

THOMAS TROTTER BUILDING

[Click here to view photo gallery of the Trotter Building.](#)



This report was written on May 1, 1985

1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the Thomas Trotter Building is located at 108 S. Tryon St., Charlotte, NC.

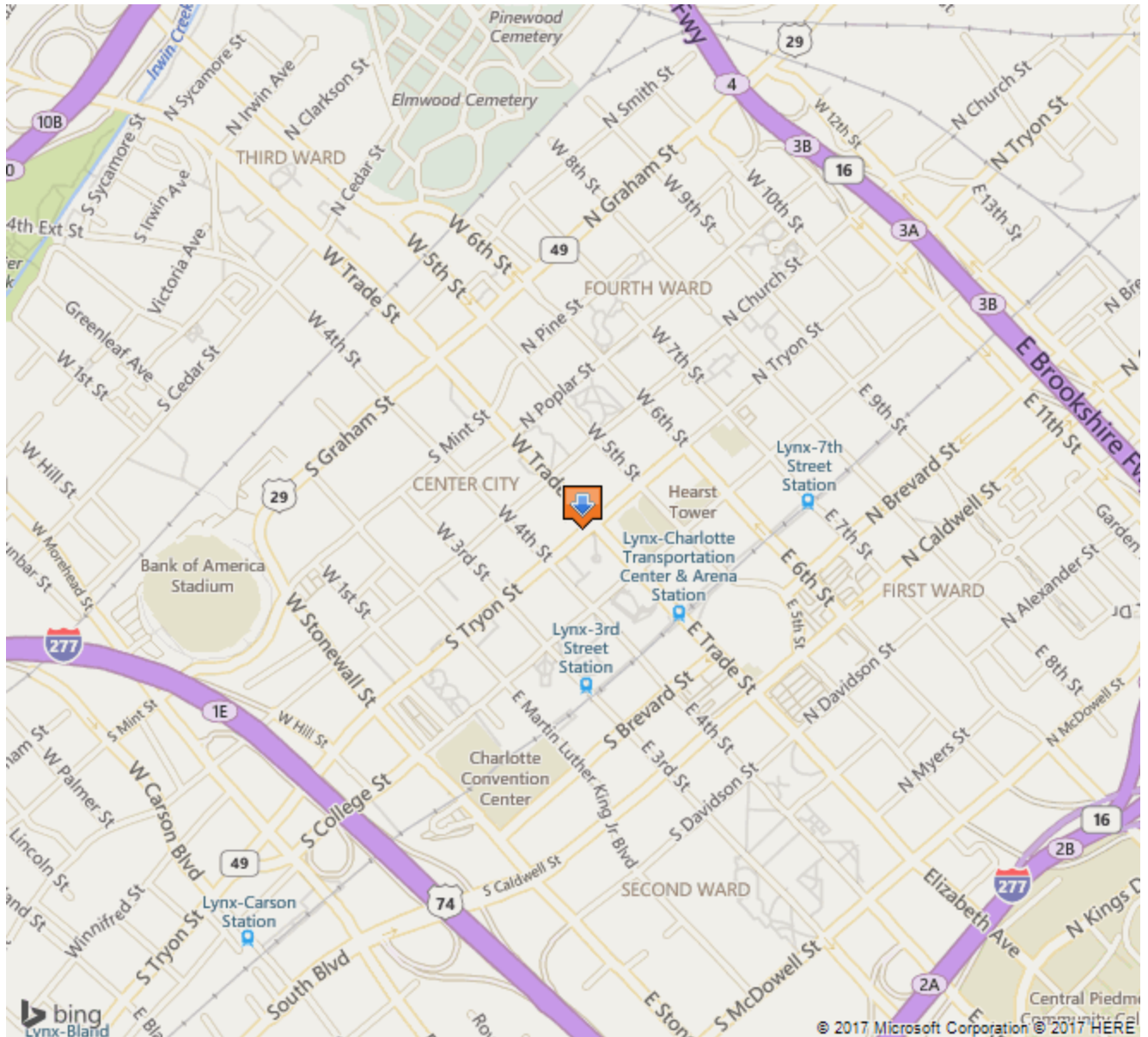
2. Name, address, and telephone number of the present owner of the property:

Albert S. Rousso & Wife, Doris H.
108 S. Tryon St.
Charlotte, NC, 28202

Telephone: (704) 374-0100

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

4. A map depicting the location of the property: This report contains a map which depicts the location of the property.



5. Current Deed Book Reference to the property: The most recent deed to this property is recorded in Deed Book 3403, page 89. The Tax Parcel Number of the property is 073-011-11.

