

Washington Heights

by Thomas W. Hanchett

This suburb, is about two miles from the heart of the city, with [streetcar lines](#) running through it. It is high and dry, being the highest point around Charlotte. It has beautiful streets convenient to churches and schools. In this suburb is to be found some of the best people and some of the handsomest homes to be found in any part of Charlotte. Today Washington Heights is one of Charlotte's inner neighborhoods. It is located along the west side of Beatties Ford Road between the Brookshire Freeway and Northwest Junior High School. Its streets - Booker, Sanders, Tate, Dundeen, Celia, Pitts, Carmel, Redbud, and Onyx - slope gently downward from the ridgeline marked by Beatties Ford Road, and they are lined with some 200 modest bungalows dating from the 1910s through 1930s. When Washington Heights opened in 1913, though, it was not an inner city neighborhood but a "streetcar suburb" at the edge of Charlotte.² This suburb was built especially for middle-income black residents.

When C.H. Watson penned his advertisement for Washington Heights in the mid 1910s, Charlotte was experiencing a suburban boom. The beginning of electric trolley service and the opening of Dilworth back in 1891 had heralded the age of streetcar suburbs.³ Now any middle-income person who earned enough to afford the five cent trolley fare could work downtown but commute home to a "country house" on a tree-shaded street near the edge of the city. By the 1910s nine trolley tracks radiated from downtown like spokes in a wheel. All along the city's rim were new suburban neighborhoods: [Dilworth](#) (1891) and its extension (1911); the [Elizabeth](#) (1891), Piedmont Park (1899), and Oakhurst (1903) areas of present-day Elizabeth; Colonial Heights (1905) and [Crescent Heights](#) (1907) between Vail Avenue and Providence Road; [Myers Park](#) (1911) southeast of town; the Club Acres (1910) and Chatham Estates (1912) sections of [Plaza-Midwood](#); and Wilmore (1914) southwest of the city.⁴

Developers advertised the benefits of this new "country living," and similar arguments could be found in frequent articles in the popular magazines of the day. Ads touted the clean air and well-drained homesites available in the suburbs. They promised that children brought up in single-family homes, with opportunities to play on tree-shaded grassy lawns, would grow up healthier and happier than their city peers. The suburbs themselves were designed to enhance the semi-rural feeling. Most included parkland, and the biggest parks near the trolley lines, such as Latta Park in Dilworth or [Independence Park](#) in Elizabeth, drew not only neighborhood residents but also weekend picnickers and baseball players from all over the city. After 1911, when landscape architects John Nolen and the Olmsted Brothers laid out curving Queens

and Dilworth Roads, almost every new Charlotte suburb also featured curving avenues designed in keeping with the naturalistic spirit of the land.⁵

The suburbs were also meant to be carefully controlled residential enclaves, where one's neighbors would always be middle and upper-class citizens, and where one would never have to worry about a factory opening up next door. Charlotte had no zoning laws as yet (the first in America were in New York City in 1916).⁶ So developers used restrictive covenants in the lot deeds to ensure that land would be used only for residences, that houses would be above a specified minimum cost, and that structures would be set back from the street to provide spacious front lawns.

One of the most frequently used restrictive covenants had nothing to do with buildings, however. Almost every Charlotte suburban deed included the clause, "shall be owned, occupied and used only by members of the Caucasian race, domestic servants in the employ of the occupants excepted."⁷ Such clauses had seldom been found in older center city areas where blacks and whites had long lived relatively close together. Suburban race restrictions were commonplace in the early twentieth century throughout the South and in parts of the North, but they must have been particularly disheartening to blacks in Charlotte. By the 1910s the city's black population had made great economic strides. The Honorable Dr. J.T. Williams, a medical doctor who had served as United States diplomat to Sierra Leone, West Africa from 1898 to 1907, was the town's leading black citizen.⁸ He lived in a spacious house on Brevard Street near downtown, had a farm south of the city, and owned a number of investment properties including the Hotel Williams. Lawyer J.T. Sanders, hailed by blacks as "the Colored Financier of Charlotte," controlled three drug stores, one barber shop, one restaurant, one hotel, one newspaper, a movie theater, and large real estate business."⁹ Black architect W.W. Smith was building churches and business buildings throughout the region, including the four-story headquarters of Charlotte's Afro-American Mutual Insurance Company. J.W. Crockett and W.C. Smith ran the *Progressive Messenger* newspaper. The A.M.E. Zion Publishing House handled a large volume of printing under the direction of Bishop George Wiley Clinton, Dr. George C. Clement and their successors. Black-owned barbershops, twenty-four in number, were major moneymakers in a period when there were few white barbers.¹⁰ Barber Thad L. Tate rivaled J.T. Williams in importance, and owned a farm north of the city in addition to a handsome brick residence in town.¹¹ There were some two dozen black college professors and public school principals.¹² Chief among them were [Dr. George E. Davis](#), who had been the first black teacher at Biddle University in the city, and Dr. Henry L. McCrory, the institution's energetic young president.¹³ Both also invested in real estate. The city also boasted eighty-seven black ministers, and a dozen black doctors, many of whom helped staff black [Good Samaritan Hospital](#).¹⁴ Below the lawyers, doctors, business

and real estate investors, publishers, and leading barbers and ministers was a rising black middle class.¹⁵ Among those in this group were the city's thirty-nine public school teachers, its eighty bricklayers and plasterers, the proprietors of its twenty-four black-owned small grocery stores, the ministers of the smaller churches, and railway employees. The black middle class was not as well-to-do as its white counterpart, but its members could afford the down payment for a modest lot and the five cent fares for the daily trolley commute.

