

The Frank Lytle House



1. Name and location of the Property: The property known as the Frank Lytle House is located at 16820 Huntersville-Concord Road, North Carolina.

2. Name, address and telephone number of the current owner of the Property:

Woodley's LLC
14324 Eastfield Rd
Huntersville, NC 28078

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 depicting the location of the property. The UTM is 17 521096E 3919555N

farm production, and growing cash crops, beef cattle, and significant numbers of working livestock, such as mules and horses.

4) Frank Lytle's wealth allowed him to pursue other business opportunities that gave him greater community visibility outside of the rural farm locality. He lent money to other farmers, invested in rental properties in Second Ward, and had an interest in Grier's Funeral Home.

5) Frank Lytle used his influence and wealth to the betterment of the rural African American community near Huntersville through the establishment of Lytle's Grove Colored School and Torrence-Lytle High School.

6) The Frank Lytle House is architecturally significant in the Ramah Presbyterian Church Community, as one of the last incarnations of the traditional I-house form.

b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling and/or association: The Commission contends that the architectural description included in this report demonstrates that the Property known as Frank Lytle House meets this criterion.

9. Ad Valorem Tax Appraisal: The Commission is aware that designation allows the owner to apply for an automatic deferral of 50% of the ad valorem taxes on all or any portion of the Property that becomes an "historic landmark." The current appraised value of the land containing 34.46 acres and the building is \$315,100.

Date of Preparation of this Report: April 15, 2003

Prepared by: Stewart Gray and Dr. Paula Stathakis



Statement of Significance

Based on the survey of historic African American resources performed by the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission in 2002, it appears that the Frank Lytle House near Huntersville was the finest and most substantial farmhouse built by any African American farmer in Mecklenburg County during the period between the Civil War and the Second World War. With the destruction of many of the homes in Charlotte's urban core during the era of Urban Renewal, the Frank Lytle House is among the largest of the very few surviving historic homes associated with early 20th century African American businessmen and professionals. Born a slave around 1854, Frank Lytle became a prosperous farmer, amassing over 500 acres of farmland. He invested his farm profits in various agricultural and non-agricultural business opportunities. His successes in business earned him respect in the white community around Ramah Presbyterian Church, and a prominent place in Mecklenburg County's larger African American community. Aside from the farmhouse, little evidence of Frank Lytle's enterprising life has survived.

Historical Background Statement

The story of Frank Lytle's life is extraordinary. Lytle was the son of Mary Nance, a slave on Rutledge Withers's farm. Withers was Lytle's father and Mary's owner. Mary somehow

managed to leave the plantation as a free woman, but according to law, she had to leave young Frank behind. She married Jerry Lytle, and they lived on a small farm in Northern Mecklenburg. When the Civil War ended, Mary rode a mule to the Withers Farm and was ecstatic to find that her eleven-year-old son was still there. According to Dorothy Bennett, Lytle's granddaughter, "She [Mary] got to the barnyard, got on her knees, prayed and kissed the ground. She thanked God that her family was together." She put her son on the mule and proceeded out of the barnyard. When Withers tried to stop her, a confrontation ensued in which Mary prevailed, and she and her young son rode off of Withers's property together to the Lytle home near Cornelius.^[1]

Little is known about Frank Lytle's childhood or early adult life. He joined his mother, stepfather, and stepbrothers Manual and Cainly after leaving the Withers Farm. In spite of his humble beginnings, Frank Lytle became a prosperous and influential farmer in North Mecklenburg. He and his first wife, Lois Alexander, had three sons: Julius, John, and Edward, and five daughters: Anna, Mattie, Mary, Sadie, and Maggie. Lois died in 1912, and he remarried to a woman named Elizabeth. Lois Alexander was a teacher and taught Lytle to read.^[2] Although Lytle was unschooled, he educated his children and was a strong proponent of education for the local African American community. All of his children received college educations; his sons graduated from Biddle University and his daughters from Barber-Scotia College. Lytle paid their tuition with farm produce. His niece Corrine said that he would "kill a cow and take a child to college."^[3] Lytle also used his influence to benefit the African American community in North Mecklenburg through the establishment of Lytle's Grove Colored School, a Rosenwald school built in 1926 with matching funds adjacent to Columbus Chapel A.M.E. Zion Church on Davidson-Concord Road. Torrence-Lytle High School in Huntersville opened its doors in 1938 as the only high school for African Americans in North Mecklenburg, and still stands, although it is currently used as a storage facility. Torrence was a favorite music teacher, and Frank Lytle helped acquire the property for the school.



