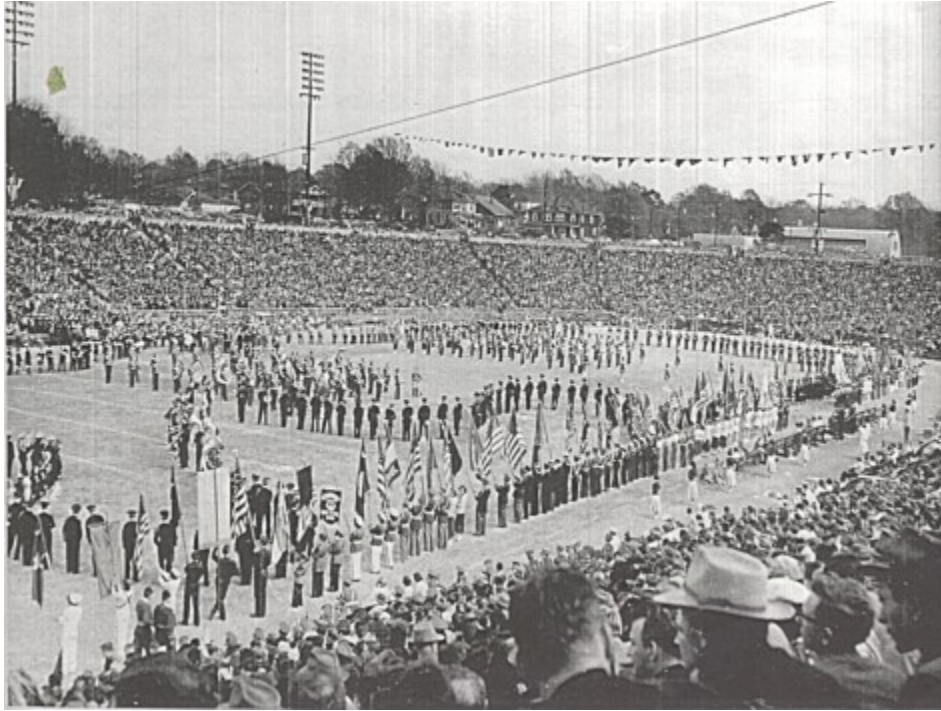


# **SURVEY AND RESEARCH REPORT**

## **ON**

### **The American Legion Memorial Stadium (1936)**



**1. Name and location of the property:** The property known as the American Legion Memorial Stadium is located between Sam Ryburn Walk and East Seventh St. on East Independence Boulevard in Charlotte, North Carolina.

