



## Former Charlotte Post Office



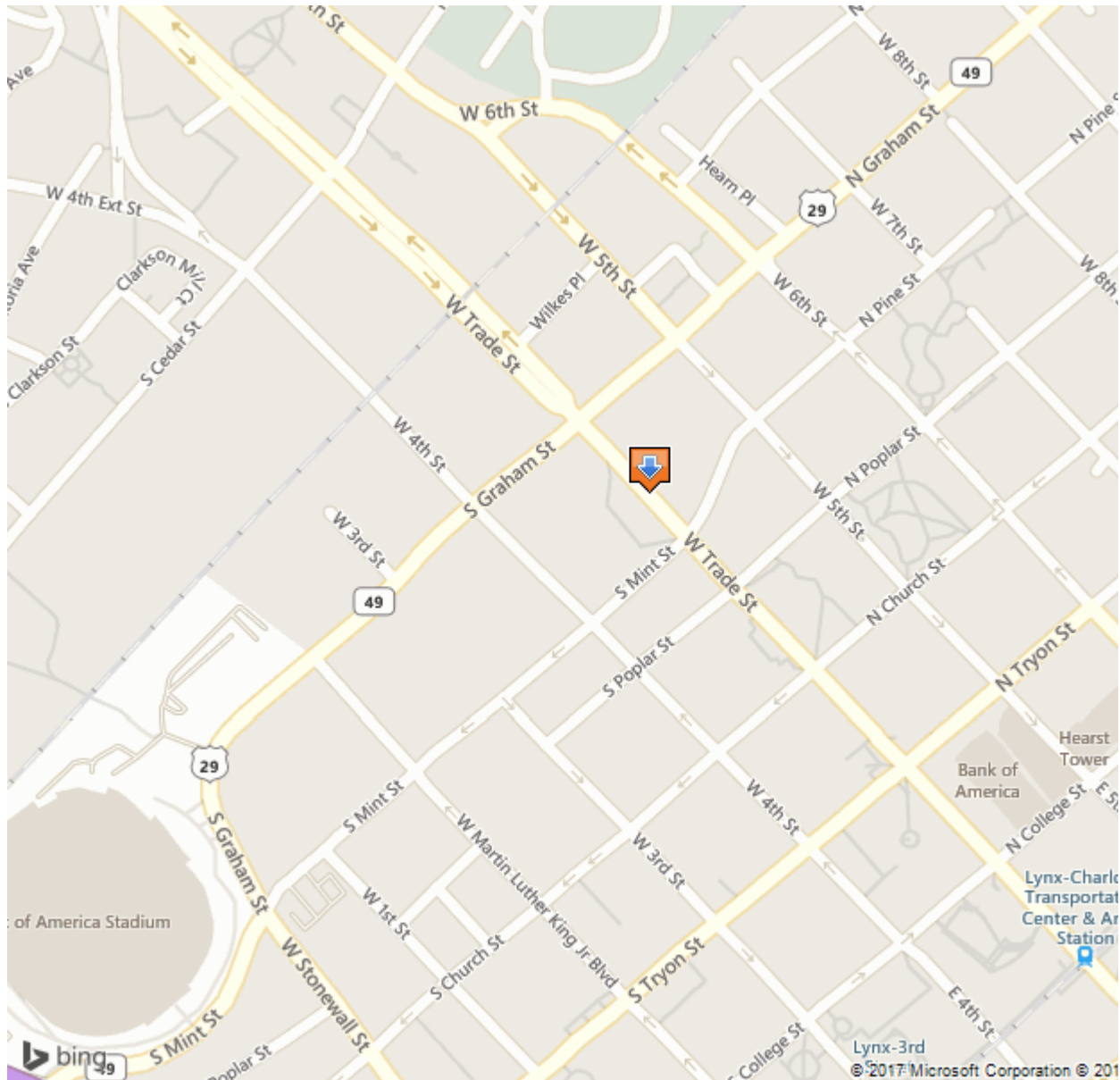
*This report was written on April 1, 2000*

**1. Name and location of the property:** The property known as the Former Charlotte Post Office is located at 401 West Trade Street in Charlotte, North Carolina.