Torrence-Lytle High School

The public record is quiet about Frank Lytle until 1895, the year in which his first real estate transaction was recorded. When he was thirty-nine years old, Lytle purchased 35 ½ acres from a white neighbor, Mrs. Hattie L. Bradford, for \$426.00. This parcel in Huntersville was described in the deed surveyor's description as adjacent to Lytle's "dwelling house." The house known as the Frank Lytle house is probably not this house, but a house subsequently built on this property.^[4]

The Bradfords and Lytle remained neighbors and friends for years. Hattie's husband Joe died in 1894 leaving her with five small children to raise. Lytle's purchase of part of her land would have certainly helped the young widow in a financially unsettled time. The Bradford children remembered Lytle as a good and worthy man who was a helpful neighbor and fine family friend. Indeed, the relationship between the Lytles and Bradfords was part of a little recognized pattern of friendship and cooperation that existed between landowning whites and blacks in Mecklenburg County in the early twentieth century.^[5] Although the racial barriers of the times prevented either side from crossing established social and cultural boundaries, it did not prevent families such as these from enjoying real and rewarding friendships.

According to family stories, Lytle slept on the porch at the Bradford house when Joe Bradford was dying. After Joe died, the Bradford family found that on Sunday mornings Lytle would have hitched their mule to the wagon and left it ready so they could go to church. He helped them gather in their crops and even saved Hattie's life when their house caught fire. Lytle arrived at the burning house to find Hattie frantically running in and out of the house trying to save as many pieces of furniture and other household articles that she could. He grabbed her by the wrists to prevent her forcibly from going back into the house just as the roof collapsed. Years later Hattie's daughter, Mary, recalled seeing Lytle in town in Charlotte, and still feeling

gratitude for that day, “I wanted to throw my arms around him and thank him. But I didn’t dare to touch a negra(sic). I wanted to thank him for what he did.”^[6]

Hattie Bradford’s misfortunes must have been overwhelming. She moved back to her father’s farm on Huntersville-Concord road and over time sold portions of her land to Lytle. In 1902, he purchased 61 $\frac{3}{4}$ acres from her for \$895.36, in 1906 41 $\frac{1}{4}$ acres for \$556.88, and in 1910, 26 $\frac{1}{2}$ acres for \$622.75.^[7] Although Hattie moved to a nearby location, her sons Dewitt and Caldwell remained in the neighborhood and had farms near Lytle.^[8] Lytle also acquired other parcels adjoining his lands. In 1917, he purchased two tracts of land from a neighbor’s daughter for \$9560.00, and by 1929 purchased and additional 150 acres.^[9] At its height, Lytle’s total holdings in North Mecklenburg totaled approximately 530 acres.

Lytle was unusually prosperous for an African American farmer and landowner. Although a number of African American owned farms dating from this period have been documented in Mecklenburg, especially in Northern Mecklenburg, none was of the size and scope of Frank Lytle’s.^[10] He grew crops common to the practices of the region: cotton, corn, wheat, oats, and molasses cane and raised beef cattle, dairy cattle, mules and horses. The grounds included a smokehouse, a pump house, a springhouse, and a corncrib. Lytle had the first model –T farm truck in the area, two tractors, and a hay baler. His brother, Manual, owned a wheat thresher, and he owned a corn shredder in common with Dewitt and Caldwell Bradford. It was economical for farm neighbors to own and to share different pieces of heavy equipment. Lytle also had sharecroppers on his farm; usually three to four families and all of them were African American.^[11]