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

Mecklenburg County

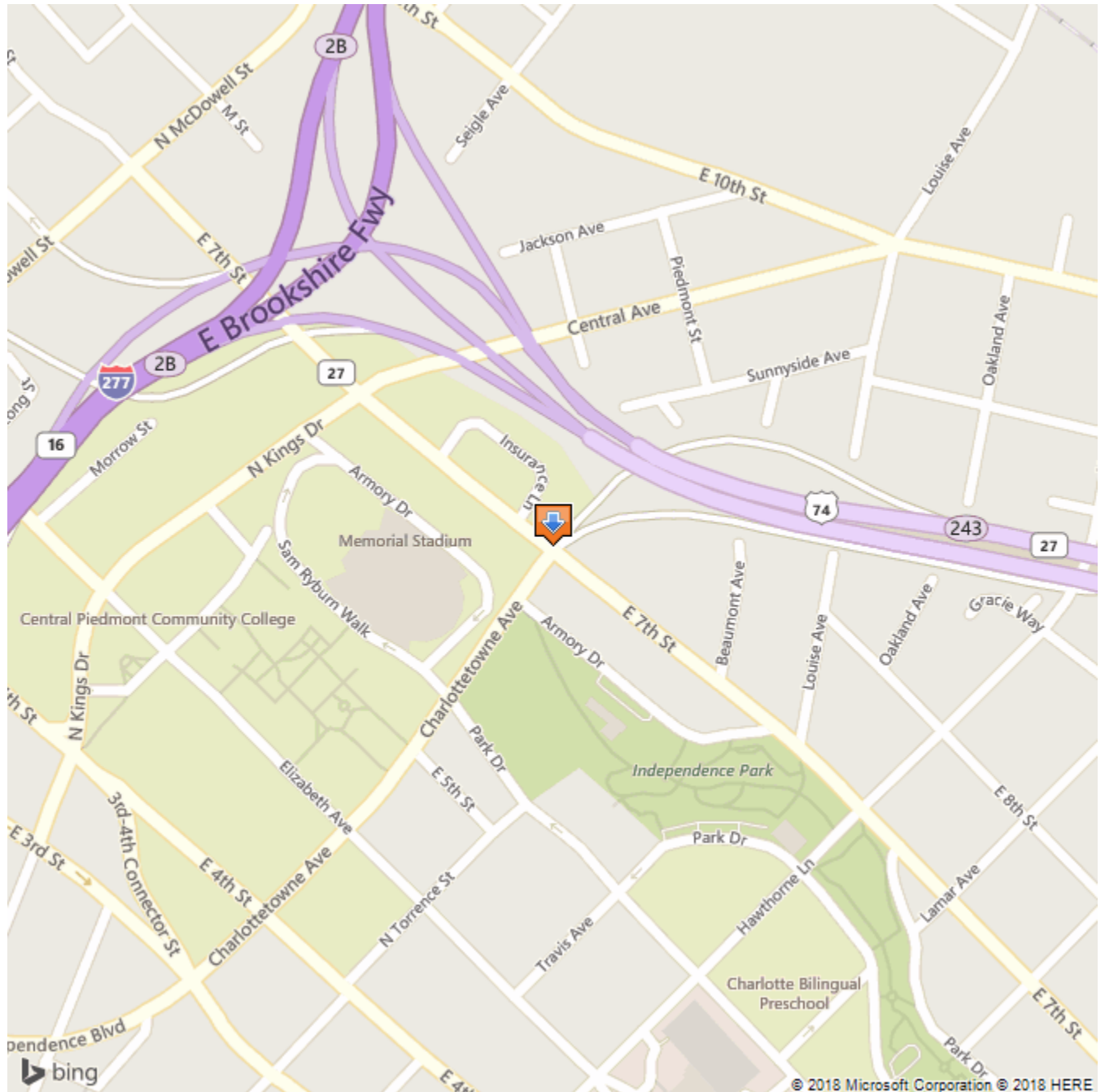
600 East Fourth Street

Charlotte, N.C. 28202-2816

Telephone: 704-336-2472

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

**4. Maps depicting the location of the property:** This report contains a map depicting the location of the property.



**5. Current deed book reference to the property:** The most recent deed to this property is recorded in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 9276 on page 437. The tax parcel number of the property is 080-171-01.

**6. A brief historical sketch of the property:** This report contains a brief historical sketch of the property.

**7. A brief architectural description of the property:** This report contains a brief architectural description of the property.

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

**Special significance in terms of its history, architecture, and/or cultural importance:** The Commission judges that the property known as the American Legion Memorial Stadium does possess special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations:

1) The American Legion Memorial Stadium was the first major spectator sports facility erected by the City of Charlotte.

2) The American Legion Memorial Stadium resulted from the infusion of substantial Federal assistance into the local economy and was a part of a major shift in the role of the Federal government in societal affairs.

3) The original portions of the American Legion Memorial Stadium exhibit distinctive qualities of the Art Deco style of architecture.

**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 a designated "historic landmark." The current total appraised value of the improvements is \$6,656,150. The current total appraised value of the 9.89 acres of land is \$4,408,080. The current total appraised value is \$11,064,230. The property is zoned MUDD-O. The property is currently exempted from the payment of Ad Valorem taxes.

**10. Portion of property recommended for designation:** The exterior and interior of the American Legion Memorial Stadium and sufficient acreage to assure the protection of its setting.

