

# Route I: South Mecklenburg

*Route I is approximately 50 miles long and takes about one and one-half hours to drive. Allow up to two hours extra time for stops and shopping.*

**NOTE:** There are separate tours for the towns of Matthews and Pineville on this website that can be incorporated into this regional tour.

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In the south of Mecklenburg County two prominent railway towns, Pineville and Matthews, flank an area of robust farming traditions. Both towns owe their existence to the railroads which began to criss-cross the county after 1852, and which boosted the area's cotton economy. As railway depots, Pineville and Matthews became focal points for the local community, offering a wide selection of supplies and fancy goods, cotton ginning and freight facilities and popular social gathering places. **Route I** takes you to both towns and the still predominantly rural area between the two.

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*Route I begins on Arrowood Road, east of I-77.*

- **If you are coming from the south, drive north on I-77 and take the exit for Arrowood Road. Turn right.**
  - **If you are coming from Uptown Charlotte, take I-77 south to the exit for Arrowood Road and turn left.**
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1. After a short distance you see the transmission towers of WBT in the distance. WBT was the first commercial radio station in the Carolinas. The station had humble beginnings; the first broadcasts were made in the 1920's from an old chicken coop in a Charlotte suburb. (See **Route II, no. 34.**)

*At the traffic light, turn right onto Nations Ford Road.*

2. Nations Ford Road follows the route of an ancient Indian trading path. Its local destination was Nation Ford, a river crossing used by Indians and later by adventurers, traders, and settlers. The name refers to its proximity to the Catawba Indian Nation. On a national scale the trading path fit into a series of Indian trails, linking the Great Lakes with the Carolinas and beyond to the Savannah River in Georgia.

When the first white explorers arrived in this area there was a population of 4000 to 5000 Indians in at least six villages scattered along a twenty mile stretch of the Catawba River. Here the Catawba, a branch of the Sioux tribe, enjoyed the advantages of fertile soil, a fish-filled river, abundant wildlife and a hospitable climate, though they also faced periodic battles with their Cherokee neighbors to the west. In 1650 a legendary battle was fought at Nation Ford in which 1100 Cherokees and 1000 Catawbas were killed in a single day. The ensuing truce granted the Catawba an area along the "Great River" from near its headwaters in North Carolina to what is now Chester County, South Carolina. This was the situation that the pioneers found as they drove their laden wagons into the Piedmont's forest. Imagine the road that the pioneers encountered. It was described in the 1750's by a settler as "a seldom trodden rocky farm road to the back field" amidst a "vast primeval wilderness arched high overhead by large wide spreading branches of majestic trees, ash, walnut, oak, pine, poplar and chestnut."

The pioneers changed what they found. By the 1760's, after only a decade of persistent white settlement in the area, much of the Catawba's lands had been sold, bartered, or lost. The Catawba nation had dwindled to a population of about 1000, for in addition to tribal warfare they suffered from contact with European diseases and vices: chiefly smallpox and whiskey. In 1764, two years after the death of the last famous Catawba chief, King Haiglar, the colonial governor of South Carolina granted the Catawba fifteen square miles on the border of North Carolina and South Carolina. By 1840 the area had dwindled to 652 acres, and there were only seventy-five Catawba left. Little was thought about the surviving remnants of the Catawba until 1977, when Chief Gilbert Blue laid claim to the original fifteen square miles granted to the Catawba in 1764.

***After about two and one-half miles Nations Ford Road now ends at Highway 51. Turn left and continue on Highway 51 until you reach Pineville.***

3. Just before you enter the village of Pineville you will cross the railroad which created the town and which set off the process by which Charlotte was to become the large city it is today. The Charlotte and South Carolina Railway ran its first passenger train on October 21, 1852, linking Charlotte with Columbia and thereby providing

crucial service for shipping cotton to the South Carolina ports. Previously, cotton and other merchandise had been laboriously carried by wagon along the tortuous roads to and from navigable rivers in South Carolina. The closest market was an 8 - day trip.



