

# Route IV: North Charlotte & Biddleville

*Route IV is approximately 10 miles long and will take about 1 hour to drive. Allow extra time for stopping at Johnson C. Smith University or for taking the Uptown Walking Tour.*

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The buildings to be seen on this tour illustrate the great economic and social changes that were taking place in Charlotte during the half century after the Civil War. In North Charlotte, to the northeast of Uptown Charlotte, mills and mill villages sprang up in response to the success of cotton textile manufacturing after 1880. By the late 1920s, Charlotte had become "the center of a textile manufacturing territory housing 770 mills and consuming more cotton than any other section of the world." To the northwest of the city center, Johnson C. Smith University and the community of Biddleville emerged as the freed slaves struggled against segregation and prejudice following the Civil War. These endeavors became symbols of hope and success for the black residents of the county in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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*The tour begins on Davidson St. between 36th and 37th Sts.*

- **From I-77 take the exit for I-85 North. Take the exit for Sugar Creek Rd., and turn right onto Sugar Creek Rd. At the next major intersection, turn right onto Tryon St. Turn left at the traffic lights onto 36th St. After crossing the railroad lines take the next left at the traffic lights onto Davidson St.**

## NORTH CHARLOTTE

This area has been characterized as the "hard-pumping industrial heart of Charlotte." Although it was by no means the first site of cotton manufacture in the county, North Charlotte was unique in housing three separate cotton mills which flourished here between 1903 and 1975. The first of these was the Highland Park Mill No. 3. The Mecklenburg Mill soon followed. Both had their own mill villages that provided housing for the workers. In 1913 the Johnston Mill joined the other two. The first mill building to your left is the Johnston Mill. It has been converted into housing.

*Pause before making a right turn onto 37th St.*

1. The [Mecklenburg Mill](#) to your left was built in the tradition of New England mills of the late nineteenth century. Notice the profusion of windows which would have allowed the maximum amount of natural light into the building. After a series of owners, the mill was acquired by the Johnston group just before the Second World War. C.W. Johnston had controlled major shares in the Highland Park Co. since 1906 and was of course the owner of the Johnston Mill next door. He is also the man who built the seventeen-story [Johnston building](#) on S. Tryon St., which you'll see on the [Uptown Walking Tour](#).



*Mecklenburg Mill*

***Turn right onto 37th St., and right again onto N. Alexander St.***

2. This was the Mecklenburg Mill village, something of a model in its time. The rural origin of most early mill workers was reflected in village life.

*"Each cottage has a large space for a vegetable garden...a good quantity of beans, peas, corn etc. are canned in the summer. There is a piggery...in a segregated spot.... There are quite a number of cows that furnish plenty of milk and butter."*

How mill workers found the time to raise animals and grow vegetables is a mystery. Men, women, and teenage children all worked ten to twelve hours a day Monday to Friday and five hours on Saturday.

One mill worker recalls the lean years of the Depression when only his mother could find work:

*After a hard shift of breathing in cotton lint, her ears ringing from the constant "bangin" and "slappin" of the motor belts, and the eternal never ending "swishin" of the bobbins and thread, she often worked late into the night hours at our own home. Still tired from the previous day's work, she would crawl out of bed at 4:30 a.m. the next morning, cook breakfast and head out to the mill to begin another shift.*

Although the houses were probably more luxurious than many country dwellings, they lacked facilities we now consider essential. Outside privies were common, "freezing in the winter and hot and stinking as hell on steamy summer days." A bath generally meant a turn in the galvanized wash tub sitting on the cold floor--youngest last.

As you drive through the village, you will notice that some of the houses are larger than others. These were the houses given to supervisors, their status being reflected in more spacious accommodation. All the houses, of course, belonged to the mill, and rent was taken out of the workers' wages.

