

Who the heck is Hezekiah {and why should we care?}

TEXT BY JULIE MARR PHOTOGRAPHY BY GERIN CHOINIERE



Charlotte is a shiny bauble of a place, a city that most definitely doesn't live in the past. Instead, we always seem to be focusing on the next big thing: skyscrapers and pro sports, the latest and greatest stores and restaurants, new neighborhoods built over the old. Inevitably, though, some well-meaning person can be heard above the din of construction asking: Does this place even have a past? Of course it does, but you'll have to head out Shamrock Drive in east Charlotte to find it. You'll have to pay a visit to Hezekiah.

Whether you're a newcomer, or a longtimer who has forgotten about or never heard of it, you will be rocked by The Charlotte Museum of History and its rock house, circa 1774, the original home of Hezekiah Alexander. He was one of Charlotte's founding citizens, a revolutionary war patriot who helped draft the first state constitution and bill of rights. Hezekiah's story embodies the experiences of many of the Scots Irish immigrants who brought their families, values and dreams to the Carolina Piedmont in the 18th century.

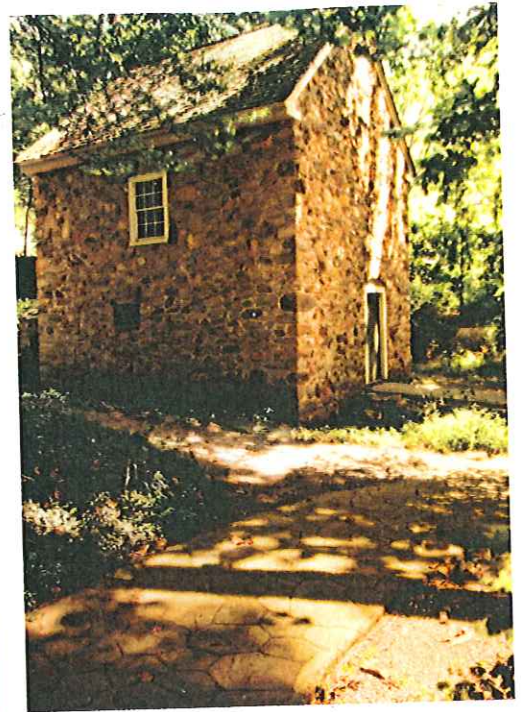
The private, non-profit Charlotte Museum of History may be devoted to the past, but it has very forward-thinking leadership in new president and CEO, Mary Davis Smart. An historian, community leader and former teacher, she came on board last spring with the goal of putting the museum forefront in the hearts and minds of all Charlotteans. And visitors.

"There's no identity crisis in Charlotte," Smart says. "Here at the museum we've preserved the stories and artifacts that capture the soul of our city. And it's fascinating!"

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— Mary Davis Smart, president and CEO

