

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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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

Asa Biggs House and Site

AND/OR COMMON

31 MT 64 (North Carolina Archeological Survey)

2 LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER

100 East Church Street (NE corner E. Church & N. Smithwick Streets)
NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

Williamston

VICINITY OF

First

STATE

North Carolina

CODE
037

COUNTY
Martin

CODE
117

3 CLASSIFICATION

CATEGORY	OWNERSHIP	STATUS	PRESENT USE
<input type="checkbox"/> DISTRICT	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PUBLIC	<input type="checkbox"/> OCCUPIED	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE <input type="checkbox"/> MUSEUM
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BUILDING(S)	<input type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE	<input type="checkbox"/> UNOCCUPIED	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCIAL <input type="checkbox"/> PARK
<input type="checkbox"/> STRUCTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> BOTH	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> WORK IN PROGRESS	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATIONAL <input type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE RESIDENCE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SITE	PUBLIC ACQUISITION	ACCESSIBLE	<input type="checkbox"/> ENTERTAINMENT <input type="checkbox"/> RELIGIOUS
<input type="checkbox"/> OBJECT	<input type="checkbox"/> IN PROCESS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> YES: RESTRICTED	<input type="checkbox"/> GOVERNMENT <input type="checkbox"/> SCIENTIFIC
	<input type="checkbox"/> BEING CONSIDERED	<input type="checkbox"/> YES: UNRESTRICTED	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRIAL <input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
		<input type="checkbox"/> NO	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> OTHER Historical Society Headquarters

4 OWNER OF PROPERTY

NAME

The Martin County Historical Society, Inc.

STREET & NUMBER

100 East Church Street

CITY, TOWN

Williamston

VICINITY OF

STATE

North Carolina 27892

5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE,
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

Martin County Courthouse

STREET & NUMBER

East Main Street

CITY, TOWN

Williamston

STATE

North Carolina

6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE

DATE

FEDERAL STATE COUNTY LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR
SURVEY RECORDS

CITY, TOWN

STATE

7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION		CHECK ONE	CHECK ONE
<input type="checkbox"/> EXCELLENT	<input type="checkbox"/> DETERIORATED	<input type="checkbox"/> UNALTERED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ORIGINAL SITE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> RUINS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ALTERED	<input type="checkbox"/> MOVED DATE _____
<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> UNEXPOSED		

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

Built in 1835, the Asa Biggs House at the northeast corner of Church and Smithwick streets in Williamston is the building most closely associated with the life and career of one of North Carolina's best known jurists and politicians. Originally a two-story, sidehall-plan, late Federal style residence, the house was enlarged northward and eastward so that its present form is almost a perfect T-plan. An interesting blend of Federal and vernacular Greek Revival details, the house reveals in its vernacular handling of these stylistic elements regional building habits found throughout northeastern North Carolina. Its awkward symmetry and rambling plan lend credence to the local legend that Senator Biggs added a room to his house with the birth of each of his ten children.

The original form of the Asa Biggs House was a three bay wide, single pile, sidehall-plan home covered in plain weatherboards and a gable roof with a single shoulder paved chimney laid in common bond set in the western gable end. The interior plan consisted of a hall with a staircase on the east wall and a parlor on the west. A bedroom opened off the hall on the second floor. The downstairs rooms are finished with wide flat-paneled wainscot while the upstairs rooms have only a simple moulded shelf-type chairrail and beaded baseboards. The mantels in these early rooms are of a simple Federal style design with wide shelves, paneled pilasters and end blocks, and reeded cornices. The quarter turn stair has a turned newel and stick type balusters. The six, raised-panel interior doors and nine-over-nine sash windows flanking the mantels, on the second story front elevation, and above the stair landing are all set in threepart moulded and mitred frames. Of particular note is the well preserved oak-grained floor in the bedroom.

Appended to the north side of the parlor is an early, one-story with attic, gable roof dining room. Between the parlor and the addition an enclosed stair leads to the finished attic sleeping room which also has access to the bedroom through a low, narrow connecting door. The interior finish and mantel in the addition are similar to those in the original portion of the house.