**2. Name, address, and telephone number of the present owner of the property:** The owner is:  
United States of America

**3. Representative photographs of the property:** This report contains exterior photographs of the property.

**4. Maps depicting the location of the property:** This report contains a map depicting the location of the property.



**5. Current deed book reference:** No deed reference is given. The Tax Parcel Number of the property is 073-113-04.

**6. A brief historical description of the property:** This report contains a historical sketch of the property prepared by Emily D. Ramsey.

**7. A brief architectural description of the property:** This report contains an architectural description of the property prepared by Emily D. Ramsey.

**8. Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets criteria for designation set forth in N.C.G.S. 160A-400.5:**

Special significance in terms of history, architecture, and cultural importance, The Commission judges that the property known as the Former Charlotte Post Office does possess special significance in terms of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations:

The Former Charlotte Post Office was, upon its extension in 1934, the largest Federal building in North Carolina and served as the city's main postal facility until 1982;

The Former Charlotte Post Office is a reflection of the business and industrial boom of the early 1900s, when Charlotte took its place as the Carolinas' leading financial, commercial, and manufacturing center, and the tremendous expansion project (begun in 1932) served as a focal point of hope for Charlotte citizens in the midst of the Great Depression;

The Former Charlotte Post Office, designed by James A. Wetmore, Acting and Supervising Architect for U.S. Government Buildings, is an excellent example of the Neoclassical Revival style, a popular choice for major center city buildings during the first half of the twentieth century.

Integrity of design, workmanship, materials, feeling, and association: The Commission contends that the architectural description by Emily D. Ramsey demonstrates that the Former Charlotte Post Office meets this criterion.

**9. Ad Valorem Tax Appraisal:** The current Ad Valorem tax appraisal for the improvements is \$4,522,210. The current Ad Valorem tax appraisal for the 2.955 acres of land is \$6,435,000. The property is zoned UMUD.

**10. Date of Preparation of this Report:** April 1, 2000

**11. Prepared by:** Emily D. Ramsey  
745 Georgia Trail  
Lincolnton, NC 28092

## Statement of Significance

### Summary Paragraph

The Former Charlotte Post Office, erected in 1917 and expanded in 1934, is a structure that possesses local historic significance as a reflection of Charlotte's maturation and expansion in the late "New South " era of the early 1900s, and as a significant player in the workings of burgeoning industries in and around Charlotte. Charlotte, like many southern cities, had followed the call of New South pioneers like D. A. Tompkins to "Bring the Mills to the Cotton." Between the years 1881 and 1913, 16 major [cotton mills](#) began operations in the city, and by the early 1900s, Mecklenburg County ranked second only to Gaston County in textile production in the state. From this solid manufacturing base, Charlotte businessmen and investors began

expanding into banking, distribution, and wholesale enterprises, among other ventures. Charlotte's postal operations were central to the smooth and efficient operation of this complicated web of businesses and industries, and the construction and expansion of the Charlotte Post Office on West Trade Street reflected the city's rapid growth during the 1910s and through the 1920s. Charlotte's central business district in particular served as a showplace for Charlotte's tremendous financial growth. When the Charlotte Post Office's substantial expansion project was completed in 1934, the facility became the largest Federal building in the Carolinas and a tangible symbol of Charlotte's new status. To citizens struggling with the effects of a worldwide Depression, the construction of the Charlotte Post Office provided not only pride in their city, but also hope for financial recovery.

Despite these noble distinctions, the Charlotte Post Office blended seamlessly into Charlotte's center city landscape. Its clean, Neoclassical design echoed the fundamentally conservative architecture of other major center city structures of the period, including the [Johnston Building](#), the [Charlotte National Bank](#), the First National Bank, and [Hotel Charlotte](#). Designed by James A. Wetmore, "Acting and Supervising Architect for U.S. Government Buildings," the Charlotte Post Office is an especially fine example of the popular Neoclassical Revival style. The graceful elegance of the exterior, which features Corinthian columns and pilasters, a simple pedimented portico, and an ornate entablature, is echoed in the interior's marble wainscoting, baseboards, and columns, solid oak doors, extravagant plaster wall moldings, and high ceilings.