***At the junction of N. Alexander and 36th St., turn right onto 36th St., and then left onto Davidson St. Pause opposite the fire station on the left.***

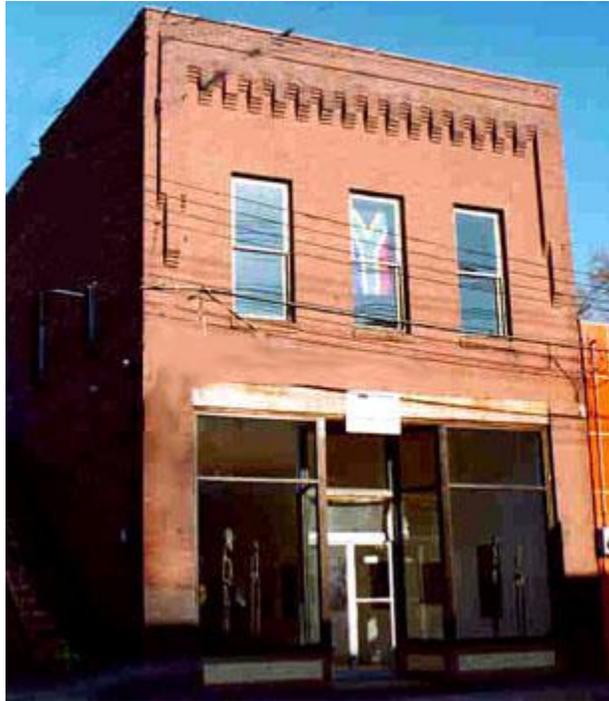
3. From 1903 until the late 1940s, the community functioned as a self-contained village separated from the city by farms and fields. This was the main street of that village, linking the first two mills and their villages and providing all of the basic necessities: a barber shop, dry goods store, lunch room, doctor's office and pharmacy, and five groceries lined the street by 1929. A trolley line ran down the center of the street, and trips to town were considered a treat, though old time mill workers recall being taunted by city folk as "lintheads" because of the inevitable cotton fibers trapped in their hair and clothes.

Fire Station No. 7 was built when North Charlotte was annexed by the city in 1928. Notice the pilasters and pediments adorning an otherwise plain facade. Apparently North Charlotte could get rather rowdy, and since the city jail was so far away, two cells were built onto the back of the station for emergencies. No doubt the rowdiness resulted from the lack of stability in a society where people often moved in search of better living and working conditions.

***Continue down the block. Notice the building to your right, just before you turn left at the intersection with 35th St.***

4. The old [Hand Pharmacy](#) building on this corner was the site of union activity in 1923 when the United Textile Workers of America tried to unionize the Highland Park Mill. They voted to

call a strike in the meeting hall above the shop after eight members had been fired for union activity. The strike, however, never gained sufficient support in a community which could not afford to lose work and where labor was always available.



*Hand Pharmacy*

***Turn left onto 35th St. Stop in front of the large house on your right at the end of the first block.***

5. When the Highland Park Mill and its adjoining mill village were designed, the planner intended the village to focus around a square with its own hotel, school, and store. The plans were never realized, but the hotel was built in the then fashionable Colonial Revival-style. Called the Highland Inn and later the Sears Hotel, it was popular among the many drummers (traveling salesmen) who frequented Charlotte with their wares.

***At the next block, turn right onto N. Alexander St., then right onto 34th St., then left onto Davidson St., and then finally right onto Mallory St. Pause by the corner to view the Highland Park Mill No. Three.***

6. In February, 1903, the [Highland Park Mill No. 3](#) was announced as Charlotte's largest and first electric driven mill. The architect and engineer responsible was Stuart Cramer, a man who was widely recognized as a textile machinery innovator. He pioneered the development of heat and humidity controls for spinning mills and has been credited with coining the term "air

conditioning." Imagine what a crowded spinning room would have felt like on a July day before air conditioning.

The mill was designed to hold 30,000 spindles and 1,000 looms, and the weaving room alone was as large as one and a half football fields. It was a fully integrated mill, meaning that cotton was carded, cleaned, spun, woven, and dyed on the site. The sturdy brick walls of the mill were in part a protection against fire, for cotton fibers were notoriously flammable. Within the mill a firewall was built between each room, and floors and roofs were constructed of heavy, slow burning planking. The ornate tower with its crenellated parapet faced the busy Southern Railway's main line, presenting an impressive facade to clients.

