



Survey and Research Report  
on the  
Mallard Creek School



1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the Mallard Creek School is located at 11400 Mallard Creek Road in Charlotte, NC.

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

The present owner of the property is:

Mallard Creek Presbyterian Church

1600 Mallard Creek Road

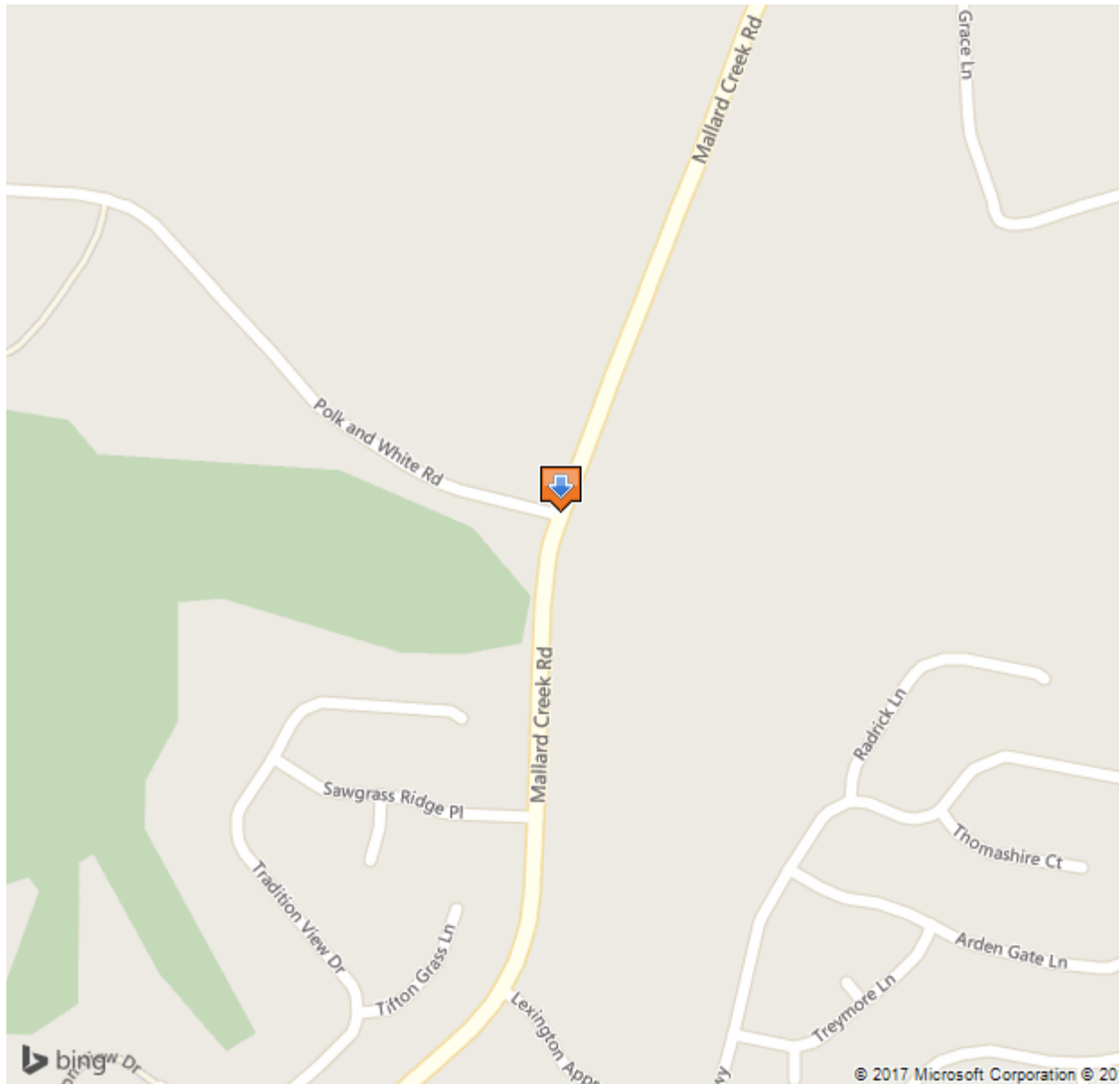
Charlotte, NC 28262

Telephone: 704-547-0038

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.