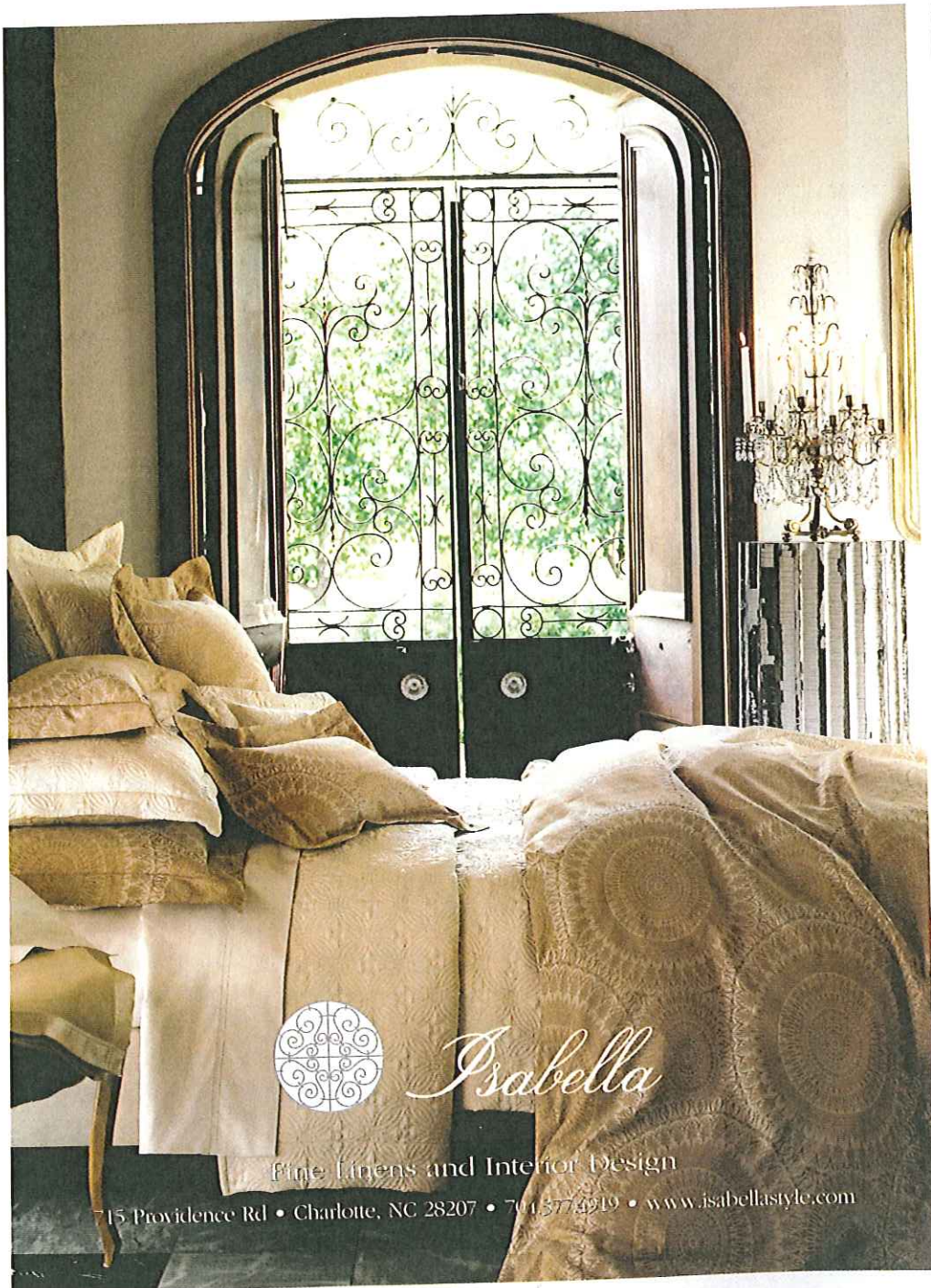


Smart believes that learning about these early settlers is the basis for understanding the region today. "Hezekiah and his contemporaries founded Charlotte on the ideals of patriotism, family, education and hard work, core values that are still very dear to us," she adds.

The Charlotte Museum of History sprawls across a gorgeous 10-acre setting on the city's east side, seven miles and a world away from Uptown. It's a haven for history and architecture buffs, nature lovers and the thousands of students who visit annually. It's best to set aside a chunk of time when visiting to really take in the exhibits, tour the rock house and stroll the grounds. There are picnic tables and plenty of idyllic spots to just sit and relax. Sunday is family day, when there's no charge for admission.

The experience begins in the spacious museum at the entrance. Completed in 1999, more than 15,000 artifacts are housed here, spanning three centuries of regional history. There's everything from documents and dolls to teacups and textiles. Three galleries take visitors from 18th century settlements through gold mines, slavery, the Civil War and the rise of commerce. This is also where special exhibits are displayed, such as "ToyTime," a delightful interactive exhibit of giant folk toys that runs through December 31st.

