

The Bar-B-Q King: Adapted From A Report by Ms. Lara Ramsey

The Bar-B-Q King is located at 2900 Wilkinson Boulevard in Charlotte, North Carolina.



Boundary Description

Beginning at the northwestward corner of Wilkinson Boulevard and Weyland Avenue, westward 171.4 feet along the northern side of Wilkinson Boulevard, northward 128.25 feet, eastward 75 feet, northward 32.2 feet, eastward 96.4 feet, southward 160.45, to the point of beginning. See Exhibit A.

Boundary Justification

The boundary encompasses all of the property historically associated with the Bar-B-Q King.

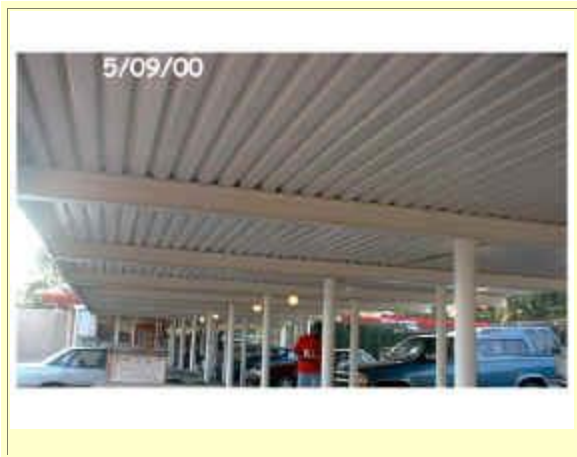
Statement of Significance

Summary Paragraph

The Bar-B-Q King, erected in 1961, is a structure that possesses local historic significance under National Register Criterion A as a reflection of the growing influence of the automobile in Charlotte's booming post-World War II economy. America emerged from World War II as a world leader, politically and

economically. The new-found affluence of those on the home front and those returning from the war, along with the increasing numbers of new suburbs built to house these veterans, created a great demand for cars, which had not been manufactured during the war. By the 1950's, America had become a society centered around the automobile. Charlotte was no exception – its diversified economy adapted well to post-war economic trends, and the state's Good Roads program (begun decades earlier) laid the groundwork for a more extensive system of roads needed to support growing numbers of cars.

In response to Charlotte's increasing dependence on the automobile, many businesses began catering to the needs of motorists. The Bar-B-Q King is an excellent example of one type of business that emerged to accommodate the flourishing car culture – the drive-in restaurant. Located along Wilkinson Boulevard, a heavily traveled main corridor between Charlotte and nearby Gastonia, the Bar-B-Q King provided good food and fast service to customers waiting in their cars. The Bar-B-Q-King, like other drive-in restaurants, also became a popular meeting place for teenagers, to whom automobiles provided a means of independence and status.



The Bar-B-Q King is also locally significant under National Register Criterion C as representative of the end of what could be considered the "first generation" of roadside architecture. America's obsession with automobiles not only influenced the way businesses worked, it also changed the way they designed their buildings. The design of drive-in restaurants, as well as other roadside buildings, revolved around two goals: attracting motorists moving quickly along the highway; and serving these customers as quickly and efficiently as possible. Bar-B-Q King, like most smaller drive-ins, combined flashy neon signs with efficient, functional building designs to accomplish these goals. Although drive-in restaurants like the Bar-B-Q King shared with later fast-food chains (like McDonalds) the desire to draw motorists and serve them quickly, most drive-in's sought to enhance the pleasure of automobile travel by providing a place where people could enjoy a meal and the company of friends, all from the comfort of their automobiles. The architecture of Bar-B-Q King (and other drive-in's of the late 50's and early 60's) reflects the fading image of the road as a place for adventure and individuality that contrasts sharply with the interstates and expressways that have the same drive-through restaurants at every exit.

Commerce and Social History Context and Historical Background Statement

The Bar-B-Q King, erected in 1961, is an excellent example of the ways in which businesses adapted to the growing dependence on automobiles in post-war Charlotte. America experienced a surge of economic growth in the years after World War II, and the newfound affluence of its citizens translated

into unprecedented levels of home and automobile ownership. Through the aid of FHA and VA loans, which "accounted for 'nearly a quarter of the new housing units during the period of 1946 through 1967' constructed in the United States," many Americans were able to afford a home in the suburbs. This move away from the centers of towns and cities, along with low gas prices and the appeal of mobility, caused the demand for new automobiles to skyrocket – the number of cars registered in the United States grew from 23 million in 1931 to 60 million in 1955.