No less than whites, the emerging black middle class longed for the advertised benefits of suburban living for themselves and their children. Land use controls seemed especially desirable, for black downtown neighborhoods were subject to even greater disruptive forces than white ones: Rosa Smith, daughter of pioneer black publisher W.C. Smith, still remembers when the city's informally sanctioned red-light district was suddenly moved to within sight of her Second Ward house early in the century.¹⁶ As importantly, a suburban location seemed a fashionable and fitting attainment for families who had worked their way up from penniless ex-slavery in two generations.

White real estate developers in Charlotte could not ignore this ready market. In June of 1912, real estate man Walter S. Alexander organized the Freehold Realty Company with partners John M. Scott and A.M. McDonald.¹⁷ The same partnership had earlier developed Elizabeth Heights across town under the name Southern Real Estate Company.¹⁸ By June of the following year Alexander and partners had purchased a tract of farmland north of the city along Beatties Ford Road.¹⁹ The property lay along the west side of the old country highway just north of the bridge over the Seaboard Air Line Railway tracks. It was just beyond the nineteenth century black village of Biddleville around Biddle University (later Johnson C. Smith University), which was now becoming surrounded with white suburbs.²⁰ A trolley line had recently opened along West Trade Street and out Beatties Ford Road from downtown; Freehold Realty's new purchase two-and-a-half miles from the center of town was now within easy commuting distance of virtually all parts of the city.²¹

On June 10, 1913, Freehold Realty filed a plat map at the Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office laying out streets in the former farmland.²² The new suburb was to be called Washington Heights, evidently in honor of educator Booker T. Washington, the national black leader. The streets running west from Beatties Ford Road commemorated other local and national black leaders. There was Davis Avenue (later renamed Dundeen Street), named for Charlotte's pioneer black professor Dr. George E. Davis. Parallel to it was Tate Street, after black Charlotte barber and community leader Thad L. Tate, who himself owned a tract of farmland just beyond Davis Street. Further down was Sanders Avenue, named either for J.T. Sanders, or for Dr. D.J. Sanders who had recently completed his tenure as the first black president of

Biddle University. There was also a Douglas Street shown on the map (now the site of the on-ramp of the Brookshire Freeway), perhaps intended to honor black abolitionist Frederick Douglass. These straight streets formed a grid adjacent to Beatties Ford Road, with cross-streets named after trees: Elm Street (Carmel Street today), Holly Street (now Redbud Street), and Oak Street (today Onyx Street).²³ The central street in the neighborhood was Booker Avenue running west off Beatties Ford Road. It was wider than the rest because it was intended as the route of the trolley line whenever it might be extended. After Booker crossed Holly it broke out of the grid pattern and formed a gentle curve in the newest suburban style.

Behind the lots lining Booker Avenue the plat map reserved land for another suburban essential, a creek-bed park. Evidence in deeds indicates that this area was to be called Lincoln Park, and the trolley company reserved a right-of-way directly from Beatties Ford Road to the site.²⁴ A curving street which ran along the north side of the park was to be called Park Drive (now Pitts Drive).

Along the new streets, Freehold Realty laid out more than 200 lots. Most were fifty feet wide and 150 feet deep and had rear alleyways. This arrangement was much the same as might be found on side streets in white suburbs. Thomas Avenue, for instance, platted the same year parallel to The Plaza across town, has lots fifty feet wide and from 135 to 182 feet deep.²⁵ Washington Heights property cost a bit less than Thomas Avenue lots. A Thomas Avenue homesite went for \$500 to \$750. Washington Heights lots ranged from \$500 for prime Beatties Ford Road frontage, to \$380 in the first block of Sanders Avenue, to as little as \$300 in the second block of Tate Street.²⁶ As in all streetcar suburbs, the further one had to walk from the existing trolley line (in this case on Beatties Ford Road), the less one paid for a lot.

Just as in white suburbs, Washington Heights buyers were protected by deed restrictions. Clauses specified that land was to be used for residence only and that buildings were to be set back at least twenty feet from the street. The better-located lots carried a requirement that no house could be constructed costing less than 1000 dollars, while other sites had minimums of \$700 or in a few cases \$600. There were no clauses referring to race.

