the trench almost filling it. The only thing that would fit into narrow trench for wet soil removal was a small hoe.

A Locust House---For many years I was fascinated by the legendary durability of Black Locust. I decided that I wanted the house sided with the Black Locust and also Locust for the front porch beams, railings, and steps. A man in Millers Creek, NC (Roy Triplett) had a large sawmill in his back yard and he only sawed Locust, mainly big timbers and posts. It took many hours of begging before he agreed to cut siding boards for me. I took the boards to the home site for air drying. Once air dried I took the boards to a dry kiln for final drying. The operator made a stacking error by placing heavy iron spacers between the rows of drying sticks rather than on them. This caused two rows of boards top and bottom to be bowed and not yielding enough good boards to completely side the house. I then had to go back to Roy Triplett and urgently request more locust boards for several months before he would agree to cut more for me. When I arrived to pick up the second load of Locust it did not look like all I had requested; once installed we were twenty-one boards short of completing the siding. To get enough Locust siding boards, three times I went through the process of ordering fresh sawn Locust boards, then air drying, kiln drying, and then finally having them milled to the specified size.

My son Chris and I installed the lap siding boards on one end side of the house. Dried Locust is very hard and you cannot drive a nail in it, so we had to pre-drill every intended nail hole. I finally located a team of three bricklayers who liked to also work on Saturday but doing a different type of work; they were excellent carpenters and so they installed the siding on the other three sides of the home.

Thirty-five years have passed and the locust is still in good condition; the only exception is the steps off the porch which had full exposure to the weather and need to be replaced. When I started looking for more Black Locust I found that there is now a Locust disease and wide boards are impossible to find in any quantity. I did find enough to make the step railing but the six replacement step boards, 3"x11"x5'0", will have to be treated pine.

Beginners Luck---Almost all the craft people give me a verbal quote; I never asked for a written quote or insurance papers. They were good honest people, because when it came time to pay them the price was still the same.



Completed Home Exterior With Locust Siding



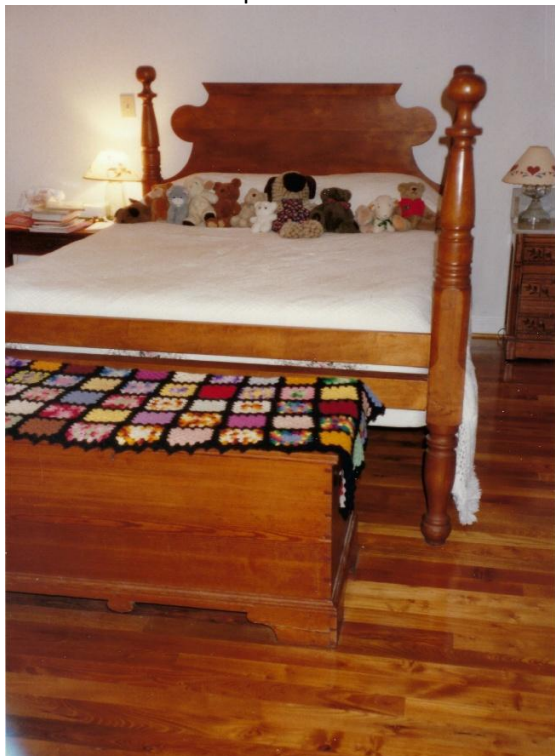
Front Porch Detail, All Wood is Locust Except Porch Flooring



Kitchen With Granite Counter Tops, Mesquite Cabibets, & Gaggenau Oven & Cooktop



Tulikivi (Finland) Soapstone Fireplace & Four Wood Type Flooring



Master Bedroom With Locust Floors & Twelve Family Members



Downstairs Bathroom With 36 Types of Granite and Ifo (Sweden) Toilet