### *Historical Overview*

The history of the Charlotte Post Office and its progress is a reflection of the development and maturation of the city itself, from a small town centered at the crossing of Trade Street and Tryon Street to the largest city in North Carolina. Charlotte received its first "Postoffice department" on October 1, 1794, with Edward Wayne appointed as the first postmaster. The arrival of the railroad in 1852 was a pivotal moment not only for Charlotte trade and industry but also for the postal service, which had, until then, relied almost exclusively on stagecoaches to deliver mail. Tony L. Crumbley writes, "As railroads branched out in every direction from Charlotte during the latter half of the [nineteenth] century, the need for stage coaches disappeared." With four railroads converging in the city by the eve of the Civil War, stage routes were phased out in favor of much faster and more efficient rail routes. These advancements, and Charlotte's success as a cotton trading and distribution center after the Civil War, provided the impetus for construction in Charlotte of the first building used exclusively as a Post Office. Prior to the completion of the brick Victorian structure, the Post Office was located in various rented spaces. In 1891, the Charlotte Post Office moved to the prominent corner of Trade Street and Mint Street, alongside a Charlotte landmark - the first [branch of the U.S. Mint](#), built in 1836.

Although the Post Office would stay at this location for almost a century, Charlotte's continuing growth and development assured that the facilities themselves would change and expand. The erection of the Former Charlotte Post Office in 1917 on the corner of West Trade and Mint Street and its expansion in 1934 are intimately connected to the phenomenal economic growth that occurred in Charlotte during the early twentieth century. Charlotte, like many southern

cities, had heard the call of New South pioneers like D. A. Tompkins in the late 1800s to "Bring the Mills to the Cotton." Between the years 1881 and 1913, 16 major cotton mills began operations in the city, and by the early 1900s, Mecklenburg County ranked second only to Gaston County in textile production in the state. Charlotte soon emerged as the center of a large and profitable textile region that covered North Carolina and South Carolina as well as large parts of Tennessee and Georgia. The city's central location, its ever-expanding web of railroads and paved highways, and the enormous economic success of textiles in the region made Charlotte an attractive location for a diverse array of new businesses and manufacturers. Consequently, as historian Thomas Hanchett points out, "with the booming economic growth came tremendous physical expansion." The population of the city grew rapidly between 1900 and 1910, from 18,091 to 34,014 people - an 82 percent increase in just ten years. The city was nearing "the crest of the wave" in terms of its textile production and prosperity, and confident Charlotte businessmen and investors began expanding into the new areas of banking, distribution, and wholesale.

Such tremendous and rapid growth quickly overloaded Charlotte's existing postal service, which had become a sizeable and complex industry unto itself. As early as 1899, the increased volume of mail handled by the Charlotte Post Office had necessitated the purchase of Charlotte's first automated canceling machine, the Hampden Type Automatic. At a time when the majority of private and business correspondence was conducted through the mail, the Charlotte Post Office served as an important center of communication. Now, in addition to providing for the needs of private citizens and small businesses, the Post Office was responsible for a large and intricate web of correspondence among nationally-known businesses and industries operating in the city.

Although the existing structure had provided ample space for postal facilities when it was completed in 1891, by 1915 the city's new status as a major regional business and industrial center demanded a much larger building. City officials quickly drew up plans for a new Federal Building to replace the building on West Trade and Mint Streets. Prominent Charlottean Edward Dilworth Latta stepped in to solve the problem of mail delivery during the razing of the old Post Office and the construction of the new building in its place. Latta, *The Charlotte Observer* reported, "came through by building the Latonia building at the corner of Second Street and South Tryon . . . and turning it over to the Post Office" for use as its temporary facility. In 1915, the brick Victorian structure came tumbling down, and work began on the new building.

Constructing the formal limestone structure proved a challenge. "It was the only big construction job going on back then," postal worker S. D. Lambeth (interviewed by Portor Munn of *The Charlotte Observer* in 1961), recalled. "Big stuff was few and far between." Contractors ran a spur track from the Southern Railroad to get the heavy and awkward materials to the construction site. The work was slow and laborious, but it provided "a satisfying show day after day" for crowds of curious citizens. In 1918, the new building, complete with Post Office facilities and a district courthouse, was formally dedicated and opened to the public.