The next enlargement of the house was a two-story, single pile, eastern addition which contains a parlor and upstairs bedroom finished in a highly individualized interpretation of the Greek Revival style. The unknown builder/architect for this portion of the house seems to have had some idea of the elements of the style, but was either unsure of or unable to execute the details in the customary fashion. Instead of symmetrically moulded surrounds and cornerblocks, he applied flat wooden strips to frames and used cut-outs or adapted pilaster bases for cornerblocks. He is also probably responsible for the installation of the large nine-over-nine windows set into frames with diminutive cornerblocks and applied strips for the moulding and the reuse of the original Federal style sash on the extension's second story. This arrangement of windows and the placement of a central window of yet a different size and style give the front elevation of the Asa Biggs House its awkward symmetry and help to identify the sequence of additions and renovations.

A one-story with attic addition was soon appended to the north elevation of the eastern extension to make the rear elevation symmetrical and give the house a U-plan. The space between the two northern additions was eventually enclosed to form a hall and a two-story ell was added to the rear to give the house its present T-plan and confusing

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interior floor plan. All of these later additions are finished in the same naive Greek Revival style and contain identical mantels of simple design.

In the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, minor renovations were undertaken which included the addition of wrought iron balconies beneath the large first story, front windows, the installation of multi-paned French doors at each end of the hall formed between the two one-story northern additions; and replacement of the original doubleleaf front doors (which are stored in the attic) with doors containing a large glass light set above a moulded wooden panel. The central, one-story, single bay porch with a hipped roof supported by Doric columns on the front elevation was probably added at this time, as well as the one-story, wraparound porch (now partially enclosed) which encircles the two-story rear ell.

Archeological excavations during the summer of 1978 uncovered the original brick sidewalk from Smithwick Street to the rear of the dining room of the original structure and subsurface tests indicate a number of refuse pits on the present property. If more of the original Biggs lot is acquired, archeological work could produce evidence of outbuildings and other features.

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- D. Archaeological tests made during the summer of 1978 indicate that the Asa Biggs Site is likely to yield information which will be important for interpreting and understanding the basic human use of the house in its surroundings.

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Located on the corner of Church and Smithwick streets in Williamston is the structure known as the Asa Biggs House. For approximately three decades of the mid-nineteenth century it was the permanent home of one of North Carolina's best known jurists and politicians.

Asa Biggs was born in Williamston in 1811, the son of Joseph Biggs, a merchant and Baptist minister, and the former Chloe Daniels, Joseph Bigg's third wife. Biggs attended Williamston Academy, which his father had helped found, but he left at fifteen to work as a clerk in several stores at various times. While working as a clerk he began reading law privately.¹ "In 1830," he wrote in his 1865 autobiography, "I purchased a lot in Williamston on which I built an office and enclosed it with a good substantial fence."² The lot was No. 95 and Biggs bought it from Henry B. Smithwick for \$82.³ He began his law practice in 1831, and it was probably then that he built the office and fence.⁴

In 1832 Biggs married Martha Elizabeth Andrews in Bertie County, and she brought him some slaves and eventually bore him ten children. "After my marriage until 1833," he later recalled, "we boarded with Mr. Williams and the years 1833 and 1834 we resided at a rented house in town and during that time I built a dwelling and outhouses on my lot--to which I have greatly added as my family increased." (The dwelling, of course, was the present-day Asa Biggs House.)⁵

As a new attorney Biggs devoted himself primarily to the successful practice of law, and he developed a reputation for being painstaking and honest. His court circuit included Martin, Edgecombe, Pitt, Bertie and occasionally Washington and Greene counties. In 1835 as a Democrat he "expounded the cause of Andrew Jackson" and was elected to the State Constitutional Convention. "Here," according to one biographer, "he said nothing, learned much and voted as planter interests and sectional jealousies required."⁷

Biggs was elected to the State House of Commons in 1840 and 1842 and the State Senat in 1844. In 1845 he was a member of the United States Congress. During the hard-fought campaigns for these offices Biggs gained an honest reputation for refusing to deal or compromise on public issues. In 1847 he was a candidate for reelection to Congress but was defeated. While attending the Democratic state convention of 1850 he drew statewide attention in his efforts to commit the party to opposition to state internal improvements:

