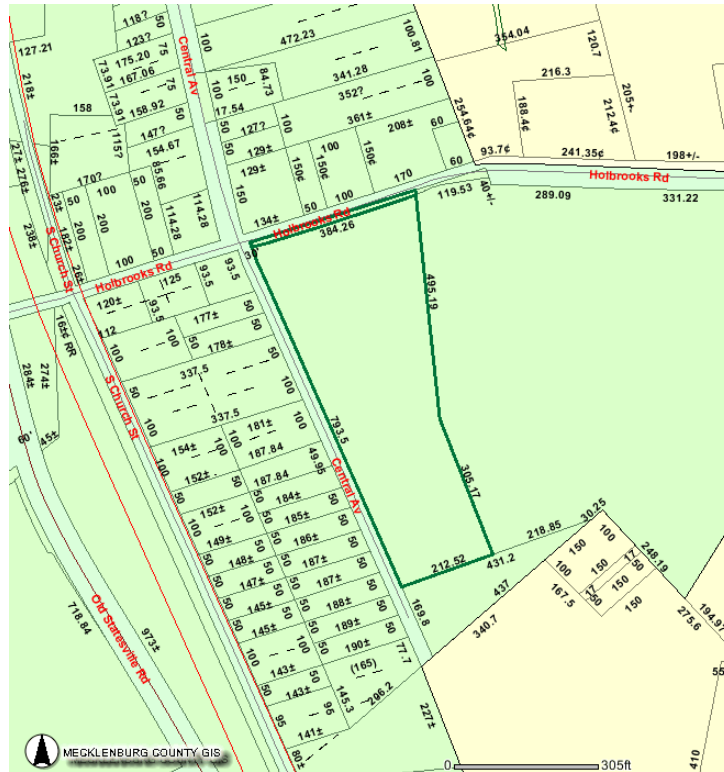


Survey and Research Report for The Torrence-Lytle School



1. **Name and location of the property:** The property known as the Torrence-Lytle School is located at 302 Holbrooks Road, Huntersville, North Carolina.
2. **Name and address of the present owner of the property:**
Mecklenburg County Real Estate/Finance Department
600 E. 4th Street, 11th Floor
Charlotte, North Carolina 28202
(704)-336-2472
3. **Representative photographs of the property:** This report contains representative photographs of the property.
4. **Map depicting the location of the property:** Below is a map depicting the location of the property. The UTM coordinates are 514908E 3917295N



5. **Current deed book reference to the property:** The most recent deed to this property is recorded in the Mecklenburg County Deed Book 3314 page 441. The tax parcel number of the property is # 01909304.
6. **A brief historical sketch of the property:** This report contains a brief historical sketch of the property.
7. **A brief architectural description of the property:** This report contains a brief architectural description of the property.
8. **Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets the criteria for designation as set forth in N.C.G.S. 160A-400.5:**

Cultural importance: The Commission judges that the property known as the Torrence-Lytle School does possess special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment based on the following considerations:

- i. The Torrence-Lytle School represented the first opportunity for African-American residents of North Mecklenburg County to attend a public high school in the region where they lived.

- II. The Torrence-Lytle School is one of the older remaining African-American school buildings in Mecklenburg County and is, therefore, important in understanding the broad patterns of the county's history.
 - III. The Torrence-Lytle School is representative of a movement in the 1930's to bring high school education to rural blacks in Mecklenburg County.
 - IV. The Torrence-Lytle School is significant as an important example of early 20th-century school building architecture
9. **Ad Valorem tax appraisal:** The Commission is aware that designation would allow the owner to apply for an automatic deferral of 50% of Ad Valorem taxes on all or any portion of the property which becomes a designated "historic landmark." The current appraised value of the lot, which is 4.9443 acres, is \$435,100. The appraised value of the 1937 building and the two attached wings is \$742,600. The current total tax value of the land and the historic building is \$1,177,700.
10. **Portion of property recommended for designation:** The Commission recommends that all portions of the building and the entire tax parcel be recommended for historic landmark designation.