6. A brief historical sketch of the property: This report utilizes the historical sketch included in the National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form for the Thomas Trotter Building.

7. A brief architectural description of the property: This report utilizes the architectural description included in the National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form for the Thomas Trotter Building.

8. Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets the criteria set forth in N.C.G.S. 160A-399.4:

a. Special significance in terms of its history, architecture, and/or cultural importance: The Commission judges that the property known as the Thomas Trotter Building does possess special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations: 1) the Thomas Trotter Building, erected in 1850-51, is the oldest remaining masonry structure in Charlotte; 2) the building was originally owned by Thomas Trotter (1800-1865), one of the State's finest silversmiths and the leading jeweler of Charlotte for over forty years; and 3) the Thomas Trotter Building's construction and subsequent remodelings reflect Charlotte's economic development over a 130-year period, as it grew from a small upcountry crossroads town to the largest city in North and South Carolina.

b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling, and/or association: The Commission contends that the architectural description included in this report demonstrates that the Thomas Trotter Building 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 "historic property. The current appraised value of the .026 acres of land is \$101,250. The current appraised value of the improvement is \$29,390. The total current appraised value is \$130,640.

Date of Preparation of this Report: May 1, 1985

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Architectural Description

The Trotter Building at 108 South Tryon Street is a three-story brick loft structure. The shell of the building includes portions of an 1850s commercial structure known as Granite Row, which is today the earliest surviving brick commercial building in Charlotte, the leading commercial city of the Carolinas. Because of the structure's prominent location near the Square in the center of downtown Charlotte, its interior and front facade have been updated many times over the years. Today's front and interior are a composite of twentieth century remodellings, while the hidden side walls and exposed rear wall are much as they were before the Civil War.

In the early 1850s Charlotte was the Carolinas' sixth largest urban place, an upcountry town of barely a thousand souls. But the coming of the Charlotte & South Carolina Railroad in 1852 promised that the town might soon grow into a city. In anticipation, a group of Charlotte businessmen erected a string of handsome store buildings which they dubbed Granite Row just off the square at the center of town. The row faced east toward the railroad tracks two blocks away, so that visitors walking up the hill from the train station would be sure to be impressed by it.

The Granite Row consisted of five connected three-story [Greek Revival](#) style structures with [gable roofs](#). Between each store was a shared brick wall which extended above the roofline to form a stepped gable. Three courses of molded, corbelled brick formed an ornamental cornice and gable decoration. The shop fronts were probably constructed of granite, hence the building's name. Such Granite Rows were quite popular in cities all over the eastern United States in the period, though few survive. Raleigh and Salisbury, North Carolina, are known to have had examples. Perhaps the best known survivor today is Faneuil Hall Marketplace in Boston, whose elegantly simple brick buildings with their granite shopfronts have recently been restored.

Around the turn of the century, the owners of Charlotte's Granite Row buildings began to update them in the modern Victorian, and later the [Neoclassical](#), fashion. Flat roofs replaced the gables, and elaborate new fronts were substituted for the plain brick and granite; Charlotte was booming with textile prosperity, and was too wealthy to allow such old-fashioned looking structures to remain at the center of the city. Included in the remodelling was the old Thomas Trotter Building, the southern-most one of the five structures that made up the row.