**Date of preparation of this report:** April 23, 2003.

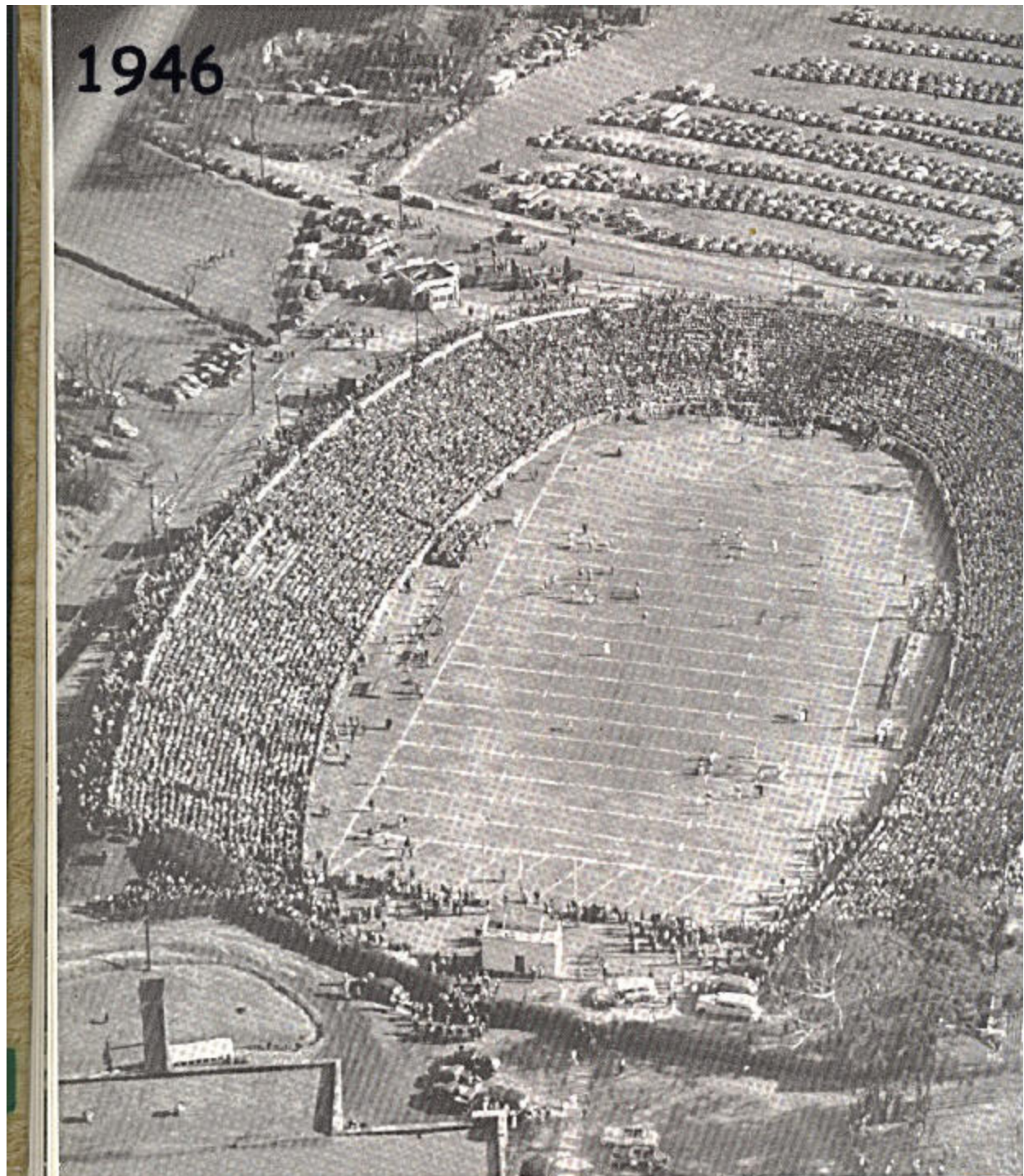
**Prepared by:** Dr. Dan L. Morrill

### **Historical Overview**



The American Legion Memorial Stadium (1936) was a direct result of substantial Federal assistance to local government and was the first municipal structure in Charlotte, N.C. that could accommodate thousands of visitors. From the outset it became a venue for sporting, entertainment, and civic events that theretofore would have been impossible to hold. Over the years a broad array of happenings have occurred at the stadium, most notably football games – high school, collegiate, and for many years the Shrine Bowl from 1937 through 2000. The stadium has also hosted July 4<sup>th</sup> concerts, professional wrestling matches, and performances by entertainers.<sup>1</sup>