Frank Lytle’s agricultural practices conformed to the bigger picture of county trends, although it seems that he was one of the lucky few that made much of his money from cotton. Mecklenburg County led the state in cotton production at the turn of the century; over one-half of the cotton produced in North Carolina by 1896 was grown in 28 counties, and most of it in Mecklenburg.^[12] By the early twentieth century, the county remained a leading cotton producer even as it began its transition towards a regional urban, commercial, and manufacturing center. In 1910, the 1568 farms in the county planted 63,220 acres of cotton, producing 27,466 bales. Only 12% of Mecklenburg farm owners in 1910 were African American, and Lytle was not only among the most affluent of this category, he was among the most well off of all 1568 farm owners, both black and white.^[13]



Fig. 12. New Road, Charlotte, N. C., 1898.

Lytle based the core of his farm production on cotton, as did the majority of Mecklenburg farmers of the times. Unfortunately, the South's emphasis on cotton production was a key factor in undermining the region's overall agricultural health by the early 1920s. Although Mecklenburg County produced a significant amount of cotton, its dependency on the crop destined the local agricultural economy to stagnation and deterioration. By 1921, American agriculture began a steady decline that was worsened by the Great Depression of the 1930s. Southern farmers dedicated to cotton production and mid-western farmers dedicated to wheat production had no recourse when the international market prices of these commodities plummeted in the 1920s and 1930s. The overarching response to this crisis was overproduction, worsening the situation and leading to increased foreclosures and an increase in tenancy.

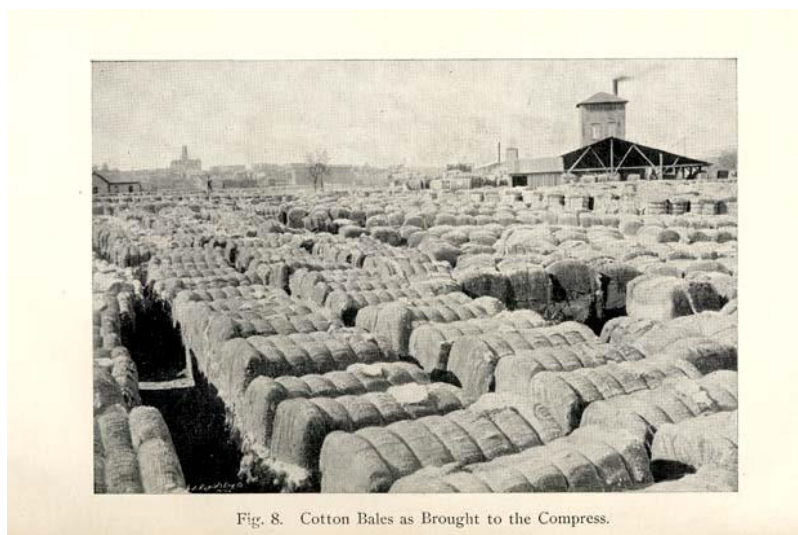


Fig. 8. Cotton Bales as Brought to the Compress.

Cotton bales waiting to be compressed

Lytle's agricultural practices and patterns of land acquisition show him trying to survive in the changing economic currents of the 1920s. During the cotton boom times, he was able to purchase land, and did, to devote to cash crop agriculture. Although there are no extant written records, family friends and descendants of sharecroppers who worked on the Lytle farm attest to his large cotton crop. What is particularly striking about his record is that he did not start buying land until he was 39 years of age, and he continued to add to his farm holdings for the next twenty years, and did not stop purchasing adjacent parcels until 1929, although the final two parcels were purchased from his sons, and he had not added to his farm since 1918, when he was 62 years of age.^[14] At approximately the same time that the American agricultural economy began to sag, Lytle became involved in other capital ventures. According to real estate records, beginning in the early 1920s, he purchased several tracts in Second Ward.^[15] Shifting his investment interests from farmland to urban parcels, Lytle could profit from rents from urban residential properties in Charlotte's most densely populated African American center city neighborhood. Prior to these investments, Lytle purchased a lot in Biddleville in 1912, allegedly as a location for funeral home in which he was a part owner.^[16]