*Main Street, Pineville*

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*See the Pineville route...*

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Before the railroad opened, Pineville had been a small community clustered around a stagecoach stop and was known as Morrow's Turnout. It reputedly got the name Pineville from the many large pine trees casting shadows over the town at the time of the railroad's construction. The railroad ensured Pineville's future as a commercial center, and by 1873 it had become an incorporated municipality. By 1900, the town boasted two bars and ten stores and served the surrounding countryside, both as a mule-trading center and an important credit market.

Following Charlotte's example, Pineville also attracted the growing textile industry. Its first textile mill opened in 1890. Although the mill has expanded and changed ownership several times since then, this mill operated until very recently as the Cone Mills.



*Pineville's Mill*

Pineville no longer serves all the needs of a large rural population, but it still attracts many shoppers to its antique shops and cafes. You may want to park your car and explore the sights, including the many antique shops.

***Continue east through the village on Hwy. 51. At the intersection with Hwy. 521 turn right. On your left, after .5 miles, you will see the log cabin of the Polk Museum on your left. Turn into the drive and park near the Information Center.***

**4.** The museum marks the birthplace of James Knox Polk, the eleventh president of the United States. He was born in 1795 into one of the leading pioneer families of Mecklenburg and spent his childhood in the county. His great uncle was Thomas Polk, one of Charlotte's first residents and a forceful leader of the early community. Although the Polk family lands were located at this site, the present log buildings are not original to the farmstead. They are reconstructions which date from the early nineteenth century. The museum tells the story of James K. Polk and sets the scene of eighteenth - century Mecklenburg through exhibits, a slide show, and guided tours of the log house and outbuildings. Allow about one hour for a full visit. Admission is free. The museum is open Tuesday to Saturday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Sunday 1 p.m. - 5 p.m.. There is a picnic area, and toilet facilities are provided. (For more information call (704) 889-7145.)



*Polk Museum, Pineville*

***On leaving the Polk Museum, turn left onto Hwy. 521 and continue driving south for about 3 miles. You will pass Harrison Methodist Church on your right.***

**5.** Although the church building itself is not old, the first Methodist congregation in the county assembled on this site in 1785. George Washington is said to have attended a service at [Harrison Methodist Church](#) during his triumphal tour through the new Republic in 1791.



*The old Harrison Methodist Church, which burned.*

***Just past Harrison Church, turn left onto Providence Road West.***

**6.** The farmhouses that you will see on the country drive along Providence Road West between here and Providence Church offer an insight into life in Mecklenburg County for the last hundred years. If the Polks and their neighbors had stayed in the area, their farms would have seen many changes. No doubt two story frame dwellings would have replaced their hand-hewn log houses. The old log structures would have been used as kitchens or for storage or could have been incorporated into the new houses. Mecklenburg farmers wasted very little, even in their relative affluence.

***After about 2 miles, turn right onto Community House Road. Bear left at the fork, keeping the 1930s Community House (which is a log building) on your right. Drive a farther .5 miles. Turn around to get a view of the house set in the distance among the trees across the fields to your left.***



*Providence Community House*

7. The view that you see gives you a good sense of how the landscape must have looked during the late nineteenth century. James R. Dunn built the house in the distant grove of trees in about 1885, but it is better remembered for the Ross family who resided here from 1919 to the 1970s. William and Sarah Ross operated a flourishing cotton farm here with four tenant houses, a store, a cotton gin, and a blacksmith's shop.

***Return to Providence Road West, turn right and take the next right turn after 1.3 miles onto Blakeney Heath Road. Drive .5 miles through a recent subdivision until you come to the Blakeney house set in the trees to your right.***

8. If the Polks had stayed in the area, their frame house might have burned, as did the first house on this site. Even if it had survived, many farmers around the 1900s felt the urge to either update their old homestead with generous new wrap-around porches and additional ells or rear projections, or build a completely new house to conform with the fashions of the time.

This house was erected in 1905 to 1906 by James A. Blakeney who had been acquiring land in the area since the 1880s. The house is a splendid example of the type of dwelling prosperous farmers constructed at that time. It was no doubt the work of a local builder. It is a conservative interpretation of Victorian architecture, popular 20 to 30 years earlier in more fashionable areas of the U.S. Notice the large bay on the left

front of the building, the wood shingles in the gable ends, and the large wrap-around porch with its decorative details. These are all Victorian motifs, but presented in an unpretentious manner.