**This photograph of American Legion Memorial Stadium appeared in the 1947 Central High School Annual. You are looking east. Note that Independence Boulevard had not yet been built.**

Spectator sports, both amateur and professional, rose in popularity in the 1920s and 1930s largely because of an increase in middle class income, greater availability of automobiles, and the growth of urban



centers.<sup>2</sup> Charlotte's population burgeoned in the early 1900s, from 18,091 in 1900 to 134,052 in 1950. Clearly, the need for a facility such as the American Legion Memorial Stadium was becoming increasingly defensible.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, a major expansion of the stadium took place in the 1960s and 1970s, when upper level seating was added first on the north side and then on the south side of the playing field.



### **Photograph Of The Shrine Bowl (1966)**

The stadium bore dramatic testimony to a shift in attitudes in the 1930s about the role of the Federal government in societal affairs. The construction of the American Legion Memorial Stadium in Charlotte, N.C. was intimately bound up with the relief programs of the Great Depression. President Franklin D. Roosevelt persuaded the U.S. Congress to create the Works Progress Administration (W.P.A.) in April, 1935, with an initial appropriation of \$4.88 billion dollars to provide jobs for millions of unemployed laborers, artists, writers, scholars, and others. The W.P.A. provided most of the funding to construct an assortment of structures, including airports, seaports, bridges, schools, museums and stadiums.<sup>4</sup> The W.P.A. also supported programs in the humanities, including the Federal Arts Project, Federal Writers Project, Federal Theatre Project, National Health Survey, and the Historical Records Survey.<sup>5</sup>



**Mayor Arthur E. Wearn  
(1933-1935)**

Charlotte leaders, including Mayor Arthur E. Wearn, were eager to benefit from the dollars provided by the Works Progress Administration. Wearn, who had become mayor by appointment on May 3, 1933, had already secured \$70,000 of Federal funds from the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (F.E.R.A.) and the Civil Works Administration (C.W.A.) on January 3, 1934, to enable the City to begin work on a stadium in Independence Park. There was considerable public opposition to the City's accepting the money to start the stadium. One property owner was particularly outspoken. "I am a lover of beauty," he began. "I object to having a beautiful thirty or forty trees cut down, a beautiful natural amphitheater turned into a concrete bowl surrounded by a high fence -- to say nothing of the attendant noise and dust."<sup>6</sup> Strong political support for Mayor Wearn's efforts to build a major outdoor sports facility in Charlotte had come from the Hornet's Nest Post Number 9 of the American Legion. That patriotic organization wanted the stadium to serve as a memorial to those soldiers from Mecklenburg County who had served the United States during The Great War, now called World War One. The City Council agreed on June 13, 1934, to name the facility "American Legion Memorial Stadium."<sup>7</sup>



**The Stadium As It Appeared In December, 1935. Notice that there are no seats.**

Earth had been moved by December, 1935, to create a playing field that was bordered by a rock wall and that was surrounded on three sides by grass

embankments. Enough money to install seats was not initially available, however.<sup>8</sup>This meant that the stadium was essentially unusable.

Soon after the House of Representatives gave its assent to the creation of the W.P.A. in January, 1935, City officials provided a tentative list of the projects they planned to submit to the new agency if it was approved by the U.S. Senate.<sup>9</sup> These included an array of undertakings, including street improvements and even placing public restrooms below ground at the intersection of Trade and Tryon Sts., locally known as the Square.<sup>10</sup>



