

A Walking Tour Of Elizabeth

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A month after he launched Dilworth, E.D. Latta helped to form a group of investors to develop the oldest part of Elizabeth. Latta formed the Highland Park Company which included a real estate developer, Walter S. Alexander, and a businessman, Walter Brem. The name of this development company is significant, and it illustrates the connection between Charlotte's real estate development and textile industry, for the Highland Park Company was closely related to the Highland Park cotton mill of North Charlotte.

Initially the venture experienced the same slow start and consumer resistance that threatened Dilworth. However, in 1897 Walter Alexander decided that the company should donate a large block of land at the top of the hill to attract a Lutheran woman's college that was seeking a location. The college came to be called Elizabeth after the wife of its sponsor, and the scheme proved to be the boost that the neighborhood needed. By 1903, Latta had extended the E. Trade St. trolley line up the new boulevard, and many Charlotte business leaders chose to live in the luxurious dwellings on "Elizabeth Hill" where they could benefit from the genteel cultural pursuits of the college. Only a handful of these houses survives today. Central Piedmont Community College which located here in the 1960's in the buildings of the former Central High School now dominates the avenue.

1. [John Paul Lucas House](#). (1601 East Seventh St.).



John Paul Lucas, managing editor for the *Charlotte Evening Chronicle*, purchase this lot and house in Elizabeth in 1913 for \$8,500. Later he became the publicity manager for the Southern Public Utilities Company, which operated Charlotte's streetcar system. His wife, Alice Craft Lucas, was a Wilmington native and graduate of Trinity College, now Duke University. The house is built in the Bungalow sub-set of the Craftsman style, meaning that it was part of the first wave of modernism in American architecture that broke with the period styles that had

dominated the late 1800's. The smaller houses of the early 20th century were part of an architectural response to the home economics movement. Women of the American middle class wanted to revamp their homes to allow more time for club and civic duties as well as for jobs in offices and department stores. Fewer families employed live-in servants or domestic help; cornices and niches that collected dust and germs were rejected as too time consuming. Dining habits became more relaxed with families eating simpler meals with fewer courses as slim figures became the fashion of the day. In short, the American home economics movement changed the style and size of the American home.

2. [Hawthorne Lane United Methodist Church.](#) (501 Hawthorne Lane).



Hawthorne Lane United Methodist Church was designed by Charlotte architect Louis Asbury, Sr. and opened on December 3, 1916. It is a fine example of an early 20th century Gothic Revival style building. Asbury used the "Akron plan" for the Hawthorne Lane United Methodist Church, so named because it first appeared at the Methodist Episcopal Church in Akron, Ohio. The Akron plan is a distortion of the circular plan since the square or rectangular nave has a semicircular arrangement of pews around a point of focus which is the sanctuary and the choir. Hawthorne Lane United Methodist Church was just one of many Christian churches that appeared in Elizabeth as it developed.

3. [Moore-Golden House.](#) (1701 East Eighth Street).



Designed in the English Cottage subset of the Craftsman style, this house was built in 1910 for Dr. Baxter Moore, whose family only lived here for one year. It then became the home of Norman A. Cocke, an official of Piedmont Traction Company, later part of Duke Power Company. Lake Norman is named for him. This was Harry Golden's last Charlotte residence before his death in 1981. When he arrived in Charlotte in 1941, he brought with him a strong sense of his New York Jewish immigrant background.

This was reflected in his witty and controversial bi-monthly newspaper, the *Carolina Israelite*. During the late 1950's and 1960's he gained national acclaim as one of the great liberal voices in favor of racial integration. He is perhaps best remembered for his "Golden Vertical Plan Of Integration." Harry Golden sardonically pointed out that since the South's blacks and whites managed quite well at grocery counters, bank teller windows, and other places where they were not required to sit down together, then perhaps seats should be removed from schools, buses, theaters, and restaurants to assist integration in those places!

4. [Jennie Alexander Duplex](#). (1801-1803 East Eighth Street).