*The James A. Blakeney House*

***Return to Providence Road West. Cross the road and pull into the parking lot of the convenience store to see the Robinson house.***

9. This was the home of a local store owner. The store was nearby, but burned in 1954. Most Mecklenburg farm families were self-sufficient, growing their own grains and vegetables, producing their own meat and eggs, churning their own butter and even making their own clothes. The country store provided the things which could not be made at home. As you can see from this house it could be a lucrative trade.

Note the Victorian motifs, especially the decorated pediment capping the center of the porch, which suggests that this house may have been constructed by the same local builder as the Blakeney house.

***Continue eastward on Providence Road West. Shortly past the Robinson house, take the right turn to stay on Providence Road West. Almost 1 mile farther you will pass the McKinney house on your left.***

10. This was once the seat of a 900 - acre plantation. Here the old 1870s house which is now to the rear was incorporated into a fancy new Colonial Revival extension in

1916. The property also contains several agricultural outbuildings, especially an imposing barn.

*Continue eastward on Providence Road West for approximately 1.25 miles. At the traffic light at Providence Road, turn left onto Providence Road. Drive .5 miles and turn into the parking lot of Providence Church on your left.*

11. For many early South Mecklenburgers this was the center of their community and a source of strength and inspiration. The charming Federal - style sanctuary which we see today was built in 1858, but it was preceded by more modest structures. The earliest worshippers gathered here in the open air in all weather to listen to sermons delivered from a large rock overlooking a spring in an oak grove. The stone outcropping can still be seen in the cemetery opposite, across Providence Road. Their first shelter would have been a brush arbor -- a canopy of fresh cut pine boughs.

As soon as the predominantly Scots-Irish settlers had built their own homes and cleared some land for crops, they turned to the task of establishing a church and seeking out a spiritual leader. It was not easy to find such a leader and teacher in the newly settled back country of North Carolina. For many years Mecklenburgers were served by itinerant preachers who took on the enormous job of serving a large and zealous flock. The most famous of these men was Alexander Craighead, a man who embodied all that the Mecklenburg community stood for--a determination to live, work, and worship in freedom. His sermons stressed the "new Side" evangelical components of Christianity, and he openly encouraged liberty and independence in both the religious and political sphere. Although Rocky River and Sugar Creek churches, several miles to the north and northeast, were his official congregations, Craighead preached all over the county and counted the Providence group as "one of his houses."

By 1767, the Providence group had built a simple log meetinghouse which stood east of the cemetery. With the new church came the congregation's first pastor, William Richardson, the son-in-law of Mr. Craighead.

During the Revolutionary War, the British General Charles Cornwallis moved his army through this area on his march to Charlotte in September, 1780. As was true throughout the county, he received a cold reception from the community. Three members of the Providence Church, Neil Morrison, John Flenekin, and Henry Downs, were said to be signers of the alleged Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence. Their graves and those of other Revolutionary heroes can be found in the cemetery. Take a walk through the cemetery, but be careful crossing the road.

[Providence Presbyterian Church](#) has also been the site of several successful revival meetings. One such held in 1802 was described by a church member: "...prayer and hymn-singing filled the air, phenomena of a strange and unaccountable nature occurred, and many hundreds of persons were converted." In 1804 a second sanctuary was erected in front of the cemetery, and by 1831 the church was flourishing, with 240 members many of whom were black. In 1858 a new structure was built, and it survives as one of the most interesting and well-preserved in the county. It is an excellent example of the simplicity of meetinghouse architecture. Notice the immense height of the windows, which rise twenty-five feet above the sanctuary floor. Inside, the decoration is plain, but beautifully executed. The galleries are original and were built for the use of black members, who, as slaves, had no choice but to attend the church of their white masters. These became empty after the Civil War as the freed slaves formed their own congregations.

Today Providence Church is once again thriving and living up to its name "symbol of God's protecting care."



