



# MURKLAND PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

[Click here to view a photo gallery on the Murkland Presbyterian Church.](#)



*This report was written on 30 October 1990*

**1. Name and location of the property:** The property known as the Murkland Presbyterian Church is located at Old Providence Road in Charlotte, NC.

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

Matthews-Murkland Presbyterian Church  
7001 Old Providence Road  
Charlotte, North Carolina

Telephone: (704) 365-5032

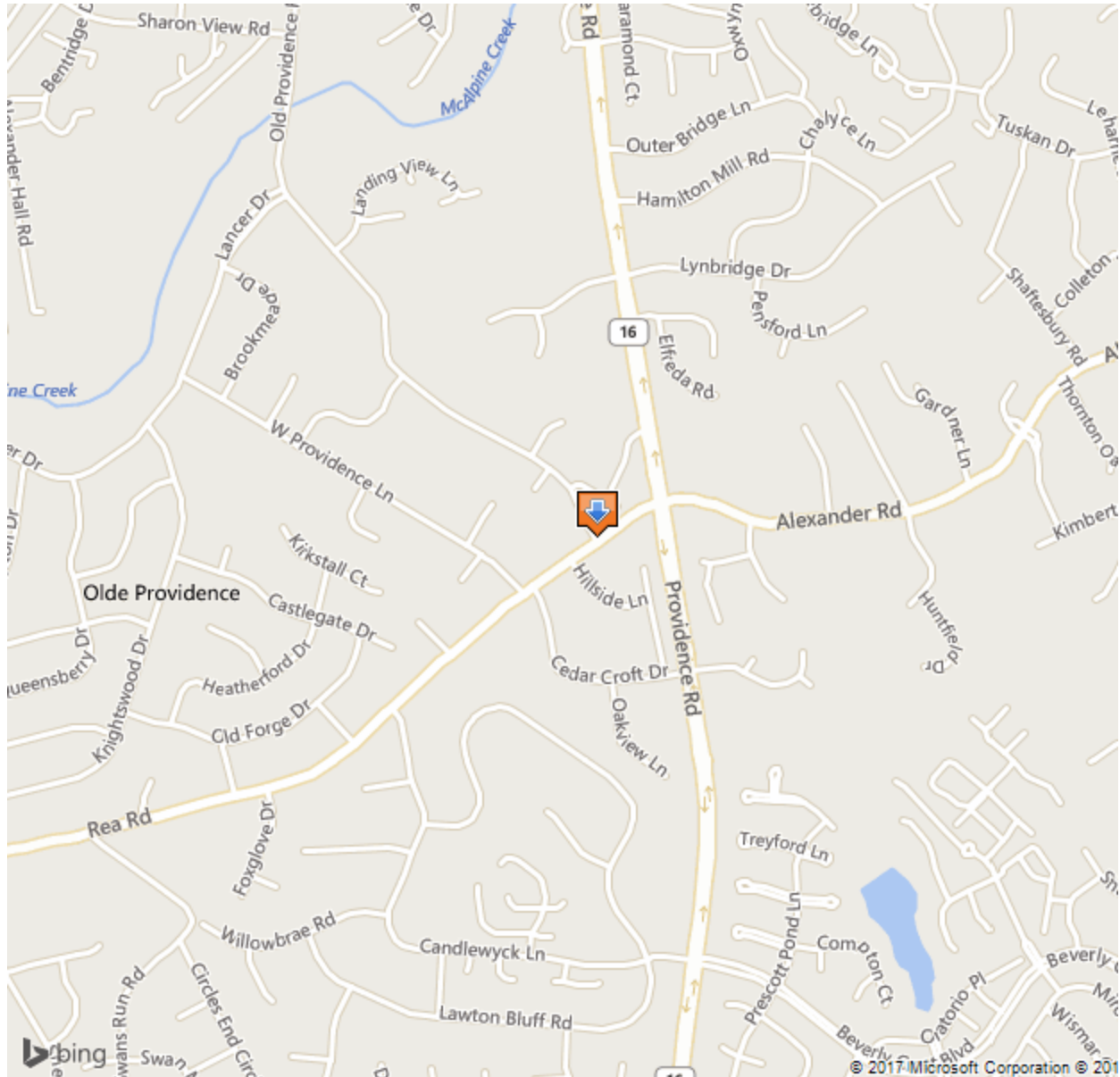
Tax Parcel Number: 211-021-01

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

photographs of the property.