To help sell the new suburb, Freehold Realty secured the services of C.H. Watson. Watson was one of the city's black leaders, and listed "real estate" as his occupation in city directories of the period. He was active in trying to persuade government leaders to provide a reform school for delinquent black youth, who at the time were sentenced to hard labor on the chain gangs with no provision for education.²⁷ In 1915 Watson was instrumental in organizing a massive celebration of the anniversary of the end of the Civil War and slavery: "The Fiftieth Anniversary of the Freedom of the Negro in the County of Mecklenburg and the City of Charlotte, North Carolina."²⁸ The day

included a morning parade through the streets of Charlotte, noontime program in the city auditorium with speeches by black civic and religious leaders and music by four brass bands, and an evening "Musicale" featuring the singing of eight church choirs, soloists, and the Biddle University Orchestra.

Watson's most lasting accomplishment was a thick booklet published in connection with the anniversary celebration. Called *Colored Charlotte* it heralded the accomplishments of the city's black community in the fifty years since the end of slavery.²⁹ Professional black photographer J.H. Alibury recorded for posterity dozens of the city's black leaders, businesses, homes, and churches. A.M.E. Zion Bishop George Wiley Clinton contributed an introduction that set forth the booklet's aim:

The pamphlet to which these words are to serve as an introduction is designed to set forth in brief form a narrative of some of the achievements of the Colored people who constitute a large percentage of the inhabitants of the city of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County....

Facing, as we do, the second half century of Negro freedom, it is quite befitting that we take note of what has been done along the line of substantial race progress for our immediate encouragement and inspiration. It is no less desirable that the people of other races should know what we are doing in the way of proving ourselves substantial citizens and valuable members of the community in which we live....

As a people we have not done much in the way of publishing the achievements of the race. Other people have been and are still diligent in advertising our shortcomings, and if we would counteract these damaging influences we must be no less zealous in collecting and publishing our best achievements.

The book included paragraphs on the city's black businesses, publications and periodicals, schools social organizations and library. Three pages of statistics for the city and county set forth the number of blacks in professions and trades, gave the number and assessed value of black business buildings and churches, and pointed out that the city had 805 black homeowners. Today *Colored Charlotte* is the most important single resource for the study of the city's black heritage. Watson, not coincidentally, devoted several pages of *Colored Charlotte* to the Washington Heights project, and also made mention of the planned suburb of Douglassville which he intended to develop on the other side of Beatties Ford Road along present-day Oaklawn Avenue. There was a half-page photograph titled "Watson Park, Washington Heights -- The only Park around Charlotte for Colored People. Owned by C.H. Watson." The park was located at the end of the trolley line, for the photo shows a

streetcar turning a curve. Few residents remember it well today, but it apparently was actually on Watson's Douglassville land along Beatties Ford Road in the vicinity of the present Vest Water Works plant. The park featured wooden pavilions for weekend picnickers.

Also to be found in *Colored Charlotte* were photographs of three handsome new Washington Heights bungalows, plus a pair of apparently earlier residences probably dating from the land's farm days. One bungalow was captioned "Owned by Rev. H. Wilson." Reverend Wilson had been among the suburb's first lot purchasers when he acquired 2328 Sanders Street in July of 1913. The other houses were listed as "Residence of Mr. W.H. Lyttle," "Residence of Reverend A.F. Graham," "Residence Of Mr. L. Henry Warren," and "Residence of C.D. Dockry." None of these men are known to have purchased lots in the development, and were likely renting their dwellings.

Though only five houses were pictured in the 1915 book, some forty-three lots had already been sold since June of 1913.³¹ Most of the purchasers were middle-class blacks who bought the land for investment purposes. R.L. Douglas, a teacher at Biddle University, purchased a lot on Beatties Ford Road and another on Sanders Avenue but continued to live in the Seversville area south of the campus. Two other professors, Rev. York Jones and W. Thomas Long, purchased Beatties Ford Road lots in 1913 but remained at their old residences near the campus. Other speculative buyers included bricklayer Walter Hill who owned a lot at 2320 Sanders Street but continued living in Second Ward, grocer W.M. Williams who purchased the corner lot at Beatties Ford and Booker streets but remained in residence at 804 East Stonewall Street, and barber Eli Jewell who owned 2309 Tate Street while still living at 302 West Gold Street near Third Ward.

Because Washington Heights was outside the city limits in its earliest years, and not covered by city directories and insurance maps or served by city water, it is difficult to determine exactly when many of the homes were built or by whom. It is certain that a number of houses were constructed to be rented. A landlord who can be identified with certainty is Lethia Jones, remembered as one of Charlotte's leading black women.³³ She purchased two lots in the 1000 block of Beatties Ford Road in 1916, and in 1918 added another in the 900 block of Beatties Ford and one at 2213 Booker Avenue. In the early thirties when city water reached the area, Lethia Jones Henderson was listed as landlord on the hookup permits, but the city directory listed others as living at three of the addresses.

A number of professional black real estate investors also purchased lots, sometimes building a house for rental income, sometimes holding the land for eventual resale. Among them were J.T. Sanders, I.D.L. Torrence, J.R. Hemphill, and H.L. McCrorey.