It was not long, however, before the Post Office was again in need of more space. The 1920s were the heyday for the Charlotte textile industry and its related businesses, and more than ever the city was proving to be a major financial force in the two Carolinas. A 1927 City Directory

proclaimed that "practically all the large [textile] companies in the United States and England handled their entire business in the South through Charlotte offices and plants." This economic growth was reflected by physical growth - in 1928 the city limits expanded to include almost twenty square miles. The Charlotte Post Office met the increasing demand by expanding its services. On April 1, 1930, "airmail service was begun from what is now Charlotte Douglas International Airport." Despite the effects of the Great Depression, by the early 1930s the Charlotte Post Office, still in many ways the city's communication center, needed to expand.

Although the architects of the existing building had taken into account the possibility of future additions by creating a design that could be expanded, they did not foresee the public outcry that would erupt when tentative plans for the Post Office's expansion were revealed. Government architect James A. Wetmore insisted that in order for the Charlotte Post Office to expand, the former U.S. Mint building would have to be removed. The proposal was completely unacceptable to many Charlotte citizens, who viewed the former Mint as a symbol of Charlotte's national importance even before the Civil War. After months of tense negotiations, the two parties reached a compromise of sorts. The former Mint building was disassembled and reconstructed at its present site in Eastover, where it was converted into the state's first art museum.

Wetmore's final plans called for a huge expansion of the Post Office building along West Trade Street, at an estimated cost of \$525,000. The Ralph Sollitt and Sons Construction Company of South Bend, Indiana was awarded the building contract. The addition, which tripled the size of the Charlotte Post Office and provided a large courtroom at the center of the building, was completed in 1934. With its 273-foot-long West Trade Street facade, it became the largest Federal Building in the two Carolinas. On November 21, 1934, Postmaster General James A. Farley arrived in Charlotte to dedicate the structure. Farley stressed the importance of the Charlotte Post Office building to the city, and the importance of the Post Office as an aid to businesses in a time of great economic hardship:

This building typifies the power and glory of our nation and marks the industrial and social progress of your city. The growth of the postal service keeps pace with the growth of the businesses of the United States. The postal service is the aid of commerce and industry, and necessary to their well-being.

The Former Charlotte Post Office building at 401 West Trade Street housed the city's main postal facility until 1982, when a new building was built at the corner of Sixth and McDowell Streets. The building, renamed the Charles R. Jonas Federal Building and Courthouse in 1982, is now operated as a Federal courthouse and government office building.

### *Architectural Description*

The great prosperity and growth of the early twentieth century affected Charlotte architecture as much as Charlotte industry. "The 1900s and 1910s," Thomas Hanchett states, "saw a revolution in architectural taste" in Charlotte and across the United States. The Victorian aesthetic, with its



"complex decoration, eclectic combinations, colors, shapes, and historical motifs," was overshadowed by a resurgence in the clean lines and simple forms of the Colonial Revival, the Bungalow, and the Neoclassical Revival styles. Professional architects brought their firms to Charlotte for the first time, attracted by the city's wealth and eagerness to build in the new styles. The Neoclassical Revival style became particularly popular for government, commercial and institutional buildings. It provided a clean break from the lighthearted Victorian style, while still conforming to the fundamentally conservative "political, social, and economic thinking of Charlotte's business elite."

Charlotte's central business district, expanding from the intersection of Trade and Tryon Streets, became a showplace for the city's newfound prosperity. By the time the Charlotte Post Office building was expanded in 1934, Revival-style skyscrapers (such as the [Independence Building](#), the Johnston Building, and the Professional Building), banks (including the First National Bank and the Charlotte National Bank), and public buildings ( Louis Asbury's County Courthouse and [C.C. Hook's City Hall](#) among them) had significantly altered the center city landscape. Even retail stores like Efirds, Iveys, and Belks soon followed the trend with their center city store buildings. Tryon Street in particular became a corridor made up mostly of columned or pilastered buildings with off-white facades, "square-cut parapet tops and chaste Style stone trim." The Former Charlotte Post Office, designed by Acting Supervising Architect for U. S. Government Buildings James A. Wetmore, fit well into Charlotte's central business district.

