



SURVEY AND RESEARCH REPORT

ON

The Arthur S. Grier House



1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the Arthur S. Grier House is located at 421 Montrose St., Charlotte, North Carolina.

2. Name and address of the present owner of the property: The present owner of the property is:

Arthur E. Grier and the Arthur Grier Jr. Trust
2718 Monroe Road
Charlotte, NC 28205

3. Representative photographs of the property: This report contains representative 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 and tax parcel information for the property: The tax parcel number of the property is #15701517

6. UTM coordinate: 17 517428 E 3895451 N

7. A brief historical sketch of the property: This report contains a brief historical sketch of the property.

8. A brief architectural description of the property: This report contains a brief architectural description of the property.

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

a. Special significance in terms of its history, architecture, and/or cultural importance: The Commission judges that the property known

as the Arthur S. Grier House does possess special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations:

- 1) The Arthur S. Grier House is significant for its association with Arthur S. Grier, one of Mecklenburg County's most successful and influential African American businessmen during the era of segregation.
- 2) The Arthur S. Grier House is significant as one of the few surviving substantial early 20th century homes built by an African American in Mecklenburg County. Many of the historic homes of the Black Community's leaders and business professionals were lost with the destruction of the Brooklyn Neighborhood.
- 3) The Arthur S. Grier House is significant as a large, well-preserved example of an eclectic style home featuring elements of the Craftsman and Colonial Revival Styles.

b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling and/or association: The Commission contends that the physical and architectural description which is included in this report demonstrates that the Arthur S. Grier House meets this criterion.

10. Ad Valorem tax appraisal: The Commission is aware that designation would allow the owner to apply for an automatic deferral of 50% of the Ad Valorem taxes on all or any portion of the property which becomes a designated "historic landmark." The current total appraised value of the improvements is \$97,500. The current appraised value of the lot is \$18,000. The current total value is \$115,500.

Date of preparation of this report: August 2003

Prepared by: Stewart Gray and Dr. Paula M. Stathakis

Historical Overview



Arthur S. Grier

Arthur Samuel Grier was born in 1887 on the Sarah Grier Farm on Providence Road. His origins were humble; Grier grew up as a farm laborer and only had a third grade education. In spite of these limitations, he enjoyed an immensely successful life and career. Grier established himself as a civic leader in the African American Community as well as in the city community at large as a businessman, and as the developer of one of the first suburban neighborhoods for blacks.[\[1\]](#)

Grier's achievements are all the more impressive when viewed in the racial and social context of early twentieth century Mecklenburg. Grier and other African American businessmen who established themselves during this period encountered an array of complex obstacles. For example, Jim Crow culture stifled entrepreneurial growth, since most black shopkeepers and service providers could only cater to a black clientele. Segregation also limited employment opportunities for African Americans. It was difficult for an aspiring African American to refine a public image that would satisfy whites; blacks that appeared to have too much ambition were considered "uppity," and blacks that seemed to have no ambition were labeled "shiftless." Perhaps the ideal African American, in the mind of local whites, was described in civic promotional literature published by The Greater Charlotte Club in 1913. This

pamphlet praised the friendly and co-operative relationship that existed between Mecklenburg's white and African American communities and concluded by saying that "*the Negro is welcomed in the pursuits to which he is best adapted*, [italics not original] and there is nothing of the race prejudice felt elsewhere and he is given every opportunity to better his own condition and that of his children."^[2]

African Americans in the south got along best when they knew their place and they stayed in it. The majority of African-Americans in Charlotte worked as common laborers or in the service sector. A minority were merchants or small business owners, and an even smaller minority was in the professional class. Clergymen dominated in the black professional and upper class. In 1911, there were two attorneys, fourteen barbers, one dentist, five physicians, five nurses, two funeral directors, and sixty-seven clergy men, in addition to proprietors of billiard rooms, drug stores, eating houses, as well as several other types of businesses listed in the Charlotte City Directory.^[3] With the exception of the professional classes, most blacks in Charlotte had no education, no skilled training, and no political voice.