Hemphill was a tailor with a shop at 39 North College Street in the heart of downtown. By the 1910s he also was involved in real estate, operating Progress Investment Realty Company. Torrence, a full-time real estate person, and H. L. McCrorey, the president of Biddle University, were also part of Progress Realty at various times. Individually they purchased thirteen lots in Washington Heights over the years, and water permit records indicate that they built a number of houses for rental, including 1304 Beatties Ford Road, 2304 and 2312 Booker Avenue, 2417 Dundeen Street, and 2224 and 2317 Tate Street. McCrorey's rental income evidently allowed him to expand his interests in real estate. He eventually took over development of Watson's Douglassville area along Oaklawn Avenue and today it is a handsome suburb known as McCrorey Heights.

After the initial burst of lot purchases, Washington Heights sales slowed down. In 1919 Freehold Realty sold almost all its remaining lots to another partnership, Biddle Realty, made up of grocer C.W. Todd, T.T. Cole, and auto salesman D. F. Reid.³⁵ The late 1910s and early 1920s were tough times for real estate developers due to a general economic depression combined with shortages of building materials resulting from World War I. By 1921 Biddle Realty had legally dissolved its partnership, and the Washington Heights lands were in the hands of real estate developer Louis B. Vreeland who had guaranteed the Biddle Realty purchase notes.³⁶

Vreeland and a partner named Thomas B. Newell evidently were able to regain sales momentum. In February of 1928 they platted an extension of Pitts Drive and Dundeen Street at the edge of the neighborhood, adding some sixty new lots.³⁷ Not all of the plat was built as proposed, but the west half of Pitts Drive curving to meet Booker Avenue is a legacy of this extension. About the same time, Celia Street was laid out parallel to Dundeen Street just north of the original Washington Heights plat.³⁸ The land was the property of Celia Henderson, a relative of Thad Tate. Tate himself owned the large tract of farmland immediately north of Celia Street, and it is likely that he and his family were the new street's actual developers.

By the time that city directories began listing Washington Heights in 1931, the development had grown to be a reasonably substantial suburban neighborhood. More than 160 families lived along its streets. Perhaps the neighborhood's leading resident was Reverend W.H. Davenport, Editor of the *Star of Zion*, the national newspaper of the A.M.E. Zion religion which was published in Charlotte's Second Ward at the A.M.E. Zion Publishing House. Davenport occupied a large two-story brick residence that stands today at 1223 Beatties Ford Road. Nearby at 1121 was the residence (now gone) of hairdresser Lethia Jones Henderson. Leon Alexander, who owned two grocery stores, lived at 1023 (demolished), and Dr. N.B. Houser resided at 901 (also demolished). Nellie Dykes, teacher supervisor for the black Mecklenburg County

schools for many years, lived just off Beatties Ford Road in a small bungalow at 2219 Celia Street.³⁹

Other important Washington Heights citizens in 1931 included Luther Howard (2415 Booker Avenue) who was bell captain at the elegant new Hotel Charlotte, and Samuel Peterson (2305 Dundeen Street) who was headwaiter at the posh Stonewall Cafe in the downtown Stonewall Hotel. There also were a number of ministers, who commuted from Washington Heights by trolley or auto to parishes in many parts of the city. Among them were Rev. P.R. Washington (1118 Beatties Ford Road) who was pastor of Stonewall Baptist Church in Second Ward, Rev. W.H. Davidson (1316 Beatties Ford Road) who headed [Mt. Carmel Baptist Church](#) in [Biddleville](#), Rev. Boysie B. Moore (2308 Dundeen Street) of St. Paul's Baptist Church in Second Ward, Rev. J.H. Gamble (2304 Booker Avenue) of Moreland Presbyterian Church, and Thomas T. Barber (2501 Dundeen Street) who pastored Washington Heights' own Tabernacle Baptist Church.

A frequent occupation among Washington Heights residents in 1931 was Southern Railway employee. Railroad work was an important calling for blacks all over the United States in the first half of the twentieth century due to union-secured pay scales and job security, as well as the opportunity to travel.⁴⁰ At least half a dozen Southern employees lived in Washington Heights in 1931, a short trolley ride to the yards and offices of the railroad on West Trade Street. Southern employee John Lyles owned one of the neighborhood's few two-story residences, a Four Square type dwelling at 2320 Booker Avenue. Other Southern employees included machinist helper M.L. Dunham who owned 2316 Booker Avenue, porter L.C. Boger listed at 2214 Celia Street, H.V. Allen at 2301 Celia Street, Lewis Hefner at 2216 Dundeen Street, and cashier J.C. Nelson who owned 2215 Sanders Avenue.

Many of Washington Heights' 1931 residents had humbler occupations, such as laborer, maid, driver, or "helper." The majority of the renters seem to have fallen in this category, but evidence indicates that some of these owned their own homes. Chevrolet dealership janitor John Hemphill (no relation to the real estate man J.R. Hemphill), Buick Motor Company helper Gaither Alexander, and a Wilson Motor Company helper owned houses side by side at 2217, 2221, and 2225 Booker Avenue. Walter Banks, a cook, lived at 2225 Dundeen Street, and Huntley West, a porter at B.F. Goodrich, resided at 2229 Dundeen Street. A number of owners were simply listed as "laborer," including William Lindsay of 2228 Sanders Avenue and John Grier of 2216 Tate Street.

