

The Tuckaseegee Ford and Trail



1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the Tuckaseegee Ford and Trail is located at 5000 Whitewater Center Parkway, Charlotte North Carolina.

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

Mecklenburg County
600 East Fourth St / 11th Floor
Charlotte, NC 28202

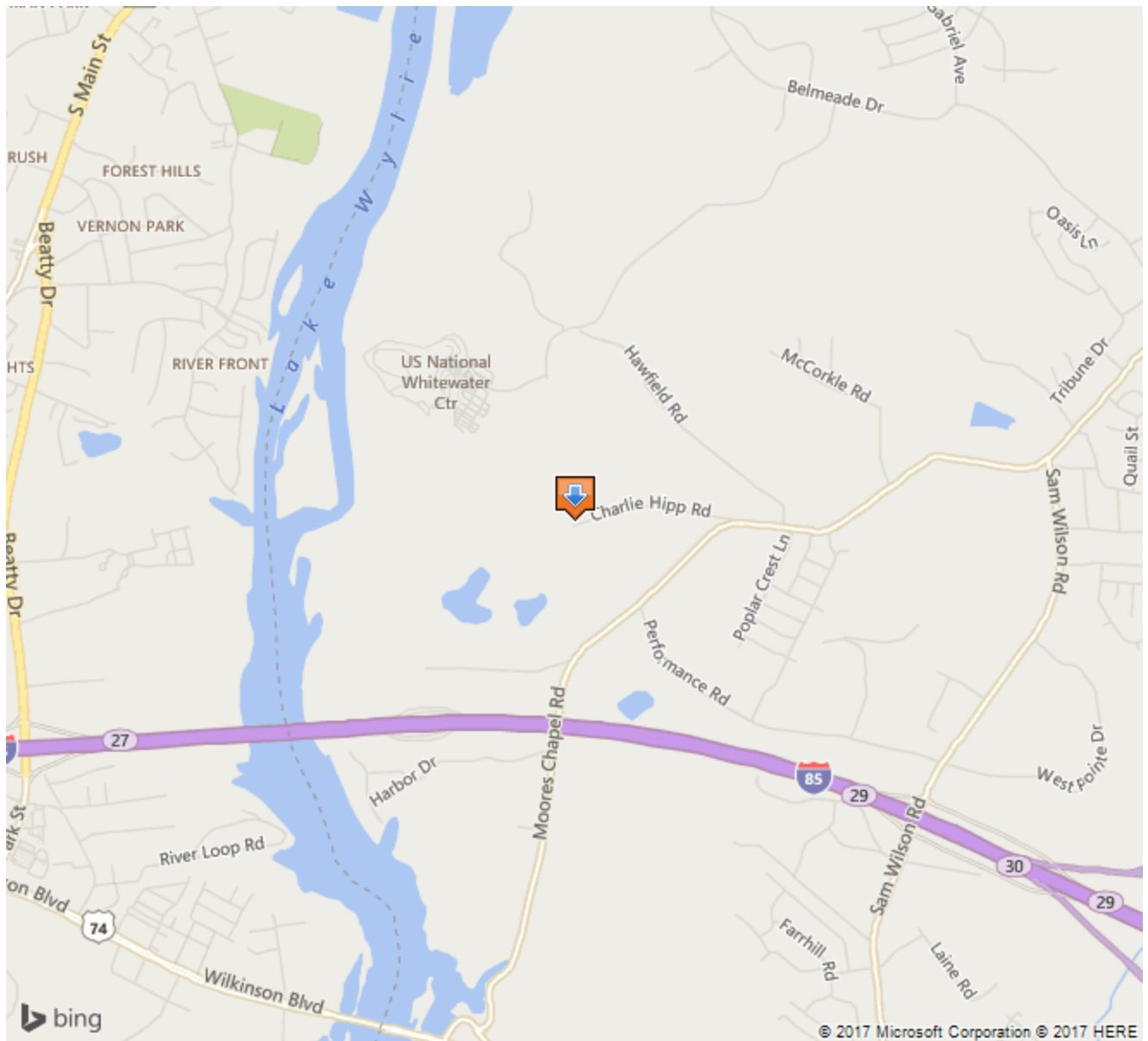
Duke Power Company
422 South Church St
Charlotte, NC 28242-0001

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 maps depicting the location of the property. The area in black is the general outline of the proposed landmark. The red line shows the approximate route of the Tuckasegee Trail and the Tuckasegee Ford. The red dot is the approximate location of the ruin of the Civil War Power Mill.







5. Current deed book reference to the property: The most recent deeds to the properties are located in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 6230, page 893 and Mecklenburg County Deed Book 3926, page 909. The tax parcel numbers for the properties are 053-101-99, 053-111-07, 053-111-08 and 053-111-03.

6. A brief historical sketch of the property: This report contains a brief historical sketch of the property prepared by Emily D. Ramsey.

7. A brief description of the property: This report contains a brief site description of the property prepared by Emily D. Ramsey.