The Great Depression was hard on Lytle, although, unlike many farmers, he managed to keep most of his property. County statistics for the 1920s and 1930s clearly illustrate Lytle's distinctive financial and social position as the Depression began to take its toll. Like many of their southern counterparts, Mecklenburg farmers were hampered by inefficient methods, such as one or two crop agriculture, and by crop liens. The consequences of this system were that the number of land owners, both white and African American, decreased over time, and that tenancy increased, swelling the ranks of poor rural whites and blacks. Rural African Americans already tended to be poorer than the majority of rural whites and more likely to be landless and bound to some form of tenancy. Of the 4344 farmers identified in the 1920 Census of Agriculture for Mecklenburg County, 1647 were African American and of these only 150 were farm owners and 1497 were tenants, compared to the 2690 farms operated by whites, of which 1492 were owner operated, and 1184 were operated by white tenants. This not only illustrates the vast economic gaps between black farmers and white farmers in the county in the early part of the century, it also raises the perplexing question of why there were so few African American farmers of any type when the rural African American population in Mecklenburg in 1920 numbered over 12,000. Somewhere scattered around the county in unincorporated areas and in the small towns outside of Charlotte were approximately 10,000 African Americans, and slightly over half of them were over the age of twenty-one. They were likely employed as domestics, as skilled and

unskilled workers in the small towns, on the railroad, and in processing jobs affiliated with agriculture such as cotton ginning.^[17]

The existing agricultural depression coupled with the Great Depression decreased the number of farmers from 4344 in 1920 to 3773 by 1930. The number of African American farm owners decreased to 97, compared with 150 of the previous decade, and the number of African American tenants also decreased from 1497 in 1920 to 1229 in 1930. Of the 3773 farms, 794 were described as cotton farms, and of all the farms reporting; nearly 50,000 acres were devoted to cotton, producing over 24,000 bales.^[18]

By 1934, the year of his final public transaction, Lytle was 78 years of age. He remained an established community leader and businessman, and he still owned 347 acres, but was no longer able to undertake any new financial ventures. As African American farm ownership decreased substantially, he managed to keep his house and a significant part of his farm. In these respects, he was exceptional within the African American community, not only with regard to his affluence and social influence, but also in his ability to ride out the financial tempests of the 1920s and 1930s. The farm was willed to Lytle's sons, who sold their portions. After Lytle's death in 1939, his granddaughter Dorothy Bennett inherited the house. Dorothy Bennett had already started her career as an educator and school principal in Queens, New York. She took her step grandmother, Lizzie Lytle, to live with her in New York, renting the remaining farm land to local farmers and the house to various tenants. Frank Lytle was buried at Cedar Grove Presbyterian Church next to his first wife, Lois. Lizzie Lytle was buried in New York.^[19]

^[1] Celia Bradford Hunter Dickerson, typescript compiled March 15, 2002.

^[2] Ibid.

^[3] Celia Bradford Hunter Dickerson.

^[4] Mecklenburg County Courthouse, Register of Deeds, Deed 101-536, January 10, 1895.

^[5] Similar close-knit relations were common in Shuffletown, a small community in Northwestern Mecklenburg; Interview, Judy Rozzelle, May 2002.

^[6] Celia Bradford Hunter Dickerson.

^[7] Mecklenburg County Courthouse. Deed 165-18, January 1, 1902; Deed 208-71, January 1, 1906; Deed 345-520, May 23, 1910-the property in this deed, formerly in Mecklenburg was located in Cabarrus County according to a redrawing of the county line in 1884.

^[8] Celia Bradford Hunter Dickerson.

^[9] Mecklenburg County Courthouse. Deed 371-544, May 5, 1917; Deed 394-4, August 15, 1918; Deed 735-80, January 23, 1929; Deed 735-83, January 23, 1929; Deed 735-254, January 23, 1929.

^[10] See Survey of African American Buildings and Sites in Mecklenburg County, 2002.

^[11] Celia Bradford Hunter Dickerson; Interview with Isaac Thompson, April 17, 2003.

^[12] North Carolina Board of Agriculture, *North Carolina and Its Resources* (Winston, M.I. and J.C. Stewart, Public Printers and Binders, 1896), p. 158. North Carolina Collection; Documenting the American South Database.

