

# Route VI: Northwestern & Western Mecklenburg County

*Route VI. is approximately 50 miles long and takes about one and a half hours to complete. Allow extra time for stops. The best time of day to drive this route is in the morning, since then you can avoid the glare of the afternoon sun as you drive west for the first few miles of the route.*

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The Northwest and Western Mecklenburg tour begins on a stretch of country road rich in ante-bellum history, and ends in Steele Creek, one of the county's largest and most cohesive rural communities. As you drive between the two, this rural scene is interrupted by the (almost constant) comings and going of airplanes at Charlotte's Douglas International Airport. The airport has had a dual effect on the area. Many old homesites have disappeared under its runways; yet it has delayed the development of new subdivisions and so the area maintains its strong rural character.

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*The tour starts at St. Mark's Episcopal Church on Beatties Ford Rd.*

- **From Charlotte, take W. Trade St. out of the city center, and follow the signs for I-77 north. From I-77, drive to the north of Charlotte and take the Harris Blvd./Reams Rd. exit. Turn left onto Reams Rd. Continue for almost 2 miles (Reams Rd. turns off to the left, but you go straight ahead onto Vance Rd.) At the stop sign, turn left onto the Mt. Holly-Huntersville Rd. St. Mark's Episcopal Church is .8 miles down the road to your left on a wooded hillside. Turn up the drive into the parking lot.**

1. This picturesque Victorian [Gothic church](#) is the oldest Episcopal church in [rural Mecklenburg](#). Discontented with Hopewell Presbyterian Church to the north, a local farmer, Columbus McCoy, encouraged the rector of St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Charlotte to visit the community in 1883. McCoy's friends and neighbors were impressed, and a year later, the [Church of St. Mark's](#) was founded and received its first minister, the Rev. Edwin Osborne. Building the church was not so easy as securing a congregation. Severe rains during 1886 almost totally destroyed the season's crops, setting back fund-raising efforts. Moreover, in the same year, the Charleston earthquake destroyed the brick kiln which had been set up at the creek branch below the site. A local builder, the young John Ellis McAulay, was in charge

of producing the bricks. Ever resourceful, he reconstructed a crude and dangerous kiln using an old steam boiler with no pressure gauge.

By some miracle, McAulay's boiler survived, and the first service in the new church was held in 1887. At that time, this wooded hill overlooked the intersection of two sand-clay lanes. In the valley below the church the Whitley Mill and the miller's house sat alongside Long Creek, and across the creek was a country store.



*St. Mark's Episcopal Church*

Gothic-style architecture has traditionally been associated with the Episcopal church in America. Notice the steep pitch of the roof, the cross-shaped floor plan, and the lancet windows set in Gothic [arches](#). Try to find the cornerstone, and take time to explore the graveyard. Look for the grave of Captain Gluyas whose [house](#) you will see down the road.

John McAulay's perseverance in making bricks obviously pleased the congregation, for he was asked to build the rectory in 1887-8. It is just one of many that McAulay designed and built in the area between the late 1880s and the early 1900s. But, despite his hard work, it is thought that McAulay never made a profit from his labors.

***Return to the Mt. Holly-Huntersville Rd. and turn left. Cross Beatties Ford Rd., and after .6 miles notice the house on your left.***

2. This is the former [home of Dr. Walter Pharr Craven](#). He built his house next to his first wife's childhood home in the late 1880s. His first wife was Martha Addie May Gluyas, and they raised their eleven children here. This is the first of many nineteenth-century houses that are scattered along what was once a major road in the area. Take your time and drive slowly so that you don't miss any.



*Craven House*

3. Less than one half miles farther, and also on your left is Gluyas Acres. It was built by Dr. Craven's father-in-law, Captain Thomas Gluyas. Gluyas emigrated to America with his parents from England in 1834. The oldest portion of Gluyas Acres is a log house thought to have been constructed soon after his marriage to Letitia Beeson in 1847. Captain Gluyas was one of the founding members of St. Mark's Episcopal Church.

4. Just under one and a half miles farther on your right is the house which belonged to Dr. Craven's competitor, Dr. James Samuel Abernathy. Locals referred to them as "Dr. Pill and Dr. Powder." The house has an early log core, which is to the right of the front gabled projecting wing. The additions were made during the 1870s. Dr. Abernathy's ancestors had originally settled in Charlotte (then a small village), but moved to the country to avoid the temptations which the "city" presented to their children.

5. A quarter mile farther on your left you will pass the ante-bellum home of the Luckey family. Robert Luckey purchased the house and a 400-acre farm in 1855, and the family farmed cotton here until the Second World War. Even then they only stopped because boll weevil infestations were making the crop uneconomical.

