

# THE INN AT BINGHAM SCHOOL

6720 Mebane Oaks Road, Orange County, North Carolina

*A Property History*

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## **The Land and Its Early Structures**

The property at the northeast corner of N.C. 54 and what is now Mebane Oaks Road sits in the gently rolling Piedmont farmland of western Orange County, along the route of the Historic Hillsborough-Salisbury Stage Road. The oldest portion of the house is a two-story log cabin dating to approximately 1790, predating the Bingham family's ownership entirely. Eleven years later, in 1801, a Federal-style addition was constructed, encompassing what is now known as the 1801 Room. The main section of the house — a two-story Greek Revival structure with a center-hall plan — was built in 1835. Together, these three phases form the L-shaped complex that survives today, unified by a colonnaded porch and brick-paved courtyard that remain among its most architecturally distinguished features.

The National Register nomination prepared by the NC Division of Archives and History describes the interior as essentially unchanged, with sheathed ceilings and walls plastered above fine wainscoting, richly paneled doors expertly wood-grained to resemble fine hardwoods, and marbled baseboards hand-painted with a feather — all characteristic of skilled mid-nineteenth century craftsmanship. The stair, rising back-to-front in the hall, features slim square-section balusters and a robust rounded handrail. Exterior chimneys of brick in common bond, with single stepped shoulders, anchor each end of the main block.

Outbuildings on the property include a smokehouse of traditional heavy timber frame construction, a well house, a barn with silo, and a detached guest cottage — several dating to the mid-nineteenth century.

## **The Bingham Family and Their School**

The Bingham name was synonymous with academic excellence in North Carolina for well over a century. The dynasty began with the Reverend William Bingham, a native of Ireland educated in Scotland, who established a school in Wilmington in 1793 before eventually settling in Orange County, where he ran a school known as Mount Repose until his death in 1826.

His son, William James Bingham (1802–1866), continued the family tradition. After taking a B.A. with first honors at the University of North Carolina in 1825, he became principal of the Hillsborough Academy, where the school garnered a national reputation for excellence. By the 1840s, students were coming from nearly every state in the Union, and the school's tuition of \$150 per year was reportedly the highest charged by any preparatory school in the nation.

In 1844, William James purchased the Oaks property from Alexander Morrow for \$2,500, encompassing approximately 370 acres. He moved the school here in 1845, deliberately seeking a rural setting to raise his sons away from town distractions. When the Bingham family arrived, they added the small board-and-batten headmaster's office at the rear of the main house — the distinctive smaller "student door" facing the garden is still visible today. The school stood on the back portion of the property while the Bingham family lived in the house. Students boarded with nearby families, as there were no dormitories on site.

The Bingham circular of the 1850s described a school of vigorous outdoor life: boys were free to hunt, fish, trap, and play games — including "skinny," a rustic version of field hockey — across what it called "God's great gymnasium." Discipline, however, was famously strict. The school's reputation drew applicants from across the country; enrollment was capped at 30, and the second headmaster reportedly had to refuse admission to 300 pupils in a single year.

In 1857, William James's sons William and Robert joined the school as partners, renaming it W.J. Bingham and Sons and expanding enrollment to 60. When the Civil War interrupted operations in 1861, Robert raised a company of recruits and served with Company G of the 44th North Carolina Troops, seeing continuous service until the surrender at Appomattox. William, unable to fight due to frail health, kept the school running through the war years and incorporated it as a military academy in 1864. Old William James Bingham, who had vigorously opposed moving the school from Oaks, stipulated in his August 1864 will that if his sons failed to continue the school at this location, the academy buildings and grounds would pass solely to his widow. Nevertheless, the school relocated to Mebanesville (present-day Mebane) in December 1864 and continued in various forms — eventually moving to Asheville in 1891 — until it closed in 1928, one year after Robert Bingham's death.

### **After the Bingham: From Farm to Inn**

After the school's departure, William James's widow Eliza Alves Bingham continued to live at the Oaks house and manage the surrounding lands. Following her death in 1885, the property passed through several hands. In 1910 it was sold to the McIver family, whose descendants maintained the 9.98-acre house site, operating it as a dairy farm. The sitting room of the Milkhouse Cottage on the property was used for milk storage during this period.

In 1976, the property was purchased by Preservation North Carolina — notably the first property ever acquired through the organization's landmark revolving fund program, which places protective covenants on historic properties before reselling them to sympathetic owners. The current covenants expire in 2027 and may be renewed by incoming owners who wish to maintain the property's protected status. That program has since saved hundreds of historic properties across the state.

In 2002, a fire damaged the 1801 Federal addition to the house. The section was subsequently rebuilt with great care: the majority of moldings, window and door frames are original, and reclaimed wood for the floors, walls, and ceilings was sourced from the Ossippee Cotton Mill, built in 1865. The 1801 bathroom retains its original noggin construction of brick and timber. The result is a restoration that reads as seamlessly continuous with the rest of the historic fabric of the house.

In the 1980s, Bob and Jane Kelly of Greensboro undertook the enormous task of restoring the remainder of the property, which at that time had no plumbing or electricity. Their meticulous work earned the Gertrude S. Kelly Award from Preservation North Carolina. In 1985 they opened The Inn at Bingham School for guests, and in the 1990s it was chosen as one of only six designated Orange County Landmarks.

The Deprez family — Francois and Christina — moved to the Inn in November 1994, pursuing Christina's dream of innkeeping. They operated a full bed and breakfast for over two decades, later transitioning to the Airbnb platform in 2018. Over 25 years, they raised their family here and welcomed guests from around the world to this singular place.

## **Significance and Designations**

The Bingham School was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1977 and holds the unique distinction of being designated an Orange County Landmark. The property is under protective covenants held by Preservation North Carolina, expiring in 2027 with renewal available to the new owners.

Located just 3.7 miles from vibrant Saxapahaw along the Historic Hillsborough-Salisbury Stage Road, and approximately 10 miles west of Carrboro and Chapel Hill, the property encompasses 11+ acres. Historic structures on the property include the c.1790 log home, the 1801 Federal addition, the 1835 Greek Revival main house, the 1845 headmaster's office, a well house, smokehouse, milkhouse cottage, and barn with silo. The property has operated with an active Special Use Permit as a bed and breakfast, Airbnb, and event and wedding venue.

The current owners have further enhanced the outdoor experience with two petanque courts and a custom-built brick outdoor wood-fired grill — large enough to accommodate a full paella pan and purpose-built for the legendary paella gatherings that have become part of the Inn's own modern history. These additions sit comfortably alongside the property's historic character and convey with the sale.

The Inn at Bingham School is a place where nearly two and a half centuries of North Carolina history are not merely preserved but lived in — a rare opportunity to steward one of the state's most architecturally intact and historically resonant properties.

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*Sources: National Register of Historic Places Nomination (1977); NC Division of Archives and History; Deprez Family History of the House; Orange County Landmark Records*