For the next four years the Martin County jurist devoted himself to the practice of law, residing primarily in his house in Williamston. In 1854 he and Judge B. B. Moore completed the revision of the statutes of North Carolina, and their work resulted in the Revised Code of 1854. In that same year Biggs was again elected to the General Assembly. While attending there he was chosen to serve in the United States Senate. Here he was a leader in several debates involving the questions of slavery and state rights, both of which he defended.⁹ Because of his stand for economy in government he was appointed to the Finance Committee. Throughout his government service in Washington Biggs maintained his home in Williamston, but his family was frequently with him in Washington where they lived in a rented residence.¹⁰

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Despite his notable efforts in the Senate, Biggs became dissatisfied with the position. His reasons were that he lacked political knowledge, his health was failing, he longed for a more desirable religious and domestic situation, and he viewed government as corrupt and growing worse.¹¹ As a result he resigned from the Senate in 1858 and wrote a letter to the people of North Carolina explaining his resignation. The message was published in state newspapers and in part read:

Suffer me . . . to repeat my profound acknowledgements and gratitude for the distinguished honor you have conferred upon me: and upon my retirement to impress upon all my countrymen the importance of sustaining in all our public men and in our intercourse as Citizens of this great Union of States, the well earned and cherished reputation of North Carolina as the "honest old North State," although we may occasionally, in this degenerate day, for such an ambition, incur the sneers of wittings and spendthrifts.¹²

When Biggs retired from the Senate President James Buchanan appointed him District Court Judge of North Carolina, a position he held until 1861. With the coming of the Civil War, Biggs was active in the Secession Convention of 1861 in the state and resigned his federal judgeship, writing to President Abraham Lincoln that:

I hereby resign my office of District Judge of the United States for the District of North Carolina, being unwilling longer to hold a commission in a Government which has degenerated into a military despotism. I subscribe myself yet a friend of constitutional liberty.¹³

He then became a Confederate District Court Judge and served in that office until the end of the war, supporting the Confederacy "whole-heartedly and prayerfully to the end."¹⁴

During the conflict, in 1862, Biggs and his family were forced to abandon their house in Williamston as federal troops moved on the town from Albemarle Sound, after the fall of Roanoke Island. Following the family's departure from their Martin County home the judge's office was ransacked by Union soldiers who were attempting to "allay the craving for spoils and relics."¹⁵ The family first moved to a cottage two miles south of Tarboro, then to a house west of Rocky Mount, and finally to a house called Dalkeith (NR), Warren County, which they purchased in 1863. "I selected this place as secure from Yankee raids and invasion," wrote Biggs from Dalkeith in 1865, "and although we have been excluded from society and the social intercourse to which we had been accustomed, and find it difficult with my limited means to obtain sufficient 'food and raiment,' yet so far we have not suffered. . . ." ¹⁶

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Two of Bigg's sons, William and Henry, served in the Confederate Army, and Henry was killed near Appomattox in the final days of the war. When news of his death came, his father later remembered "that awful truth sunk our hearts, threw a gloom over the household, plunged us into the deepest grief, and night and day has his dear mother mourned, the loss of her absent boy with broken lamentations."¹⁷

Following the war Biggs moved to Tarboro to practice law. In 1869 he and several other North Carolina lawyers signed a document protesting what they conceived as the State Supreme Court's interference in political affairs. Rather than face contempt charges or apologize to the court for his action he left the state and went to Norfolk, Virginia, where he continued to practice law until his death in 1878.¹⁸

Following the demise of Biggs, the executors of his will sold his land on the corner of Church and Smithwick streets in Williamston to his daughter, Martha E. Biggs in 1879.¹⁹ In 1885 she left the property to her daughter, Martha Cotton Crawford, who in 1913 left the lot containing the Biggs house and office to her son Asa T. Crawford.²⁰ He sold the property to Anna M. Crawford in 1919, and she sold the lot consisting at that time of 1/3 acre to Mrs. Susie Fowden in 1928.²¹ Mrs. Fowden recently transferred the property to the Martin County Historical Society which presently owns it. No remains of the law office or fence are visible on the Biggs lot today; only the house of Asa Biggs still stands.²²