**4. A man depicting the location of the property:** This report contains maps which depict the location of the property.



**5. Current Deed Book Reference to the property:** The most recent deed to this property is listed in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 312 at page 315. The Tax Parcel Number of the property is 211-021-01.

**6. A brief historical sketch of the property:** This report contains a brief historical sketch of the property prepared by Paula Stathakis.

**7. A brief architectural description of the property:** This report contains a brief architectural description of the property prepared by Nora M. Black.

**8. Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets criteria for designation set forth in N.C.G.S. 160A-400.5:**

**a. Special significance in terms of its history, architecture, and cultural importance:** The Commission judges that the property known as the Murkland Presbyterian Church does possess special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following consideration:

- 1) the Murkland Presbyterian Church was founded by ex-slaves and freedmen who left the Providence Presbyterian Church about 1866;
- 2) the Murkland Presbyterian Church was named for its first pastor, Rev. Sidney Murkland;
- 3) the ca.1912 structure that formerly housed the Murkland Presbyterian Church is architecturally significant as an early 20th century vernacular interpretation of the carpenter Gothic style;
- 4) the two entry towers of the west facade serve as focal points of the Old Providence Road landmark;
- 5) interior details such as the curved ceiling are examples of a high level of local craftsmanship; and
- 6) the property is a visual reminder of the varied contributions made by all aspects of religious life to the black community of Mecklenburg County.

**b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling, and/or association:** The Commission contends that the architectural description by Nora M. Black which is included in this report demonstrates that the Murkland Presbyterian Church 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 improvements is \$263,670. The current appraised value of the 6.540 acres is \$163,500. The total appraised value of the property is \$427,170. The property is zoned R-15.

**Date of Preparation of this Report:** 30 October 1990

**Prepared by:** Dr. Dan L. Morrill in conjunction with Nora M. Black  
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission  
1225 South Caldwell Street, Box D  
Charlotte, North Carolina 28203

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### *Historical Overview*

*Paula M. Stathakis*

The Murkland Presbyterian Church (now the Matthews-Murkland Presbyterian Church) was organized under the director of the Reverends Samuel G. Alexander, Sidney Murkland, and Willis L Miller. These men organized three other black Presbyterian congregations: The McClintock Church, the Seventh Street Church, and the Woodland Church. They were also instrumental in the development of the Biddle Institute (1867), a school for the education of black ministers. In addition to their work in Mecklenburg County, they also secured the organization Catawba Presbytery, the first all black Presbytery in the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., which was authorized in 1887 Murkland Church was included in this Presbytery.<sup>1</sup>

The date of the actual organization of the Murkland Church was never recorded. An informal church history claims that the church was founded as early as 1864, but taking the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation into consideration, the year of organization was probably 1865 if not later. The majority of the first members of Murkland Church were ex-slaves, who were formerly compelled to attend the dominantly white [Providence Presbyterian Church](#). Slave members of Providence Presbyterian Church were allowed to attend church services from the upstairs gallery built especially for this purpose. Providence Church historian Louise Barber Matthews found that the slave members wished to have their own prayer meetings on Sunday afternoons. By 1862, they were given permission to do so only if two or more white men were

present for fear of insurrection. By 1864, the rigors and the stress of war had a dispiriting effect on the Providence congregation. The session books record that "servants" were disinclined to take communion and were prone to drunkenness and fighting. These problems were also prevalent among the white members of the church.

Beginning in 1865, the Providence Presbyterian Church Session minutes indicate the elders' concern about the "irregularities with the Colored people" which seemed in some way connected with their new freedom. In May of that year, many black members of the church formed a Sunday School under the supervision of William Rea. They met for one hour starting at 10:00 a.m. devoting one-half hour to teaching letters, spelling, and reading. The other half hour was devoted to catechism lessons. By October of 1887, the Rev. Willis L Miller of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. intervened to advise the black members of Providence to form their own church. This rankled the session of the Providence Church because many black members left without asking permission to organize into a church "separate and distinct from ours." The session decided to "omit from the roll of members of this church without censure" those ex-slaves who chose to leave. According to Matthews, former black members of the Providence Presbyterian Church have "name erased, April 29, 1866" on the church rolls when they withdrew from the church. Many left to go to Murkland.<sup>3</sup>