Today 1910s and 1920s dwellings still make up the majority of Washington Heights structures. Houses are predominantly single-family, with only a few of the duplexes common in more working-class areas of Charlotte. Most Washington Heights houses

are one story tall and of wood construction in the [Bungalow](#) style. They feature wide-eaved roofs with exposed rafter ends, broad front porches that are now often screened in, and wooden weatherboard or tongue-and-groove "novelty" siding. The structures today look much like those on the more modest streets of 1910s and 1920s, such as Thomas Avenue in Plaza-Midwood or Grove Street in the section of Third Ward that was developed as the Woodlawn suburb.

Along with houses, the 1931 city directory listed three churches. There was a Church of God on Booker Street at Carmel Street, the Tabernacle Baptist Church on Dundeen near Rosebud Street, and the A.M.E. Zion Boulevard Chapel on Sanders Street at the corner of Carmel. None of these early religious structures survive today. The neighborhood also boasted a handful of commercial establishments, including a restaurant, a cleaning and pressing shop, and grocery stores. Almost all of these were on or near Beatties Ford Road and have been replaced by newer buildings since 1931. A single wood-frame grocery remains from the early years in the neighborhood's heart, at 2515 Booker Avenue. Known in 1931 as Jim Patterson's grocery, it continues to be used as a food store today.

The neighborhood was served by the Biddleville Graded School, just over the Seaboard Railway tracks on Beatties Ford Road at Mattoon Street. It was originally a frame four-room structure built in the late 1910s and supervised by teaching principal Mrs. E.R. Anderson.⁴¹ The wooden building was later replaced by a brick school building, later demolished.

Until the late 1930s, high school students (eighth through eleventh grades) from Washington Heights had to travel to Second Ward High School on the other side of downtown, the city's only secondary facility for blacks. Then, in 1938, the city School Board decided to build West Charlotte High School on the old Thad Tate farm at 1415 Beatties Ford Road just beyond Celia Street. According to Superintendent of Schools Harry Harding:

In the building program of 1936-'37 \$75,000.00 for the building, \$5,000.00 for the site, and \$1,305.00 for equipment, had been allotted. The architect was Mr. Charles Connelly.

When the Board was negotiating for the purchase of the site, the Superintendent was directed to approach Thad Tate, for whom all of the citizens of the city had great respect, with a proposal to name the new High School "The Thad Tate High School" in his honor if he would donate the ten acres for the site. He asked for a night to think it over. The next morning he said, "Mr. Harding, I will take the \$5,000.00." Thad Tate was not only a good businessman and a good citizen, but he wanted no honors that he had to buy.⁴²

The \$500 per acre price probably represented something of a donation on Tate's part anyway. The tract included prime Beatties Ford Road frontage worth in the range of \$500 per lot. West Charlotte High has recently moved to a new site, but architect Connelly's original two-story modern, fire-resistive brick building survives as part of the ten-acre campus of Northwest Middle School, and the remainder of the Tate farm has been developed as suburban streets.

One suburban attribute that was missing from Washington Heights by the 1931 city directory was a park. Watson Park was no longer operating, perhaps a victim of the nationwide Great Depression. The Piedmont Traction Company had never developed its proposed Lincoln Park along Pitts Drive in the heart of the neighborhood, though the land did remain vacant and in a state of nature for many years.

Since 1931, approximately seventy residences have been added along the streets of Washington Heights. Most of these date from the late 1930s and early 1940s, but a number are more recent and in some cases replaced earlier dwellings. The late 1930s and 1940s also saw an upsurge of commercial activity along Beatties Ford Road. The wooden store buildings and some residences gave way to new brick and concrete business structures, most two stories tall. Along with groceries, drug stores and beauty salons was a music store, a photography studio, and fraternal society meeting rooms. Though the streetcars stopped running in 1938, the stores remain clustered around the area that was once the terminus of the line.⁴³ Longtime residents continue to refer to the shopping area as "The End."

The most architecturally and historically interesting building in "The End" is a club completed about 1946. It was run by James R. McKee, and it replaced an early house on the site. The club is one of Charlotte's best examples of [Art Moderne](#) architecture. It is finished in white concrete with black horizontal accent stripes and glass-block windows. The small, square-plan second story is centered ziggurat fashion on the larger square-plan first story. An elaborate metal awning with porthole-like openings extends from the front steps to the street. The club became an important gathering place for black political leaders during the 1950s and 1960s. Today the Excelsior Club continues to be a northwest side landmark, and is still popular as a tavern and meeting place.



Excelsior Club

Since the 1940s, two changes have affected the edges of Washington Heights. In the 1970s, the Brookshire Freeway from downtown sliced through the hillside parallel to the existing Seaboard Railway track. The wide cut took several businesses along Beatties Ford Road between Mattoon Street in Biddleville and the Excelsior Club in Washington Heights, as well as the site of the old Biddleville Graded School. The main casualty was Douglas Street, which disappeared, houses and all, and was replaced by a freeway entrance ramp. Also in the 1970s the land originally set aside for Lincoln Park was sold for redevelopment. Today the recent sanctuary of Tabernacle Baptist Church shares the tract with several clusters of two-story apartment structures.