By the early twentieth century, thanks to vagaries of segregation laws and customs, the African American business community was fairly well self-contained. Black businesses were sequestered in a separate location from the larger white district. If African Americans wished to eat inside a restaurant, they had to patronize a black-owned establishment; if they required legal, financial, or medical services; they sought the services of black professionals. There were a few businesses that were used by clients of both races, such as barbershops and shoe repair shops; but generally, in the urban setting, the white and black worlds drifted apart. These economic and occupational trends continued well into the first half of the twentieth century. By 1940, 88.8% of the non-white employed workers fourteen and older in the city of Charlotte were concentrated in the following categories: operative, domestic worker, service, and non-farm labor. By contrast, 77.6% of white employed workers fourteen and older in Charlotte were concentrated in the categories of professional, managerial, clerical sales and operatives.^[4] These statistics demonstrate the significance of Grier's achievements during his lifetime.

His first wage-paying employment was with the Cole Manufacturing Company. Grier acquired his first piece of real estate, a house in the Cherry neighborhood, with the earnings from this job. By 1911, he branched out as an entrepreneur opening Grier's Grocery on Monroe Road.^[5] He built a large and stylish home across the street from the store in 1922. This two-story eclectic style home with craftsman details was as impressive as any African American middle or upper class home to be found in the Brooklyn neighborhood in the city's Second Ward.

Grier's grocery was one of the few in the area outlying the city limits on Monroe Road and subsequently served the surrounding neighborhoods of Elizabeth, Chantilly, and Elizabeth Acres, later known as Griertown and now known as Grier Heights.^[6] Former Charlotte City Council member Fred Alexander had fond memories of Grier's Grocery: "his little country store on Monroe Road was one of the closest places to buy firecrackers." Grier could sell these since his store was just beyond the city limits and not subject to the laws prohibiting the sale of fireworks.^[7]

By the early 1930s, Grier was ready to move on to other endeavors. In 1931 he opened the Grier-Thompson Funeral Home in First Ward at 701 East First Street. Former Charlotte Mayor Ben Douglas, who also owned a funeral home, took credit for encouraging Grier to learn the mortuary business. Grier left his brother Leroy in charge of the grocery store as he devoted more of his time to the funeral home. His son, Arthur Eugene, became a partner in the funeral home. Leroy Grier eventually joined his brother and nephew in the business. Arthur Eugene was the embalmer; Arthur Samuel was the secretary and financial officer; and Leroy was president.^[8]



Undated photograph taken at undertakers convention held at Charlotte area school.

Arthur S. Grier identified by red dot

By the late 1940s, Grier also saw development possibilities on the land behind his home, and he branched out as a realtor and developer of suburban housing for African Americans. Grier's impulses in this endeavor were probably a mix of the pursuit of a good business opportunity and a solution to the prevalence of the substandard housing that was all too common in African American neighborhoods. As Grier became more

active in civic affairs in the post War period, slum clearance and improved living conditions were the integral social and economic issues in his agenda.

The community that became Grier Heights was not planned as a suburban neighborhood. According to neighborhood history, former slaves organized the community. Sam Billings was the first recorded black landowner; he purchased fifty acres for \$913.50 in 1892, and another substantial parcel in 1893 for \$1057. Grier Heights was originally described as a community of one square mile with 50 families, many of them craftsmen. The neighborhood, located approximately two miles from the city center, was once called Elizabeth Acres, as shown in Map 71 in Map Book 230, and was part of a parcel formerly belonging to Laura B. Davidson.^[9] The older residential core of the neighborhood was built along Skyland Avenue and Orange Street and the occupations of the residents of these streets ranged from skilled to unskilled jobs. Janitors, domestics, laundresses, and laborers lived among bricklayers, plasterers, and mechanics.^[10] Grier Heights had two churches, and a school; Billingsville Elementary School built in 1927, on land donated by Sam Billings.^[11]

As the community grew, it became commonly known as Griertown, after Arthur Samuel Grier who was one of the largest landowners. Grier's impressive home and store anchored the northwestern edge of the neighborhood, and it was this section of the community that Grier developed. He formed Grier Development Company in 1949, and built approximately 30 houses on Fannie Circle, Montrose Drive and Gene Avenue.^[12]

Grier Development Company eventually built approximately one hundred homes in the Grier Heights Community. Many of the people who bought homes in Grier Heights in this period were veterans who used G.I. Bill financing.^[13]

By the early 1950s, Grier turned his attention to politics. Along with Kelly Alexander, he ran for a seat on the City Council and although he was unsuccessful, he was strongly supported by both white and black local leaders. The *Charlotte Observer* endorsed him saying, "...this outstanding Negro leader has exhibited the highest qualities of citizenship in useful and exceptional service to his community, not merely in a racial sense, but as a man of good will and consecrated impulse. He is a humble man, but his achievements command respect."^[14]

After the 1953 defeat, Grier remained active in civic affairs. He served on Mayor Ben Douglas's Committee on Substandard Housing. In 1962 he also helped to found Camp Oak, a local Boy Scout Camp for black scouts, served as director and member of the Executive Committee of the McCrorey Branch YMCA, and as President of the Catawba Presbytery.^[15] Grier died in 1969.