*Continue on Mallory, which changes to Brevard St. shortly after the left-hand curve. Eventually you will come to a stop sign. Turn right onto Parkwood Rd. Parkwood Rd. curves round and eventually rejoins Brevard St. Continue on Brevard St. until the intersection with 7th. St. Turn right onto 7th St. Take the third left onto Church St. Two blocks after 6th St. turn right onto Trade St.*

7. You will be driving through the city center and may wish to park and explore. The city has many attractions, including, Spirit Square (a regional center for the arts), the Afro-American Cultural Center, Discovery Place (a hands-on science museum), and historic Fourth Ward. If you would like to walk through the center city and visit its historic sites, turn to the back of the book and follow the instructions for the **Uptown Walking Tour**.

*Leave Charlotte on Trade St. heading north and continue out of the city. You will cross under I-77 and begin climbing up a long hill.*

## **BIDDLEVILLE**

The community of Biddleville, clustered around Johnson C. Smith University, is Charlotte's oldest surviving and one of its most interesting black neighborhoods. Biddleville's story begins in the city's Second Ward (then known as "log town") where the Biddle Memorial Institute launched its first class of eight male students in 1867. It was the initial step in Charlotte towards giving an equal educational opportunity to people who had been denied literacy by law before 1865. The founders were three white Presbyterian ministers, and the institution was made possible by the generous contribution of a Philadelphia philanthropist, Mrs. Mary Biddle. The aim from the beginning was to teach "preachers and teachers" and to prepare community leaders.

The college moved to its prominent hillside location in the early 1870s, when Colonel W. R. Myers (the father of John Springs Myers of Myers Park, see **Route II**) donated seven acres of land to the new institution. For the first twenty years all faculty members were white, but the intention was always eventually to employ a black principal and professors. In 1891 the institute appointed its first black president, Rev. Daniel Sanders. Over the years the university realized its goals by training thousands of administrators, doctors, dentists, teachers, and ministers; at least seven of its graduates became college presidents. Three returned to Johnson C. Smith university, including Dr. H. C. McCrorey who led the school for forty years between 1907 and 1947. These were years of rapid change for the university. McCrorey led a drive to raise funds to build a Carnegie library on campus; he instituted co-education, and he also secured a generous donation that gave the university its current name.

*As you near the top of the hill you will come to a five-way junction with traffic lights. Take a shallow right turn to continue on Beatties Ford Rd. Notice the gates to your right just after you cross the intersection.*

8. In 1921, President McCrorey persuaded Mrs. Jane Berry Smith, a Pittsburgh philanthropist, to donate eight new buildings and an endowment fund to Biddle University, more than tripling its size. The institution was renamed Johnson C. Smith University in honor of her husband, and to commemorate the occasion this [stone archway](#) was erected as the new entrance to the refurbished campus.



*JCSU Entrance Gate*

*The current campus entrance is located just ahead on your right. Turn into the college entrance and inform the security guard that you are following the county*

*tour. You may park in designated visitor parking spots to view the outside of the buildings, and this is recommended since the campus is best seen on foot. For information about the campus call (704) 378-1000.*

9. The clock tower building which dominates the campus is [Biddle Hall](#). When it was built in 1884 it served as a classroom facility, dining hall, and chapel meeting almost all the needs of the student body. It is Charlotte's finest example of Victorian institutional architecture. Notice how complex the building is with its towers, bays, and dormers. Even the brickwork is intricate on close examination. Two features are particularly worth noticing: the corner stone with its message "Sit Lux" (let there be light), and the crosses worked into the brick chimneys of the old chapel.



*Biddle Hall at Johnson C. Smith University*

10. [Carter Hall](#) is a student dormitory erected in 1895 entirely by student labor. Notice the huge corner turrets which contrast with the delicate wooden cupola in the center of the roof -- all characteristic of Victorian architecture.