The developments in the Washington Heights area in the post-1940 decades mean that the neighborhood no longer looks exactly as it did when it was Charlotte's only black streetcar suburb. There are, though, abundant reminders of the early years. The names Booker, Tate, Sanders, and Celia continue to celebrate black history. And most of the early bungalows built by Charlotte's black middle class of the 1910s and 1920s may still be seen.

Washington Heights is an important part of Charlotte's history. A symbol of black economic strength, it helped shape the direction of black suburban growth after World War II. University Park, McCrorey Heights, Biddle Heights, Hyde Park, and a number of other predominantly black developments may now be found out Beatties Ford Road. In addition, there is evidence that the Washington Heights development is unique in North Carolina. Real estate developments for, and in some cases by, blacks were not uncommon in the early years of the twentieth century. Most, however, were in center city locations or otherwise within walking distance of employment.

Architectural and historic inventories conducted under the direction of the North Carolina Division of Archives and History have yet to identify another black North Carolina neighborhood built as a streetcar suburb .⁴⁴

Notes

¹ C.H. Watson, ed. *Colored Charlotte: Published in Connection with the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Freedom of the Negro in the County of Mecklenburg and the City of Charlotte, North Carolina* (Charlotte A.M.E. Job Print, c. 1915), p. 6.

² Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office: map book 230, P. 228. For more on the streetcar suburb phenomenon see Sam Bass Warner, Jr., *Streetcar Suburbs: the Process of Growth in Boston 1870-1900* (Cambridge , Massachusetts: Harvard University and the M.I.T. Press, 1962).

³ Dan L. Morrill and Ruth Little-Stokes, "Architectural Analysis: Dilworth: Charlotte's Initial Streetcar Suburb" (Charlotte: Dilworth Community Association, 1978).

⁴ See the section entitled "The Growth of Charlotte: a History" on this website.

⁵ For a statement of this naturalistic philosophy read the chapter on Myers Park in John Nolen, *New Towns for Old: Achievements in Civic Improvement in Some American Small Towns and Neighborhoods* (Boston: Marshall Jones, 1927), pp. 100-110. See also the chapters on city planning, Myers Park, Dilworth, and Plaza-Midwood on this website.

⁶ Mel Scott, *American City Planning Since 1890* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969),pp. 153-161.

⁷ These particular words are from Eastover, but similar phrases are found in almost all deeds. "Eastover Restriction Agreement," undated, in the files of the E.C. Griffith Company, Charlotte.

⁸ Janette Thomas Greenwood, *The Black Experience in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, 1850-1920: a Curriculum Guide for Teachers* (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Properties Commission, 1984), pp. 4-2, 4-3.

⁹ Watson, *Colored Charlotte*..... p. 9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6. For more on the importance of barbers in the black community see Allan H. Spear, *Black Chicago: the Making of a Negro Ghetto 1890-1920* (Chicago:

University of Chicago Press, 1967), p. 112. Oscar Handlin, *Boston's Immigrants: a Study in Acculturation*, rev. ed. (New York: Atheneum, 1974), p. 63.

¹¹ Greenwood, *The Black Experience . . .*, pp. 4-8, 4-9.

¹² Watson, *Colored Charlotte . . .*, p. 6.

¹³ For more on Davis see William H. Huffman, "Dr. George E. Davis House: Survey and Research Report" (Charlotte: Charlotte Mecklenburg Historic Properties Commission, 1984). Both Davis and McCrorey are included in Inez Moore Parker, *The Biddle-Johnson C. Smith Story* (Charlotte: Charlotte Publishing, 1975), pp.8-9, 15-23.

¹⁴ Watson, *Colored Charlotte . . .*, p. 6.

¹⁵ For a more thorough discussion of the "class structure" of black communities see Spear, *Black Chicago . . .*, pp. 23 and passim, or David M. Katzman, *Before the Ghetto: Black Detroit in the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana. University of Illinois Press, 1973), pp. 29-31, 135-174, and passim. Spear notes that "The negro class structure ... does not always correspond with the white class structure. The Negro upper class, for instance, includes professional people, whose white counterparts are usually considered middle class. At the same time, postal clerks, Pullman porters, waiters and other occupational groups that would belong in the upper lower class among whites have traditionally formed the core of the Negro middle class," p. 23n.

¹⁶ Rosa Smith, interview with Thomas W. Hanchett and Janette Thomas Greenwood in Charlotte, March 1984.

¹⁷ Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office: record of corporations book 3, p. 468; record of corporations book 6, p. 345.

¹⁸ See the chapter on Elizabeth on this website.

¹⁹ Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office: map book 230, p. 228.