To your left is one of three buildings erected in this area to house members of the Alexander family. The Alexanders moved to Charlotte from Union County, North Carolina, after the Civil War, and quickly made a name for themselves in the city. During the 1890's, they became involved in real estate development, Walter S. Alexander controlling the Highland Park Company which developed Elizabeth Avenue. In 1904, his brother John and son Walter developed this area of Elizabeth, and John bought a whole block of land here for family houses two years later. In 1913, he built his own house on the corner of Clement and 8th St.

This duplex was built by his sister Jennie in 1921. J.M. McMichael was hired as the architect, and the popular new Bungalow style was chosen. The Bungalow first gained popularity in California during the 1890's, where its modest simplicity challenged the ostentation and complexity of late Victorian dwellings. It was not until the building boom of the 1910's and 1920's that the Bungalow became one of the predominant styles in Charlotte. It was particularly well suited for smaller middle class homes, but it could also be adapted to grand proportions. Bungalows are distinguished by their prominent roof, with wide eaves sweeping over a large porch supported by thick columns. They often have dormer windows, shingled walls, and plain rustic decoration, such as stone chimneys. The overall effect is intended to be functional, and unnecessary decoration is avoided.

5. [John Baxter Alexander House](#). (509 Clement Avenue).



John Baxter Alexander purchased an entire block in Elizabeth in 1906 and erected this grand Bungalow style home in 1913. He was a vice-president of the Highland Park Development Company, the developers of this portion of Elizabeth. In recent years the house has been converted to condominiums. A particularly interesting design review issue for the Historic Landmarks Commission arose concerning this house. There was a proposal to build a house in the sideyard.

Happily, the owners of the house and their neighbors worked out an arrangement whereby the new house was placed behind the John Baxter Alexander House instead. You will notice that Clement Ave. is unusually wide in comparison with its neighbors. The reason is that it was originally intended as a grand boulevard for a streetcar line from 7th St. to Central. The line, however, was never built which has preserved Clement as a quiet neighborhood street.

6. [Walter L. Alexander House.](#) (523 Clement Avenue).



Walter L. Alexander built this grand home next to his uncle's abode in 1915. Like its neighbor, it is an elegant variation of the Bungalow style, with a wide, wraparound front porch rounded at one end to form a pavilion seating area. The front door sidelights and transom are of heavy beveled glass placed in intricate variations of the diamond pattern.

Walter Alexander, a Charlotte native, moved to Blowing Rock, N.C. in 1919. The house was purchased by William Cook Wilkinson, president of the Merchants and Farmers National Bank and the man for whom Wilkinson Boulevard is named. It is now the home of Dan Shoemaker, former City Council member.

7. [Thad Adams House](#). (604 Clement Ave.).



This home, built in 1908 for Thad Adams, a prominent Charlotte attorney, is inspired primarily by the design vocabulary of Colonial Revivalism. Colonial Revivalism, which emphasizes classical ornamentation, geometric massing, and, at least in North Carolina, simplicity of detail in comparison with the more adventuresome examples of this motif in major cities of the North and Midwest, was probably the most popular example of historic revivalism that emerged in the late 1800's.

This widespread acclaim was in no small part due to the fact that Colonial Revivalism provided compelling images which enabled wealthy suburbanites to satisfy their "search for order" and their desire to live in an "idyllic escape from the overcrowding, crime, and ethnic strife identified with the city."

8. Independence Park. (East Seventh Street).

The Elizabeth neighborhood continued to expand. Subsequent development companies bought adjacent farms and commenced building. To attract customers, several companies donated land which was landscaped as Charlotte's first public park, and proudly christened in 1906 with the name Independence Park. Only a small part of the park remains today, since much of it was sacrificed to build Independence Blvd. in 1949, but in its heyday it provided locals with tennis courts, a rose garden, and landscaped lawns. The landscaping was the first Charlotte project of the Harvard-trained John Nolen. It was a lucky commission for Nolen, since it introduced him to George Stephens who was to employ him seven years later to design and landscape his Myers Park suburb.