In 1911 M.I.T-trained Charlotte architect Louis Asbury, the city's first professionally-schooled designer, was hired to provide a fresh facade for the Trotter Building. Asbury apparently had the entire original front of the structure taken down. He replaced it with a vaguely Victorian front of wood and metal that was dominated by

huge windows on each of the upper levels. The ground floor consisted of a glass shopfront, and an entrance to the stairwell along the north wall that gave access to commercial space on the second and perhaps third floors.

In 1925 the building was again remodeled, an action that nearly coincided with Charlotte emergence in the Census of 1930 at the largest city in both North and South Carolina. Asbury's front was replaced by a Colonial Revival influenced facade of yellow pressed brick, the color chosen to complement the adjoining [Garibaldi & Bruns Building](#) to the north (an Asbury remodelling of two Granite Row units) and the just-completed First National Bank tower to the south. According to the building permit dated November 13, 1925, the work was undertaken by contractor J.P. Propst at a cost of \$2,000.00. Propst may have designed the new facade as well, for no architect was listed.

The 1925 front was topped by a simple parapet that aligned with the lower cornice of the adjoining Garibaldi-Bruns Building. The third story featured three tall and narrow windows with round-arched tops each arch held a four-section [fanlight transom](#), above the main one-over-one-pane [double-hung sash window](#). The second floor was lit by a single large window opening that held a three-part "Chicago" window. It consisted of a large central "picture window," flanked by two narrower one-over-one-pane double-hung sash windows for ventilation, and topped by a long transom made up of vertical panes.

On the ground floor, the 1925 remodelling divided the Trotter Building into two deep, narrow shops. There were no longer front stairs from the street to the upper floors. Instead a new stairwell was added at the back of the building; from then on, the second and third stories were used largely for storage.

The Trotter Building was remodelled yet again in 1967. By this time the downtown location near the Square was not as lucrative as it had been in the era before suburban shopping malls. As consequence, the 1967 remodelling was less costly than preceding reworkings, and left much of the earlier work intact.

The ground floor was rebuilt as a single shop once again. The occupant was to be once again a jeweler, just as Thomas Trotter had been, this time Brownlee Jewelers. Contractor Board Construction of Charlotte left the existing stamped metal ceiling, and simply added a dropped ceiling beneath it of acoustical tile. A smooth, windowless facade of blue "Granolux 'Stucco' Marble" was put in place over the upper stories of the front, covering the windows and all. The only ornament of the exterior was now the jeweler's tall neon sign.

An examination of the Trotter Building in 1984 shows evidence of all of the building's incarnations. Inside the long-disused third floor one can see the stacks of two 1850's chimneys. One is on the south wall near the front, and the other is at the center of the rear wall, though the fireplaces have long since been plastered over. Floors are heavy six-inch-wide planking, with the boards running the long way in the single large room. The roof has two large metal ventilators. At the rear south corner is the stair to the second floor, surrounded by a simple wooden railing apparently from the early twentieth century.

The second floor is also basically a single room, except for recent restrooms at the rear. At the front north corner, evidence may be seen in the floor and ceiling to indicate where the original front stairs once ran. The new stairwell enclosure at the rear south corner has tongue-and-groove boarding, and a heavy wooden door with a large glass upper section and a glass transom. The plaster ceiling of the second story has been removed to reveal the large joists that support the third floor, each approximately 3" x 12". The floor of the second story is made up of diagonal strips of oak, a popular practice in the 1910s and 1920s.

The first story interior at first appears to date completely from the 1967 remodelling. Close examination, however, reveals the ornate early-twentieth-century stamped metal ceiling hidden under the acoustical tile. A sink at the rear of the shop dates from the same period.

Outside, careful examination indicates that much of the handsome 1925 front facade remains under the 1967 sheathing. The upper front windows were not altered in any way when the new front was put on. Inside the third floor one may still see the woodwork of the arched windows, complete down to much of the glass in the elegant fanlights. The "Chicago" window at the second level is nearly as intact. It seems quite possible that the 1967 covering could be removed and the front returned to its vintage appearance.