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

a. Special significance in terms of its history, architecture, and/or cultural importance:

The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission judges that the Tuckaseegee Ford possesses special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations:

- 1) The Tuckaseegee Ford was the first documented ford crossing the Catawba River in Mecklenburg County.
- 2) The Tuckaseegee Trail was a major route for Native American and European settlers which stretched from the center of Charlotte to as far west as the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains.
- 3) The Tuckaseegee Ford and the Tuckaseegee Trail contributed to the development of Charlotte as a burgeoning center of trade and settlement in the Piedmont region of North Carolina.
- 4) The Tuckaseegee Ford was the site of several important crossings of the Catawba River, including the crossing of General Rutherford and his troops on the way to Ramseur's Mill in 1780 and the crossing of French botanist and explorer Andre Michaux in 1789.
- 5) The Tuckaseegee Ford and the Tuckaseegee Trail are visible reminders of early patterns of settlement and travel between Charlotte and western North Carolina.

b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling, and/or association:

The Commission judges that the site description completed by Emily D. Ramsey demonstrates that the Tuckaseegee Ford meet 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 part of the property which becomes a designated "historic landmark."

10. Portion of property recommended for designation: The portions of tax parcel 05310199 described in the architectural description. All of Sadler Island composed of tax parcels 05311103, 05311107, and 05311108.

Date of preparation of this report: September 1, 2000

(Revised March 10, 2010 by Stewart Gray)

Prepared by: Emily D. Ramsey

Statement of Significance

The property known as the Tuckaseegee Ford, located on the western border of Mecklenburg County at the Catawba River, is a site that possesses local historic significance as the first documented crossing place along the Catawba River in Mecklenburg County and as an integral part of the Tuckaseegee Trail, the major thoroughfare for travelers (both Native American and European settlers alike) moving to and from Charlotte as far west as the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains. While the eastern regions of North Carolina had been inhabited by European settlers for over a century, the area that would become Charlotte had been inhabited only by Catawba Indians by the time Thomas Spratt and Thomas Polk, the area's first European inhabitants, decided to settle and build cabins there in the early 1750s. The Charlotte region was a logical location for inland settlement, since two of the Carolina's most frequently traveled Indian trails, the Tuckaseegee Trail and the great Trading Path, intersected at what is now the center of the city of Charlotte. Although most historians site the coming of the railroad in the 1850s as the key event that would transform Charlotte from a small town into the major transportation, distribution, and manufacturing center of the Carolinas, Charlotte's location at the intersection of the Tuckaseegee Trail and the great Trading Path gave the town, from the very beginning of the area's settlement, a key advantage over dozens of other small Piedmont towns around it. Without the Tuckaseegee Ford and the Tuckaseegee Trail, which brought settlers, travelers, and traders directly into Charlotte from the western part of the state and beyond, Charlotte could not have grown and developed as successfully as it did in the late eighteenth century and well into the nineteenth century.

The Tuckaseegee Ford is also significant as the site of several important crossings of the Catawba River, including the crossing of General Rutherford and his troops on the way to Ramseur's Mill in 1780 and the crossing of French botanist and explorer Andes Michaux in 1789. The Tuckaseegee Ford, the oldest and most important point of crossing along the Catawba River, played an integral role in the exploration of the region and provided easy access and a direct route to the western regions of North Carolina.

Historical Overview

Although the coastal regions in eastern North Carolina had been home to some of the earliest colonial settlements in America, settlement did not reach farther inland until almost 100 years after these first coastal settlements were established. Although North Carolina's coastline was regarded as treacherous and geographically isolated, with "no natural harbors or navigable rivers that flowed unencumbered into the ocean," the prospect of "fertile new lands, animal furs, and trade with the Indians" led

many settlers from coastal Virginia to areas along the North Carolina shoreline.¹ Settlements quickly spread from the area around the Albemarle Sound farther south to the Pamlico and Neuse River Basins and, finally, to the Cape Fear River Valley where numerous water routes were readily available for the transportation of people and goods. By the mid-eighteenth century, historian Thomas Hanchett writes, "the port towns of New Bern and Wilmington, North Carolina, and Georgetown and Charleston, South Carolina, flourished where major river systems emptied into the Atlantic."² Means of travel and transportation became difficult, however, as one traveled west from the coast, and this presented the greatest problem to those who would settle farther inland. The western portions of what would become North Carolina the piedmont, the foothills and the mountains were much more difficult to traverse than the areas around the coast. Since long-distance travel by water became practically impossible as one traveled inland, settlers were in need of relatively reliable land routes across the state. They would find them in well-worn, frequently traversed Indian trails.