Date of preparation of this report: December 2004

Prepared by: Hope L. Murphy and Stewart Gray

Historical Overview

The history of Charlotte-Mecklenburg public schools began in the 1880's. Though the Federal Freedmen's Bureau had set up schools for newly-freed slaves at the end of the Civil War, there was little support for education from local or State governments prior to the 1880's. In 1882 the City of Charlotte established its first graded schools, one for white children and another for black.^[1] In the 1890's Mecklenburg County began to buy land for county schools for white and for black children. All buildings were locally funded, with the county school board paying for teacher salaries and supplies such as wood out of local tax revenues, which left serious disparities between the quality of education in wealthier communities and poorer rural ones.

Most efforts to improve public education for blacks in North Carolina, as well as the rest of the South, were initiated by Northern philanthropists. In response to the lack of public funds for the education

of black children, Julius Rosenwald, the president of Sears-Roebuck, established the Julius Rosenwald Fund. At the time of its founding, in 1917, there was not a single standard eight-grade rural public school or a public high school that provided even two years of instruction for black children.^[2] Most black children only attended school three months out of the year, to enable them to aid in planting and harvesting crops.

While the Rosenwald Fund allowed for the development of elementary education for Mecklenburg County's black children, there was no opportunity for high school education for rural blacks in their own communities. African-American children who completed elementary school in the first three decades of the 19th Century and who desired advanced schooling were sent to boarding schools, if their families were able to afford it.

Though the North Carolina Legislature passed legislation in 1913 that enabled counties to issue bonds to build high schools for African American children, it was not until 1923 that the City of Charlotte opened its first high school for African American children, Second Ward High School. Some rural families sent their children to live with relatives in the City so their children could attend there. In 1936 the County approved the construction of four rural high schools for black children: Pineville Colored High School, Plato Price High School (West Mecklenburg County), J.H. Gunn High School (East Mecklenburg County), and the Huntersville Colored School.^[3]

Huntersville Colored School, later Torrence-Lytle High School, opened in 1937. At that time it was a "union school" housing grades 1-11. It had seven rooms that housed three elementary school teachers, two high school teachers, principal Isaac T. Graham and 181 pupils.^[4] From its opening in 1937 to its closing in 1966 Isaac T. Graham was the school's principal. Torrence-Lytle was the only high school for African-Americans in northern Mecklenburg County.



Torrence-Lytle High School

Torrence-Lytle is located in the south end of Huntersville, in an area historically known as Pottstown. Pottstown is named for Ortho Potts, a brick mason and prominent member of the community. Most of the other men in the community were employed as tenant farmers or janitors, yard men, and kitchen help at the Mecklenburg Sanitarium, which opened across the railroad tracks from the community in 1926. Black women from Pottstown also worked at the Sanitarium or traveled to white communities to perform domestic work.^[5]

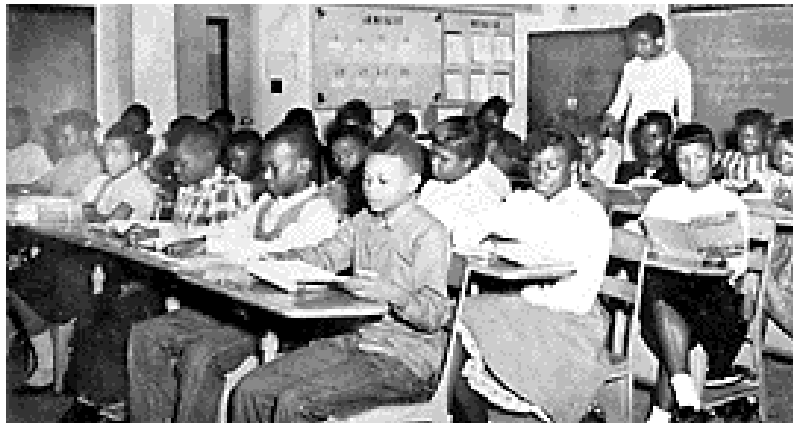
Times were often difficult in Pottstown. Pottstown resident B.J. Caldwell, an alumnus and member of the Torrence-Lytle class of 1964, recalls that her father was forced to use newspapers to cover the large cracks in her family's home. She recounts a recurring joke that someone could stand on the railroad tracks and read the newspaper through the holes in the walls. But she says that her family was better off than some. While she carried her lunch to Torrence-Lytle in a fresh brown paper bag, others had to reuse the same bag all week. When the original one-story brick Huntersville Colored School was erected it was surrounded by the Potts's farm, Huntersville A.M.E. Church, and a few frame houses. Ms. Caldwell's, whose family moved into one of those houses, relays that these were the first homes owned by the former slaves and sharecroppers who had previously rented their homes.^[6]