**Mayor Ben Douglas  
(1935-1941)**

The impetus for new construction projects in Charlotte increased substantially when Ben Douglas defeated Arthur Wearn by popular election and became Mayor in May, 1935.<sup>11</sup> A native of Iredell County, Douglas had moved to Charlotte from Gastonia in the mid-1920s and had established a funeral home at the corner of Fox Street and Elizabeth Avenue, now Independence and Elizabeth. A tireless and adroit politician, Douglas was Mayor from 1935 until 1941, and earned the reputation of being the "Builder of Modern Day Charlotte." Douglas loved the drama and passion of the political arena and devoted his enormous energies and talents to leading the people into what he hoped was a bright and prosperous future. Born in the 1890s, he reached adulthood during the "roaring twenties," when it seemed that everybody was making piles of money in the stock market. Then came the crippling Great Depression of the 1930s. Douglas saw himself as a cheerleader, as an urban booster, who would rally the people of Charlotte and give them hope.<sup>12</sup>





**City Manager J. B.  
Marshall**

Douglas hired James B. Marshall as City Manager.<sup>13</sup> A native of Anderson, S.C., Marshall was a brilliant engineer who had graduated from the College of Charleston before settling in Charlotte in the 1920s.<sup>14</sup> By the end of May, 1935, Marshall was busily at work preparing a list of projects for submission to the Works Progress Administration for possible funding.<sup>15</sup>

The W.P.A. had a major presence in Charlotte. A district office of the Works Progress Administration was established on Tryon St. in July.<sup>16</sup> John Grice, its Director, urged Charlotte-Mecklenburg officials and those in surrounding counties to submit applications for projects.<sup>17</sup> On August 28, 1935, local attorney Marvin Ritch appeared before the City Council and urged that "some immediate action" be taken "toward completing the stadium in Independence Park." Not surprisingly, Marshall included the completion of Charlotte's stadium on his list of W.P.A. applications.<sup>18</sup> The largest project for which the City sought W.P.A. funding was the creation of a municipal airport.<sup>19</sup>



**This is the Armory Auditorium which stood just west of the stadium. If you look carefully you can see part of the natural area that once occupied the space behind the building.**

The Charlotte Observer reported on November 7, 1935, that the City would be submitting its formal application to the Works Progress Administration for the stadium.<sup>20</sup> George W. Coan, Jr., State Administrator of the W.P.A., informed Mayor Douglas and City Manager Marshall on December 27, 1935, that funding for finishing the stadium had been approved. "Completion of the stadium will give Charlotte one of the finest bowls in North Carolina," stated the newspaper. Mayor Douglas greeted the news with his usual enthusiasm. "It will put a lot of people to work," he said. "I am mighty glad to hear that it is going through." City Manager Marshall announced: "Our plans are ready and we ought to get started on it right away."<sup>21</sup> The Charlotte Observer commented editorially on the project the next day. "Gratifying the information that the completion of the local stadium through the medium of Federal funds is to be undertaken at once," the newspaper proclaimed.<sup>22</sup>



**This picture of newly-elected Mayor Douglas and the Charlotte City Council appeared in the *Charlotte Observer* in May 1935. Seated left to right on the front row are Claude L. Albea, W. N. Hovis, Mayor Ben E. Douglas, L. R. Sides, and John F. Boyd. Standing left to right on the back row are J. S. Nance, Herbert H. Baxter, J. H. Huntley, Mayor Pro-Tem John L. Wilkinson, J. S. Tipton, W. Roy Hudson, and John F. Durham.**

George Coan, Jr. left to local officials the decision as to whether the stands would be constructed of concrete or native stone. Stone, which had been used in the recently completed wall at the edge of the playing field, would have been more aesthetically appropriate; but the City selected concrete as the building material for the stands, primarily because the installation of stone would have required a pool of skilled labor that was not locally available.<sup>23</sup> The W.P.A. awarded \$51,617 for the stadium project, and the total City contribution was less than \$5000.<sup>24</sup>

Workers came to the site in early January, 1936, and work continued during the next eight months. The need to complete the stadium intensified after June 22<sup>nd</sup>, when word arrived that President Roosevelt would be visiting Charlotte on September 10<sup>th</sup> and would be making a major public address at the American Legion Memorial Stadium. According to the Charlotte Observer, the President would be participating in an "old-time Democratic love-feast," labeled a Green Pastures Rally, to which the party faithful of seven states would be invited.<sup>25</sup> On July 11th, John Grice stated that the concrete stands would be finished soon and that installation of the seats would commence shortly thereafter. "The stadium positively will be completed by September

1," Grice promised.<sup>26</sup> The newspaper reported on August 25<sup>th</sup> that the seats were being installed, and the Charlotte Observer published a photograph of the completed stadium on September 1, 1936.<sup>27</sup>



### **The Stadium Completed (1936)**

The editors of the Charlotte Observer understood the role of the Federal government in making the American Legion Memorial Stadium possible.