Little is known about the original members of Murkland church. Murkland does not have any extant records from this period. According to the Rev. D. G. Burke, who grew up in the Murkland Church, and who wrote a general history of the Catawba Presbytery, most black churches from this period have few or no records from the period of their organization.<sup>4</sup> What is known is that the Rev. Sidney Murkland was the first pastor of the church. The next pastors Rev. Matthew Ijams was the first black to minister to the Murkland congregation. The first elders were G. W. Grier, M. W. Peoples, James Porter, and Henry Porter. The first deacons were John Burke, William Hines, and Aron Stitt. There is also a list of fifteen original members; however, it is probably safe to assume that these fifteen represent only a portion of the total original membership.<sup>5</sup>

The original church building is no longer standing. No one remembers what it looked like, but some members vaguely recollect that it resembled the Providence Presbyterian Church. Mr. Adolphus Jones, oldest living member of the church at age 102, remembers that this church was called "Little Providence" and Providence Presbyterian was called "Big Providence." He also remembers a session house was built behind the church.<sup>6</sup> Rev. Burke believes that the church was constructed according to plans provided by the Presbytery, and paid for with a loan from the national church. This structure burned in the first decade of this century. The precise date of the destruction of the old church and the construction of the second structure were never recorded and are long-forgotten. One may estimate the date of the fire by the memories of some of the long-time church remembers. Mr. John McGrant vividly remembers the fire; he thinks he was either six or eight at the time. Mrs. Rosa Bell Cutherson remembers hearing the bell that signaled the fire at age four. Mrs. Cutherson was born in 1907, Mr. McGrant was born in 1903; this would put the date of the fire c. 1911.<sup>7</sup>

A brush fire that burned out of control caused the fire. Mr. Jones, who owns a farm across the road from the church, says that the fire came from behind his property. The church, which was

built of wood, burned quickly. Somebody managed to get inside and worked in their fields. When it was apparent that it was impossible to save the building, Mrs. Alexander White and Mrs. Maggie Grier ran into the church and managed to haul out some of the pews. Some Bibles were saved as well. Benches, Bibles, and the church bell were the only objects to survive the blaze.<sup>8</sup>

A new church was built on the same site as the old church. The date of construction is uncertain, but it was probably c. 1912. The style of the church, Carpenter's Gothic, is not common in this area, but a few other churches in the area that exhibit this design were built between 1911 and 1915.<sup>9</sup>

This church was built by Mr. Billy Stewart and Mr. Charlie Jarman (Yarmouth?). They were assisted by any members of the congregation who were able to contribute time or materials. Mr. McGrant helped Stewart and Jarman by doing odd jobs, such as carrying water. This church is an impressive structure for a community volunteer effort. There were professional carpenters in the church membership, and as one member has pointed out, the people were able to lay straight rows in their fields without surveyors. That they could build a solid church is not so surprising. It is not known if they were assisted with any details, such as the installation of the windows.<sup>10</sup> The stained glass windows in the new church were a gift from the Matthews Presbyterian Church, which was in the process of building a new church. Two women from the Murkland Church, Jennie Morrison, and Nancy Grier, worked for a physician who was a member of Matthews Presbyterian Church, and who arranged this donation.<sup>11</sup>

The bell was saved from the first church, and in addition to signaling Sunday morning services, was a vehicle that relayed news to the surrounding community. If the bell rang fast, it announced an emergency, such as a fire. If it rang slowly, it tolled someone's death.<sup>12</sup>

A cemetery is situated behind the church. The majority of graves there are unmarked, which makes it difficult if not impossible to know how many people are buried there and who is there. Most of the churchyard is cleared land, but the lot is very deep and some graves are now hidden in the overgrowth of trees in the furthest reaches. The graves that are marked are oriented with the feet facing east. The oldest marked graves belong to Eliza Peoples, May 1, 1848-October 1, 1866-January 31, 1905; Harriet Ann Stitt, November 6, 1848-December 19, 1895; Lucinda Peoples, 1848-1908.