In the fall of 1952 the school expanded its physical space with the addition of a cafeteria and eight additional classrooms. ^[7] In 1953 the name of the school was changed from Huntersville Colored School to Torrence-Lytle High School. The name change honored two men who had been important in establishing the Huntersville Colored School, Isaiah Dale "Ike" Torrence and Franklin Lytle.

Franklin Lytle was born a slave, on a farm owned by Rutledge Withers. Little is known of Lytle's life from his childhood until the 1890's. But he later became a prominent and influential farmer, and married Lois Alexander, a schoolteacher. Lytle was able to send all five of his and his wife's children through college, paying for their sons' tuition at Biddle University (now Johnson C. Smith) and daughters' at Barber-Scotia with farm produce.^[8] Though not formerly educated himself, Lytle became a proponent of African American education in Huntersville. He was an integral part of the establishment of Lytle's Grove Colored School, a Rosenwald school, and helped to acquire the land for Torrence-Lytle.

Not much is known of Isaiah Torrence's early or personal life. He worked as a farm agent, and is purported to have been a music teacher and coach. What is known, from the public record, is that Torrence was a staunch advocate for the education of black children in north Mecklenburg County. In July 1935 Torrence appeared before the Board of County Commissioners of Mecklenburg meeting. The meeting was a public hearing to gather constituent views on a proposal by the Board to issue Public Works Administration bonds, from The Federal Emergency

Administration of Public Works (P.W.A.), to enhance public education in Mecklenburg County, by improving and expanding school buildings. The Board hoped that such expansion would ensure every student access to six months of schooling, as required by the North Carolina Constitution. The County schools requested \$242,000 for this purpose. The minutes from that meeting read, "Ike Torrence, negro citizen and taxpayer, asked for schools in the county for children who had passed the seventh grade and wanted to go to high school."^[9] Apparently Torrence was a savvy lobbyist and appeared before the Board again in September 1935. This time Torrence brought a group of African American residents of Huntersville and a gift to the Board of farm produce.^[10] In July 1936, when the Board met to appropriate the P.W.A. funds, \$35,300 was dedicated to "the construction of a New School building and auditorium in Huntersville Township."^[11] A little over a year later Huntersville Colored School, later Torrence-Lytle High School, opened its doors.



Torrence-Lytle 6th Grade Class, Late 1950's
Photo: Public Library of Charlotte-Mecklenburg

In 1957 twelve new classrooms, a science laboratory, a home economics department, a gymnasium and an agricultural building were added to the school. In 1966 when the school closed there were 964 students, 45 teachers, a librarian, a guidance counselor, an assistant principal and five custodians. In 1965 some high school students were re-assigned to North Mecklenburg High School. In 1966 the school was closed, and all of the students were sent to racially integrated schools^[12]. Graham was sent to be an assistant principal at North Mecklenburg High School, a move many found unjust considering Mr. Graham's long tenure as a full principal.^[13]

Long tenures were not unusual at Torrence-Lytle. According to B.J. Caldwell, Esther H. Johnson, the school librarian, came to the school in 1938 shortly after its opening, and stayed until the school closed in 1966. Caldwell worked as an assistant to Johnson after her graduation

in 1964. She remembers Johnson as the consummate professional. Though she approached all things with “love, care and tenderness,” Johnson was demanding and taught her staff and students to “do things right the first time.” Caldwell credits her own ease in finding a job after the closing of Torrence-Lytle with the lessons that Johnson taught her.^[14]

Caldwell further recounts that parents were very involved with the education of their children. Going to P.T.A. meetings was difficult for most parents who worked long hours, but students knew that their parents cared about their progress and behavior at school. If a student was having a problem at school, teachers would visit the parents in their home. If a teacher came to your house, Ms. Caldwell explained, “then there was big trouble.”