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Footnotes

1. Allen Johnson, Dumas Malone, and others (eds.), Dictionary of American Biography (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 20 volumes, 1928; index and updating supplements), II, 262, hereinafter cited as Dictionary of American Biography.
2. Asa Biggs, "Autobiography of Asa Biggs, 1865, Including a Journal of a Trip from North Carolina to New York in 1832," edited by R. D. W. Connor, Pamphlets and Leaflets of the North Carolina Historical Commission Bulletin No. 19, 1915, p. 6, hereinafter cited as "Autobiography of Asa Biggs."
3. Martin County Deed Books (microfilm) Archives, N.C. Division of Archives and History, Raleigh, Deed Book I and J, 173, hereinafter cited as Martin Deed Book.
4. Dictionary of American Biography, II, 262.
5. "Autobiography of Asa Biggs," 6.
6. Dictionary of American Biography, II, 262; "Autobiography of Asa Biggs," 5.
7. Dictionary of American Biography, II, 262.
8. Dictionary of American Biography, II, 262.
9. North Carolina Biography, Volumes IV, V, and VI of History of North Carolina, by R. D. W. Connor, William K. Boyd, J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton, and others (Chicago and New York: Lewis Publishing Company, 6 volumes, 1919), VI, 68, hereinafter cited as North Carolina Biography.
10. Dictionary of American Biography, II, 262; "Autobiography of Asa Biggs," 22.
11. Dictionary of American Biography, II, 262.
12. Tarboro Southerner, May 15, 1858, as quoted in "Autobiography of Asa Biggs," 40.
13. Dictionary of American Biography, II, 262; "Autobiography of Asa Biggs," 29.
14. Dictionary of American Biography, II, 262.
15. "Corporal" (Z. T. Haines), Letters from the Forty Fourth M.U.M. in the Department of North Carolina in 1862-3 (Boston: Herald Job Office, 1863), 51.

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16. "Autobiography of Asa Biggs," 1.
17. "Autobiography of Asa Biggs," 33-34.
18. North Carolina Biography, VI, 68.
19. Martin Deed Book BB, 337, The deed from Biggs's executors does not mention lot no. 95 but only the two adjacent lots 93 and 94. Subsequent deed in the Biggs chain of title, however, show that the lot descended from Martha E. Biggs who must have owned the house tract.
20. Martin Will Books 3, p. 272; p. 132.
21. Martin Deed Books Y-1, p. 406; V-2, p. 576.
22. Author's interview with Renee Gledhill-Early, architectural historian, May 7, 1979.

8 SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD	AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW			
—PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNITY PLANNING	<input type="checkbox"/> LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> RELIGION
—1400-1499	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> CONSERVATION	<input type="checkbox"/> LAW	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENCE
—1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> ECONOMICS	<input type="checkbox"/> LITERATURE	<input type="checkbox"/> SCULPTURE
—1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN
—1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> ART	<input type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSIC	<input type="checkbox"/> THEATER
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
—1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY)
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION		

SPECIFIC DATES 1838-1865 BUILDER/ARCHITECT Unknown

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

From its construction in 1835 until the family evacuated Williamston during the Civil War, the house at the northeast corner of Church and Smithwick streets was the home of Asa Biggs, one of North Carolina's best known jurists and politicians. Biggs (1811-1878) began his practice of law in 1831 and his political career in 1835. He was twice elected to the North Carolina House of Commons and served in the State Senate and United States Congress. Before being chosen for the United States Senate in 1854, he helped to prepare the North Carolina Revised Code of 1854. A defender of states' rights and slavery, Biggs earned a reputation for honesty and refusing to compromise on public issues. Appointed a United States District Court judge by President Buchanan in 1858, Biggs resigned this position in 1861 to back the Confederacy and serve as a Confederate District Court judge. After the Civil War, Biggs' refusal to compromise on issues of public importance forced him into self-exile from North Carolina when he refused to apologize to the State Supreme Court for protesting what he considered the court's interference in political matters.