The church has played a central role in the lives of its members. Going to church on Sundays was the culminating event of the week. Those who lived close to church walked to Sunday services; those who had to travel long distances arrived in surreys, mule carts, and ox carts. It was common for families to travel well over three miles for Sunday services.<sup>13</sup>

Sunday School began at 9:00 a.m. Every child brought an offering to Sunday School, usually a penny or a nickel, which Miss Elnora Stitt remembers taking tied to a handkerchief for safekeeping. Church services followed Sunday School and lasted until 1:00 p.m.<sup>14</sup> The Church had no piano, and singing was accompanied by clapping. A lead singer would "pitch" the melody and the rest of the congregation would follow.<sup>15</sup>

Seating was arranged by sex; men sat on one side, the women opposite them, and children and visitors sat in the rear. Before the church had electricity, gas lamps lit the interior and a large wood stove sat in the middle of the sanctuary. This spatial arrangement meant that when it was time to give the weekly offering, each person walked up to the altar to present their money as their name and amount given was recorded in a ledger. The return trip to their seat entailed continuing from the altar and around the stove. This process took each individual on a complete trip around the sanctuary.<sup>16</sup> On special occasions, such as Homecoming, Children's Day, or Communion, the congregation stayed after church for a picnic. Everyone contributed food for these events.<sup>17</sup>

The ministers of Murkland were paid a salary that was provided out of the offerings of the members. When money was scarce, the congregation took care of their preacher by paying in fatback, ham, butter, chickens, eggs, and milk: Visiting preachers frequently participated in homecomings and the revivals that were part of these events. To accommodate the visiting clergy, a different family fed him each day of the week. The preacher and the adults ate before the children of the house, whose duty was to shoo flies, since no one had screened windows and doors. Mrs. Rosa Bell Cuthbertson recalled tending to a visiting preacher in her parents' home: "we didn't eat--we just shooing flies." The children ate after the adults finished and there was always enough food left, but as Mrs. Cuthbertson remembers, it took too long to get it.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to revivals, the Murkland community met on Saturdays for baseball games, the premier activity to "let your hair down." Baseball was clearly serious business. Team pitcher John McGrant, could hardly wait for Saturday noon, to put up the mule and go play ball. The church sponsored a men's baseball team and a women's softball team. Not all team members were part of the church community, but an effort was made to recruit good ball players from the area as ammunition against the opposition. Both teams had uniforms with "Murkland Team" on them. These uniforms were described by John McGrant as first class, similar to those worn by professional teams.<sup>19</sup>

The ballfield was located on Alexander Road, approximately one mile from the church. Ballgames were invariably accompanied by picnics; refreshments were available across the road from the ballfield. Lemonade, made in a tin washtub with a block of ice to cool it, sold for five cents for all you could drink. Watermelon and home-made ice cream were also available, as well as fish that sold for ten to twenty-five cents. Additional entertainment at ball games in the 1920s was provided by a band organized by eight men from Murkland who played at picnics and ball games.<sup>20</sup>

Spectators sat under the trees at the fringe of the field where they offered words of encouragement to the team, or advice when necessary. "Get an apron!" was the phrase best-remembered for players who let balls slip through their legs. The games usually lasted until 9:00 p.m. If a game lasted into darkness, those how brought cars would turn their headlights on the field so the players could see to finish the game.

Saturday nights, when not taken up with ball games, were the time for fish fries or chitterlings dinners, with lemonade and home brew. These events were held at home, and the evening was



not complete without square dancing. There was no music for dancing, just a caller, usually Walter Harrison.<sup>22</sup>

The membership of the Murkland Church came from the outlying farming community. Their weekdays were spent hard at work in the fields, and their meager leisure time was reserved for church, baseball, and fish fries. These were self-sufficient people who raised everything they needed except coffee and sugar. Cotton was their cash crop. Church members now in their seventies and eighties remember picking cotton to earn enough money buy candy on Saturdays. A cotton gin was located in the vicinity operated by a [Mr. Funderburke](#). Mr. Jones remembers two other cotton gins: one in Matthews owned by John Crittendon and one in Pineville owned by the Miller brothers.

Corn and wheat were ground at a mill in Monroe, or some had small, hand-crank mills at home. Two general stores in the neighborhood, Roger's store (located the fork of Providence Road and Old Providence Road where an Exxon station stands today) and Hunter store provided these families with equipment, fertilizer, and other supplies that they could not grow or manufacture for themselves.<sup>24</sup>

The second Murkland Church served the congregation until a third church was built in the adjoining lot in 1976. The Matthews Chapel, also organized in the Catawba Presbytery in 1876 merged with Murkland in 1969. The reason for the merger was that Murkland pastor Dr. Daniel O. Hennigan was responsible for both congregations since 1963, and as a result each church had services every other Sunday. The consolidation of the churches seemed the best solution to the problem. The new church was called the Matthews-Murkland Church, and a new building was constructed on "neutral" to accommodate the congregation.<sup>25</sup> The second church was used for an arts and crafts building until 1983. It is not currently used.

