

Mordecai Historic Park History

1785 - 1817

The house we now know as the Mordecai House was built for the Lane Family in 1785. Joel Lane, famous for selling the land which would become Raleigh, built the home in 1785 as a wedding gift for his son Henry Lane and Henry's new wife Polly. When the Lane family occupied the house it was a one-and-a-half story, four-room home. Henry, Polly and their four daughters Peggy, Temperance, Harriet, and Nancy, occupied those four rooms. The Lanes owned 2,000 acres. Family wills show that there were 14 enslaved African Americans here when the Lane's owned the property. No information survives about the names of the enslaved workers or their jobs. We do not believe Henry Lane ran a farm or plantation, so we can assume that the enslaved workers in the late 1700s and early 1800s worked in the home, cooked, took care of the horses, did the laundry, and took care of the Lane daughters. Henry Lane died when he was 33 leaving behind his wife Polly and four daughters. The widowed Polly Lane remained with her daughters at the home until her death in 1813. The four Lane girls inherited the house, land, and enslaved people. After their parents died, the Lane girls lived with their Grandfather, Colonel Hinton, at his home Clay Hill on the Neuse. Receipts indicate that the Lane Home and land was rented while the girls were living with their grandfather.

1817 - 1826

Mordecai House is named for Moses Mordecai who in 1817 married Henry Lane's oldest daughter, Peggy. Moses was from a prominent Jewish family based in Warrenton, North Carolina where his father had founded and operated a school for girls. Moses was an ambitious young attorney when he arrived in Raleigh to practice law. When he married Peggy Lane, an Episcopalian, this created tension in his family – his father did not attend the wedding held at Clay Hill on the Neuse. It may have been these circumstances that caused Moses to change the pronunciation of his last name from 'Mor-duh-kie' to 'Mor-duh-key'. The newly married couple moved into the house, and were joined by Peggy's three unmarried sisters, Temperance, Harriet, and Nancy. In the years that followed, Moses' brothers George and Augustus also moved into the home. Both brothers came to Raleigh to study law under Moses. In addition to working as a lawyer, Moses began to run the land around the Mordecai House as a cotton plantation. Before Peggy's death, due to complications in childbirth in 1821, she and Moses had three children, the eldest being their son Henry, the second a daughter, Ellen, and the third a son, Jacob. In January 1824 Moses married Peggy's youngest sister, Anne Willis (Nancy) Lane. By this time Moses was in failing health. Moses died six weeks before his fourth child, Nancy's first and only daughter, Margaret, was born. Although Moses named his widow, Nancy, as executor of his estate and guardian of his children, George Washington Mordecai continued to live with the family and acted as administrator.

1817 - 1826 continued

In his will, Moses left funds for a "proper home" for his family. His widow chose to enlarge the existing house. William Nichols, the state architect who had remodeled North Carolina's first State House, planned the massive south side addition. When the work was completed in 1826, the modest hall-parlor dwelling had been transformed into an elegant Neo-classical house with eight new rooms.

1850 - 1875

Moses' son Henry, upon reaching 21, inherited Mordecai house and the surrounding plantation. He married Martha Hinton, (he was 26, she was 16). Henry and Martha had four children-Margaret, Moses, Mary, and Martha. Moses died at the age of four, so during the fourth generation of occupancy, the house would once again be inherited by women. Henry continued to manage the Mordecai land as a plantation. Census records indicate that Henry's main cash crop was corn. The enslaved people that lived and worked on the Mordecai Plantation did much more than working in the fields. Chaney and Sabina were nursemaids that took care of the children. Charlotte and Milly worked in the outdoor kitchen to prepare food for the Mordecai family, and to prepare the mid-day meal for the enslaved people. Dick was a blacksmith and Davey was a cobbler. According to three narratives written by formerly enslaved people, Henry was not kind to the enslaved people that lived and worked at Mordecai.

1875 - 1949

After Henry's death in 1875, his widow and two of her three daughters, Martha (Patty) and Mary Willis, remained in the house. The other Mordecai Sister, Margaret had married Dr. William Little and moved into another home nearby in Raleigh. It was Martha Lane Mordecai, Henry's widow, who faced the reality that Mordecai could no longer operate as a farm. After her husband's death, she sold off all the farm equipment except that which was absolutely necessary. Miss Patty Mordecai inherited the house from her mother, and lived in it her entire life (89 years), eventually sharing it with her older widowed sister Margaret Mordecai Little and her five sons. Ms. Patty was a business-savvy woman and continued selling off the Mordecai land throughout the 1900s and investing the money, and investing in the development of neighborhoods. When Ms. Patty died in 1949 at the age of 89 her estate was valued over \$100,000.

1949 - 1968

With Miss Patty's death in 1949, her youngest nephew, Burke Haywood Little, inherited the house. He was the last family member to live in the Mordecai House. In 1964 Mr. Little entered a nursing home in Raleigh. After Burke's death, his brothers and cousins decided to sell the home. It was purchased by the City of Raleigh in 1968 for \$60,000. With help from local charitable groups, money was raised to purchase all the furnishings inside. Today 80% of the pieces on display in the Mordecai House are original.

1949 - 1968 continued

The house and grounds opened to the public as Mordecai Historic Park in 1972. Between 1968 and 1979, the Allen Kitchen, Andrew Johnson Birthplace, Badger-Iredell Law Office, and St. Mark's Chapel were moved to the Mordecai property from other areas of Raleigh and the state, giving the park the village-like feel it maintains today.