5. Current deed book reference to the property: The most recent deed to the property is found in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 3717, page 709. The tax parcel number for the property is 029-13-101.

6. A brief historical sketch of the property: This report contains a brief historical sketch of the property prepared by Emily D. Ramsey.

7. A brief architectural description of the property: This report contains a brief architectural description of the property prepared by Emily D. Ramsey.

8. Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets the 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 Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission judges that the Mallard Creek School possesses special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations:

- 1) The Mallard Creek School, constructed in the early 1920s, is a tangible reminder of the community-based and locally-supported system of education common in rural Mecklenburg County well into the twentieth century, and is an important part of the County's rapidly disappearing rural landscape.
- 2) The Mallard Creek School, a spacious, four-classroom schoolhouse that replaced several one-room schools in the area, is a reflection of the continued prosperity of small farming communities in Mecklenburg County during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.
- 3) Architecturally, the Mallard Creek School is an excellently preserved example of vernacular school construction in Mecklenburg County. The building's distinctive features – including the steeply pitched roofline, low-hanging eaves, long bank of windows and center-hall plan – reflect a variety of local and regional influences.
- 4) As the home of the regionally renowned annual Mallard Creek Presbyterian Church Barbeque, the Mallard Creek School (purchased by Mallard Creek Presbyterian Church in the early 1930s and renamed the Mallard Creek Community House) remains an integral part of the Mallard Creek Community.

b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling and/or association: The Commission judges that the architectural description completed by Emily D. Ramsey indicates that the Mallard Creek School 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 a designated "historic landmark." The current appraised value of the building is \$36,140. The appraised value of the 6.54 acres of land is \$95,040.

Date of Preparation of this Report:

April 13, 2000

Prepared By:

Emily D. Ramsey

745 Georgia Trail

Lincolnton, NC

## **Statement of Significance**

### **Mallard Creek School**

#### **11400 Mallard Creek Road**

#### **Charlotte, NC**

### **Summary Paragraph**

The Mallard Creek School, erected ca. 1920, is a structure that possesses local historic significance as a tangible reminder of the community-based and locally supported system of education common in rural Mecklenburg County well into the twentieth century and as a reflection of the continued prosperity of small farming communities in Mecklenburg County during the late-nineteenth-and early-twentieth centuries.

By the turn of the century, Charlotte and the surrounding area were in the midst of an economic boom that would last in large part until the Great Depression. While Charlotte blossomed as a regionally important textile manufacturing and cotton-trading center, farmers in rural Mecklenburg County continued to thrive through the 1910s and 1920s with cotton as their main cash crop. Scots-Irish farmers in the Mallard Creek Community in northern Mecklenburg County took advantage of this prosperity by constructing a spacious schoolhouse on Mallard Creek Road, replacing several one-room schoolhouses in the area and following a trend towards consolidation in public schools that would escalate throughout the county in the 1930s and 1940s. Built decades before Mecklenburg County began to construct a more formal, government-controlled public education system, the new schoolhouse was constructed entirely through the efforts of volunteers from the community. The Mallard Creek School, which served the area's children for only eleven years, remained an integral part of the community as the Mallard Creek Community House, a center for activities sponsored by Mallard Creek Presbyterian Church. The schoolhouse now houses the church's popular and regionally renowned annual barbeque fundraiser.