The rear facade of the Trotter Building shows evidence of the earliest period of the structure's heritage. Above the two-story early-twentieth-century brick stairwell one can see the brick exterior of the original 1850s building. The brick is laid in [common bond](#), alternating one course of headers after every three stretcher courses. The two window openings (one now a firedoor, and the other bricked in) are topped by brick flat arches. Above the windows is a section of the three-course corbelled, molded brickwork that decorated the building when it was new, when the Trotter Building of Granite Row was a prestigious symbol of the railroad prosperity that set Charlotte on its way to becoming the Carolinas' leading city.

Historical Overview

A distinctive common thread linking Charlotte's 18th-Century origins with its present configuration is retail commerce at the intersection of two former Indian trails, now known as Trade and Tryon Streets which meet at Independence Square. One of the last small-scale retail store buildings remaining as part of this long tradition is the Thomas Trotter building at 108 South Tryon Street, and in fact, it is, as far as is known, the only antebellum commercial building remaining in the city. Along with four other companion buildings extending to the corner of Trade and Tryon Streets, which were known as "Granite Row," it was built in 1850-51, and much of the original construction remains today. The development of that corner and much of the rest of Charlotte was a direct result of the boom set off by the city acquiring rail links to the sea and the Northeast.¹

In 1850, Charlotte had a population of just over one thousand, and was a dirt-street village with the typical small merchants, cotton brokers, and craftworks. On the southwest corner of Trade and Tryon stood a large, two-story wood structure, the corner of which was used as a store on the first floor, and the rest as a dwelling next to it was a smaller wood building which was also used as a store, and later as Charlotte's first bank, a branch of the New Bern Bank.² That same year, a group of merchants bought that part of the block, known as the "Davidson Corner," and divided it into five separate store lots.³ From 1794, when Thomas Davidson of the pioneer Mecklenburg family of that name bought the property and built his house there, it had been owned by the Davidsons until 1842, when the Bank of the State of North Carolina bought it at a public sale.⁴

In 1852, Charlotte began its ascendancy to being a major brokerage and distribution center by the acquisition of its first rail service which ran to Columbia, SC, thus giving it a link to the seaports. Three years later a connection was made to Norfolk, VA, linking the city to the markets of the Northeast. The boom brought by the great increase in cotton trade as a result of the new railroads was reflected in the town.⁵ It was just before the time of the first railroad service that the investors who bought the "Davidson Corner" developed it to include five stores of three stories with a common facade, which was either of granite or appeared to be so, because it was thereafter known as "Granite Row" for the next fifty years.⁶

Granite Row, or, as they first called it, Granite Range, was among the first brick commercial buildings in the city, and indeed, may have been the first.⁷ Construction began in July, 1850,⁸ and the stores were completed and occupied in September, 1851, when several merchants, including jeweler Thomas Trotter, announced in the papers that they had removed to the "Granite Range."⁹ Today the basic structure of the

Trotter building appears to be the only remaining ante-bellum brick commercial building in the city.

Number Five Granite Row, now 108 South Tryon street, was purchased by jeweler and silversmith Thomas Trotter from the investor group in 1850, and ownership remained in the Trotter family until 1909.¹⁰ Thomas Trotter (1800-1865), was a Virginia native who was apprenticed to a silversmith in Salisbury, NC at the age of eighteen, and subsequently opened a shop in Greensboro, NC prior to 1824. In that year, he came to Charlotte and set himself up in the jewelry business singly and at times in partnership with others. Trotter not only would make or gild jewelry, but in an 1833 advertisement said that he continues to manufacture silver spoons and other articles of gold an silver, and he would inform the public, that this is the only shop in town where such articles are repaired. As stated in *Silversmiths of North Carolina*: "For nearly forty years Trotter dominated the jewelry business of Charlotte."¹²



Two years after installing his jewelry business in the Granite Row, Trotter took his son William P. in as a partner.¹³ When the Civil War broke out in 1861, Trotter's four sons (by his first marriage to Margaret Graham in 1828) enlisted in the Confederate army, and he sold much of his extensive real estate holdings in the city to buy Confederate bonds.¹⁴ In 1864, Trotter's health began to fail, and he made out a will wherein he left his plantation to his second wife, Jane Elizabeth Brown Trotter (married in 1850), and the children by this marriage, and Number Five Granite Row to the children of his first marriage.¹⁵