In the beginning of the eighteenth century, the land that now encompasses Mecklenburg, Gaston, and other neighboring counties was a wilderness inhabited by a tribe of Native Americans known as the Catawbas. The Catawba Indians concentrated their settlements along a river that they called "Eswa Taroa" the great river.³ By 1700, at least six Catawba Indian villages hugged the banks of what is now known as the Catawba River. From these settlements, the Catawbas ventured in all directions to trade with other tribes and with European settlers already established in Virginia and the coastal regions of North Carolina. Traveling on foot, Native American tribes in North Carolina, including the Catawba, created established trade routes that crossed the state. By far the most traveled and well-known Indian trade route was known as the Great Wagon Road, which stretched from the Shenandoah Valley south through North and South Carolina and to the Savannah River. In North Carolina, the Great Wagon Road merged with what local traders and travelers called the great Trading Path. The Trading Path wound its way southwest from Virginia through the piedmont of North Carolina, directly through the center of what would become the city of Charlotte, and into South Carolina, thus serving as the major route for Native American traders and travelers.⁴

While the great Trading Path was the most traveled and most well known of the Piedmont's Indian trails, it was not the only important route established by the region's Native American tribes. The Tuckaseegee Trail, winding its way west from Charlotte (where it crossed the great Trading Path) to the edge of the Blue Ridge Mountains, provided a key link for Native American traders and travelers. Not only did the Tuckaseegee Trail provide a reliable and direct route for western travelers to link up with the great Trading Path, it also provided, with the Tuckaseegee Ford, the first

documented point of crossing along the piedmont portion of the Catawba River. Maps as early as 1704 identify the Tuckaseegee Ford as the only ford on the Catawba in what would become Mecklenburg County.⁵

As European settlers became familiar with the system of reliable, well-established Indian trails that criss-crossed the state, many of them adopted the trails for their own use as they ventured inland to settle and establish communities. Crossing the unfamiliar terrain with animals, wagons, and buggies was difficult, even under the best of circumstances, and Indian trails provided the most reliable form of travel by land. When, in 1750, Thomas Spratt and Thomas Polk, the first European settlers to lay claim to land in Mecklenburg County, arrived in what would later become the city of Charlotte, they came by way of the great Trading Path.

Not only were Indian Trails essential for travel to new points of settlement, they often became the center of new towns and villages. Indian trails like the Tuckaseegee and the Great Trading Path became as important to inland settlers as proximity to good rivers and other water routes were to settlers near the coast. The points where Indian trails crossed provided a logical location for settlement. Not surprisingly, Spratt and Polk chose to settle along the intersection of the Tuckaseegee Trail and the Great Trading Path, the central point around which the city of Charlotte would later flourish. Settlement near this intersection provided the settlers with access to communities to the north, south and west of what became, in 1762, the county of Mecklenburg.⁶

Although the majority of the Scotch- Irish settlers who flooded down from northern colonies to populate Mecklenburg County and the newly established county seat of Charlotte during the last half of the eighteenth century came, as Thomas Spratt and Thomas Polk had, by way of the great Trading Path, the Tuckaseegee Trail and the Tuckaseegee Ford brought its share of people to the growing community of Charlotte and to Mecklenburg County. Settlers, traders, and travelers from the far reaches of the Blue Ridge Mountains and into Tennessee used the Tuckaseegee Trail and crossed the Catawba River at the Tuckaseegee Ford on their way to Charlotte. Many passed through the small town and continued north or south on the great Trading Path; however, many stayed, built homes and farmed the land around the steadily growing community at the crossroads. In 1765, the small town of Charlotte was named the county seat of Mecklenburg County, and the newly erected courthouse (built "not on a corner, but square in the middle of the crossroads") drew many people from the western part of the county, who traveled along the Tuckaseegee Ford to take care of public business and to trade in Charlotte.⁷ Other areas along the trail continued to attract settlement as well on the western side of the Tuckaseegee Ford, in the small peninsula of land between the Catawba and the South Fork rivers, a community known as the Point settlement flourished, where:

Men and girdled and felled trees to clear corn patches, and hunted deer and turkey and fished the rivers and creeks for food. Women worked tirelessly from dawn until dark, washing, cooking, hoeing, milking cows. Here and there millstones were imported, to fit to creekside paddle wheels for the grinding of grain. One or two settlers were blacksmiths . . ."⁸

As settlement to the east and the west of the Tuckaseegee Ford increased through the late seventeen-hundreds and early eighteen-hundreds, the Tuckaseegee Ford became even more important as a route connecting points through the piedmont and into the mountains of North Carolina. The Revolutionary War accelerated traffic along the Tuckaseegee Trail and across the Tuckaseegee Ford troops moved across the state alongside travelers and traders on the Trail's familiar route. General Griffith Rutherford and his troops crossed the Tuckaseegee Ford on their way to one of the major Revolutionary battles fought in the area, the battle of Ramseur's Mill in Lincoln County. The Tuckaseegee Trail was a well-known local landmark by the time of the Revolution, even for those traveling it for the first time. Benson Lossing described his experience at the Ford in great detail in volume two of his *A Pictorial Field Book of the Revolution*:

I breakfasted by candlelight on Monday morning and before sunrise was on the road for Kings Mountain and the Cowpens. I passed the United States Branch Mint, upon the road leading from [Charlotte] to the Tuckesege or the Great Catawba Ford From Charlotte to the Catawba, a distance of eleven miles, the country is very hilly, and the roads were bad the greater portion of the way. I crossed the Catawba at the Tuckesege Ford The distance from shore to shore, in the direction of the ford, is more than half a mile, the water varying in depth from ten inches to three feet, and running quite a rapid current.⁹

Rutherford and Lossing were not the only important people to record their crossing of the "Great Catawba Ford." In November of 1789, French botanist and explorer Andre Micheux wrote in his journal of crossing the "Tuck-a-segee-foard," which he estimated as being about fourteen miles west of Charlotte.¹⁰ Micheux was exploring the region, discovering and describing previously undocumented plants. Soon after crossing the Ford, as he continued his way along the Tuckaseegee Trail, Micheux discovered the first of several big-leaf Magnolias (a deciduous magnolia which grows naturally in a very small area of the North Carolina Piedmont) located in the area. His journal description was the first written documentation of the tree.

After the Revolutionary War, the area to the west of the Catawba River became a major destination point along the Tuckaseegee Trail. Peter Forney's Big Ore Bank in Lincoln County began, in the late 1700s, to dig local iron ore and use it in manufacturing, and soon other iron furnaces began appearing "around the iron

deposits that stretched north from Kings Mountain" and through Lincoln County.¹¹ The area quickly flourished as a center for the mining of iron ore and the production of iron products such as pots, rifles, cannonballs, tools and nails, which were in great demand when Britain ceased trading with the colonies after the Revolutionary War. The Tuckaseegee Trail and the Tuckaseegee Ford provided a direct route from Charlotte and other points east of the Catawba River and along the Trading Path to Vesuvius Iron Furnace, Mount Tirzah Forge and Rehoboth Furnace, among others, where merchants would bring "wagons loaded with wool, flax, hams and cloth [to] exchange for iron implements."¹²

Industries such as the iron works around Lincolnton were few and far between in the agricultural South, but the industrial needs brought on by the South's entrance into the Civil War would bring several new and unusual industries to the Charlotte-Mecklenburg area, and to the Tuckaseegee Ford. The South was industrially unprepared to meet the enormous and varied needs of the Confederate Army when the Civil War began. Confederate industries were hurriedly established to provide the army with such items as gunpowder, naval supplies, rifles, and ammunition. Charlotte-Mecklenburg in particular became a center for war-related industries. In 1862, the Naval Ordnance Works was moved from Norfolk, Virginia to Charlotte. The naval yard "employed some 1500 men and boys" and consisted of "a smithy, foundry, machine shops, rigging loft, laboratory and other departments," as well as all the equipment needed to produce "the necessary repair parts to keep the South's locomotives, mining, textile, and farm machinery in running order."¹³ The Confederate States Acid Works, also located in Charlotte, produced sulphuric and nitric acid, essential elements in the maintenance of wet cell batteries and in the "manufacture of fulminate of mercury, used in the percussion caps needed for muskets and rifles."¹⁴

In the early 1860s, the area around the Mecklenburg side of the Tuckaseegee Ford became home to yet another war-related industry the manufacture of gunpowder. Concern over the shortage of gunpowder supplies in North Carolina prompted the General Assembly to action; in September of 1861, the Assembly authorized North Carolina's governor to "subscribe stock or loan money to any company making powder, or building of any powder factory, and to buy machinery to make powder." The North Carolina Powder Manufacturing Company was chartered by the State and received the maximum advance ten thousand dollars to begin work immediately on a powder mill near the Tuckaseegee Ford.¹⁵ The main building was a stone structure "at least 35 by 10 feet" with "no windows, no chimney, and just a single door." Company president S.W. Davis made a special request to the Confederate Secretary of War to exempt local carpenters Josiah Asbury, Michael Carter, James M. Hutchinson, and James S. Parker from military service while the