^[13] U.S. Census of Agriculture, 1910. In 1910, only Robeson County produced more cotton than Mecklenburg.

^[14] See endnote 8.

^[15] Mecklenburg County Courthouse. Deed 498-596, September 22, 1923; Deed 553-632, October 1, 1924; Deed 585-403, May 14, 1925; Deed 608-337, December 12, 1925.

^[16] Mecklenburg County Courthouse. Deed 303-65, November 9, 1912. Celia Bradford Hunter Dickerson asserts that among Lytle's business interests in Charlotte were a share of Grier's Funeral Home and a woodyard.

^[17] U.S. Census of Agriculture, 1920; U.S. Census of the Population, 1920.

^[18] U.S. Census of Agriculture, 1930. Figures for bale weights were not provided, it is assumed that bales were approximately 500 pounds as was common twenty years earlier.

^[19] Celia Bradford Hunter Dickerson.

Brief Architectural Description



The ca. 1910 Frank Lytle House is a two-story frame farmhouse located in the northeast section of Mecklenburg County, near the town of Huntersville. The house faces north, and is situated 100 yards from the Huntersville-Concord Road, not far from the Mecklenburg/Cabarrus County Line. The house sits alone on a prominent knoll, and some of the rural character of the setting remains. To the east of the house, open rolling fields slope down to the Ramah Creek. To the

south, cultivated fields slope down to Clarks Creek. To the west, however, a massive greenhouse complex covers much of the landscape.



At one time the Frank Lytle House was at the center of a 500-acre farm, and would have been the most public if not the most prominent feature of a complex of buildings, including barns, cribs, pens, equipment sheds and tenant houses. None of these accessory buildings, with the exception of a dilapidated wellhouse, remain and the acreage of the farm has dwindled to around thirty-five acres.



The cross-gabled house is three bays wide, and built in a side facing T-plan with wings projecting from the front and the rear of the principal section of the house. The principal and wing sections of the house are single-pile, just one room deep. The house was built on brick piers, now infilled with brick. The moderately pitched roof is covered with corrugated aluminum roofing panels. One of the most prominent features of the house is a one-story, hip roofed, wrap-around porch that extends to the house's west elevation. Tapered Craftsman Style posts, not original to the house, resting on square brick piers, support the porch. A concrete porch floor probably replaced an earlier wooden floor. The house's front door has been replaced, and several of the first-story windows have been covered with plywood. The windows are typically tall Victorian two-over-two double-hung sash. Located high in the front gable is the most notable decorative feature of the house, a Masonic symbol applied over a wooden louvered vent. Another notable feature of the house are the deep pronounced lines of the eaves, emphasized with moulded trim and a wide freeze board. The pronounced eaves and deep returns give the gables the semblance of pediments, and are an element of yet another style, the Neoclassical.



The front porch wraps around to the house's west elevation. It stops short of a prominent two-story, three sided, hip-roofed bay, located at the southern edge of the rear-projecting wing. The bay was likely a later addition. Its two-over-two windows appear to be newer, ca. 1920, with much wider muntins than found in the rest of the house. An interior chimney pierces the roof near the center of the elevation.



East and rear elevations

The east elevation is dominated by the gabled end of the principal section of the house. A brick chimney, which has been partially removed, is centered between on the four windows of the single-pile section. The same deep eaves and trim seen on the front of the house are also found here.

The rear elevation of the house is perhaps the most altered. Originally dominated by the two-story wing, the elevation featured a small one-story attached gabled kitchen, and a shed porch along the rear of the principal section. The rear porch has been enclosed, and a small shed addition has been added to the kitchen. On the second-story, a small addition was constructed under the eastern eave to accommodate an upstairs bathroom.



Detail of exterior woodwork.

Moulded corner board on the front porch.