In July, 1865, just over three months after Thomas Trotter died on March 31, a merchant tailor named James A. Caldwell moved his business to the site of Trotter's store, and for the next three decades it housed various retail concerns.¹⁶ But in 1896 it was leased once again for a type of business which has occupied the building for most of its existence: a jewelry store. Garibaldi, Bruns and Dixon (Garibaldi-Bruns, 1916-

present) prospered so well in this location that in 1904 and 1909 they bought Number Three and Number Four respectively of the old Granite Row, remodeled them both with a common facade, and moved there in 1911.¹⁷

That the jewelry business flourished there in turn-of-the-century Charlotte was not surprising, because the city was in the middle of a sustained business boom that lasted nearly unabated from the 1880s to the end of the 1920s. At the end of Reconstruction, Charlotte was able to improve its rail connections in the 1870s, and over the next five decades it became an increasingly important banking, distribution and commercial center serving the Piedmont Carolinas as cotton mills mushroomed in the region as part of New South industrialization.¹⁸

In 1911, when Garibaldi, Bruns and Dixon moved to their own quarters next door, Thomas W. Wade, who had purchased the building (now No. 14 South Tryon Street) two years earlier, put up a new facade and interior designed by Charlotte architect Louis Asbury.¹⁹ Wade (d. 1943) was typical in many ways of Charlotte businessmen who prospered during the city's rapid economic expansion. He made money as a cotton broker with his Piedmont Cotton Company, then organized and became president of the Union National Bank in 1908 (in 1958 merged with First National Bank of Asheville, NC to become First Union National Bank). Louis Asbury (1877-1975), the designer of the 1911 facade, also designed the neighboring fronts and remodeling of the Garibaldi and Bruns building (1909) and the Southern Real Estate and Loan and Trust Company building (the former No. 2 granite row, 1913). A Charlotte native who was educated at Trinity College (now Duke University) and MIT, Asbury was the city's first professionally trained architect. After practical experience in architectural firms in New York, he returned to Charlotte in 1908 to launch a distinguished career of nearly fifty years and over one thousand commissions. Among his best known important commissions are the old Mecklenburg County Courthouse (1929), the Law Building (1926), First National Bank (1915), all in Charlotte, and many large churches, stores, municipal buildings and fine residences throughout the city and surrounding area.²⁰

After the remodeling of four of the five 3-story stores of the old Granite row, from 1900 to 1913, the buildings presented a dignified, even stately appearance, yet they remained on a human scale which fit the lively street activity at the town's center. Following the move of Garibaldi and Bruns two doors down, No. 14 South Tryon was variously occupied by a millinery shop, a short-lived bank, the Peoples Bank and Trust (1916-1920), and a cafeteria and tea room until 1925, when T. W. Wade again had the building remodeled and put on a different facade, this one being done by builder James P. Propst. In this change, the side entrance and stairs leading to the second floor were eliminated, and the building was divided into two ten-foot wide

stores at the street level, which by 1931 were numbered 108 and 108A South Tryon Street.²¹

The remodeling of the Wade Building to include a street level division and new facade was completely in keeping with similar changes in other stores on Tryon Street in the mid-twenties, all of which reflected the great surge in business and building activity throughout the city until the end of 1929. In 1925 alone, there were sixteen major alterations of twenty-two storefronts in the first three blocks of South Tryon Street, which included the twenty-story First National Bank building next door to Wade's on the south side.²² Following this remodeling, number 108 was occupied by a shoe store (1926-31) and the National Hat Shops (1933-1958), and 108A by various clothing stores.²³

In 1940, Brownlee Jewelers set up business in number 108A, and continued operating there until 1967, when it took over the entire store building and the present facade was put on over the 1925 one.²⁴ While vast changes have taken place recently in the vicinity of 108 South Tryon Street, particularly the building of large Bauhaus-type, impersonal office and hotel towers, Brownlee Jewelers still flourishes as the only small scale retail store remaining in the first block of South Tryon. The present owner of the property, who is also head of Brownlee, Al Rousso, would not only like to preserve the building for its historic character but because of its uniqueness as a busy small retail store in that part of the business district.