The membership of the church is now scattered throughout Charlotte, but Sundays bring them all together again. This is a significant testimony of the enduring tradition of a community whose origins go back to a small group of freedmen and a handful of free blacks who founded the church. The second Murkland Presbyterian Church is significant. First, it is an important historical link to the community's past, and there are many people who are able to personally identify with this structure as the place of Sunday School in their youth, where they married, or where they buried friends and family. Second, the church is a significant part of the greater Mecklenburg community. It is noteworthy as a country church, as a post-war southern church established outside the jurisdiction of the then Presbyterian Church in the United States (the southern church), and as the focus of a rural black farming community.



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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Reverend D.G. Burke, *The Catawba Story, 1886-1980*. Historical Committee of the Catawba Presbytery, 1981, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Louise Barber Matthews, *A History of the Providence Presbyterian Church*. Charlotte, NC: Books-Litho, 1967, pp. 138, 147, 143.

<sup>3</sup> Matthews, *History of Providence*, pp. 145,146. The session minutes of the Providence Presbyterian Church were not made available to verify this. There is no reason to assume that Matthews omitted any detail from the minutes in her church history. The Rev. D. G. Burke has seen the records at Providence Presbyterian Church, and confirms that the details concerning the names of black members who withdrew from the church at this time are virtually non-existent.

<sup>4</sup> In his research for the *Catawba Story, 1886-1930*. Rev. Burke was unable to find any records for the Murkland church during the period of its organization. Rev. Burke has conducted thorough search in the Presbytery records and in the Assembly Records located in Philadelphia. He believes that this church probably kept records of members, but that this information was

probably discarded by the church every time a new session was installed and began a new series of records that were simply more pertinent for their purposes at the time.

<sup>5</sup> This information was taken from a *History of the Murkland Presbyterian Church*, submitted by C.A. Burke, clerk of session. This is an unpublished report to the session which is the property of the church and has no date.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Mr. Adolphus Jones, 8-1-90.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Mr. Adolphus Jones 8-1-90. Interview with long-time members of the Murkland Presbyterian Church, 8-5-90.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Mr. Adolphus Jones, 8-1-90; Interview with long-time members of Murkland Church, 8-12-90.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Mr. Adolphus Jones; Interview with long-time members of Murkland Church, 8-5-90, 8-12-90. Mr. Jones recalls some people using dog carts as another variety of travel.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with long-time members of Murkland Church, 8-1-90. Mr. Walter Cuthberson managed to save six ledger books from the second Murkland Church. Some of these ledgers are the Sunday School records which show for the lessons read each Sunday, who was in attendance and the amount collected in offerings. Other ledgers are accounts of what individuals gave in church offerings.

<sup>15</sup> Interview, 8-12-90.

<sup>16</sup> Explained by Mr. Walter Cuthberson, 8-5-90.

<sup>17</sup> Interview 8-12-90.

<sup>18</sup> Interview, 8-12-90.

<sup>19</sup> Interview, 9-2-90. The uniforms were purchased from Sears and Roebuck, the ever popular purveyor of material goods in the early twentieth century.

<sup>20</sup> Interview, 9-2-90. The members of the band were: Walter Harrison (lead horn), Jim Hood (bass drum), Tom Down (kettle drum), Bridey Morrison (alto horn), Ed Dunn (bass horn), Tom Barber (drum), Ed Massey, and William Weathers.

<sup>21</sup> Interview, 9-2-90.

<sup>22</sup> Interview, 8-12-90.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Mr. Adolphus Jones, 8-1-90; Interview, 8-12-90.

<sup>24</sup> Interview, 8-12-90.

<sup>25</sup>. From a historical sketch in the *Homecoming Service Bulletin*, 11-14-82. Access kindly provided by Mr. Harvey Boyd.

### *Architectural Description*

*Nora M. Black*

Murkland Presbyterian Church, located on the east side of Old Providence Road, presents a facade virtually unchanged since it was constructed during the early 20th Century. Sited on a low hilltop in a curve of Old Providence Road, the structure's entry facade faces approximately west. Small additions on the northwest and southwest corners are in keeping with the original building.