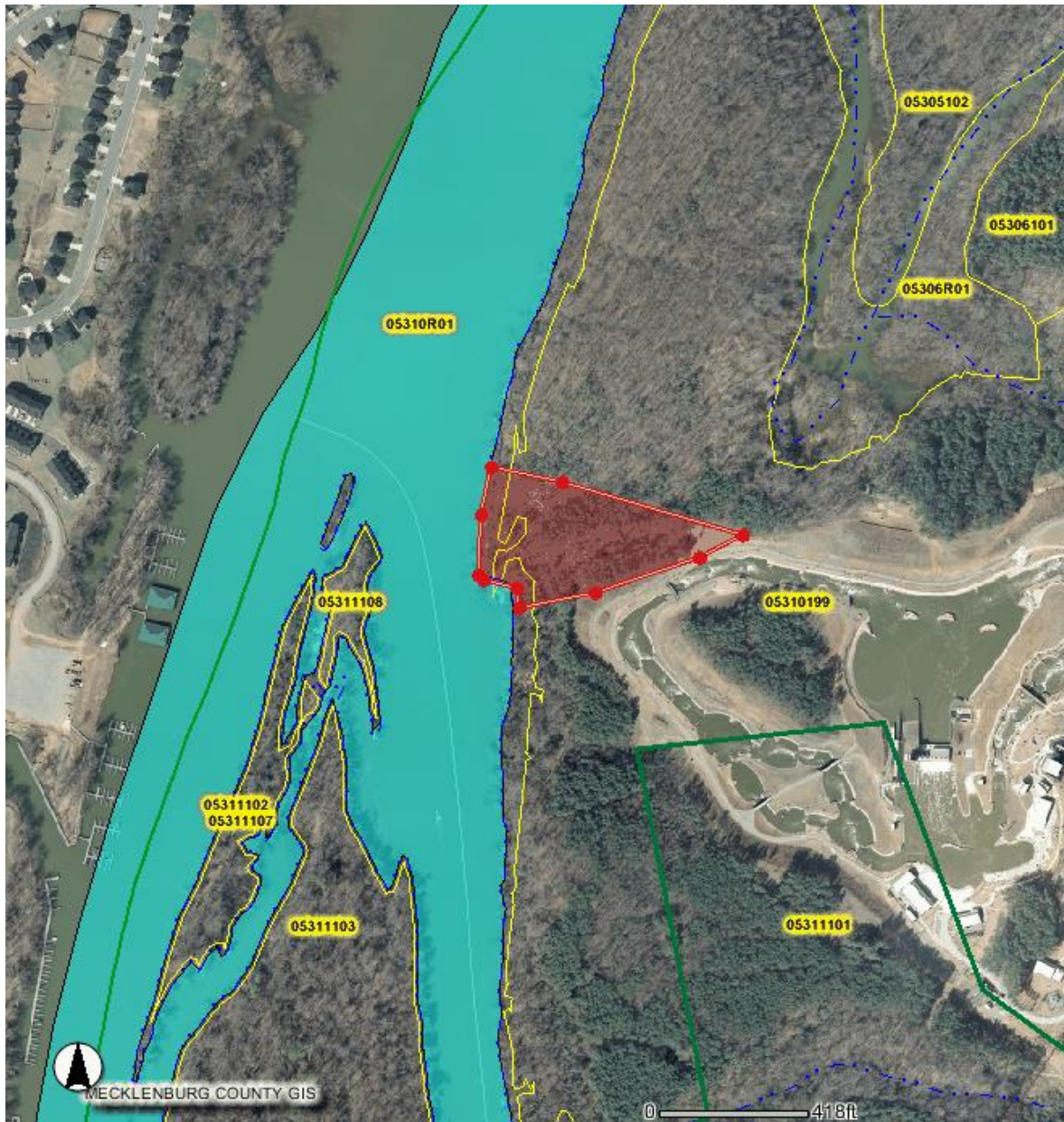
factory was being built.¹⁶ On February 10, 1863, soon after the factory's completion, the Governor gave permission for the North Carolina Powder Manufacturing Company to "build a dam on the Catawba to supply a constant and ample supply of water for operating its machinery." The Company was also given permission to construct "plank roads, tram roads or railroads to connect the mill with the Wilmington, Charlotte and Rutherford Railroad" and the right to issue then percent coupon bonds.¹⁷

Despite such promising beginnings, the North Carolina Powder Manufacturing Company's brief existence on the Tuckaseegee Ford was plagued with disasters. On May 23, 1863, one of the mill's workmen, while "knocking caked powder off the mill stones with a copper hammer in the customary manner," caused an enormous explosion. A reported 700 pounds of gunpowder exploded. The blast, which killed the mill's superintendent and four of its workmen, completely destroyed the mill and created a shock felt in downtown Charlotte, eleven miles away.¹⁸ The mill was promptly rebuilt and began producing powder again in early 1864. Nevertheless, on August 4, 1864, another powder explosion occurred. Two workmen were killed and the mill itself was badly damaged. The Company attempted to bring the mill back into production, but inadequate labor supplies and the dwindling hope of victory for the Confederacy stalled these efforts. What was left of the mill building was abandoned, and remained perched on the edge of the Tuckaseegee Trail near the Tuckaseegee Ford until 1916, when the Catawba River flooded its banks and washed away all but the foundation of the North Carolina Powder Manufacturing Company.¹⁹