A building that for over 130 years has been a part of a long tradition of small retail business in the center Of the city surely deserves preservation, and has earned the distinction of being historically significant.

NOTES

¹ LeGette Blythe and Charles Brockman, *Hornet's Nest: The Story of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County*(Charlotte: Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County, 1961), pp. 259-261.

² *Ibid.*, p. 449; Charlotte City Directory, 1875/6, p. 135.

³ Unrecorded deed dated 6 July 1850; Mecklenburg County Deed Book 3, pp. 243-245, 11 December 1850.

⁴ Mecklenburg County Old Deed Book 15, p. 54, 1 November 1794; *Ibid.*, Book 17, p. 743, 1 May 1802; *Ibid.*, Book 24, p. 42, 14 July 1836; *Ibid.*, Book 2, p. 26, 7 March 1842.

⁵ Blythe and Brockman, pp. 259-61; Charlotte City Directory, 1875/6, p. 132.

⁶ Various Mecklenburg County deed references from 1855 to 1907; c.f. note 10.

⁷ A description of Trade and Tryon Streets in 1850 states that there was only one brick building in the city besides the courthouse, a one-story structure on the east side of North Tryon. Charlotte City Directory, 1875/6. pp. 132-135.

⁸ *The Charlotte Journal*, July 31, 1850, p. 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*, October 8, 1851, p. 2.

¹⁰ Mecklenburg County Deed Book 3, p. 343, 11 December 1850; *Ibid.*, Book 254, p. 71, 10 July 1909.

¹¹ George B. Cutten and Mary R. Peacock, *Silversmiths of North Carolinas 1696-1850* (Raleigh: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, Division of archives and History, 1973), pp. 111-115.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 113.

¹³ *Western Democrat*, January 28, 1853, p. 3.

¹⁴ Cutten and Peacock, p. 113; Mecklenburg County Marriage Bonds.

¹⁵ Original will of Thomas Trotter, dated 25 May 1864, probated July, 1865, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, N.C.; Mecklenburg County Marriage Bonds.

¹⁶ *Western Democrat*, July 3, 1865, p. 4; *Ibid.*, various dates; *The Charlotte Journal*, various dates; Sanborn Insurance Map, 1885, p. 4.

¹⁷ Mecklenburg County Deed Book 250, p. 394; William H. Huffman, "A Historical Sketch of the Garibaldi and Bruns Building," Charlotte Mecklenburg Historic Properties Commission, February, 1983; Sanborn Insurance Maps, 1900, p. 10, 1905, p. 13 and 1911, p. 4.

¹⁸ Blythe and Brockman, pp. 259-60, et passim; William H. Huffman, "A Historical Sketch of the Charlotte Supply Company Building," Charlotte Mecklenburg Historic Properties Commission, August, 1983.

¹⁹ Mecklenburg County Deed Book 254, p. 71, 10 July 1909; Louis Asbury Job Book, Job # 66, 28 February 1911, Louis Asbury Papers #4237, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

²⁰ Louis Asbury's Job Book; information on file at Charlotte Mecklenburg Historic Properties Commission.

²¹ Charlotte City Directories, 1911-1931; City of Charlotte Building Permit No. 6509, 13 November 1925.

²² City of Charlotte building permit records.

²³ Charlotte City Directories, 1925-present.

²⁴ *Ibid.*; City of Charlotte Building Permit dated 21 February 1967.

Bibliography of Principal Sources

Blythe, Le Gette and Charles Brockman, *Hornet's Nest: The Story of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County*(Charlotte: Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County, 1961).

Charlotte City Directories.

The Charlotte Journal

Cutten, George B. and Mary R. Peacock, *Silversmiths of North Carolina. 1696-1850* (Raleigh: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, Division of Archives and History, 1973), pp. 111-115.

Mecklenburg County Deed Books

Sanborn Insurance Maps

Western Democrat