6. After a farther one half mile on your left is the Abernathy farm. The mid-nineteenth century Abernathy farmhouse was the center of a large cotton farm. It follows the "I" pattern of a typical Mecklenburg farmhouse, being two stories high, one room deep, with side gables, exterior end chimneys, and a central entrance hall. During the tour you will see many more houses built in this style.

7. A farther half mile down the road on your right there is yet another [ante-bellum house](#) of log construction. Notice the single exterior chimney on a fieldstone foundation. Log buildings usually had only one chimney. The stone foundation is a clue to its great age.

*Continue on the Mt. Holly - Huntersville Road through the traffic signal at Hwy. 16 and after 3 miles, turn right at the stop sign onto Hwy. 27. You will notice a house to your left .3 miles past the intersection and on a rise.*

8. The Connell House is typical of many one-story farmhouses built around the turn of the century in Mecklenburg. Notice its generous wrap-around porch and prominent [gables](#). Mr. Connell ran a popular riding stables here.

*Take the next left turn onto Belmeade Rd. (It used to be called Blacksnake Rd. because of the many black snakes in the area, but according to one local resident, the name was changed when a church was built because the members didn't think that the association was appropriate.) Turn right at the stop sign onto Moore's Chapel Rd. Not far past the intersection you will pass a picturesque Victorian house on your left.*

9. George Williamson built the house in about 1875. All of the wood for the house was prepared on site and cured for a year before building. The weatherboarding on the house is reputed to have come from one tall pine tree! The two-level porch is relatively unusual for rural Mecklenburg.

*Continue down Moore's Chapel Rd., and pause at the old frame house opposite Moore's Chapel Methodist Church.*

10. This house was also built from lumber cut on the property. Fabius Wilkinson built it between 1905 and 1907. Notice the [sawtooth shingles](#) and diamond shaped vent on the cross gable. Both were popular embellishments at the turn of the century, but underneath the dressing is the very traditional Mecklenburg "I" house.

11. Across the fields and behind the trees to your left is the rather grand house of the **Moore brothers**, who donated land for the church. At one time a plank walkway was said to have been laid between the house and the church.

*Continue on Moore's Chapel Rd for .7 miles. Turn right onto Hawfield Rd. After .3 miles, pull in to view the Hovis Spratt house which is set well back from the road on your right.*

12. The [Hovis Spratt House](#) used to be in the Steele Creek community, and was moved here to avoid demolition in 1986. Franklin Hovis began building the house just before the Civil War and completed it after he returned from service. Family folklore states that he cut the beams and clapboard from pines so tall that he did not have to remove any branches. Notice the traditional design of the house.

*Find a convenient place to turn, and retrace your steps, turning left off of Hawfield Rd. onto Moore's Chapel Rd. When you pass the Moore's Chapel Methodist Church on your right, turn right onto Sam Wilson Rd. Continue on Sam Wilson Rd. crossing Wilkinson Blvd., and at the "T" junction turn left onto Old Dowd Rd. After 1.7 miles, turn right at the stop sign onto Wallace Neal Rd., and then after 2.5 miles turn right onto Dixie Rd just past a modern convenience store. Drive .7 miles and turn right onto Mt. Olive Church Rd. Stop just after the turn to view the Cooper log house.*

13. This [house](#) is unique in that it demonstrates changes in building traditions in the county over a 100-year period. It is also one of Mecklenburg's original pioneer dwellings, and one of only two known eighteenth-century log buildings to remain intact.

The house's story begins with the log section which is covered by modern siding but which forms the left side of the house. William Cooper, the son of one of Steele Creek's first settlers, probably built the log cabin around 1780. By that time the strongly Scots-Irish settlement of Steele Creek had established itself in the southwest of the county. Cooper's log house was typical of many of the first homes in the area. Pines were hand hewn to produce twelve-inch-thick logs which were laid horizontally and notched to fit together at the corners. Curved logs were laid first since the weight of those on top would help to straighten them in time. The gaps between the logs were filled with clay to make the building weatherproof. These early dwellings usually had one entrance, one window, a dirt floor, and an external brick or stone chimney.



*Cooper Log House*

William lived the life of a typical early Mecklenburg farmer, growing a variety of crops, including corn, wheat, hay, oats, and cotton, and raising livestock. Close to the house were slave quarters, and his slaves could supplement their rations by hunting, fishing, and raising their own crops.

When William died in 1834, his son Alexander took over the house and farm and probably built the two-story addition to the right of the log house. The flush eaves and tenon-and-mortise construction are characteristic of this era. The second addition, a frame structure with an internal chimney directly behind the log structure, was made in 1880 by the next heir, Thomas Cooper. Thomas Cooper held the prestigious office of sheriff of Mecklenburg County between 1887 and 1898.