The closing of the school in 1966 was difficult for the community. Caldwell recounts that the school had been the “center of the universe” for African Americans in Northern Mecklenburg. Caldwell believes that the community fragmented with the termination of classes. Torrence Lytle had been the nucleus of the neighborhood, and it was now gone.^[15] Because of the prevailing system of racial segregation “there were no McDonald’s where you could go and hang out,” Caldwell explains. Instead there were “sock hops” in the school gym every Friday. Football games and Basketball games were also big social events. David Beatty, who attended Torrence-Lytle from 1961 to 1965, recounts that games were taken seriously and that school rivalry could at time be extreme. Beatty recounts that it was not uncommon for the football team to lie on the floor of the bus going to games so that they would not be hit by rocks and bottles thrown at the bus from opposing school students.^[16] Torrence-Lytle’s homecoming games were held at Davidson College in the 1960’s and were accompanied by a parade.



Torrence-Lytle band in the late-1950’s
Photo: Public Library of Charlotte-Mecklenburg County



Photo: 1965 Torrence-Lytle yearbook.

When Torrence-Lytle closed its doors as a school it became an alternative learning center. Students, counselors and teachers lived on campus. Subsequently, the Torrence-Lytle gym has been used as a Recreation center for the community. The rest of the campus is currently used as a storage facility for Mecklenburg County and the Town of Huntersville.

^[1] Thomas Hanchett, "Rosenwald School Survey," Charlotte Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission.

^[2] Ibid.

^[3] Ibid.

^[4] Betty Jane "B.J." Caldwell, "A History of Torrence-Lytle High School" by

^[5] "Small Towns of Mecklenburg County", Charlotte Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission

^[6] Interview with B.J. Caldwell, December 8, 2004.

^[7] Ibid.

^[8] Stewart Gray and Paula Stathakis, "Survey and Research Report of the Frank Lytle House (2003)," Charlotte Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission.

^[9] Minutes, Board of Commissioners for the County of Mecklenburg, July 10, 1935.

^[10] Minutes, Board of Commissioners for the County of Mecklenburg, September 3, 1935.

^[11] Minutes, Board of Commissioners for the County of Mecklenburg, July 8, 1936.

^[12] Caldwell, "A History of Torrence-Lytle School"

^[13] B.J. Caldwell interview.

^[14] Ibid.

^[15] Ibid.

^[16] David Beatty interview with Mihir Desai, Davidson Reminiscence Project, 2003.

Architectural Description



The Torrence-Lytle High School opened in the fall of 1937 as the Huntersville Colored High School. In 1953 and again in 1957, the school was greatly expanded. In 1965, some students were reassigned to North Mecklenburg High School, and in 1966 the school was closed when all of the students were reassigned to racially integrated schools. Despite some notable structural deterioration in some sections of the large masonry building, the original one-story, hipped-roofed 1937 section of the school exhibits a high degree of integrity. Along with the Davidson Colored School in the nearby town of Davidson, the Torrence-Lytle School is significant in Mecklenburg County as a substantial surviving African American school building from the first half of the 20th century. Flat-roofed, two-story Modernist wings are attached to the north and south elevations of the hipped-roofed 1937 building by stair tower/hyphens. The style of the Modernist wings contrast markedly with the traditional architecture of the older one-story building, but the distinctive Modernist features of the wings, combined with their high degree of integrity give these additions significance.

The original 1937 one-story brick school building faces west onto Central Avenue in Huntersville, one block east of the Norfolk Southern Railroad line that runs north-and-south through the town from Charlotte to Statesville. In 1937 this area, known as Pottstown, consisted of the new hipped-roof masonry school building, Ortho Potts' farm, and a few frame houses concentrated around the Holbrook Road intersections with Central Avenue and Church Street, and the Huntersville A.M.E. Church.

The 1937 school building features a rear-facing T-plan, with a very wide façade and a short rear wing, which houses an auditorium. The bricks walls are laid in 5:1 common bond, with a corbelled water course that continues around the building. The school building features a steeply pitched modified hip roof, with small gables housing louvered vents located at the ends of the ridgelines. The school's main entrance is centered between the four sets of tall windows that have been covered with plywood. Each set of windows includes triple nine-over-nine double-hung sash windows, with the ganged windows bordered on each side by a single nine-over-nine window. The openings have brick sills and a soldier course representing the lintel. However, the facade is not symmetrical. The northernmost section of the facade features a large, simple brick panel laid in running bond, highlighted by a border composed of soldier courses and cast stone corner blocks.