*They wrote: "If New Deal spending all over the country could be accurately, fairly and truthfully measured by that which was locally done to provide our community the handsome, elaborate and commodious stadium, the mouth of the critics of the Roosevelt administration would be sealed. . . .*

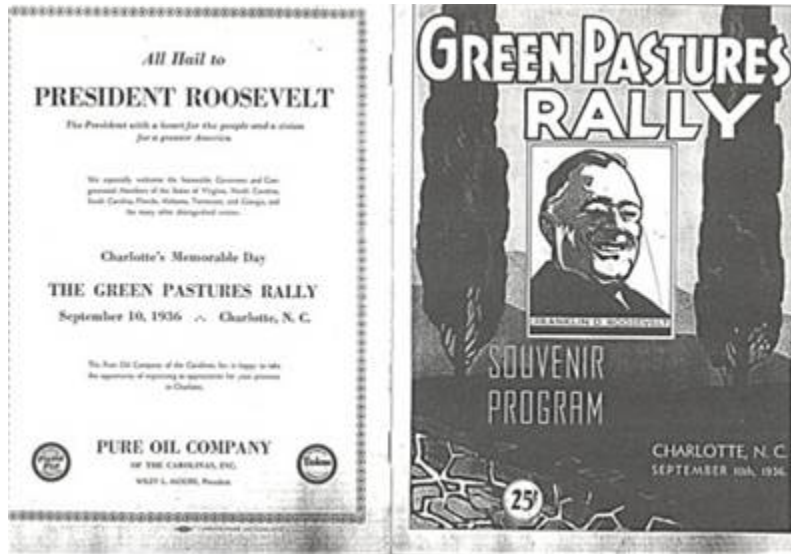
*Except for Federal financial aid designed at once to relieve unemployment and to provide communities the realization of some improvements of which they stood in need, this stadium would have remained, perhaps, only as a forecasted fantasy, the dream of a project, sorely needed, but never to be realized as a result of the investment of purely localized funds."*<sup>28</sup>





**Crowd Lines West Trade Street Awaiting President Roosevelt's Motorcade. Picture from Haywood Robbins Collection, Special Collections, UNCC**

It was altogether fitting and proper that President Roosevelt was the first speaker at the American Legion Memorial Stadium. The Chairman of the Green Pastures Rally of September 10, 1936, was Charlotte attorney Haywood Robbins. He and his colleagues worked diligently to assure that the event would be successful.<sup>29</sup>



### Official Program

President Roosevelt arrived by motorcade from Asheville, N.C. in the early afternoon of September 10<sup>th</sup> in a heavy rainstorm and traveled directly to the American Legion Memorial Stadium. From a platform erected at the western end of stadium, just behind the Armory Auditorium, the President gave a rousing address to an enthusiastic throng of well wishers.<sup>30</sup>



**The Crowd Listens To President Roosevelt. Picture from Haywood Robbins Collection, Special Collections, UNCC**

Even though he professed to be making a nonpartisan speech, Roosevelt insisted that the nation would only prosper if the common man fared well.<sup>31</sup>



**This is the podium from which President Roosevelt spoke. Picture from Haywood Robbins Collection, Special Collections, Atkins Library UNCC**

The Charlotte Observer commented editorially on the Green Pastures Rally and insisted that the event had indeed been political. "It is as impossible to divorce the President . . . from politics," the newspaper proclaimed, "as it would be for a minister of the Gospel to announce when he enters the pulpit that such a step involves no religious significance."<sup>32</sup>





**Haywood Robbins Was Chairman Of The Green Pastures Rally. Picture from Haywood Robbins Collection, Special Collections, Atkins Library UNCC**

The first of many college football games in the American Legion Memorial Stadium in Charlotte occurred in the afternoon of September 26, 1936. The University of North Carolina and Wake Forest College played. According to the Charlotte Observer, it was "by far the largest (crowd) ever to see a football

game in Charlotte." U.N.C. won by a score of 14 to 7.<sup>33</sup> Dedication ceremonies for the stadium were held before the game.