*Providence Presbyterian Church*

***To shorten the tour, turn left onto Providence Road from the parking lot and then right at the major junction with Hwy 51. Follow Hwy 51 into Matthews, and turn left onto Trade St. at the crossroads in the center of town. Skip to number 16.***

***To continue on the full tour, turn right onto Providence Road from the parking lot and drive south to Providence Road West and McKee Road. Turn left onto McKee Road. After .5 miles take the fork to the right onto Tilley Morris Road. After a mile you will see the Hennigan Place on your right, just after a bend at the top of a hill. Be careful, it is easy to miss it.***

**12.** This old [farmstead](#) has been moved from its original location where it was threatened with demolition in 1973. James Hennigan built the house in about 1845, adjacent to James K. Polk's old farm. Hennigan was a prominent Methodist layman and an official of the court of pleas and the quarter sessions of the county.

The house is a good example of the Greek Revival influence on local builders. Notice the four plain Doric-style columns, wooden of course. Otherwise the house is very similar to other vernacular farmhouses of the area. Notice again the "I" house design. A series of large single stone piers supports the house, hinting at its great age.

*Continue along Tilley Morris Road. You will be driving on this road for several miles, though the name changes to Weddington Road shortly after the Hennigan Place. You will be in Union County for a short period of time. After about 3 miles you will cross McKee Road again, and eventually come to a stop sign. Turn left onto Pleasant Plains Road, and follow it into Matthews.*

13. Before you reach the town's crossroads, look out for the old [Matthews School](#). It is on the right-hand side of the road, just past the fire station, and set well back from the road among other public buildings. The school symbolizes Matthews's growth and civic pride during the first decade of the twentieth century when the town was chosen as the site for one of the first state-supported rural high schools. The building was truly a community enterprise, with locals providing building materials and teams and wagons for hauling them to the site. In 1983 the town purchased the outgrown school and converted it into a community center.



*Matthews School*

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*See the Matthews route...*

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**14.** Like Pineville, Matthews owes its growth and commercial success to the railroad. Prior to the Civil War the area was known as Fullwood. It consisted of a stagecoach inn and post office on the run between Charlotte and Monroe. The first postmaster was John Fullwood. After the war, the area became known as "Stumptown," a humorous name derived from the pine stumps remaining after local trees were cut down to build houses and a general store. The turning point in the town's history came in 1874 when the Carolina Central Railroad routed its track through the small community to link Tennessee to Wilmington, North Carolina via Charlotte. The name Matthews was chosen to honor Watson Matthews, a member of the Carolina Central's board of directors. The town was incorporated in 1879.

*Matthews' main street is best appreciated on foot. Park your car. When you return you will be continuing down Trade St. towards the railway tracks.*

**15.** Many of the store buildings date from the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. Probably the most interesting is the old [Heath and Reid General Store](#) building at the eastern corner of N. Trade St. and the railroad line--a prime location when it was completed in 1889. This store was the economic and social centerpiece of the community. Everard Jefferson Heath and Edward Solomon Reid provided a variety of services including banking, cotton brokerage, and of course wholesale and retail of every imaginable commodity. Mrs. Sanford L. Forbis, a resident of Matthews, remembers visiting the store in the early twentieth century and describes a beehive of activity. Groceries were sold in the rear section, while at the front, ladies could select from a rich assortment of cloth ribbons, hat pins, zippers, buttons, and thimbles. Farm supplies were of course a staple, and Heath even loaned supplies to sharecroppers in the spring, exacting a share of the crops in the fall as payment.