The lot on which the Asa Biggs house is built was purchased in 1830 and served as the site for his law office, house, and outbuildings. The original house, begun in 1835, was a typical, two-story side-hall plan, late Federal style structure. Biggs enlarged the dwelling with several additions over the years, to produce a complex floor plan and irregular exterior. The original Federal style interiors survive as well as the vernacular Greek Revival detail of the later additions. The house is therefore fairly representative of many houses in northeastern North Carolina which underwent enlargements through time and incorporated vernacular adaptations of the then popular building styles to produce a regionally recognizable form. Biggs's diary references recalling construction and additions are notable and rare documentation. Archaeological excavations on the site have uncovered an original brick sidewalk and could produce evidence of the outbuildings and other associated artifacts which would provide a better understanding of the use of the building within its surroundings.

Criteria Assessment:

- B. For nearly three decades of the mid-nineteenth century, the Asa Biggs House was the permanent home of Asa Biggs (1811-1878) and is the site most closely associated with the activities of his adult life and career as one of North Carolina's best known jurists and politicians.
- C. The Asa Biggs House is a representative example of regional building habits and the product of local vernacular adaptations of Federal and Greek Revival elements, revealing the sequence of additions to accommodate a growing family.

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Johnson, Allen, Malone, Dumas, and others (eds.). Dictionary of American Biography.
New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 20 volumes, 1928.

Martin County Records (microfilm), Archives, N.C. Division of Archives and History,
Raleigh. (Subgroups: deeds, wills.)

North Carolina Biography. Volumes IV, V, and VI of History of North Carolina, by
R. D. W. Connor, William K. Boyd, J. G. de Roulhac, and others.
Chicago: Lewis Publishing Company, 6 volumes, 1919.

9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Biggs, Asa. "Autobiography of Asa Biggs, 1865, Including a Journal of a Trip from North Carolina to New York in 1832," edited by R.D.W. Connor. Pamphlets and Leaflet of the North Carolina Historical Commission, Bulletin No. 19. 1915

"Corporal" (Z. T. Haines). Letters from the Forty Fourth M.U.M. in the Department of North Carolina in 1862-3. Boston: Herald Job Office, 1863.

10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY 1/4 Acre

Latitude $35^{\circ} 51' 22''$

Longitude $77^{\circ} 03' 24''$

UTM REFERENCES

A	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING	B	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING
C	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING	D	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION The Asa Biggs House and site is bounded on the North and East by residential properties, on the South by Church Street, and on the West by Smithwick Street.

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE

11 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME / TITLE	Percy A. Price, President	117 East Main Street (P. O. Box 1048)
ORGANIZATION	The Martin County Historical Society, Inc.	Williamston, North Carolina 27892
ORGANIZATION	Joe Mobley, Researcher, Survey and Planning	DATE
Branch, N. C. Division of Archives & History		November 1, 1978
STREET & NUMBER		TELEPHONE
109 East Jones Street		919-733-6545
CITY OR TOWN		STATE
Raleigh		North Carolina 27611

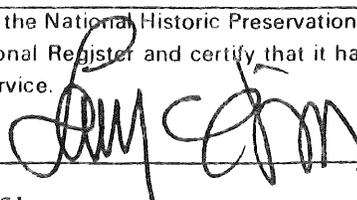
12 STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION

