

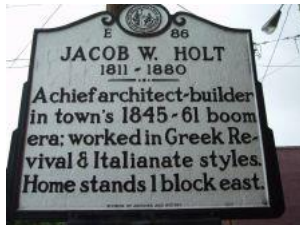
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## Warren County Historical Tidbits: Jacob Holt

### The Man Beyond The Name...

I can definitely say that one of the first names of local importance I learned over 2 years ago when we moved to Warren County was "Jacob Holt". There is a NC Historical marker on Main Street in Warrenton noting his contributions...the Warrenton Welcome Center is housed in the Jacob Holt House...there is an historic sign on south Main Street marking his "First" house...every book, every newspaper article, every website, every historical tour seems to mention Jacob Holt and his architectural influence.

In fact, with the exception of Washington, D.C., I don't know of any other towns or cities across this country, other than Warrenton, that owe such a large part of their design and "look" to the efforts and influence of just one man. As I've read numerous articles by expert Catherine Bishir, our architectural patron is unique in the fact that he is associated with so many buildings from the 19<sup>th</sup> century...no other builder is named as often as Jacob Holt.



As I settled into life here in Warren County it occurred to me that beyond our shared recognition of the name "Jacob Holt" and the homes and churches he left for us, no one seems to really have much more information about the man. And it doesn't seem to be just me – as I Googled his name I found this interesting note on a **Waymarking Site listing his NC Historic Marker**: *"His home is one block from this marker. Alas, even though Holt's work can be seen throughout Warrenton's Historic District, very little is available by way of information on Holt himself. If a waymarker can add to this entry, please do so in a log."*

Well, over the coming weeks we're going to look at the stories surrounding Emmanuel Episcopal Church, Warrenton Presbyterian Church, Eaton Place, Hebron Methodist Church, the Somerville-Graham House and so many more historic treasures that owe their existence to Mr. Holt. So I thought it might be very helpful to get to know the man...and maybe how he still lives on in these historic structures.

So before we peel back the years on many more of our Warren County treasures, let's see what we can learn about Jacob W. Holt.

Here's what I've been able to find out so far about the man: Jacob Holt was born in Prince Edward County, Virginia in 1811. His Mother died when he was only 11 years old with his Daddy passing away 3 years later. His only inheritance seemed to be a collection of carpenter tools from his Father. Then, other than a brief mention of marriage, we don't hear of Holt until he arrives in Warrenton in about 1842 with an entourage of builders, masons, his brother Thomas and other artisans from Prince Edward County. We do know that he survived the economic downturn of the Civil War and remained here with his wife and 6 children.

The later chapters of his life were influenced when, in 1869 a large group of northern investors decided to develop Chase City (then Christiansville) and Boydton, Virginia, so Jacob Holt moved his family north and followed the money. 11 years later, in 1880, he quietly passed away at his son's home in Virginia.



Fig. 38. Emmanuel Episcopal Church, Warrenton, North Carolina, 1827, 1854-58. (North Carolina Division of Archives and History; Photo, pre-1906.) Remodeling by Jacob W. Holt included tower and front facade and probably the side brackets.

That is literally the bulk of what I've been able to find to acquaint us with this local icon. So now begins the detective work...and we have some great clues in the buildings he left us.

First of all, we know he was skilled at his trade and believed in delivering quality. 36 of the 56 buildings attributed to him as builder/contractor/etc. by Catherine Bishir are still standing after 150+ years. Yes, each of them have been remodeled and salvaged thru the years; however, if they had not been built with top-of-the-line materials and designed to last, we'd have a huge collection of "lost treasures."

Next, we know he was a humble man. In Antebellum Warren County he founded one of the largest building firms in the state. Behind his first home (on South Main Street in Warrenton) he had a large lumber yard and shop, a wood-drying kiln, a brick kiln and apparently grew a large sawdust pile that served as a

playground for local boys. Yet, in spite of his architectural expertise, he would usually list his profession as "mechanic", "carpenter" or "joiner"...only rarely taking the credit of "architect" for the many homes he designed. Add to that the design of his first house...very basic and unadorned...simply a place for his family to live, and you see a very humble man.

He was adaptive. During the pre-Civil War years many local residents were interested in either expanding their current, basic homes or building new, substantially larger homes. To get ideas for their homes they turned to popular "pattern books", generally published from Europe. Additionally, select magazines featured detailed drawings of European estates that could be copied for homes here in America. With that said, the overwhelming trait of these homeowners was to err on the conservative side. So, they picked a mantel from this house...a porch from that...woodwork from another. It took expertise and genius on the part of our builder, Jacob Holt, to carve parts from so many examples and merge them together into a final product. And when it came to a total budget for the house, this quote sums his personality up very nicely, ***"The bill is made to have the work done in a manner & style that will suit you, but can be done for less money if done in a plainer manner. I have concluded to put the bill at \$1150, you will please let me know whether [you] wish to have the bill changed to less work & plane."***

And finally, we know that Jacob Holt was a master builder, able to recreate European villas



*Jacob Holt House on Bragg Street Late 1800's*

here in Warren County as evidenced by his home on Bragg Street. As Catherine Bishir notes, "For his own residence in Warrenton, Holt took the unusual step of building a picturesque villa in a format illustrated by both Downing and Sloan, with a center tower and flanking gables. Lizzie Montgomery recalled of the **Jacob W. Holt House**, "On the south on the corner Jacob Holt built . . . [an] unusually shaped house for that time, as people knew little else than a square house. This was built for his own use, and he resided there as long as he remained in

Warrenton."

Well, that's about it for this week's story. I've learned a little more about the man who built or influenced more than 90 homes and Churches here in Warren County in a little more than 15 years and hopefully so have y'all...

Wherever you turn in Warren County we have a jewel...

"Warren County Historical Tidbits" is a project of The Chamber of Commerce of Warren County.