[1] *Charlotte Observer*, February 19, 1969, “A.S. Grier, Negro Developer, Dies. ” Mamie Zillman.

[2] The Greater Charlotte Club, *Charlotte*, Charlotte, N.C., 1913, “Charlotte’s Negroes.”

[3] *Charlotte City Directory*, 1911. The business section of the 1911 City Directory indicates an African-American presence in the following occupations: Attorneys: 2 of a total of 48; Barbers: 14 of 34; Billiard & Pool Rooms: 2 of 6; Boarding Houses: 2 of 36; Tobacco shops: 2 of 16; Cleaning & Pressing: 12 of 21; Clergy: 67 of 112; Dentists: 1 of 15; Dressmakers: 3 of 22; Drug Stores: 3 of 21; Eating Houses 22 of 24; Fish, Oyster & Game: 2 of 5; Funeral Directors: 2 of 4; General Merchandise; 1 of 20; Grocers; 13 of 154; Hairdressing: 1 of 4; Hotels: 1 of 14; Insurance: 4; Papers: 2 of 12; Nurses: 5 of 17; Physicians: 5 of 61; Schools & Colleges: 2 of 14; Shoemakers & repairs: 13 of 29; Tailors: 3 of 19; Wood & Coal: 9 of 23.

[4] U.S. Census of the Population, 1940. The total number of non-white employed workers in Charlotte was 14,906; the total of white employed workers was 30,419. The non-white category included Chinese, Japanese, and Indians as well as Negroes, but in Mecklenburg County the number of Chinese, Japanese, and Indians was so small as to be negligible, and “non-white” can be assumed in this case to mean African Americans.

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] Interview with Arthur Eugene Grier, Jr. [A.S. Grier’s grandson and current owner of the family home].

[7] *Charlotte Observer*, 2-19-69.

[8] Interview, Arthur Eugene Grier, Jr.

[9] Map Book 230, Map 71, Dated 1910. Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds.

[10] *Charlotte City Directory*, 1940.

[11] *Charlotte Observer*, November 22, 1981. P. 1A, 10A.

[12] *Charlotte Observer*, November 22, 1981. P. 1A, 10 A.

[13] Interview, Arthur Eugene Grier, June 8, 2002

[14] *Charlotte Observer*, April 25, 1953, Editorial Page.

[15] *Charlotte Observer*, February 19, 1969.



Architectural Description

The Arthur S. Grier House is one of the largest and most impressive homes built by an African American in Charlotte in the years following WWI. During the 1960s and 1970s most of the built-environment associated with the black communities in the city's urban core was demolished. The Arthur S. Grier House is now among the very few surviving substantial early 20th century African American homes in the city, and the only one located outside of the Biddleville/Washington Heights area. Built around 1922^[1], the two-story house incorporates architectural elements associated with the Craftsman Styles and the Colonial Revival movement, and stands in stark contrast to the generally plainer and smaller houses found in the neighboring Grier Heights Neighborhood.

The Arthur S. Grier House faces north on an oddly shaped lot of approximately one acre. The T-shaped lot appears to be the remains of a larger lot that may have once include the property containing the Martin's Grocery building. Early city directories list the house's address as 2800 Monroe Road, and the house sits back approximately 240' from that busy thoroughfare. Montrose Street, a connecting neighborhood street,

runs within 25' of the house. Located within 100 yards of Briar Creek, the land around the house rises noticeably to the southeast.



The side-gabled Grier House is of frame construction, built on a full brick foundation, and covered with German siding. The massed house is three-bays wide and features a prominent full-width two-story gabled portico supported by four large boxed posts measuring 14" across. Tall base trim surrounds the bottom and two-part moulded trim forms a capital of each of the posts. The portico features a beaded-board ceiling with two louvered vents in the gable. As with all of the house's eaves, wood decking, and rafter tails are exposed, and Craftsman Style brackets support the gable's eave. The front elevation's fenestration is symmetrical and features the original Craftsman Style three-vertical-light and three-horizontal-panel front door topped with simple, small pointed pediment trim and centered between two large picture windows, each topped with operable transoms. On the second floor two sets of paired four-over-one windows pierce the façade.



