Exploring the Old Campus: A Walk Through Wake Forest's Historic District

Wake Forest, North Carolina is a town that wears its history on its streets. Long before the name became synonymous with a university in Winston-Salem, this small community north of Raleigh was the original home of Wake Forest College. When the college departed in 1956, it left behind a remarkably intact historic core—one that today offers visitors a quiet, walkable journey through nearly two centuries of architectural and cultural heritage.

The heart of this experience is the **Wake Forest Historic District**, listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2003. Its period of significance stretches from approximately 1820 to 1953, encompassing the old college campus and the surrounding residential streets where faculty, staff, and students once lived. Walking these blocks feels less like touring a museum and more like stepping into a preserved slice of Piedmont college-town life.

The Old Campus and Its Architectural Treasures

The former Wake Forest College campus remains the district's defining feature. The oldest surviving campus building, **Lea Laboratory**, was designed by Baltimore architect John Appleton Wilson and built in 1888. It is considered the earliest known example of Colonial Revival style in North Carolina—a modest but historically significant structure that hints at the architectural sophistication to come.

During the Depression era, Raleigh architect **William H. Deitrick** reshaped the campus with a dignified brick Georgian Revival aesthetic. Three buildings from this period set the tone: **Stealey Hall** (1934), with its cupola and classical details; **Simmons Hall** (1936), a dormitory with a pedimented entrance; and **Binkley Chapel** (completed 1944), a massive brick sanctuary with a Corinthian portico and a three-stage steeple. Together, they form a cohesive architectural ensemble that still anchors the old campus landscape.

One of the most poignant survivors is the **South Brick House** at 112 East South Avenue. Built in 1837–1838, it is the only remaining structure from the first three permanent buildings erected for Wake Forest Institute. Its brick construction and stylish execution testify to the founders' determination to establish a lasting educational institution. Nearby, the **Dr. Calvin Jones House**—a ca. 1820 Federal-style dwelling—predates the college itself. Jones sold his plantation to the Baptist Convention for the school's establishment; the house now serves as the **Wake Forest Historical Museum** at 414 N. Main Street, where visitors can explore artifacts and exhibits documenting the town's layered past.

Faculty Avenue: A Living Architectural Timeline

North of the seminary grounds, **North Main Street**—once known as **"Faculty Avenue"**—is the town's earliest residential avenue. It boasts examples of nearly every American architectural style from 1820 to 1956, a direct result of the professors who built their homes along this street. For twenty years, this was Wake Forest's only historic district, designated locally in 1979.

Walking Faculty Avenue today, you pass private residences that remain largely unchanged in character. The street provides what the town's preservation documents describe as "a living developmental and architectural history of the town's origins". It is a reminder that Wake Forest's historic district is not a frozen diorama but a neighborhood where people still live, maintain their properties, and carry forward the town's sense of place.

Practical Notes for the Visitor

The **Wake Forest Historical Museum** is free and open Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon and 1:30 to 4:30 p.m.. For those who prefer a structured route, the town offers self-guided virtual tours of the Local Historic District, Downtown, and Town Cemetery, with printed brochures available at Town Hall and the museum. Guided walking tours are occasionally offered by Historic Preservation Commission staff, particularly during Preservation Month in May.

A visit to the old campus and its surrounding streets is best approached slowly. This Click here for info is not a district of grand monuments and interpretive centers; it is a district of brick houses, shaded sidewalks, and institutional buildings that have watched a town evolve around them. The reward lies in noticing the details—the fanlights, the chimneys, the cupolas—and understanding that each represents a decision made by people who believed this small patch of Wake County was worth building something lasting upon.