Facade Detail

Note the small gable at the ridgeline of the otherwise hipped roof.



Detail of Altered Entrance

**Note the brick and
block-work behind the
deteriorating metal
paneling.**

While the exterior of the building has retained a high degree of integrity, the front entrance has been greatly altered. A gabled porch shelters the entrance, supported by ca. 1957 cast concrete posts. The original doors have been replaced with metal doors and direct-glazed transoms. Decorative brick and block-work surrounding the doorway has been encased with painted metal panels.

The relatively narrow north and south elevations are partially obscured by the two-story brick hyphens, which connect to the 1937 building's original side entrances. The north elevation features paired nine-over-nine windows to the west of the hyphen, and a bricked-in opening to the east of the hyphen. The south elevation features a simple brick panel laid in running bond, highlighted by a border composed of soldier courses and cast stone corner blocks.



Rear view of the 1937 building from the northeast



Rear southernmost section of the 1937 building.



Rear wing houses the auditorium.

The rear elevation features a substantial hipped-roofed wing that also features a gabled vent at the ridgeline. Unlike the rest of the building, the rear wing incorporates tall brick piers, that indicate the use of roof trusses needed to span the relatively wide auditorium. The piers form pilasters that divide the wing into three bays. On both the north and south elevations the bays closest to the principal section of the building contain paired nine-over-nine windows. The middle bays contain tripled windows, and the easternmost bays each contain a single door and a narrow four-over-four window. The wing's east (rear) elevation is also divided into three sections by exposed piers, but is otherwise blank. The ridge of the hip roof over the auditorium is slightly lower than the building's main ridgeline. The grade slopes away from the rear of the school building.



Central Hallway



Classroom



Classroom Windows



Auditorium

The interior of the 1937 building is in poor condition, but it has retained sufficient integrity to contribute to the significance of the building. The most notable feature of the building's interior is a wide hallway that runs the length of the building. While some changes have been made to the original floor plan, it appears that the original plan included three classrooms and a library to the west of the central hallway, and three classrooms and the auditorium to the east of the hallway. Classrooms feature some original woodwork such as baseboards, blackboard surrounds, and interior transoms with three-light sash. The interior walls are plastered, and the solid masonry construction of the building is visible where some of the plaster has deteriorated. At least one wythe of terra-cotta block was laid in the exterior walls, allowing for a textured surface that would accept plaster. Original 4" pine floors are exposed in some areas. Linoleum tile has

covered the floor in several of the rooms. The frame-work of the massive "stick-built" hipped roof is visible in one of the classrooms where the ceiling has been removed. The auditorium features a raised stage, accessed by short enclosed stair on each side of the stage. Two small dressing rooms open onto the rear of the stage.



West Elevation of North Wing



East (rear) Elevation of South Wing



Masonry Hyphens Attach Old and New Sections



Second Story Classroom in South Wing

The two flat-roofed wings to the north and south of the 1937 building feature exposed concrete frames, filled with curtain walls of glass block, metal framed windows, and masonite or cast panels. The end walls are brick veneered block. The wings feature concrete floors, with the second floor supported by cast concrete beams. On the second floor, narrow cast beams support corrugated steel roof pans. The classrooms are divided by partial-height masonry walls, topped with

corrugated translucent fiberglass panels. The interior doorways are topped with operable louvered-vent transoms. The hallway walls are tiled. While the condition of the wings has been affected by neglect, with some areas of water damage, the degree of integrity is very high. It appears that the original floor plans of the wings has not been altered, and original features such as doors, door hardware, lights, and fixtures have survived.

The two flat-roofed wings, aside from their significance as well preserved examples of Modernist architecture, offer an important contrast to the traditional early 20th century architecture of the original 1937 building. Built only twenty years apart, there are almost no building material, building techniques, or design features common between the older and newer buildings. The buildings are all excellent examples of school buildings for their time, and they dramatically illustrated the great changes that took place in Mecklenburg County architecture in the middle decades of the 20th century.