Charlotte was in a particularly good position to take advantage of the post-war boom. Its diversified economy, "resting on the three legs of manufacturing, wholesaling/transportation, and banking," gave the city "an adaptability that smoothed economic bumps" and allowed it to enter the "information age" after World War II. North Carolina's Good Roads Program, which had its beginnings in Mecklenburg County in 1879, allowed Charlotte to develop as a distribution and trucking center and provided a network of paved roads for the growing numbers of automobile owners. One of these roads was Wilkinson Boulevard. Built in 1926, the highway became the first four-lane road in North Carolina, carrying motorists between Charlotte and Gastonia. Although overshadowed by the opening of Independence Boulevard in 1949, Wilkinson Boulevard still carried the second heaviest traffic in the state. The highway became an active commercial corridor, attracting businesses hoping to capitalize on the numbers of motorists traveling the boulevard. The Bar-B-Q King joined the ranks of these roadside businesses during the hey-day of the American drive-in restaurant. Owned by Omega Foods, Inc (partners Charlie Psomadakis and Jack Law), the restaurant served hamburgers, some seafood, desserts, and, of course, barbecue. Like most drive-in's, the Bar-B-Q King employed carhops. Originally, these carhops took orders from customers and served their food. To avoid confusion as to which carhop served which customer, the hops used an "open-call" system. A hop would claim a car coming in through the Weyland Avenue entrance by calling out "swing left"; to claim a car from the Wilkinson entrance, he or she would say "swing right". Similarly, a carhop could claim the car by calling out its model ("swing Chevy" or "swing Buick"). The first to call the car would serve it. The Bar-B-Q King installed a speaker system in 1965 to increase the speed of service. These systems consisted of a speaker "similar to the kinds used in drive-in theaters" mounted to an extendable serving tray and permanent menus. Customers could now push a button on the speaker and give their order when they were ready. This innovation cut the number of carhops at the Bar-B-Q King in half.



Even with this new improvement, the Bar-B-Q King still had trouble keeping up with the crowds that came on the weekends. Pete Gianniks, who began working at the restaurant soon after it opened, recalled that the majority of weekend customers were teenagers. This was typical of most drive-ins in the 1950's and 1960's – teens were looking for a place where they could be free of the constraints of their parents, where they could socialize with peers and gain a measure of independence. The drive-in restaurant made for an ideal hangout for these youngsters; all they needed was "the ownership of a car or the ability to borrow one." For the teen, the drive-in restaurant became a home away from home." Most of the teenagers would congregate under the canopy in the back of the Bar-B-Q King's parking lot. Although the restaurant hired a patrolman to monitor their behavior (another officer directed traffic), the teens were often rowdy, often getting out of their cars to talk to friends and blaring music from their car radios; sometimes scuffles would break out "over a girl or the ball game"

Despite the occasional problems with unruly teenagers and, more importantly, the rise of drive-through and walk-up restaurants like McDonalds and the proliferation of new expressways and interstates highways, the Bar-B-Q King continued to serve customers traveling Wilkinson Boulevard. On June 12, 1972, Pete Gianniks bought the restaurant from Jack Law; in 1979, he and his brother Stravos Giannikas bought the property. Mr. Gianniks continues to run the restaurant, and says that, by expanding the menu and providing take-out service, the business is still strong. The Bar-B-Q King remains a tangible reminder of the ways that the automobile changed Charlotte's commercial and social fabric.

Architecture Context and Historical Background Statement

The Bar-B-Q King is an excellent example of what is generally called "roadside architecture". Although this term can apply to any building sitting on or near a roadway, there are differences between the roadside architecture of the 1950's and '60's and the roadside buildings of today. Andrei Codrescu, filmmaker and author, states that these differences are a reflection of "two different generations of roads." The first, spanning from the 1920's to the mid-1960's, "was a giddy and adventurous enterprise that legitimized the new freedom of the car." With the construction of expressways and multi-lane interstate highways in the mid-1960's and the 1970's, highway travel became more monotonous, and

roadside architecture soon followed – instead of individual restaurants, the same fast-food franchises appeared at every exit, promising continuity and stability in the place of adventure and novelty.

The characteristics of Wilkinson Boulevard place it somewhere in between these first roads and the newer expressways. Although built early in the 20th century, Wilkinson Boulevard was not a winding back road; the first four-lane highway in the state of North Carolina, it still carried the second-heaviest traffic load of any road in the state as of 1959. Because of this large number of motorists, roadside businesses proliferated along this corridor – the sheer number of businesses along the boulevard actually kept it from being widened considerably as part of Charlotte’s thoroughfare program in the early 1960’s. The Bar-B-Q King’s design reflects Wilkinson’s standing as a relatively large highway that was still a long way from becoming a superhighway. In this way the restaurant’s design also represents well the period in which it was built – a period of heavily traveled boulevards like Wilkinson and Independence but before the advent of I-85 and I-77.