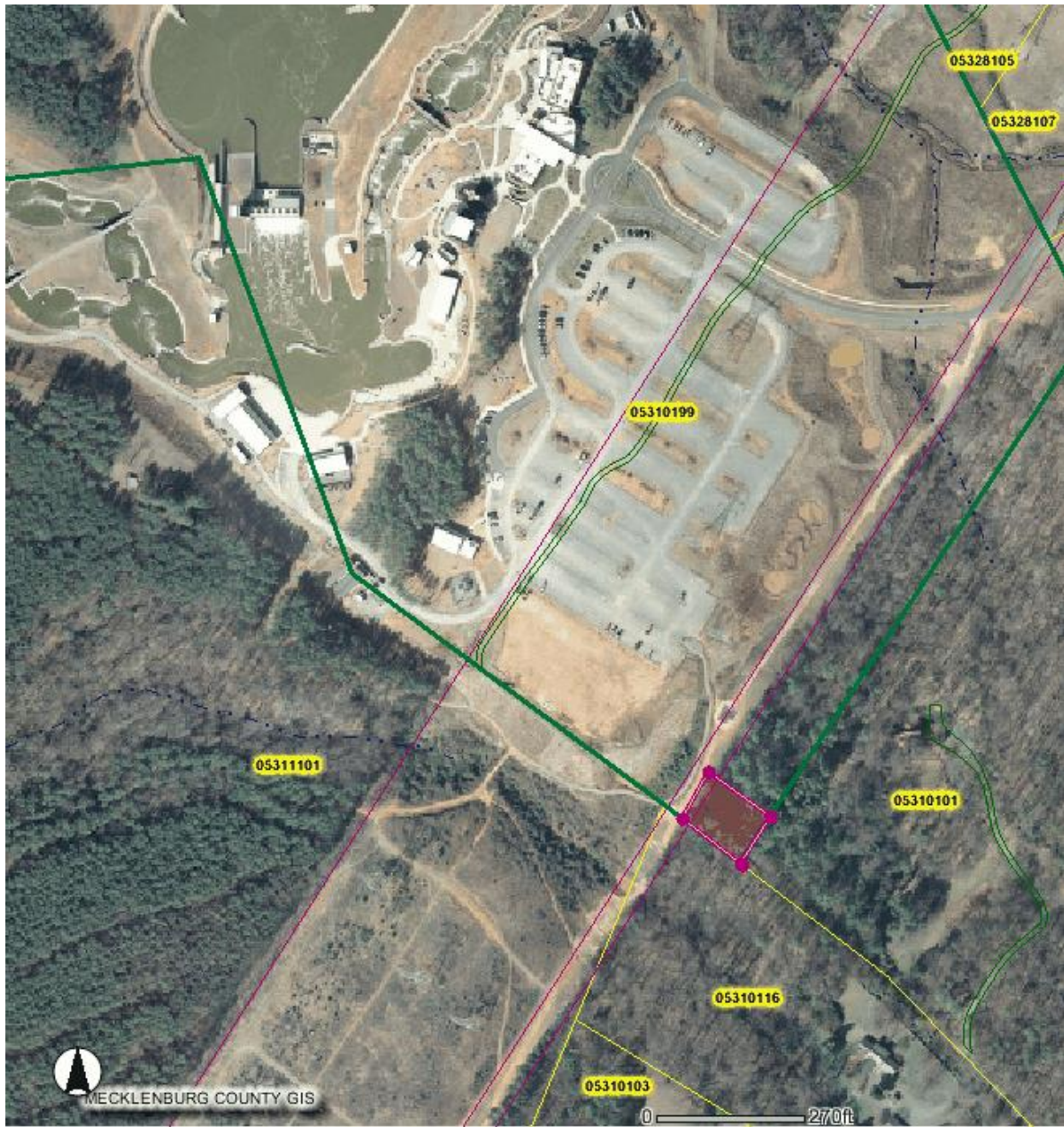
Despite the misfortune that occurred along its banks during the Civil War, the Tuckaseegee Trail and the Tuckaseegee Ford continued to serve as a major route for travelers well into the nineteenth century. Other trails and fords across the Catawba River sprang up as Charlotte grew as the county seat of Mecklenburg County: Beatties Ford near the county's northern boundary; Cowan's Ford five miles below; Toole's Ford, south of Cowan's Ford; Martin's Ford near the Point settlement; and Armstrong's Ford.²⁰ However, the Tuckaseegee Ford (centrally located and on a major east-west route through the Piedmont of North Carolina) remained the most important crossing place on the Catawba River. By the time of the Civil War, however, transportation in Charlotte and the piedmont had begun to progress radically, particularly with the coming of the railroad in the 1850s. Historian Thomas Hanchett writes that "when the Charlotte and South Carolina completed its track up from Columbia in that year, it was one of the first railways in the western half of North Carolina. Suddenly Charlotte had the advantage over the half-dozen similar sized villages in the region."²¹

By the end of the Civil War, four major railroads—the Charlotte and South Carolina line to Columbia, South Carolina; the North Carolina Railroad through Greensboro and Salisbury, North Carolina; the Atlantic, Tennessee and Ohio to Statesville, North Carolina; the Wilmington, Charlotte and Rutherford Railroad, connecting Charlotte and Lincolnton, North Carolina—converged in Charlotte. The railroad, along with an ever-expanding network of roads and bridges, quickly overshadowed the familiar Indian land routes that had been used for over a century for long distance travel and shorter trips between towns and communities. Although traffic along the Tuckaseegee Trail and across the Tuckaseegee Ford declined dramatically in the post-bellum period, the Ford remained in use until 1914, when the Catawba was dammed to create Lake Wylie, raising the waters around the Ford by twenty feet or more from their once shallow, navigable depths and covering a large part of Sadler's Island, an integral part of the Tuckaseegee Ford. Presently, the land is owned by Mecklenburg County, and Mecklenburg County Parks and Recreation has begun plans for possible development of a park in the area.