*Find a convenient place to turn, and retrace your path to the junction with Dixie Rd. Turn right onto Dixie Rd. After less than half a mile, you will see the Freeman house on your right.*

**14.** Ike Freeman built this house on the site of his old family home in 1914. The family still treasures a brick saved from the chimney or foundation of the earlier house. It bears the date 1757, making this one of the first sites of settlement in the area. Ike was a "jack-of-all-trades". Besides being an employee of the exciting new Southern Utilities Company (now Duke Power), he also ran a farm and was an accomplished carpenter. His was the first house in the neighborhood to have a telephone and electricity, yet for years he resisted the idea of indoor plumbing!

*Continue on Dixie Rd. for a farther .3 miles. On your right, just past the junction with Byrum Rd., is Dr. Query's house.*

**15.** Ike Freeman probably helped to construct this [house](#), built for Dr. Query in 1919 by a neighbor, Paul J. Brown. Dr. Query served the neighborhood for over thirty years. Local residents still remember coming to his office when it was located in the left part of the building--with a separate door of course. The adjoining porte cochere was just big enough to drive a Model T or Model A Ford through, so that patients stayed dry in bad weather. But many remember earlier days when they arrived by horse and wagon.

*Continue on Dixie Rd., (Hwy. 160) which now changes its name to Steele Creek Rd. After almost a mile, pull into the grounds of the Steele Creek Presbyterian Church.*

**16.** A local legend says that after the Lord completed the creation of the Old World (Africa, Asia, and Europe) he broke off a corner of Scotland, flattened its highlands with his hand, and laid it along the east bank of the Catawba River, calling it Steele Creek. The community has persisted in its strong Scots-Irish Presbyterian emphasis

for over 200 years. It has also continued to be a tightly knit community. Perhaps the most graphic evidence of this can be found in the graveyard, where headstones from a 200-year span echo familiar local names. It contains one of the finest collections of early headstones in the county, with graves dating from 1763.

It is not known when the very first settlers came to this area of the county, but they had an organized church here by 1760. (This makes them one of the original seven Presbyterian congregations in the county.) This building is the fifth on the site and the only one to be built of brick. The grand [Gothic-style](#) sanctuary replaced the fourth church which burned in 1888. It was designed to hold 1,000 people, a testament to a flourishing congregation. Indeed, until the 1960s there was very little competition from other denominations in the area. Locals recall that newcomers to the area automatically became members of Steele Creek Presbyterian Church!



[Steele Creek Presbyterian Church](#)

***As you leave the parking lot of the church, turn left to continue down Steele Creek Rd. After .2 miles, you will see the Steele Creek Manse on your right.***



17. The Steele Creek Manse was constructed by the congregation for their pastor in 1910. It is said that the windows were crafted on the site and are all slightly different in size. The spacious lot reminds us of a time when the pastor was expected to grow some of his own crops and keep animals to supplement his wages.

*A farther .7 miles down the road you will pass the William Grier house on your right.*

18. The Grier family is a classic example of the Scots-Irish migration into the county. The patriarch of the family, James Grier, came to Lancaster County in Pennsylvania from County Antrim in Northern Ireland in 1772. He brought with him his wife Margaret, his sons and daughters, and two-year-old grandson Jimmy. Arriving on the eve of the Revolutionary War, the Grier family immediately threw their lot in with the revolutionaries, and his sons James and Thomas both joined the Continental Army. Introduced to the Carolinas during the war, the family decided to settle here in the Piedmont once the fighting was over. Thomas Grier became a significant farmer in Steele Creek; he owned twenty-nine slaves by 1820, an unusually large number for a Mecklenburg farmer. He had [this house](#) built for his son William sometime before his death in 1828. It has been carefully restored to look much as it did when William lived here. You will notice that it follows the traditional pattern of rural farm houses, though it is not as symmetrical as one might expect. During the last 100 years, the house has been in the possession of the Byrum family, whose enterprise has left its impression in the vicinity.

*Pull into the parking lot of the Byrum store just ahead on your right.*

19. The little community of Shopton is said to have got its name "shop town" when the [store](#) was built here by Joe Hayes during the 1880s. Hayes ran a post office in one corner of the store until rural delivery was introduced in 1896. By the time Hayes sold the store to William Lester Byrum in 1919, this spot had become a community gathering place with a blacksmith's shop almost opposite (the building can still be seen), a cotton gin, and as many as eight residences. Joe Hayes probably erected the house next door (to the right) around the turn of the century. It would have been very stylish at the time and could easily have fit into a suburban setting such as Dilworth or

Elizabeth. (See **Route II.**) Notice the classical overtones in the central pediment of the extensive wrap around-porch.



*Hayes-Byrum Store*

You may wish to visit the store which sells a wide range of snacks and drinks as well as fishing tackle and other goods. Many of the fixtures are original.