The house's siding is nailed with square-cut nails over diagonal sheathing, which was attached to the balloon framing with wire nails. Decorative features include beaded corner boards, and a wide water table board with a moulded drip cap. Interior details include six panel doors, molded door and window trim, picture molding, and tall baseboards with decorative caps. The stair is in the center hall, and turns at a landing. It features turned newel posts, balusters, and a moulded rail. The house is now vacant, and much of the stair railing, many of the windows, and some of the interior doors have been damaged by vandals. The exterior, while largely complete, is deteriorating. Some of the siding has failed, and there are signs of water damage on the front porch.

Architectural Significance of The Frank Lytle House

The Frank Lytle House has a cross-gabled form, but the relationship of this house to the I-house form is apparent. The I-house form dominated among successful farms in Mecklenburg County for well over 100 years. Early examples in the county include the ca. 1805 Grier-Rea House. The form continued to be popular throughout the 19th century and into the 20th with homes such as the 1912 Kidd House on Beatties Ford Road.



Ca. 1805 Grier-Rea House



1912 James B. Kidd House

Representative examples of the I-house form as it evolved after the Civil War can be seen in a relatively compact area, including the Lytle House, roughly centered on the Ramah Presbyterian Church. At least eight austere post-bellum I-houses remain within a three-mile radius of Ramah Church.¹ These homes, while well built, substantial, and even stately, lack ornamentation. The homes' simplicity and symmetry may be a reflection of the conservative attitude of the rural Presbyterian community. But the power of popular culture is strong. In their 1997 report on Mecklenburg's rural historic resources Dr. Dan Morrill and Sherry Wyatt wrote: "The period between the close of the Civil War and 1910 was one of rapid development and change," and this was "expressively shown" through the design of the county's farmhouses.² Modern house plans were disseminated through newspapers, magazines, and especially through late 19th century patternbooks such as *Woodward's Cottages and Farm Houses*, *Bicknell's Village Builder*, and *Cottage and Constructive Architecture*.³ Asymmetrical massed-plan Queen Anne cottages sprang up in the nearby towns of Davidson and Huntersville, with the Sloan House on Main Street in Davidson being a well preserved example. By the turn of the century, even the rural Ramah community saw the arrival of a massed Folk Victorian house with the construction of the Dr. Wilson House on Mayes Road. Catherine Bisher tells us "Such novel designs did not replace customary forms and plans, however. Many new homes assumed old forms even as their builders took advantage of new mass-produced materials."⁴ Some of Mecklenburg's late 19th century builders decorated the basic I-house form with the newly available factory-made sawnwork and spindles decorating eaves and porches. A fine example of this is the Ewart House, just a few miles south of the Lytle House. The Ewart House also features another

common modification to the I-house form, the addition of a center gable forming a Triple-A roofline.



Builders such as Frank Lytle and William Bradford, who built a cross-gabled plan two-story farmhouse less than a mile from the Frank Lytle Farm in 1890, chose to modify the I-House form by intersecting two single-pile gabled wings, and thus achieving a more popular asymmetrical form. This was not a new idea, with J.M. Alexander building this design west of Huntersville in 1874, but it could be considered the final adaptation of the I-house form. Few I-houses were built after 1900. Before the First World War massed-plan houses gained popularity in the county, and could better accommodate indoor plumbing, and furnace heating. Even though these amenities were rare outside of town, massed plan homes also began to dominate new home construction in the county's countryside early in the 20th century, with the Craftsman's style and the Bungalow form being widely adopted.

¹ D.W. Mayes House (Enlarged into an I-house 1891), 12300 Mayes Road, Willie Mayes House, 1899, 17700 Blk. Davidson-Concord Road, Caldwell Bradford House, ca. 1890, 17345 Davidson-Concord Road, S.T. Caldwell House, 16912 Davidson-Concord Road, Barnhardt House, 15000 Blk. Ramah Church Road, Barnette House, ca. 1870, 14344 Ramah Church Road, Ozbourne House, ca. 1890, 12445 Ramah Church Road, McCord House, ca. 1910, 13312 McCord Road

² Sherry J. Wyatt and Dr. Dan L. Morrill “Historic Rural Resources in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina,” Charlotte - Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, 1997.

³ Catherine W. Bishir, *North Carolina Architecture*, The University of North Carolina Press, 1990, p.281.

⁴ *ibid*, p. 288.