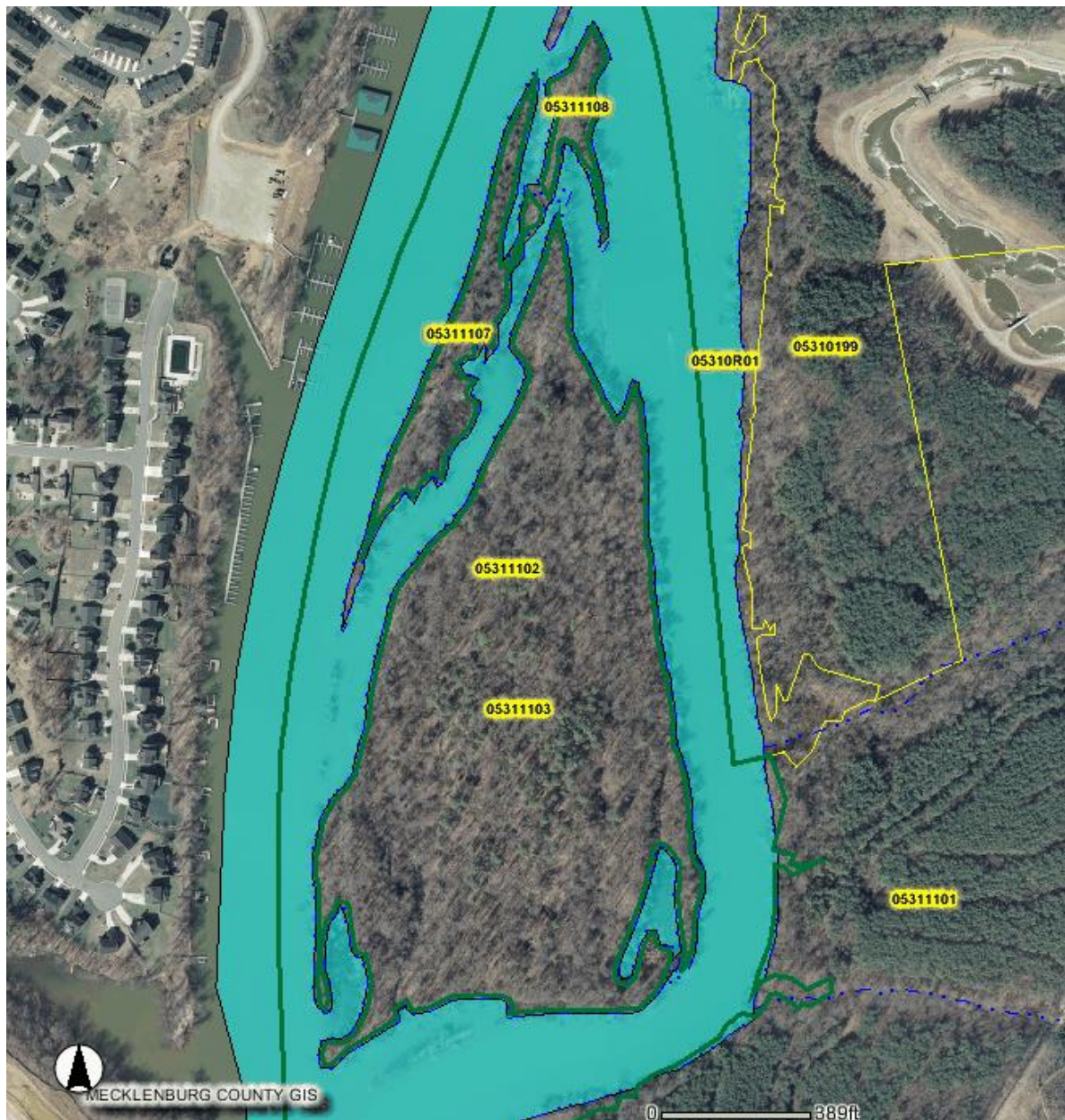
Architectural Description



The map above shows the location of the ford. The map below shows the location of a significant remnant of the trail



Below is a map of Sadler Island.