*Continue down Steele Creek Rd., and keep to the left at the fork. The next left after the fork is Brown-Grier Rd. Turn left and drive to the farmhouse which you can see in the distance across the fields on the left side of Brown-Grier Rd.*

**20.** The scene here, with fields, forest, and a classic Mecklenburg farmstead in the distance, has remained unchanged for at least 150 years. This was the homesite of James Grier, and the farm we see today was built by his descendant, John, in 1836. The Grier family still farm the land and take a pride in their Federal-style farmhouse. The collection of farm buildings surrounding the farmhouse includes a smoke house, well house, wood store, and various barns. Such buildings would have surrounded all of the old houses we have seen along the route. Notice the two boxwoods in front of the house marking the entrance. They were probably planted when the house was built.

Just beyond the house is the creek which gives this area its name. The derivation is uncertain. Some say the creek was named for Robert Steele, a pioneer Indian trader. Others claim that a family named Steele lived here near the confluence of the two streams that form Steele Creek.

*Find a convenient place to turn around and return to Steele Creek Rd. Turn left and continue straight through the traffic lights at Westinghouse Blvd. and stay on Steele Creek Rd. for another 1.3 miles and turn left onto Erwin Rd. Drive .5 miles and you will see a frame building on your left. This is the McClintock Rosenwald School.*

**21.** Before the Rosenwald School was built here in the 1920s, the local black sharecroppers had little hope of providing their children with an education, and even afterwards it was not easy, for many inequalities existed between black and white schools. (For the history of Rosenwald schools in the county see **Routes III and IV**.) Children had to walk five or six miles to attend the [McClintock Rosenwald School](#) and were often passed by buses full of white children traveling to their schools. Lucille Stewart attended this school between 1930 and 1937, and she remembers the walk well: "When you got there, it was terrible. You'd be so cold your fingers, they'd just ache like toothache." The school calendar was quite different for black and white children in Mecklenburg as throughout much of the South. Black schools were open through the long hot summer in order to have a fall break for the harvest.

Until the late 1940s, it was difficult to get school materials. Lucille Stewart, for instance, remembers that she used to go out after school "and pick greasy greens and sell them and take the money to help to get our books." During the late 1940s, when books were provided at all, they were the second-hand cast-offs from Steele Creek School. Facilities were not modern either. Another student, Shelby Faust, remembers that "we only had an outside bathroom, and we would have to line up because there wasn't but two holes." The only chance of an education past eighth grade was to live with friends or relatives in Charlotte's Second Ward and attend the high school there.

However, the dedication of the teachers at these schools was exemplary, and local communities still cherish their old Rosenwald school buildings. The McClintock School, like many others, was closely linked with the Presbyterian church. The McClintock Presbyterian Church was one of the first black Presbyterian churches in the county.

*Continue on Erwin Rd. until you reach the intersection with York Rd. At this point, you have several alternatives:*

- *For McDowell Park, turn right. This nature reserve is a farther 2.5 miles along York Rd. on Lake Wylie. It is open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily (except on Mondays and Tuesdays from August to May). Admission is free on weekdays, and on weekends there is a small charge per vehicle. (For information call (704) 336-3854)*
- *For Carowinds Theme Park, turn left and then right onto Carowinds Blvd.*
- **To complete the tour, turn left onto York Rd. After 4.6 miles, two interesting old houses flank the road. Stop by the side of the road to read the plaque in front of the right hand house.**

22. This house is the homesite of the McDowell family. John and Mary McDowell came here from Virginia with three children. They are known to have secured land here as early as 1739, making them among the first white settlers in the area. Their log house was constructed across the road from here, though John did not enjoy it for long, for he was killed by Indians on his return from a trip to Virginia for supplies.

Rather like the Cooper house, this house combines three different eras of building. To the rear is part of a log house built by John's son in 1790. John's grandson incorporated this into a typical Mecklenburg "I" house in 1843. To the front is a four-room addition built in 1912, giving the house its turn-of-the-century Colonial Revival look. Notice the dentilled cornice and the classical styling of the front porch, with its Ionic columns and central pediment.

23. Across the road is a house which is closely associated with this one. Rev. James Bell Watt, the pastor of the Steele Creek Church in the late 1850s, bought an eighteen-acre tract here from his brother-in-law Robert McDowell in 1848 so that his wife could be close to her sister. The house that he built has been remodeled twice since then. In 1900, James Bell Watt II moved the whole structure 100 yards east, and replaced the exterior chimneys with interior ones.

A later renovation of the 1950s, was not so deliberate. One day, the Watt family was relaxing here with friends after dinner when an airplane pilot miscalculated his landing and came crashing into the front porch, with either engine poking through the

front windows. The pilot got out of the plane and approached the rather shaken family with a polite apology! The porch, therefore, dates from the 1950s.

*This concludes the loop of Northwest and Western Mecklenburg. To return to Charlotte and I-77 continue on York Rd. You will see signs for I-77 after about two miles. If you stay on York Rd., it becomes South Tryon St. and takes you to uptown Charlotte.*