*Heath & Reid Store*

***Return to your car. From Trade St., turn left onto W. Charles St. just opposite the Reid store, and just before the railway crossing. Take the second left alongside a fine turn-of-the-century house. Pause at the intersection with W. John Street.***

**16.** On your left, facing W. John St. is a Victorian Queen Anne style cottage, "an oasis of charm and grace." This house was built in 1890 by Edward Solomon Reid, the store owner. He lived here for a time before moving to Charlotte. Locally the house is remembered as the residence of his sister, Ellie, her second husband Dr. Thomas Neely Reid, and their daughter Nancy Alexander Reid. Dr. Reid was a model country doctor. He studied at Davidson College, the University of Virginia, and New York University before returning to Matthews to a practice which covered parts of Mecklenburg, Union, and Cabarrus counties. His early transport was a horse and buggy, but he was one of the first in Matthews to acquire an automobile. According to local historian Louise Matthews, older residents remember that when the sound of his International Harvester "runabout" was heard, "children and chickens scattered and disgruntled farmers had to dismount from their wagons and hold the bridles of their frightened horses." His daughter, Nancy Reid, was a lifelong resident of the cottage (1898-1986). She is remembered locally as a schoolteacher and community leader.



*Reid House*

The house displays many Victorian features: bay windows, cross-gables and tower, scalloped shingles on the tower roof, sawnwork embellishments on the porch including a pinwheel design. The huge magnolia to the front right was planted by Ellie and Thomas when they moved here almost a century ago.

17. Facing the Reid house across W. John Street is another late nineteenth-century cottage where Nancy's maternal grandfather, Solomon J. Reid, lived for a while after 1882. This Reid was an important local politician, serving as a representative in the North Carolina house and senate in the later nineteenth century. Local folklore claims that during the Civil War Governor Morehead asked Reid to bury some silver on a nearby farm to save it from Yankee soldiers. If he did, he was not the only one trying to preserve valuables from what seemed like the imminent sack of Charlotte by the Union Army, for another party took a quarter million in gold and coin belonging to the Bank of North Carolina and buried it in a wooded glen in the dead of night. As it turned out, General Sherman and the Yankees did not invade Mecklenburg County but swung east instead.

***Turn right onto W. John Street and after a couple of blocks take the right fork and continue on Monroe Rd. to the traffic light at Hwy 51.***

18. The house on the right, just where the road forked, dates from 1878. It was built by Eli Grier, the first Matthews resident to serve in state government. He was also a sheriff of Mecklenburg County.

*Turn left onto Hwy 51 and continue to Sardis Road. Turn right at the traffic light onto Sardis Road. Look out for the James Boyce Park sign 3 miles along the road on your right. Turn right on Boyce Road and look for the park entrance on your right.*

19. The park commemorates the Boyce homesite built in 1757. There are picnic and toilet facilities in the park.

*Return to Sardis Road and turn right. Continue driving along Sardis Road. After .75 miles you will pass the Sardis Presbyterian church on your left.*

20. The original Sardis Presbyterian Church was erected in 1789 as a daughter church to Providence Presbyterian Church that you saw earlier, and the earliest graves date from about this time. These are situated in the graveyard across the road from the present church.

*Continue on Sardis Road to the traffic light, keeping to the left-hand lane. Notice the large Victorian house called "The Homeplace" on your right just before the traffic lights.*

21. Dr. R. G. Miller, minister of Sardis Presbyterian Church for thirty-eight years, had this house constructed in 1902. The grand Victorian-style house remained in the Miller family until 1966. It now operates as a popular bed-and-breakfast inn.

*Stay on Sardis Rd. by turning left at the traffic light. After .2 miles notice a nineteenth-century home on your right, sandwiched between two more recent houses. To stop and look at the house, make a right turn onto Shasta Ln. and proceed about half a block until you can get a side view of the house.*

22. This Greek-Revival farm house was once the home of another Sardis pastor, the Reverend John Hunter. He was installed as minister at the Sardis A.R.P Church (now

the Sardis Presbyterian Church) in 1859 and remained for twenty-seven years. The Hunters were an old Mecklenburg family; John's grandfather, Henry Hunter, emigrated from Ireland during the early 1770s and helped to defend Charlotte against the British during the Revolutionary War. The house was built around 1869. Like the Hennigan Place on Tilley Morris Rd. the house is an unpretentious rendering of the Greek Revival style. This rather plain version of what was elsewhere quite an ornate type of house was a trademark of local builders, for it suited the reserved nature of the county's Scots-Irish Presbyterian inhabitants. After all, ostentation was the work of the Devil.