The American Legion Memorial Stadium has continued to occupy an important place in the cultural life of the community, especially as a host for high school football games. The completion of Ericsson Stadium in the 1990s, however, meant that Memorial Stadium was no longer the largest outdoor sports facility in Charlotte. Also, high schools have acquired their own football stadiums. Inevitably, the level of civic commitment to the site has begun to wane. Its illustrious history notwithstanding, the stadium is now in jeopardy. Influential institutions and individuals would like to demolish it, possibly to make way for a new professional baseball park.



### **Wake Forest College vs. U.N.C. Football Game (Sept. 26, 1936)**

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<sup>1</sup> Charlotte Observer (July 18, December 7, 1985; June 6, 30, July 17, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of sports history in the United States, see Baker, William J. and Carroll, John M., Sports In Modern America (River Side Publishers, 1981).

<sup>3</sup> Morrill, Dan L., "A History of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County." (cmhpf.org).

<sup>4</sup> For an overview of the New Deal programs of the 1930s, see Davis, Kenneth S., The New Deal Years. 1933-1937 (New York: Random House, 1986).

<sup>5</sup> W.P.A. construction projects in Mecklenburg County included, among many others, the rebuilding of the former United States Mint Building as the Mint Museum of Art and the construction of Charlotte's first municipal airport, now Charlotte Douglas International Airport.

<sup>6</sup> In May 1933, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration was founded principally to give assistance to the needy. The Civil Works Administration was established on November 8, 1933, to provide money to states to build roads, schools, and athletic fields. F.E.R.A. and C.W.A. provided a total of \$70,000 for the

stadium project (Charlotte Observer ,December 29, 1935) Charlotte City Council Minutes Book 22, p. 507. Charlotte City Council Minutes Book 23, p.130.

7. The Hornet's Nest Post proposed that it lease the stadium from the City to assure that the troops who had served in World War One would be properly honored (Charlotte Observer, July 8, August 9, 1936). The Charlotte City Council approved a resolution on June 13, 1934, naming the stadium "American Legion Memorial Stadium" (Charlotte City Council Minutes Book 23, p. 426.)

8. For a photograph of Memorial Stadium without seats, see Charlotte Observer (December 29, 1935).

9. Charlotte Observer (January 25, 1935).

10. Charlotte Observer (February 3, 9, 10, 15, 16, 1935).

11. Charlotte Observer (May 8, 1935). For a photograph of Douglas shaking Wearn's hand, see Charlotte Observer (May 9, 1935).

12. Morrill, Dan , "The Building Of Independence Boulevard." (cmhpf.org). Hereinafter cited as "Independence."

13. Charlotte Observer (May 16, 1935). This article contains a photograph of Marshall.

14. Independence.

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15. Charlotte Observer (May 31, 1935).

16. Charlotte Observer (July 10, 14, 21, 28, 1935). D. M. Rea was the Assistant Director of the Charlotte District Office of the Works Progress Administration.

17. Charlotte Observer (July 13, 1935).

18. Charlotte City Council Minutes Book 25, p. 17. Charlotte Observer (September 7, 8, 1935).

19. Charlotte Observer (September 4, 1935). The principal airport in Charlotte was a private facility located on Tuckaseegee Road (September 18, 1935).

20. Charlotte Observer (November 7, 1935). The application was delayed because City Councilmen Herbert Baxter feared that funding for the municipal airport might be delayed if Federal money was sought for the stadium project (Charlotte Observer, November 3, 1935).

21. Charlotte Observer (December 28, 1935).

22. Charlotte Observer (December 29, 1935).

23. Ibid.

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24. Charlotte Observer (December 28, 1935).