²⁰ W.S. Alexander had opened Western Heights (present-day Martin, Frazier, Flint, and Wake Streets) originally for whites in 1897. E.C. Griffith opened Wesley Heights (Grandin, Walnut, and parts of Summit streets off West Trade Street) in the 1910s, also for white residents. Later 1923 Roslyn Heights (Roslyn, Lima, Bacon, Turner) and 1947 Smallwood Homes (Seldon, Smallwood, Gregg, and others) opened off Rozelles Ferry Road, also for whites. City directories indicate that most of these streets remained white until the 1950s.

²¹ The trolley tracks were extended along West Trade Street in stages, stopping originally at the intersection of Tuckaseegee Road, then near Biddle University, and later along Beatties Ford Road to the Oaklawn intersection. One such extension, probably the one to the campus, opened April 25, 1903. Dan L. Morrill and Nancy Thomas, "Biddleville," in the New South Neighborhoods brochure series (Charlotte: Charlotte Mecklenburg Historic Properties Commission, 1981).

²² Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office: map book 230, p. 228.

²³ Hereafter in this essay, all streets will be called by their 1984 names, regardless of when they received those appellations.

²⁴ Almost every deed specifies that no easement is given to the lands known as Lincoln Park, owned by the Piedmont Traction Company. One particular lot was noted as bordering both Booker Street and Lincoln Park: Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office: deed book 358, p. 598.

²⁵ Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office: Deed Book 305, P. 686; Deed Book 321, pp. 93, 419, 571. These transactions took place in late 1913 and early 1914. Minimum building cost was \$1,200.

²⁶ For instance see Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office: deed book 312, pp. 272, 299, 331.

²⁷ *Charlotte Observer*. June 22, 1910. The effort was evidently somewhat successful, for Colored Charlotte... included a photograph of an old farmhouse with the caption, "North Carolina Reform Manual Training School for Colored Youth. Three Miles From Charlotte on the Nation's Ford Road. Opens February 1, 1915...." Charlotte blacks did not stop pressing for construction of a more adequate facility, however, and in the 1920s Thad Tate was able to convince Governor Cameron Morrison to open the Morrison Training School at Hoffman, North Carolina. The Morrison School continues in use in the 1980s, with one of its earliest brick buildings named in honor of Tate.

²⁸ Watson, *Colored Charlotte . . .*, passim. A program of the day's events and a list of the organizers is included near the end of the book.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

³¹ Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office: grantor books, listings for Freehold Realty.

³² Ibid.

³³ Mabel Hunt, interview with Wanda Hendricks in Charlotte, North Carolina, August 1984. Rosabell Davis, interview with Wanda Hendricks in Charlotte, North Carolina, August 1984. Hunt is a niece of Jones and is said to have a book with sections on both Thad Tate and Lethia Jones. Notes from these interviews are in the files of the Charlotte Mecklenburg Historic Properties Commission.

³⁴ An almost complete collection of Charlotte city directories is in the collection of the Carolina Room of the Charlotte Public Library. All biographical information in this essay, except where noted, is drawn from the directories.

³⁵ Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office: deed book 407, pp. 52, 54; record of corporations book 5, p. 423.

³⁶ Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office: record of corporations book 6, p. 440.

³⁷ Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office: map book 3, p. 391.

³⁸ Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office: map book 3, p. 352.

³⁹ Dykes was Jeanes Teacher for Mecklenburg County, funded by the Jeanes Foundation. Many southern counties had a Jeanes teacher in the 1920s and 1930s working in black schools: "well-prepared Negro teachers, mostly women, ...working under the direction of the county superintendents, ...to help and encourage the rural teachers; to introduce into small country schools simple home industries; to give lessons on sanitation, cleanliness, etc.; to promote improvement of school houses and school grounds; and to organize clubs for the betterment of the school and neighborhood.... In 311 counties in fourteen states ... these Jeanes teachers are veritable missionaries of goodwill and cooperation." N.C. Newbold, "Common Schools for Negroes in the South," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, November, 1928, p. 12.

⁴⁰ John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: a History of Negro Americans, 5th ed.* (New York. Alired A. Knopf, 1980), p. 358. Such gains were not secured without a struggle against racial barriers in the union movement itself.

⁴¹ Harry P. Harding, "The Charlotte City Schools" (Charlotte: typescript by the Charlotte Mecklenburg School System, 1966), p. 50.

⁴² Ibid., P. 134. One of Tate's daughters, retired school teacher Aurelia Tate Henderson, lives at 1000 Clifton Street in Charlotte in 1984.

⁴³ Dan L. Morrill, "[Myers Park Streetcar Waiting Stations: Survey and Research Report](#)" (Charlotte: Charlotte Mecklenburg Historic Properties Commission, 1980).