Architecturally, the Mallard Creek School is significant as an excellently preserved example of vernacular schoolhouse construction and as part of Mecklenburg County's rapidly disappearing rural landscape. The unusual combination of steeply-pitched tin roof, low-hanging eaves, horizontal façade, long bank of windows, and east-west orientation reflect the influence of earlier local schools and the possible influence of the [Julius Rosenwald Schools](#) that were constructed by the hundreds across North Carolina during the 1910s and 1920s, first appearing in Mecklenburg County in 1919. The schoolhouse also forms an integral part of the largely vernacular built environment in the rural Mallard Creek Community. Located on a 6.5-acre tract

of land along with several outbuildings (used for the annual barbeque), and surrounded by rolling hills and woodlands, the Mallard Creek School retains its originally rural setting. However, exponentially increasing suburban development along Mallard Creek Road will soon threaten this pristine rural landscape.

### **Agricultural and Educational Background and Historical Context Statement**

The late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century was a prosperous period for small farming communities in Mecklenburg County. Despite the success of the post-war New South campaign that brought hundreds of textile mills to the area and made Charlotte North Carolina's largest city, Mecklenburg County remained largely agrarian until well into the twentieth century. The region's post-war cotton boom, coupled with Charlotte's emergence as a regionally important cotton trading and textile manufacturing center, made Mecklenburg County a place of opportunity and prosperity for small farmers like those in the Mallard Creek Community.<sup>1</sup> The Mallard Creek area was already a well-established farming community by the beginning of the twentieth century, populated mainly by Scots-Irish Presbyterian farmers who valued religion, hard work and good education. The community's closely knit group of families built their first church building, a simple log structure known as the Mallard Creek Meeting House, in 1824. In 1856, the community again came together and built a new brick sanctuary to replace the log meeting house. The Mallard Creek Presbyterian Church formed the center of the community's religious, social and educational activities through the Civil War and Reconstruction.

By the 1870s, buoyed by the region's booming cotton economy, the community's families turned their attention towards building a separate schoolhouse for their children. The first Mallard Creek School, most likely a simple one-room schoolhouse, was completed in 1875. The school's success spurred the construction of several additional one-room schoolhouses in the area – most notably the Oehler School and the Union School. Such rural, locally supported and community based schools were common in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. Although communities were required to petition the Mecklenburg County Board of Education before beginning construction of a new public school, and although the County often offered assistance in establishing new schools, once the school building itself was completed the school became largely the responsibility of the community.

As the Mallard Creek area continued to grow into the twentieth century, the community began plans for a new, larger school building to replace the area's overcrowded and outdated one-room schools. On August 2, 1920, the Mecklenburg County Board of Education accepted a donation of land for the new school by the Crenshaw and Cochrane families. One month later, the Board endorsed an application from the Mallard Creek Community to the State Department for \$1500 to cover part of the construction costs for the new school building; additional funds were procured through the sale of the old Mallard Creek and Oehler schools.<sup>2</sup> As with the first Mallard Creek School, and in keeping with the long-standing tradition of rural communities, the new building was constructed entirely through the volunteer efforts of members from the Mallard Creek Presbyterian Church. Local farmers and "jack-leg" carpenters Mack Johnston and Mack Benfield were put in charge of the project, directing men from nine families within the community.<sup>3</sup> Construction progressed quickly, and the school was ready for use by the fall of 1920, replacing the old Mallard Creek School, the Union School and the Oehler School and

following a trend towards consolidation within the Mecklenburg County School system that would intensify in the decades after World War II.

For the first time, students from the Mallard Creek area were all housed in one building. The schoolhouse, which featured four large classrooms flanking a large central hall and a moveable partition between two classrooms that could be raised or removed to create a large auditorium space, provided ample space for students in the community to complete tenth grade - an unusually high level of education considering that "most rural schools in the South, both black and white," offered education "only through the eighth grade."<sup>4</sup> The new building's spacious rooms were also used for less studious purposes. J. Mack Oehler, whose father helped to construct the schoolhouse, remembers students playing shuffleboard in the hallway on rainy days.<sup>5</sup> Community and church social events (such as church picnics and baseball games) were often held on the school grounds, and community plays, recitals, and other programs held in the school's auditorium. As was often the case in rural communities, teachers at the Mallard Creek School, often young, unmarried men and women, boarded with nearby families during the school term, which was regularly adjusted to accommodate the fall harvest and spring planting seasons.<sup>6</sup>