The area around the Catawba River, now crossed by numerous interstate highways, boulevards and roads, was once thick forest and largely unsettled wilderness, spotted with small Catawba Indian villages. Through this rugged country, a rough, muddy Indian trail snaked to the west, opening out onto a shallow portion of the Catawba River, where two small islands broke the surface of the river. When Benjamin Lossing came across the Tuckaseegee Ford, he was piloted across "by a lad on horseback." His journal entries provide a vivid picture of the Tuckaseegee Ford in the late 1700s. According to Lossing, the Ford was about half a mile long, shore-to-

shore, and varied in depth from "ten inches to three feet." The Ford began at a point on the Mecklenburg County shore of the Catawba River and continuing diagonally southwest across two islands, "covered with shrubbery and trees," one in the middle of the river (now named Sadler Island and owned by Duke Power Company) and another, smaller island (now a peninsula at the edge of Riverfront, a suburban development) near the western bank of the Catawba.²²

Today, the parcel of land that includes the Mecklenburg County portion of the Tuckaseegee Ford and a portion of the Tuckaseegee Trail also contains the Whitewater Center, a landscape of concrete water channels and ancillary buildings. Much of the trail that ran through the parcel was destroyed when the center was built and much of the trail was lost with the grading associated with a large powerline right-of-way on the property. The topography of the ford was altered by the creation of Lake Wylie in the early twentieth century, which raised the water level of the Catawba River at the Tuckaseegee Ford site by approximately twenty feet, covering a large part of Sadler Island and making the river at what had been the Tuckaseegee Ford unnavigable by foot or horseback. However, the Ford's natural setting, along most of the Ford's original elements, including the Sadler Island and the place where archeologist Alan May believes that the Tuckaseegee Trail approached the Ford, remain undisturbed by encroaching development. The Tuckaseegee Ford, along with the remains of the Tuckaseegee Trail, serve as visible reminders of the area's early history, when patterns of settlement and travel between Charlotte and western North Carolina were first being established along important and frequently traveled Indian trails.

Notes

¹ Catherine W. Bisher, Charlotte V. Brown, Carl R. Lounsbury and Ernest H. Wood III. *Architects and Builders in North Carolina: A History of the Practice of Building* (The University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, 1990), p.11-12.

² Thomas W. Hanchett. "The Growth of Charlotte: A History" (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission) p.1-2.

³ Mary Norton Kratt. *Charlotte: Spirit of the New South* (John F. Blair: Winston Salem, 1992) p. 3.

⁴ Ibid, p.5-8.

⁵ Letter from Kathy Nebel to Charlotte-Mecklenburg Parks and Recreation Committee, dated July 24, 2000.

⁶ Hanchett, p.2 .

⁷ Kratt, p.18.

⁸ Robert F. Cope and Manly Wade Wellman. *The County of Gaston: Two Centuries of a North Carolina Region*(Gaston County Historical Society, 1961) p.11.

⁹ Benson Lossing. *A Pictorial Field Book of the Revolution, Vol. 2* (Harper and Brothers: New York, 1860), p. 421-422. Several spellings of the word "Tuckaseegee" have been documented in writings and maps of the Tuckaseegee Ford. The oldest spelling documented is "Tuckesege", which Lossing uses in his description of the Ford.

¹⁰ Excerpt from an entry in the Journal of Andre Micheux, dated November 16, 1789. Micheux spells "Tuckaseegee" phonetically, as "Tuck-a-segee."

¹¹ Kratt, p. 40.

¹² Ibid., p. 40.

¹³ Ed Smith, "Drama in 1865," D. R. Reynolds, ed. *Charlotte Remembers*, p. 33. ¹⁴ Ralph W. Donnely. Untitled report, dated September 19, 1959 and located in the " Charlotte History; Civil War" vertical file in the Carolina Room, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Library, Main Branch.

¹⁵ James H. Boykin, *North Carolina in 1861* (Bookman Associates, 1961), p.205. "Tuckaseegee Ford Site of Gunpowder Mill of the Sixties," report located in the "Mecklenburg History: Civil War" vertical file on file in the Carolina Room, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Library, Main Branch. S.W. Davis was listed as President of the North Carolina Powder Manufacturing Company, which held an office in downtown Charlotte, at the corner of Tryon Street and Fourth Street.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Donnely, p.1-3.

¹⁸ Ibid, p.2. Four of the men, including Superintendent Charles Kiepelburge and workers John N. Lee, George Hutchinson, and Christopher Ounce, died instantly. Worker John Ochler died of severe injuries the night of the accident.

¹⁹ Ibid, p.2. The second explosion killed a white man named Abernathy and an unidentified negro, and badly injured several other men.

²⁰ Cope and Wellman, p.13.

²¹ Hanchett, www.cmhpf.org .

²² Lossing, p. 421-422.

²³ See Attached map of the master plan for the proposed Catawba Riverfront Park (Exhibit A). The landscape feature numbered 12 on the map (in yellow) is, according to Darren Coffey, who surveyed the property, the site of the North Carolina Powder Manufacturing Company. The landmark numbered 14 (in orange on the map) is a point on what was originally the Tuckaseegee Trail, approaching the Ford.