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



TITLE State Historic Preservation Officer

DATE July 12, 1979

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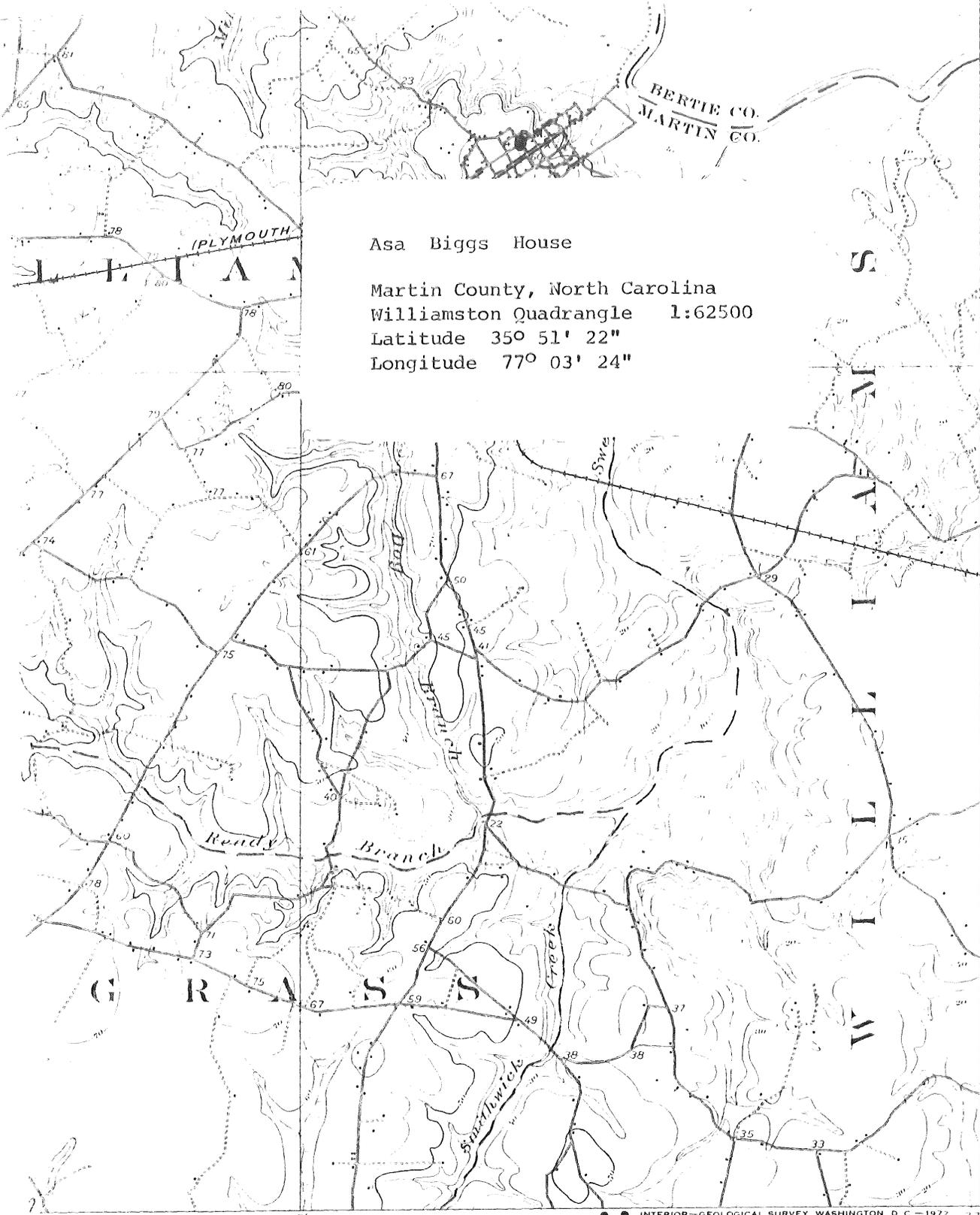
I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

DATE

ATTEST: DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF ARCHEOLOGY AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION

DATE

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

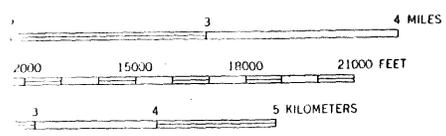


Do NOTAS
Q. 1000

Asa Biggs House

Martin County, North Carolina
 Williamston Quadrangle 1:62500
 Latitude 35° 51' 22"
 Longitude 77° 03' 24"

● ● INTERIOR-GEOLOGICAL SURVEY WASHINGTON D. C. - 1972 35°45'
 Polyconic projection 77°00'



N. C.
 WILLIAMSTON
 N3545-7700/15

1901

WASHINGTON, D. C. 20242
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