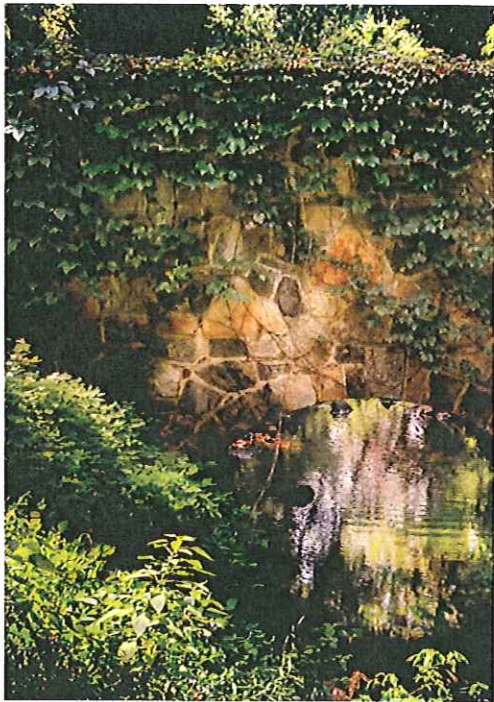
Costumed docents provide museum visitors with living history interpretations of daily life in colonial times. Momentum continues outside with the mammoth American Freedom Bell, the largest cast bell in the world viewable at eye level. Beyond that



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is a life-size bronze statue of 'The Backcountry Patriot,' a tribute to Hezekiah and his peers.

All of this is a prelude to what's down the wooded path and across the stone bridge. Listed on The National Register of Historic Places, the Hezekiah Alexander house is the oldest surviving structure in Charlotte-Mecklenburg. Built of fieldstone quarried from the surrounding property, it is furnished with artifacts and authentic replicas depicting what it was like when Hezekiah lived here with his wife and ten children. Adjacent to the main house is a reproduction log cabin kitchen, a springhouse reconstructed from its original foundations, a restored barn and an 18th century herb garden.

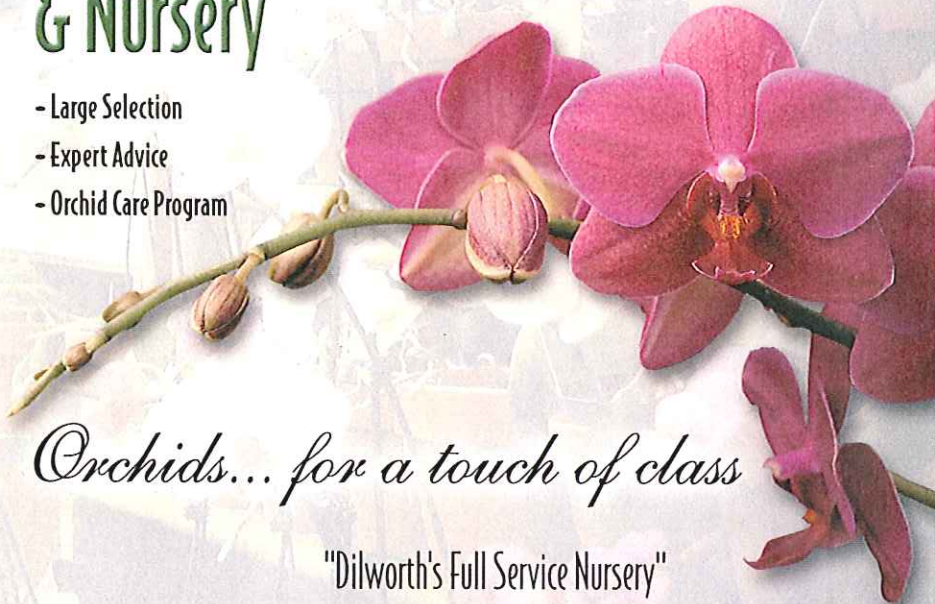
Even though history is knowledge dealing with events and people of the past, the museum is dedicated to keeping it fresh and relevant. While much has been pieced together about the life of Hezekiah Alexander, including his role in signing the mysterious missing Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence, new details about him are being discovered even today. Exciting recent information indicates that he may have actually been among the soldiers at Valley Forge.

You definitely won't find any shiny new baubles at the Smithsonian-affiliated Charlotte Museum of History, rather a shining example of historic preservation that resonates on many levels. Visit for the rich learning experience. Revel in the lovely setting. Tour in awe the centuries-old house. And be humbled and inspired by the man who called it home. *

For more information call 704.568.1774 or visit www.charlottemuseum.org.

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