The design is that of a carpenter Gothic building. It should be noted that carpenter Gothic buildings usually had very steeply pitched roofs. The pitch of the Murkland Presbyterian Church is not as steep as many buildings constructed in this style. Additionally, the weatherboarding is placed horizontally rather than vertically as might be seen in this style. Both the roof pitch and the horizontal cladding add to the vernacular interpretation of the style. The bold cross gables are indicative of the "Greek cross" plan featuring four arms of the building of equal length.

Facing Old Providence Road, the symmetrical one-story entry facade features twin recessed towers, one to each side of the centered gable wing. This breaks the entry facade into three vertical sections. The gable wing has two centered double-hung wooden sash with stained glass. Above the windows there is a pointed arch which has been infilled with weatherboarding. The arch extends into the wall surface of the gable, a feature typical of the carpenter Gothic style.

The twin towers provide distinction to the church and clearly mark the location of the doors. Since the vestibules and sanctuary are built over a crawl space, a flight of five steps leads up to the double doors at the base of each tower. The towers provide space for a vestibule on each side of the sanctuary. Above each set of double doors there is a pointed arch with tracery and stained glass. The six panel wooden doors have a single doorknob and lock; at the eave there are two electric lights above the doors. Each tower protrudes from the roof of the vestibule providing some of the most intricate detailing on the exterior of the building. The spire of each tower is topped with a metal finial. The roof of the tower slopes down, then curves gently outward to the eave. On the two outside faces of each tower, there is a very steep gable cut into the curving roofline. There is a diamond shaped wooden vent directly beneath each gable.

The church was originally supported on brick piers; however, the brick piers have been infilled with concrete blocks. Both the piers and the infill have been painted white. The weatherboarding and trim have been painted white as well. The moderately steep pitch of the roof makes it a

dominant feature. The black hexagonal-shaped shingles, with a pattern of French-method shingles, add visual interest to the building and the twin towers.

A small shed addition was added beside each tower/vestibule. The additions house restrooms; prior to their construction, church members had to use outhouses located some distance from the building. Although convenient for members, the location diminishes the power of the tower corners that were such a marked feature of the original facade.

Both the north and south (side) elevations of the building have three double-hung wooden sash that originally held stained glass. Each of the three windows has a pointed arch with tracery and stained glass above the double-hung sash. Some glass was broken by vandals; other glass has been removed and stored until the building is in use again. Clear glass and plywood cover some openings; other window openings are unprotected from the weather. A small square opening on each addition provided natural light in the restrooms. Originally the stained glass windows would be opened for ventilation during warm summer days.

A single side door on the south elevation at the rear of the building is approached by a set of six steps. A Lyle door gives access to the stage.

The two vestibules of the church may be entered through one of the two sets of double doors facing Old Providence Road. The church bell was rung using a rope that extends from the southwest tower into the southwest vestibule. The bell is visible through a square hole in the vestibule ceiling. In each vestibule, the exterior double doors may be locked by placing a heavy wooden bar across the center of the doors. Plaster in the vestibules has suffered some water damage.

The interior of the Murkland Presbyterian Church has a "Greek cross" plan. The original hardwood floor slopes down toward the building's center from the west, north and south arms of the "Greek cross" plan. The east arm of the cross has a large wood-framed arched opening with a raised stage that was used by the minister and the choir. Stairs at the northeast corner of the stage lead to a small conference room above the stage. The original wooden doors between the vestibule and the sanctuary are still in place. The wooden ceiling, painted ivory, curves down to meet the walls. Metal hooks which are visible in the ceiling were used to hold gas lamps. At this time, electric lighting is provided by translucent globes hanging from the ceiling. The original wainscoting encircles the sanctuary.

A renovation after the construction of the new Matthews-Murkland Presbyterian Church turned the older building into a crafts center. Wood paneling was used to construct walls across three arms of the "Greek cross" plan. The walls, which do not extend to the ceiling, separated the sanctuary into four separate activity areas. The paneling is not permanently attached; it is to be removed in the near future.

Murkland Presbyterian Church is no longer in regular use. The future may hold a rental of the structure to an emerging congregation. That will preserve many of the building's fine features while providing an enduring landmark in the rapidly changing southern part of Charlotte.