9. St. John's Baptist Church. (300 Hawthorne Lane).



St. John's Baptist Church makes an impressive sight as it stands on the corner of 5th and Hawthorne. Its architect, J.M. McMichael, intended that impact. "A church building should not hide its light under a bushel but rather should be built as a lamp set upon a hill whose light cannot be hid." McMichael chose cream colored brick and limestone as the materials for this "Roman Ionic" design. When he built the church in 1925, McMichael had already established his reputation as a church architect in Charlotte, having designed [First Baptist Church](#) (now Spirit Square), [Little Rock A.M.E. Zion Church](#) (now the Afro-American Cultural Center), and the Tabernacle A.R.P. Church on Trade St. Note the six, two-story, Ionic columns with characteristic spiral scroll molding on the capitals.

10. [William Henry Belk House](#) (Presbyterian Hospital Campus).



To the immediate left of the hospital on your right is the grand mansion built by William Henry Belk, the founder of Belk's department stores. When he came to Charlotte to open a store in 1895, he was already a successful businessman, having operated a store in Monroe with his brother. An advertisement for the original Trade St. store gives us a flavor of Charlotte at the turn of the century: "Catch the first train. Hitch up your beast or come at a run if you expect to keep up with the crowds flocking to Belk Brothers--Cheapest Store on Earth."

William Belk was not one to squander money. He slept in a room over his shop and remained a bachelor until he was 52 years old, only then moving to this mansion in Elizabeth to rear his family. An ardent Presbyterian, he helped to finance the move of Presbyterian Hospital to the site of Elizabeth College. He and his family originally lived in the old president's house close by, but they had this mansion overlooking the city constructed in 1924. The Belks chose C.C. Hook to design their Neoclassical house which is executed in beige brick and stone. The house was recently moved under arrangements approved by the Historic Landmarks Commission.

11. The Visulite Theater (Elizabeth Avenue)



The Art Deco style Visulite Theater opened in the 1930s when movies became especially popular as a means of escape from the doldrums created by the Great Depression. Also, by then automobiles had become a common means of transportation, making neighborhood theaters more feasible. The theater was also on a main bus line.

Two compelling events are associated with the Visulite Theater. The first was what most thought was the last trip of Streetcar 85. Mayor Ben Douglas and other dignitaries boarded Streetcar 85 in front of the theater for a "goodbye" trip to the Square in March 1938. Little did they realize that the 85 would be found in Huntersville, restored, and put back into service!



Klansman in front of the Visulite Theater

The other event was less pleasant. It occurred on September 1, 1957, in the midst of the turmoil surrounding the racial integration of the Charlotte Public Schools. Hooded members of the Ku Klux Klan picketed the Visulite Theater for showing "Island In The Sun" that depicted interracial marriages.

12. [Richard C. Biberstein House](#) (1600 Elizabeth Avenue).



Richard C. Biberstein was an engineer and designer of industrial buildings, mainly cotton mills. For example, the Spaghetti Warehouse, formerly [Nebel Knitting Mill](#) on Camden Road in

Dilworth, was one of his designs Biberstein's papers are in the UNCC Library. When this house was built in 1906, Elizabeth Avenue was a grand residential boulevard. The streetcar moved up the hill and delivered riders to Elizabeth College. Biberstein's papers are in the UNCC Library. The house is rendered in the Rectilinear Style. Though derived from the Victorian, it rejected lavish ornamentation.

12. James L. Staten House. (322 Hawthorne Lane).



Another department store owner, James L. Staten, resided in this Neoclassical style mansion erected in 1911. Originally known as Kingston Ave., Hawthorne Lane was the most sought after residential street in early Elizabeth, because it afforded a dramatic view of the uptown skyline. Today this gracious building acts as the headquarters of International House, a non-profit organization which assists internationals in adjusting to life in the United States and facilitates interaction between Americans and internationals.

13. [Lillian Arhelger Memorial.](#) (Hawthorne Lane & Seventh Street).



It was dedicated to Lillian Arhelger, a physical education teacher at Central High School, perished on June 21, 1931, in an attempt to save a young child from falling over the Glen Burnie Falls near Blowing Rock. In appreciation of this heroic and selfless act, the people of Charlotte raised the funds to erect a memorial.

Designed by Helen Hodge, an associate of Earle Sumner Draper, the landscape architect who fashioned the Rosemont section of Elizabeth. Happily, the Arhelger Memorial is essentially unchanged from the original.