The new Mallard Creek School building operated as a school for eleven years, from 1920 to 1931, during the beginnings of a key transitional period in the development of Mecklenburg County public schools. In the 1920s, North Carolina began a school consolidation program that planned to replace the scattered system of small, largely independent rural schools with a system of school districts. Fourteen districts were created in Mecklenburg County, each district centered around a union school and supported by several smaller feeder schools. Although the program was implemented slowly (delayed by the Depression of the 1930s and World War II), by the early 1950s, as better transportation allowed further consolidation of schools into fewer, larger campuses, most of county's rural schools had been closed.<sup>7</sup> The Mallard Creek School proved to be an early casualty of the consolidation process - as new and larger schools opened in nearby Derita and Newell, serving a wide area of students with new school buses, attendance at the Mallard Creek School dropped precipitously. In 1931, the school was closed.

That same year, the Mallard Creek Presbyterian Church congregation, whose families had built the school building and supported the school during its eleven years of service, purchased the structure for \$250.00 when it was offered for sale by the Mecklenburg County School Board. Renamed the Mallard Creek Community House, the building continued to serve the community and became the permanent home to Mallard Creek Presbyterian Church's most celebrated tradition - the annual Mallard Creek Church barbeque fundraiser. Begun in 1929 as a way to raise funds for a proposed addition to the church building, the barbeque (which in its first year served meat from just three pigs and one goat) was a rousing success that quickly evolved into an annual event, serving hundreds of people each October.<sup>8</sup> From its construction in 1920 to the present day, the Mallard Creek School has remained an integral part of the Mallard Creek community, and tangible reminder of life in Mecklenburg County's closely-knit farming communities during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

## **Architectural Description and Context Statement**

Architecturally, the Mallard Creek School is significant as an excellently preserved example of vernacular rural schoolhouse construction, reflecting a unique combination of local and regional architectural influences. The building's most striking and unusual feature is its steeply-pitched hipped tin roof. While some Mallard Creek Presbyterian Church members attest that the school building's roof was taken from a "northern" schoolhouse plan, which called for a steep pitch to assist with shedding large amounts of snow from the roof, other community members cite the fact that the building's steep roofline is similar to several nineteenth century schoolhouses nearby, including the Rockwell School on Eastfield Road.<sup>9</sup>

Although the Mallard Creek School served only white children, the building bears a remarkable resemblance to the Rosenwald Schools that were being constructed across the South during the 1910s and 1920s. Named for Julius Rosenwald, president of Sears, Roebuck and Company and a renowned philanthropist, the Rosenwald fund provided matching grants for southern rural communities interested in building schools for black children.<sup>10</sup> Rosenwald schools provided African American children throughout the South with large, clean, well-built schoolhouses that "incorporated the most up-to-date designs in American rural schoolhouse architecture" – the schools were often "the envy of white country neighbors."<sup>11</sup> Mecklenburg County's first Rosenwald School was erected in 1919, and may have provided a template for the farmers and amateur carpenters at Mallard Creek as they began construction on their school building in the summer of 1920. Although the steep roofline of Mallard Creek School is not reflected in any of the county's Rosenwald Schools, several other features of the Mallard Creek School are similar to those outlined in the Rosenwald Fund's strict architectural criteria – both designs feature white frame construction, long banks of windows (to maximize light and air circulation while minimizing heat), multiple classrooms clustered around a center hall or coatroom (the largest Rosenwald Schools contained four classrooms) and a movable partition to "covert classrooms into auditorium space."<sup>12</sup>