25. Charlotte Observer (June 23, 1936).
26. Charlotte Observer (July 12, 1936). The original estimate of the date the stadium would be completed was June 30, 1936.
27. Charlotte Observer (August 25, September 1, 1936).
28. Charlotte Observer (September 2, 1936).
29. Charlotte Observer (July 7, 1936).
30. Charlotte Observer (September 11, 1936).
31. Ibid.
32. Charlotte Observer (September 11, 1936)
33. Charlotte Observer (September 27, 1936). The Mecklenburg County Parks and Recreation Department has placards on the site that incorrectly state that the stadium was completed in 1937. According to historian Legette Blythe, the first football game held at the stadium was played between Charlotte Central High School and Barium Springs Orphanage. The first Shrine Bowl was held at the stadium in 1937. Blythe, Legette and Brockmann, Charles Raven, Hornet's Nest. The Story of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County (McNally of Charlotte, 1961).



**Architectural Description.** The American Legion Memorial Stadium is a "U-shaped" edifice with a sloping, grassed playing field in the middle. The enclosed portion of the "U" or bowl is at the eastern end of the site, immediately adjacent to East Independence Boulevard. The concrete stands have replacement metal bench seats and are situated on the north and south sides of the playing field. Each consists of two sections, the lower halves dating from 1936 and the upper halves dating from the 1960s and the 1970s. The stands at the closed end of the "U" have only a lower section and except for the seats are entirely original. Rows of concrete steps with



shallow risers extend at regular intervals from the top to the bottom of the stands throughout the stadium. Enclosed press boxes and seating areas exist at the middle of the top sections of both stands. A rock rubble wall of native stone forms the bottom of the stands on all sides of the "U." The walls on both sides of the playing field were extended westward at some date after 1936 to accommodate a stairway at the base of the north stand and a concrete ramp on the south stand. Tunnel entrances punctuate the north and south stands, while the remaining portion of the original barrier wall has entryways opening at the top of the stairs.



Rock Wall Bordering South Stands



Steps Leading To North Stands From  
Playing Field

Architecturally, the original elements of the American Legion Memorial Stadium reflect the "cool sophistication" of the Art Deco style. This is especially evident in the original barrier wall that sweeps around the eastern end of the bowl and in the two original ticket booths and the four original bathroom structures that survive. The barrier wall exudes understated elegance. Smooth unadorned surfaces, newels that were originally surmounted by lights, and rectangular concrete depressions in the wall point toward an idealized future and celebrate the rise of commerce and technology, so typical of design in the 1920s and 1930s. One can only wish that the addition of the upper level stands in the 1960s had not led to the destruction of all other parts of this distinctive architectural feature. The name "Art Deco" was derived from the 1925 Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs Industriels et Modernes, held in Paris, which celebrated living in the modern world.



The Elegant Barrier Wall



Ticket Booth AT Northeastern Corner  
Of Stadium

Two original ticket booths do survive -- one on the northeastern and one on the southeastern side of the stadium. They too bespeak of the understated elegance of the Art Deco style. The smooth masonry walls are devoid of elaborate decoration and have only widely-spaced, thin horizontal bands to highlight their surfaces. Three arched panels, most likely used to advertise upcoming events at the stadium, dominate the center bays of the ticket booths. The tickets windows themselves are small rectangular openings, fashioned so as not to interrupt the overall flow of the massing of the structures. Horizontal metal grates separate the seller of tickets from his or her customers.



Original Bathroom Structure



The Original Stadium

The architecture of the original bathroom structures also exhibits Art Deco features. Like the ticket booths, their wooden roofs are essentially flat and leave the rafters exposed. The same thin horizontal bands appear in their walls.



Concession Stands Added Beneath  
South Stands In 1970s



This New Ticket Window Has No  
Sophistication

The expansion of the American Legion Memorial Stadium in the 1960s was purely utilitarian and exhibited none of the initial architectural sophistication of the site. The new bathrooms and concession stands were fashioned to meet the pragmatic needs of those who attended events at the stadium. There is sufficient original fabric surviving, however, to permit the visitor to catch glimpses of the Art Deco style that was once prevalent in public buildings in Charlotte.



Charlotte's Original Art Deco Airport Terminal Is In The Background.

Charlotte's Best Surviving Example Of The Art Deco Style Is The Charlotte  
Water Works Vest Station (1924)