The Former Charlotte Post Office is a large, steel-frame, rectangular structure, 23 bays wide and 11 bays deep and consisting of two levels and a basement. The limestone building sits on the corner of West Trade and Mint Streets, facing West Trade Street. A large garden walkway, accented with mature trees and shrubbery, extends to the front of the site. At the corner of Mint Street and West Fourth Street stands a monument dedicated to First Lieutenant William Ewen Shipp, which originally sat in front of the U.S. Mint building. The obelisk-shaped monument is inscribed with a passage that reads:

"Amongst a grove the very straightest plant  
William Ewen Shipp First Lieutenant  
Tenth Cavalry U. S. Army  
Born: August 23, 1861  
Killed at San Juan, battle of Santiago: July 1, 1898."

The facade of the Post Office building is broken up into three main sections, each flanked by plain bays. The two end bays each contain deeply recessed niches. The central section of the facade consists of a projecting portico of [Corinthian](#) columns and a simple pediment. The two end sections are finished with colonnades of Corinthian columns. An entablature decorated with a simple rosette motif runs the full length of the facade. The sides of the building are much simpler, each detailed with Corinthian pilasters extending from the base of the first level to the entablature that surmounts the building.

The interior contains two spaces of particular significance in their detailing: the lobby and the courtroom. Both spaces contain lavish materials common in elaborate building projects of this period. The courtroom is paneled in oak. The entryways are accented with fluted pilasters and

entablatures. A surrounding entablature is detailed with [triglyphs](#). The entry lobby to the courtroom contains elegant "carved marble door surrounds and marble coupled pilasters." The L-shaped lobby is finished with rich marble moldings, marble columns, and marble pilasters. Throughout the building, such details as the solid oak doors, terrazzo floors, delicate brass balustrades, and plaster wall moldings reflect careful craftsmanship and attention to detail.

The construction of the Former Charlotte Post Office in 1917 and its subsequent expansion in 1934 is a tangible reminder of the growth of Charlotte itself. From its humble beginnings in taverns and rented spaces to its occupation of the largest Federal Building in the Carolinas, the Charlotte Post Office developed along with the city, and reflects its progress and maturation during the first half of the twentieth century.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Thomas W. Hanchett, "[Charlotte's Textile Heritage: An Introduction](#)" (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission), [www.cmhpf.org](http://www.cmhpf.org) .

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Thomas W. Hanchett, "[Charlotte Architecture: Design Through Time](#)" (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission), [www.cmhpf.org](http://www.cmhpf.org) .

<sup>3</sup> Christopher R. Sherry, "National Register Nomination on the Charles R. Jonas Federal Building" (North Carolina Division of Archives and History, 1977) p.4.

<sup>4</sup> *Charlotte Observer*, "Romantic History of Postal Service Outlined" (November 25, 1934), p.1.

<sup>4</sup> Tony L. Crumbley, "The Postal History of Charlotte, North Carolina" (North Carolina Postal History Society Newsletter, November 1984) p. 2. Hanchett, "The Growth of Charlotte."

<sup>5</sup> Crumbley, p.2.

<sup>6</sup> Dr. Thomas W. Hanchett, "[Charlotte's Textile Heritage: An Introduction](#)" (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission), [www.cmhpf.org](http://www.cmhpf.org) .

<sup>7</sup> Dr. Thomas W. Hanchett, "The Growth of Charlotte, A History" (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Properties Commission).

<sup>8</sup> Miller's Official Charlotte, N.C., City Directory (Asheville: The Miller Press, 1929).

<sup>9</sup> Crumbley, p.2.

<sup>10</sup> *Charlotte Observer*, "City Was Thrilled By New Post Office," September 4, 1961, p.1.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.



<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Miller's Official Charlotte, N.C., City Directory (Asheville: The Miller Press, 1929).

<sup>14</sup> Hanchett, "The Growth of Charlotte: A History."

<sup>15</sup> Crumbley, p.2.

<sup>16</sup> *Charlotte News*, "New Post Office Will Be Large Structure," January 24, 1932.

<sup>17</sup> *Charlotte News*, "Farley Dedicates Federal Building: Citizens Fay Him Honor," November 21, 1934, p.8.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p.8.

<sup>19</sup> Hanchett, "[Design Through Time](http://www.cmhpf.org)," www.cmhpf.org .

<sup>20</sup> Dr. Dan L. Morrill, "[Survey and Research Report for the Textile Mill Supply Company Building](#)" (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, 1998), p.5.

<sup>21</sup> Hanchett, "Design Through Time," www.cmhpf.org .

<sup>22</sup> Sherry, p.2-5.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p.2.