The Mallard Creek School is also significant as one of the few remaining rural schoolhouses remaining in the County. A 1997 survey of historic rural resources in Mecklenburg County, compiled by Sherry J. Joines and Dr. Dan Morrill, lists only five schoolhouses, including the Mallard Creek School – a surprisingly small number given the fact that Mecklenburg County was, until the mid-twentieth century, largely a region of small farming communities supporting an agrarian economy. Moreover, these rural resources are among the most endangered historic properties in Mecklenburg County,

since their integrity can be altered not merely through changes to the buildings themselves, but also to the rural settings (fields, woodlands, creeks, and streams) that surround them. The Mallard Creek School, surrounded by gently rolling hills and woodlands, retains its original setting. The only alteration to the 6.5 acre property is the addition of several frame and cinderblock outbuildings and sheds, used for the annual barbeque, to the east (or rear) of the school building.

The Mallard Creek School is a one-story structure of frame construction, three-bays-wide by two-bays-deep, covered with white-painted clapboards and topped with a steeply-pitched



hipped metal roof. The roofline is punctuated along its ridge by two decoratively corbelled brick chimneys, and the building's low-hanging eaves feature exposed rafters. The building rests on thick joists of heart pine supported by a brick pier foundation. Long banks of windows, covered with working wooden shutters, line the west (front) and east (rear) elevations of the school, providing light and ventilation to all of the school's four classrooms. A small shed porch with simple wooden posts extends from the center of the building's façade, giving access to the double doors (one original, one replacement) that once served as the school's main entrance. Two secondary entrances, one on the building's south elevation and one on the east elevation, provide additional access. Although most of the building's six-over-six windows have been removed, the Mallard Creek School has remained remarkably unaltered.

The interior of the building, four classrooms flanking a central hall, has also suffered little alteration. The pine board ceilings in three of the classrooms and in the central hall have been covered with acoustic tile (only the northwest classroom remains uncovered) and the moveable partition between the school's southern classrooms has been removed. In all other respects, the building's interior remains as it was in the 1920s, with heart pine floors, plaster walls above pine wainscoting, original wooden doors giving access to the hallway from each room, and a small closet in the northwest classroom that may have originally stored books and school supplies.

Although the Mallard Creek School retains its originally rural setting, fronted by woods and surrounded on three sides by fields and meadows, residential development is rapidly encroaching on this pristine rural schoolhouse. Despite the new apartment complexes and suburbs just out of sight, the Mallard Creek School remains a rare example of rural schoolhouse architecture and an integral part of Mecklenburg County's rapidly disappearing rural landscape.

1. Sherry J. Joines and Dr. Dan L. Morrill, "Historic Rural Resources in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina" (Charlotte Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, 1997).
2. Mecklenburg County Board of Education Minute Books, volumes 4-7 (July 5, 1915 - June 9, 1934), University of North Carolina at Charlotte Special Collections.
3. J. Mack Oehler, interview by Pat Ryckman, 2 May 2000. The men of the Bingham, Crenshaw, Oehler, Galloway, Alexander, McLaughlin, Johnston, Christenbury and Cochran families were said to have worked on the schoolhouse.
4. Thomas W. Hanchett, "The Rosenwald Schools and Black Education in North Carolina," *North Carolina Historical Review*, LXV, no. 4 (October 1988), p.421. The Mallard Creek School offered a tenth grade education until 1926, when the Mecklenburg County Board of Education limited the school to seven grades.
5. J. Mack Oehler, interview by Emily D. Ramsey, 19 April 2001.
6. Patricia Ryckman, "Report on the Mallard Creek School" (unpublished research paper prepared for Dr. Dan L. Morrill, 2000), p.2.

7. Francis Alexander, "[Survey and Research Report on the Billingsville School](#)" (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, 1994).
8. Ryckman, "Report on the Mallard Creek School," p.8.
9. Ibid, p.5.
10. Hanchett, "The Rosenwald Schools and Black Education in North Carolina," p. 390.
11. Ibid, p.401-405.
12. Alexander, "Survey and Research Report on the Billingsville School."