

## A Short History Of Independence Square.

Dr. Dan L. Morrill

March 27, 1986

The intersection of what are now Trade St. and Tryon St. is the fundamental reason for the existence of Charlotte. Both roads were originally Indian paths leading to fords on the Catawba River -- Tryon St. carrying travelers from the Yadkin River basin to Nations Ford on the Catawba, and Trade St. extending northwestward from the routes to Charleston to Beatties Ford and to the mountains beyond.

The first white people to enter this region were traders from the James River settlements in Virginia, who began to penetrate this region in the mid 1600's, traveling from Petersburg, Va., and eventually moving south along what is now Tryon St. By 1700 traders were also moving inland from Charleston along what is now Trade St. They came to exchange goods with the Catawba Indians, who inhabited this region.

Large scale white immigration into the Carolina backcountry began in the 1740's. Most who settled in this area were Scotch Irish Presbyterians, who journeyed from eastern Pennsylvania and eastern Maryland in covered wagons down the so-called Great Philadelphia Wagon Road, of which what is now Tryon St. was a part. They quickly subdued the Catawbas, who were already ravaged with smallpox, and established their farms. One such individual was Thomas Polk, who stopped at what is now the Square, recognized its strategic location on a major route for settlers, and built his house on the northeastern quadrant of the intersection.

By the early 1760's, enough people had settled here to warrant the creation of a new county, thereby eliminating the need to travel to the Anson County Courthouse to register deeds and to conduct other legal business. Thomas Polk succeeded in convincing the Colonial Assembly to place the new courthouse right next to his home. Established in 1763, the new county was named Mecklenburg County in honor of the German homeland of Charlotte, the queen of English king George III. Five years later, in 1768, the courthouse town, Charlotte, was created, and the enterprising Polk laid out the streets. The main street was named for the Colonial Governor of North Carolina, William Tryon.

## A Short History Of Independence Square

In its early years, Charlotte was a small crossroads village of approximately 30 log dwellings. The local economy was mainly self-sufficient farming. The distances to the headwaters of the rivers and the difficulties of getting there made the growing of cash crops largely infeasible.

Significant events occurred in and around the Charlotte crossroads during the American Revolution. In May 1775 the local political leadership met at the courthouse at the Square and expressed their firm support for separation from the British. Indeed, local tradition holds that the Mecklenburgers signed a Declaration of Independence, the so-called Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence, on May 20, 1775, thereby becoming the first Americans to declare their unconditional separation from British authority. Most historians do not accept the full validity of this event. However, everyone agrees that the local patriots signed the Mecklenburg Resolves on May 31, a highly significant document in itself. The Mecklenburg Resolves declared the conditional independence of Mecklenburg. These events gave rise to the name "Independence Square."

In September, 1780, General Charles Cornwallis, fresh from his decisive victory at Camden, S.C., led a large British army up Trade St. and set about occupying the town. His troops, were attacked by militia units located in and around the courthouse. The Battle of Charlotte, September 26, 1780, lasted for about an hour, until the overwhelming superiority of the British forces inevitably carried the day. But Charlotte is the only city which had a Revolutionary War skirmish occur at its very heart. A marker in the middle of Independence Square commemorates both the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence and the Battle of Charlotte. Cornwallis remained in Charlotte, residing in Thomas Polk's house, until mid-October. The final significant Revolutionary War event in Charlotte occurred in December 1780, when General Nathaniel Greene arrived and took command of the Southern Colonial forces from Horatio Gates.

The pattern of Mecklenburg life returned to normal after the final British surrender in 1783. A dramatic event occurred in 1791, when George Washington came through Charlotte on his Southern tour. Staying overnight at Cook's Inn, just off the Square, he called Charlotte a "trifling place."

An event of profound importance for Mecklenburg and the entire South happened in 1793. Eli Whitney invented the Cotton Gin. Now it became economically prudent to grow cotton for a cash market, and Mecklenburg County became a leading center of cotton production. Large wagons would leave the Square,

## A Short History Of Independence Square

carrying cotton to Cheraw, S.C., on the Wateree or Cross Creek, now Fayetteville, on the Cape Fear.

Mecklenburg also became the center of a thriving gold mining economy in the late 1820's, when a large vein of gold was discovered just to the south of the town. Indeed, so large did the amount of gold become that the United States Government opened a branch of the U.S. Mint in Charlotte in 1838. Designed by noted architect William Strickland, the building was an unusually elegant adornment for what was still essentially a backwoods courthouse town.

Probably the most significant event in Charlotte's entire history occurred in 1852. The first railroad came to town, linking the city with Charleston, S.C. In anticipation of the economic energy which this development would produce, a group of local investors built a five-unit commercial complex on the southwest corner of the Square in 1850-51 -- Granite Row. The Brownlee Jewelers and the abandoned Garibaldi & Bruns Building are surviving elements of this complex, with more recent facades and altered interiors.

Charlotte began to become a bustling commercial center after the coming of the railroad. Gradually, the commercial core began to expand outward from the Square. But the economic evolution of the town was interrupted by the Civil War. The city was spared from destruction, and in a sense the war helped Charlotte, because the Confederate Naval Yard located here. The most momentous Civil War events in Charlotte happened in 1865. Confederate President Jefferson Davis and his Cabinet arrived, held their last full meeting just off the Square, and were in Charlotte when they received word of the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln.

Charlotte began to boom after the Civil War, making its economic mark primarily because of the development of the textile industry. By 1890, Charlotte had approximately 11,000 residents and was a leading cotton mill town of the region. Trade and Tryon Streets were lined with large, wooden mansions, as New South Charlotte began to flex its muscles. Indicative of the growth of the town was the installation of a trolley line in 1890-91. Trolleys began operation in May 1891 and continued to serve the city until March 1938. These electric streetcars, and later the automobile, set into motion a series of events which gradually transformed Trade and Tryon Streets into uptown thoroughfares, replete with skyscrapers, the first being the Realty or Independence Building, completed in 1909. That same developmental pattern persists today.