*Carter Hall at Johnson C. Smith University*

11. Johnson C. Smith University's [Carnegie Library](#) is the only one of the three Carnegie libraries in Charlotte to have survived. It was built in 1912 using a grant donated by Andrew Carnegie who helped erect hundreds of libraries throughout the U.S. In contrast to the earlier buildings, but in keeping with changing fashions, it was built in the Neoclassical style. Notice the pediment capping the tall Doric columns of the portico, echoing the architecture of a Greek temple. The building was designed by Hunter and Gordon, a Charlotte architectural firm.



*Carnegie Library at Johnson C. Smith University*

***Return to your car, and drive to the entrance of the university. Cross over Beatties Ford Rd. onto Dixon St. At the first intersection, turn right onto Campus St. and pause.***

12. From the start, the University was a magnet encouraging further development in the area. Rev. Stephen Mattoon, the first president of the institute at its new location, bought farmland adjoining the campus and encouraged teachers, students, and others to purchase lots. By the 1890s, the community was firmly established, and once the trolley system was installed in 1903 the future of Biddleville as a thriving suburb was ensured. The expansion of the University in the early twentieth century, resulted in the expansion of the surrounding community, and several new suburbs sprang up around the central core of Biddleville in the period before 1930. When Biddleville was threatened with demolition in the 1960s, residents of the community reacted to preserve their heritage, and today many of the older homes in the suburb are being renovated. The house on your left, across Campus St., is a good example of the connection between the University and its suburb. The man who built this house in the 1890s played a significant role in the cause of black education during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. George Davis of Wilmington, North Carolina graduated from Biddle Institute in 1883 and went on to get a Ph.D. in medicine from Howard University. He returned here to become Biddle Institute's first black professor in 1886 and remained until 1921. Davis's retirement in that year, however, did not end his contributions to the cause of black education. Indeed, possibly his most significant work was accomplished as the supervisor of the Rosenwald school building program for North Carolina. The Rosenwald Foundation was incorporated in 1917 by Julius Rosenwald for the purpose of assisting communities to build schools for rural blacks. However, in an effort to involve both blacks and whites in the endeavor from the outset, the foundation only provided a grant to match funds raised by the local community. Since most of the schools were needed in poor rural areas, it is a tribute to George Davis's energy and ingenuity that North Carolina became the leading state in the Rosenwald building program. (Some of the surviving Rosenwald schools can be seen on **Routes III and V.**)

*Drive down to the next block of Campus St. to view Mt. Carmel Church to your right.*

13. The original congregation of [Mt. Carmel Baptist Church](#) dates back to 1878, though this building was erected in 1918. For decades the church was an important center for Biddleville. The Charlotte architect Louis Asbury, Sr. designed this Victorian Gothic brick structure. The congregation used to walk down the street and turn left onto French St to "The Branch" where they baptized new members.

*If you take this same route, you will come to Biddleville Park, a good site for a picnic. Otherwise, turn right onto French St. and then left onto Beatties Ford Rd. Just after crossing the freeway overpass, notice the Excelsior Club to your left. Turn left onto Sanders St., and then into the parking lot of the club to turn around .*

14. This distinctive [Art Moderne-style](#) building has played a significant role in the social and political life of Charlotte's black community. The [Excelsior Club](#) was founded in 1944 by James Robert "Jimmie" McKee and became the leading black social club in the southeast. In addition to its social function, the club also provided a meeting place for both black and white political candidates during the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. This was another chapter in the history of black advancement in the city begun by Biddle Institute back in 1867. In 1965 Charlotte got its first black city councilman of the 20th century, Fred Alexander. During the

1970s, the county became a test case for busing children to integrated schools, creating a powerful example for other southern counties. The original building was a two-story house built in 1910. The structure was heavily remodeled in 1952 and is now probably the finest example of the Art Moderne style in the county.



*Excelsior Club*

***The Excelsior Club ends the tour of North Charlotte and Biddleville.***

***To return to Charlotte, turn right out of the parking lot onto Beatties Ford Rd. and follow it back into Charlotte.***

***To return to I-77, turn right out of the parking lot onto Beatties Ford Rd. Following the signs for the Brookshire Freeway East, turn left after you recross the freeway overpass. The Brookshire Freeway will take you to I-77.***