⁴⁴ Gwynne Stephens Taylor, *From Frontier to Factory: an Architectural History of Forsyth County* (Winston-Salem: Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Historic Properties Commission, 1981). Taylor did find a small area called Columbia Heights around black Winston-Salem State University, but it seems not to have had streetcar connections and housed mainly professors at the college. Linda Harris, ed. *Early Raleigh Neighborhoods and Buildings* (Raleigh: Raleigh City Council, 1983. Harris includes a chapter by Charlotte Vestal Brown on Moore Square, a nineteenth century center city area for blacks. David R. Black, *Historic Architectural Resources of Downtown Asheville North Carolina*(Asheville: City of Asheville, 1979. Claudia Roberts Brown, *The Durham Architectural and Historic Inventory* (Durham: City Of Durham , 1982). Ruth Little-Stokes, *An Inventory of Historic Architecture: Greensboro, North Carolina*(Greensboro: City of Greensboro, 1976).

Significant Sites in the Washington Heights Neighborhood

- 921 Beatties Ford Road -- The Excelsior Club (1940s)
- 1223 Beatties Ford Road -- Rev. W. H. Davenport House (1920s)
- 2328 Sanders Street -- Rev. H. Wilson House (1914c)

THE EXCELSIOR CLUB (1940s)
921 Beatties Ford Road



Created about 1946, the Excelsior Club is one of the most architecturally and historically important structures in this sector of Charlotte. It is an excellent example of the Art Moderne style of architecture, rare in this city. And it has had a leading place in black social and political life here for some four decades.

Beatties Ford Road has been a major Charlotte thoroughfare since colonial days. In the first years of the twentieth century it became, as well, the principal street of the black suburb of Washington Heights, lined with handsome two-story homes. In the late 1930s and 1940s many of the houses began to be replaced by stores and restaurants. It was during this period that the Excelsior Club opened for business, evidently in a radically remodeled two-story house. Today the white stucco exterior gives no hint of its pre-1940s origins. In massing, the Club is composed of a small, square-plan second story that is centered ziggurat-fashion on a larger square-plan first story. Black horizontal accents and glass-block windows give the structure a strong modernistic air, as does the elaborate metal entrance awning with its porthole-like openings which extends from the front steps to the street.

Today the Excelsior Club is perhaps the oldest stylish social gathering place in Charlotte's black community. No earlier night spots are known to exist. The Club has also long been a gathering place for local black political leaders, and was an important meeting spot during the 1950s and 1960s as blacks worked to regain their political rights lost at the turn of the century. The Excelsior Club's long-time owner James McKee retired in 1984.

REV. W.H. DAVENPORT HOUSE (1920s)
1223 Beatties Ford Road

This two-story brick dwelling is the most imposing residence to be seen today in Washington Heights. The neighborhood was created in the 1910s as Charlotte's only black "streetcar suburb," and it soon filled up with middle-class and few upper-class black families. Heads of household rode the Beatties Ford Road streetcar into town each day to jobs as ministers, teachers, barbers, or railroad employees. Sidestreets filled up with one-story frame bungalows while the main avenue, Beatties Ford Road, became lined with two-story houses of such leading citizens as physician N.B. Houser or Leon Alexander, proprietor of two grocery stores. Perhaps the most important resident in those early years was Reverend W.H. Davenport. He was Editor of the Star of Zion, and thus one of the nationally-ranked officials of the A.M.E. Zion Church. The Star of Zion was the religion's official newspaper, and also a much-read source of news on black secular life in this area, for it often carried stories about achievements of blacks in the region around Charlotte. Today the old A.M.E. Zion Publishing House in Second Ward is gone, as are the homes of the early editors. The W.H. Davenport House is a vital reminder of this important chapter in Charlotte's history.

The two-story red-brick residence is a good example of conservative 1920s architecture. Its hip-roof and square outlines mark it as an example of the Four Square style. Its plain trimmings are a reflection of a national revolt against the over-elaborate Victorian ornament of the 1890s. Many conservative, efficiency-minded Charlotteans chose this style for their homes in the 1910s and 1920s, including music-store founder Charles Parker (901 Central Avenue) and Iveys Department Store chief executive David Ovens (825 Ardsley Road).

REV. H. WILSON HOUSE (circa 1914)
2328 Sanders Street

This house is the earliest-known structure standing in Washington Heights, Charlotte's first black suburb. Little is known about its owner, Reverend H. Wilson, except that he was among the first lot purchasers after Freehold Realty platted the new neighborhood June 10, 1913. On July 5th of that year Wilson signed a deed for this lot at a cost of \$300. Two years later C. H. Watson, real estate salesman for the neighborhood, published a booklet entitled Colored Charlotte which showed pictures of the handful of houses erected up to that time. Among them was a one-story frame bungalow with the caption, "Owned by Rev. H. Wilson."

Since Wilson only bought one lot in Washington Heights, and since plat map evidence confirms that it was 2328 Sanders Street, it is probable that the existing structure is indeed Wilson's original dwelling despite some variation between the present house and the early photograph. The house is a typical 1910s one-story frame bungalow. It features a gable roof and a gabled front dormer which has exposed rafters in its eaves. A pair of brick interior chimneys with corbelled caps pierce the ridgeline of the main

roof, and there is a simpler exterior chimney on the small south side addition. The most prominent feature of the house is its wide front porch which runs the length of the main facade. It has a shed roof with exposed eave rafters supported by square tapered wooden columns on brick posts, a popular motif in the era.