**The Arthur S.
Grier house
features
Craftsman Style
details**

The east elevation is composed of the wide gable of the principal section of the house, and one bay of the two-story gabled rear wing. The principal section is protected by a generous overhanging eave supported by five Craftsman Style brackets with paired louvered vents set high in the gable. A brick single-shouldered exterior chimney is located near the front of the house, with two small four-over-one windows, set high and flanking the chimney, a typical architectural convention of the Craftsman Style. Toward the rear of the principal section, paired four-over-one Craftsman Style windows are set in both the first and second stories. The rear wing features triple, narrow four-over-one windows in the second story, and paired four-over-one windows in the first.



The rear elevation is the only side of the house that appears to have been significantly altered. A partially cantilevered upstairs porch, perhaps a sleeping porch or an engaged balcony, has been enclosed with siding and louvered windows. The rest of the rear elevation appears original and includes paired two-light windows illuminating the attic, four-over-one windows on the second story, a brick furnace flue, and a rear porch enclosed by lattice.



A small one-room gabled wing extends from the west elevation, probably functioning as a sunroom in the winter and as an airy porch in the summer. Each of the sunroom's three short exposed walls contain paired double-hung four-over-one windows. Short four-over-one windows were employed in the principal section of the house above the small wing to accommodate the gable and were also employed on the first story, lighting the dining room. A square exterior chimney or furnace flue with a corbelled top is located near the middle of the principal gable. The cantilevered aspect of the enclosed rear upper rear porch is most obvious on the west elevation, with the lower rear porch set-back from the west elevation. To the rear of the house is an original one-story hipped-roof frame garage.



The interior of the Arthur S. Grier House has retained a high degree of integrity, and matches the exterior in architectural details. The front room is wide but shallow and features a Colonial Revival Style mantle featuring an ellipse. The mantle is bordered by Craftsman Style bookcases. A large hanging light fixture, dripping with cut crystal pendants, is attached to a plaster ceiling medallion. Textured plaster wall panels, bordered by moulded trim, decorate the walls. Tall baseboards with moulded caps run into starter blocks for the door trim. The architrave (door and window trim) consist of moulded jam trim supporting rectangular head casing with delicate trim. A twenty-light bi-fold door leads to the dining room and a staircase with a large square Craftsman Style newel post and simple square balusters.

Significance of the architectural features

The Craftsman Style and the Bungalow Form were extremely popular with Charlotte's black population early in the 20th century. Biddleville, Washington Heights, Cherry, and Grier Heights all feature Craftsman Style Bungalows, from small four-room houses with simple porches supported by tapered posts, to large fully realized one-and-one-half-story side gabled examples with engaged porches. The Grier House however is not a typical Craftsman Style house, but instead an eclectic design. The house is rich with Craftsman Style architectural details such as roof brackets, exposed rafters, and four-over-one windows. However, like the Oakley House in Pineville another large home with Craftsman Style details, the Grier House has little to do with the low-slung Bungalow Form. Another major deviation from the Craftsman Style is the two-story full-width porch attached to the facade, which is typically an element of the Neoclassical Style.



Oakley House



George E. Davis House

Very few pre-World War Two, large, architecturally significant homes built by African Americans in Mecklenburg County survive. The Professor George E. Davis House is comparable in size to the Grier House, but features elements of the Queen Anne Style and is in a deteriorated state. The large Frank Lytle House near Huntersville was also a symbol of the achievements of an early 20th century African American businessman, but it is a farmhouse in a rural setting. There are several large African American homes along Oaklawn Avenue, originally a part of Washington Heights, built before World War Two. The ca. 1925 house at 1927 Oaklawn Avenue, a large side-gabled one-and-a-half-story Craftsman Style Bungalow with a prominent engaged porch supported by full-height brick piers^[2], may be the most comparable home in Charlotte to the Arthur S. Grier House, despite the great differences in form.

[1] Interview with Gene Grier, May 2002, grandson of Arthur S. Grier and present owner of the house.

[2] “Survey of Mecklenburg’s Historic African American Resource, 2001-2002”, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission.