

THOMAS GRIFFITH WAREHOUSE BUILDING



This report was written on Sept. 1, 2000

1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the Thomas Griffith Warehouse Building is located at 209 East Seventh Street, Charlotte, North Carolina.

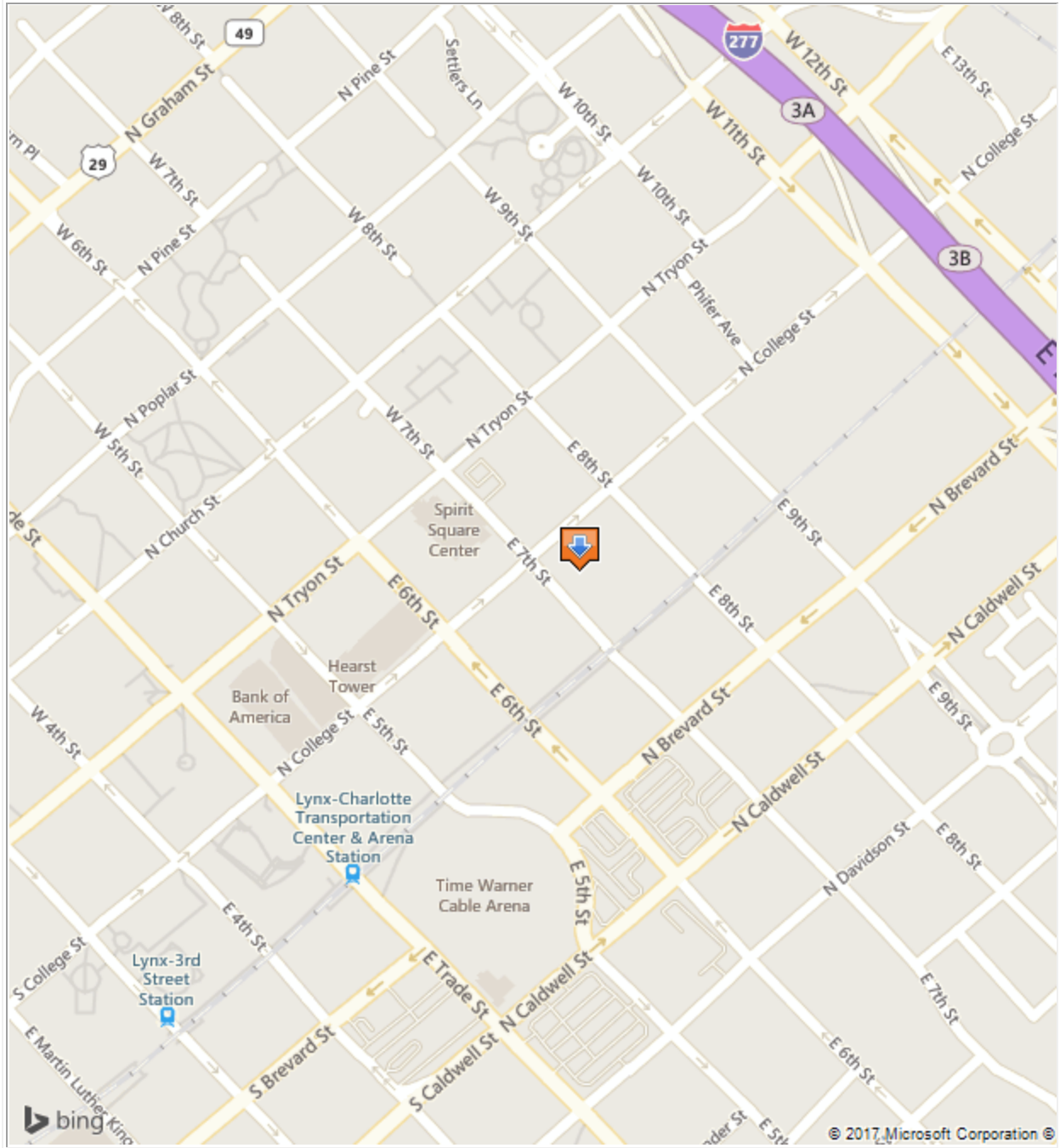
2. Name, address and telephone number of the present owner of the property: The owner of the property is:

Seventh Street Investors, L.L.C.
C/o Levine Properties
P.O. Box 2439
Matthews, N.C. 28106

Telephone: 704/366-1981

3. Representative photographs of the property: This report contains representative photographs of the property.

4. A map depicting the location of the property: This report contains a map which depicts the location of the property.



5. Current Deed Book Reference to the property: The most recent deed to this property is recorded in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 5058, Page 936. The Tax Parcel Number of the property is: 080-021-04.

6. A brief historical sketch of the property: This report contains a brief historical sketch of the property prepared by Thomas W. Hanchett.

7. A brief architectural description of the property: This report contains a brief architectural description of the property prepared by Thomas W. Hanchett with an update by Dr. Dan L. Morrill.

8. Documentation of why and in what ways the the property meets the criteria for designation set forth in N.C.G.S. 160A-400:

a. Special significance in terms of its history, architecture, and/or cultural importance: The Commission judges that the property known as the Thomas Griffith Warehouse Building does possess special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations:

- 1) the Thomas Griffith Warehouse Building, erected in 1925, was initially owned by Thomas Griffith (1864-1947), a local insurance executive and civic leader of Charlotte;
- 2) the Thomas Griffith Warehouse Building was designed by Lockwood, Greene and Company, an important industrial architecture firm; and
- 3) the Thomas Griffith Warehouse Building is an important remnant of a distribution warehouse district which arose in the first quarter of the 20th century along Charlotte's oldest railroad corridor, on the east side of Charlotte's central business district.

b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling, and/or association: The Commission contends that the architectural description included in this report and the updated architectural description demonstrate that the property known as the Thomas Griffith Warehouse Building meets this criterion.

9. 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 "historic property." The current appraised value of the improvement is \$37,680. The current appraised value of the .651 acres of land is \$708,400. The total appraised value of the property is \$746,080. The property is zoned UMUD.

Date of Preparation of this Report: January 5, 1986 with a September 1, 2000 update.

Prepared by: Dr. Dan L. Morrill
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission
2100 Randolph Road
Charlotte, N.C. 28207

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Historical Overview

by Thomas W. Hanchett and Gina Chapman

The Thomas Griffith Building at 209 East Seventh Street in uptown Charlotte was built in 1925.¹ It held the Carolina headquarters of the Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company for nearly three decades and was later the long-time home of the Brown, Rogers, Dixon Company, an appliance wholesaler. The three-story brick building was one of many warehouse structures erected along the city's railroad corridors in the first decades of the twentieth century, as Charlotte emerged as the largest city in North and South Carolina. Today groups of these buildings may still be seen along South Boulevard, West Morehead Street, South Mint Street and North Graham Street, plus scattered examples elsewhere in the city, including the [Textile Mill Supply Company Building](#), [Philip Carey Building](#), and [Query-Spivey-McGee Building](#) downtown.²

Charlotte's rise as a major regional wholesale and distribution center began with the arrival of the first railroads in the 1850s.³ It received a great boost during the 1880s and 1890s as D. A. Tompkins and Stuart Cramer made the town the Southern headquarters for distributors of textile machinery. By the 1920s Charlotte was an important city on the mainline of the mighty Southern Railway, the hub of rail lines stretching in eight directions and a focus of North Carolina's "good roads" highway building program. Dozens -- perhaps hundreds -- of national corporations chose Charlotte as the distribution point for their goods to retailers across North and South Carolina. Among them: Ford Motor Company which distributed Model T parts (and automobiles) from a vast plant on Statesville Avenue; RCA Victor which shipped phonograph records from a building on South Tryon Street (and held recording

sessions there as well); MGM and other Hollywood movie-makers which distributed motion pictures from "film row" on South Church Street.

In 1925 local insurance man Thomas Griffith decided to cash in on this trend by erecting a warehouse building to lease. Griffith (1864-1947), born in Mecklenburg County's then-rural Sharon township, was "founder and president of Thomas Griffith & Co., Inc., widely-known insurance firm with headquarters in Charlotte," according to his *Charlotte Observer* obituary.⁴ A long-time resident of Greenway Avenue in the Elizabeth neighborhood, Griffith took an active role in civic affairs. He served as Chairman of the county's Highway Commission for a decade beginning in 1921, acted as trustee of the Charlotte firemen's fund, and was for many years a member of the Municipal Service Commission, including a stint as its chairman. Griffith was also an ardent Shriner and Mason, serving from 1914 to 1941 as recorder of the Oasis Shrine Temple. He held "a number of other high offices in Masonry," noted the *Observer*, "and had a national reputation because of his attainments in the order, to which many of the best years of his life were largely devoted."

According to Griffith's son, T. Guion Griffith, the warehouse building on East Seventh Street was the only real estate development that the insurance executive ever undertook.⁵ Nonetheless Thomas Griffith built wisely and well. The mid-block site he chose on the north side of Seventh Street at the edge of the downtown commercial/industrial area had recently been occupied by houses (today the [First United Presbyterian Church](#), built by a leading black congregation in the 1890s and still extant adjacent to the warehouse, is the only reminder of the area's residential past).⁶ A track of the Southern Railway crossed Seventh Street a few hundred feet to the east, and it had had scattered warehouses and industries along it for many years. But in the 1910s the right-of-way over this track was leased to the new Norfolk and Southern Railroad (no relation to the present Norfolk Southern system). The railroad built its Charlotte freight station on the south side of the 200 block of Seventh Street, and extended its freight yard through the north side of that block. Suddenly the location became a prime site for a warehouse. Thomas Griffith purchased the land from W.S. Alexander and John M. Scott, two of Charlotte's most active real estate men, and he hired Lockwood, Greene and Company, Engineers, to design a building.⁷

Lockwood, Greene and Company originated in New England and acquired a national reputation as a designer of textile mills, a reputation it continues to hold today.⁸ In the 1920s the firm had a busy Charlotte office run by a young architect named J.N. Pease, who subsequently established J.N. Pease & Associates, now one of the largest design firms in the Carolinas. Among the major Charlotte buildings designed by Lockwood, Greene in this era were Central High School (now part of Central Piedmont Community College, 1920), the [Charlotte Supply Company](#) (550 South Mint Street,

1924), the Wilson Building (300-306 South Tryon Street, 1927), and the posh [Poplar Apartments](#) (301 West Tenth Street, 1930).⁹

The structure that Lockwood, Greene created for Thomas Griffith was a cleanly-executed variation on a very common theme of the period. The three-story flat-roofed warehouse had brick load-bearing walls along the outside and heavy wooden framing and floors inside. Windows were metal frame. Interior spaces were left open and unfinished, except for an office area at the front of the ground floor. Freight came and went by way of one or more loading platforms which lined a railroad siding along the east side of the building.

For the first twenty-nine years of the building's life, the freight consisted mainly of tires. Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company leased the warehouse as its Carolina headquarters from 1925 until 1954.¹⁰ Leonard Gordon, a Goodyear executive who started work in the building in 1948, remembers that a force of thirty to forty employees handled truck tires, car tires, bicycle tires, retread rubber (known as "camelback"), batteries and related products for a territory covering all of North Carolina and the majority of South Carolina.¹¹ The tires, each wound with paper wrapping, arrived by rail and were hoisted to upper floor storage areas by the freight elevator (still extant). When an order came in, workers slid the needed tires down a gravity chute to the first floor.

On August 11, 1947, while the structure was still leased to Goodyear, owner Thomas Griffith passed away.¹² He left behind three children: T. Guion Griffith of Charlotte, Robert H. Griffith of Chattanooga, Tennessee, and Laura A. Andrews, wife of Charles Andrews of Charlotte.

T. Guion Griffith and cousin Thomas C. Hayes continued the insurance business, and Guion administered his father's estate. Evidently under Guion's direction, ownership of the warehouse was transferred in 1962 to Firwood Properties, Incorporated, apparently a family business.¹³ It remained in Firwood's control until 1985.

Meanwhile, Goodyear Tire and Rubber was experiencing growing pains. The years immediately after World War II saw a boom in automobile ownership and travel. Gordon Leonard remembers that the company added a one-story wing to the building sometime in the late 1940s or early 1950s.¹⁴ But that was not enough to handle the growing inventory. In 1954 the company left downtown for much larger quarters on Jay Street off Tuckaseegee Road, and today Goodyear's Carolina headquarters are in a spacious building in the Arrowood Industrial Park south of the city.¹⁵

When Goodyear left in 1954, the Brown, Rogers, Dixon Company rented the building.¹⁶ For nearly thirty years the company used the warehouse as a distribution

facility for household appliances. A billboard painted at the top of the elevator housing on the east side of the building still proclaims that the firm wholesaled "Philco, Crosley, and Speed Queen" refrigerators, washers, and associated products. As time went on trucks took on more and more of the freight hauling work of railroad trains. By the 1980s the railroad siding next to the warehouse was gone, and the old Norfolk end Southern rail yard had become parking lots.

In 1985 the vacant warehouse was conveyed to Levine Properties, Incorporated, headed by Alvin Levine and his son Daniel.¹⁷ By this time the area around the warehouse was changing in character once again. Much as it had been transformed from residences to warehouses and industries in the 1910s and 1920s, it was now becoming a desirable area for office space. According to Daniel, Levine Properties plans to renovate the building for office or residential condominiums.¹⁸ As of September 2000, the owner's intentions regarding the use of the property are uncertain.

NOTES

¹ Mecklenburg County Building Standards Office: building permit files.

² Charlotte Supply, Philip Carey, and Query-Spivey- McGee have all been designated as Historic Properties by the City of Charlotte. For more on their architecture and history see the "[Survey and Research Report](#)" on each in the files of the Charlotte Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission.

³ Information on Charlotte's economic history is drawn from Chapter One of Thomas W. Hanchett, "Charlotte and Its Neighborhoods: The Growth of a New South City, 1850-1930," 1985, unpublished typescript in the files of the Charlotte Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission.

⁴ *Charlotte Observer*, August 11, 1947.

⁵ T. Guion Griffith, telephone interview with Thomas W. Hanchett, October 1986.

⁶ Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, 1896, 1900, 1911, 1929, on microfilm in the Carolina Room of the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County.

⁷ Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office: deed book 419, page 654.
Mecklenburg County Building Standards Office: building permit files.

⁸ Hanchett, "Charlotte and its Neighborhoods."

⁹ The Poplar Apartments and the Charlotte Supply Company have been designated as Historic Landmarks by the City of Charlotte. For more on their history and architecture see the "Survey and Research Report" on each in the files of the Charlotte Mecklenburg Historic Properties Commission. The Charlotte Supply Company Building no longer exists.

¹⁰ City directory collection, Carolina Room of the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County.

¹¹ Leonard Gordon, interview with Thomas W. Hanchett, October 1 1986. Interviews were also conducted with two other long-time employees, John L. Randall and Flo Farrell. Gordon had warm memories of the area, including stand-up lunches at Tanner's snack bar on North Tryon Street, and noontime shopping at the nearby Sears store. Farrell has two early photos of Goodyear employees at the building, one dating from the late 1920s - early 1930s, the other dating from the end of the 1940s. Randall remembered Tom Taylor, a black employee who worked as handyman and building superintendent for many years.

¹² *Charlotte Observer*, August 11, 1947. Mecklenburg County Clerk's Office: will book 6, page 8.

¹³ Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office: deed book 2350, page 256. Firwood Properties was incorporated in Forsyth County, North Carolina, perhaps due to the fact that Forsyth County was the home of Wachovia Bank and Trust, trustee of Thomas Griffith's estate.

¹⁴ Leonard, interview with Hanchett.

¹⁵ John L. Randall, interview with Thomas W. Hanchett, October 1986.

¹⁶ City directory collection.

¹⁷ Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office: deed book. 5058, page 936. The Levine family is associated with the fast-growing Family Dollar department store chain and Pic-n-Pay shoe store chain, both based in the Charlotte area.

¹⁸ Daniel Levine, interview with Thomas W. Hanchett, October 1986.

Architectural Description

by Thomas W. Hanchett

The Thomas Griffith Building is a three-story warehouse with a brick exterior, metal-frame windows, and an exposed timber-frame interior. It was designed by the prolific architecture firm Lockwood, Greene and Company. The Griffith warehouse is located uptown at 209 East Seventh Street, part of an area in First Ward that retains scattered warehouses and industrial buildings along a railroad track now owned by the Norfolk Southern. The structure has seen several changes over the years, but remains well preserved.

Surroundings

The location of the Griffith Building testifies to the dense mix of land uses once found in uptown Charlotte. It is only a block and a half off North Tryon Street, where the former [First Baptist Church](#) (now Spirit Square Arts Center) is a reminder of the elegant residences that lined that main street as late as the 1920s. On the west side of the Griffith Building is the handsome brick Gothic Revival style [First United Presbyterian Church](#), an indication that black residents as well as wealthy whites once lived here. The rail yard that originally flanked the east side of the Griffith Building and the freight station that stood across the street have given way to parking lots, but one line of track remains in use. To the rear of the building are business structures and parking lots that have replaced low-income housing shown on maps in the 1920s.

Exterior

The Griffith Building is five bays wide and seventeen bays deep. Most of the exterior is simple and utilitarian. The roof a virtually flat gable -- has no eaves. It is broken only by the brick elevator housing which rises an extra half story near the front of the east side. Walls are common bricks laid in [common bond](#). The rear wall of the building has no windows, but does have three brick buttresses, and rises above the roofline to form a parapet. A concrete loading dock runs along part of the east side of the structure. Windows on the two side walls are large wide units whose metal frames hold thirty-six panes of glass. The great majority of the [windows](#) no longer have their lights or mutins. Two six-pane sections in each unit pivot to allow ventilation, and each window opening has a concrete sill. An early photo in the possession of the Goodyear Company, and close examination of the units themselves, indicates that these metal windows are part of the original design of the building.

While most of the building is unabashedly utilitarian, architect Lockwood, Greene and Company gave the front facade and the first two bays on each side a slightly more expensive architectural treatment (a common practice for this type of structure). More costly, "crisper" looking pressed brick is used here, and it is laid in elegant patterns loosely based on Renaissance architecture. The walls rise above the roofline in a simple stepped parapet with a concrete cap. Across the center of the front parapet is a recessed band of brickwork, a place where the owner or tenant might paint a company name.

Below the parapet, the front facade is a symmetrical arrangement of three wide bays flanked by a pair of narrow bays. Similar narrow bays are seen on the sides. Second and third story windows are metal frame units, variations on the side windows described earlier. The first story originally held large plate-glass windows in wood frames, with prism-glass transoms above, and a wood and glass entrance.

Over the years alterations have affected the exterior of the Griffith Building. Originally the third story was just four bays deep, meaning that the rear three-quarters of the building was only two stories tall. Early in the structure's history, the third story was extended back to include the entire building. Care was taken to match the existing windows and window arrangement. Only a slight variation in brick color and window sill treatment betrays the addition today. Sometime in the late 1940s or early 1950s a one-story wing was added at the east side of the building. This flat-roofed structure with its red-brick exterior and tiny windows formed a covered loading dock along the railroad spur, and its triangular shape conformed to the placement of the track. About the same time a smaller rectangular one-story wing was added to the west side of the Griffith Building. Neither of these extensions is extant today. Later, after Brown, Rogers, Dixon Company became the tenant, the first floor front windows and entrance of the original building were bricked in. Today the original plate glass, prism glass, and all hardware survive completely intact behind the brick.

Interior

Of the three floors inside the Griffith Building, the second is the best-preserved. Three rows of square wooden columns march the length of the floor. Each has a square cast iron capital at the top, which adds a bit of Neoclassical elegance to the mundane task of holding the large wooden beams which rest upon the columns. Each beam and column has chamfered edges. Ceilings and floors consist of wood planking. No wood on this floor has ever been painted, except for the trim around the stairway and elevator shaft. These facilities are located next to each other on the east side of the space near the front of the building. The elevator shaft is enclosed in plastered walls, and has a gate of wood slates that is raised for entry. The electric freight elevator inside it appears to be original, with its wooden floor and open sides: the rider starts it

by pulling on a rope hanging down the side of the shaft. Next to the shaft enclosure is the open stair from the first floor. It features tongue-and-groove paneled balustrades, and square chamfered newel posts. A smaller and simpler stairway to the third floor is on the other side of the elevator. There is a welded grid of iron bars inside each window; the second floor has no partitions; and its scattering of wooden shelving appear to date from recent decades. The gravity chute which originally carried tires downstairs is gone, but a conveyor belt near the center of the space performs a similar function.

The third floor is quite similar to the second, with unpainted wood flexes, ceiling, beams, and columns. Here the ceiling is actually the underside of the roof, slightly angled to shed rainwater. Columns and beams are uniformly chamfered throughout the third floor just as on the second, but one can see in the iron capitals atop the columns the evidence that this space was not all built at once. At the front of the building the capitals mimic Neoclassical molding, but in the rear three-quarters of the space they are simpler in form and lack any stylistic pretensions. The small stairway opening has recently been enclosed. The most striking change to the space, unexpected from looking at the exterior, is that a number of the window openings have been filled in with concrete block. Since this work left the metal-frame windows intact outside, it would be easy to remove the infill and return the space to its original appearance.

The rear half of the first floor of the Griffith Building has exposed columns and beams, identical with upper floors except that these have been painted white. In this rear area a number of windows were bricked up and others knocked out to form openings into the two one-story additions. The front half of the first story has seen more changes. The 1929 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map of downtown Charlotte shows that this area originally held an L-shaped office area, running across the front of the building and about half-way down the west side. The Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company headquarters in Charlotte still has a photograph in their files of this space when it was new. Today all that is left of it is paneling and molding encasing the beams and columns, and the building's only pair of restrooms, which still contain their original metal partitions. The original office walls were evidently torn out by the Brown, Rogers, Dixson Company, and a new arrangement of partitions was constructed with inexpensive wood-grained plywood paneling.