The Bar-B-Q King’s design revolves around the two goals of the business – to attract the attention of the motorist, and to serve the customer as quickly and efficiently as possible. The first goal is accomplished through colorful, eye-catching signage. A blinking red neon arrow carrying the name of the restaurant curves around to point down to the building, while a billboard just underneath lists some of the day’s specials. In order to attract motorists traveling on both sides of the street, the sign is double-sided and situated perpendicular to Wilkinson Boulevard. The building that houses the kitchen, in contrast to the elaborate sign, is a simple and unadorned structure that reflects the restaurant’s second goal of providing fast service. Because the customer had little need to come into the building, there was no need to add any frills to its design. The plain yellow brick façade, plate glass windows and flat roof give the building a very functional, modern appearance. The metal canopies are also functional in their design – built to provide protection from the elements for customers and car hops, they are little more than simple metal sheds, with only a simple line of red neon adorning the edge of the roofline. This combination of functional building design and eye-catching signage is evident in several other post-war roadside businesses in Charlotte, an excellent example of which is the Dairy Queen (1947) on Wilkinson Boulevard.

The type of roadside architecture represented by the Bar-B-Q King is reflective of the changing characteristics of automobile travel in Charlotte in the early 1960’s. Although increasing numbers of lanes and faster speeds caused businesses to streamline their efforts at grabbing the motorist’s attention, drive-ins were still primarily a destination point rather than just a quick pit stop. Motorists, while being served as quickly as possible, were allowed to linger under the shade of the canopies, and teenagers packed into the parking spaces every weekend to socialize. These drive-in’s would soon be replaced with drive-thru restaurants, which would sacrifice individuality in the quest for higher production, just as the interstate highway would give up the "narrative quality" of the smaller road for speed.

Physical Description

Location Description

The Bar-B-Q King is located on a .570-acre lot in the northwestern corner of the intersection of Wilkinson Boulevard and Weyland Avenue, west of Charlotte’s central business district. Situated along this main corridor connecting Charlotte to Gastonia, the site was ideal for a restaurant catering to the

many motorists driving between the two cities. The one story, rectangular, yellow brick building housing the kitchen and takeout area is located on the southwestern corner of the property, facing east toward Weyland Avenue. The rest of the property is paved with asphalt for use as a parking area. Two aluminum canopies run from the western to the eastern side of the site, covering the parking spaces. The red neon sign on the southern edge of the property is perpendicular to Wilkinson Boulevard and designed to attract drivers traveling on both sides of the highway.

Architectural Description

The Bar-B-Q King, designed by Angelo Forlidas, exhibits characteristics typical of post-war roadside architecture. The structures on the site are designed to be primarily functional and are devoid of any kind of superfluous ornamentation. The building that houses the kitchen and take-out counter has yellow brick walls laid in common bond; plate glass windows trimmed in white run along the entire east elevation (facing Weyland Avenue) and parts of the south and north elevations. Two entrances are located on the east elevation – one with a red metal door, the other with a glass door. Another entrance is located on the north elevation. The two metal canopies are connected to the building, one extending from the east elevation, the other connected by a metal shed extending from the north elevation. These canopies are painted white, and the roofline of the canopies and the building are painted red and accented with red neon lights. Underneath the canopies and between the parking spaces are metal speaker systems, with two extendable trays and speakers attached to each side of the permanent menu. The only source of ornamentation on the site is the large sign designed to attract motorists on Wilkinson Boulevard. The red neon sign is double-sided and consists of a curving arrow inset with a red rectangle containing the words "Bar-B-Q King" and, below it, "curb service." Below the arrow, on the pole holding the sign, is a small rectangular marquee.

The Bar-B-Q King retains its historic exterior character, and has continued in its original use as a drive-in restaurant since its construction. Some minor changes have been made – incandescent globe fixtures have replaced the fluorescent lighting originally used under the canopies. In the mid-1990's, a tornado destroyed the neon sign and part of the canopy that extends from the eastern elevation; the canopy was repaired with the identical materials, and a nearly identical, slightly smaller sign replaced the one damaged by the storm. Even with these alterations, the Bar-B-Q King retains its exterior integrity as an excellent example of post-war roadside architecture.

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