

The Atherton Cotton Mills

Then...



and now...



This report was written July 14, 1997

1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the Atherton Cotton Mills is located at 2108 South Boulevard in Charlotte, North Carolina.

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

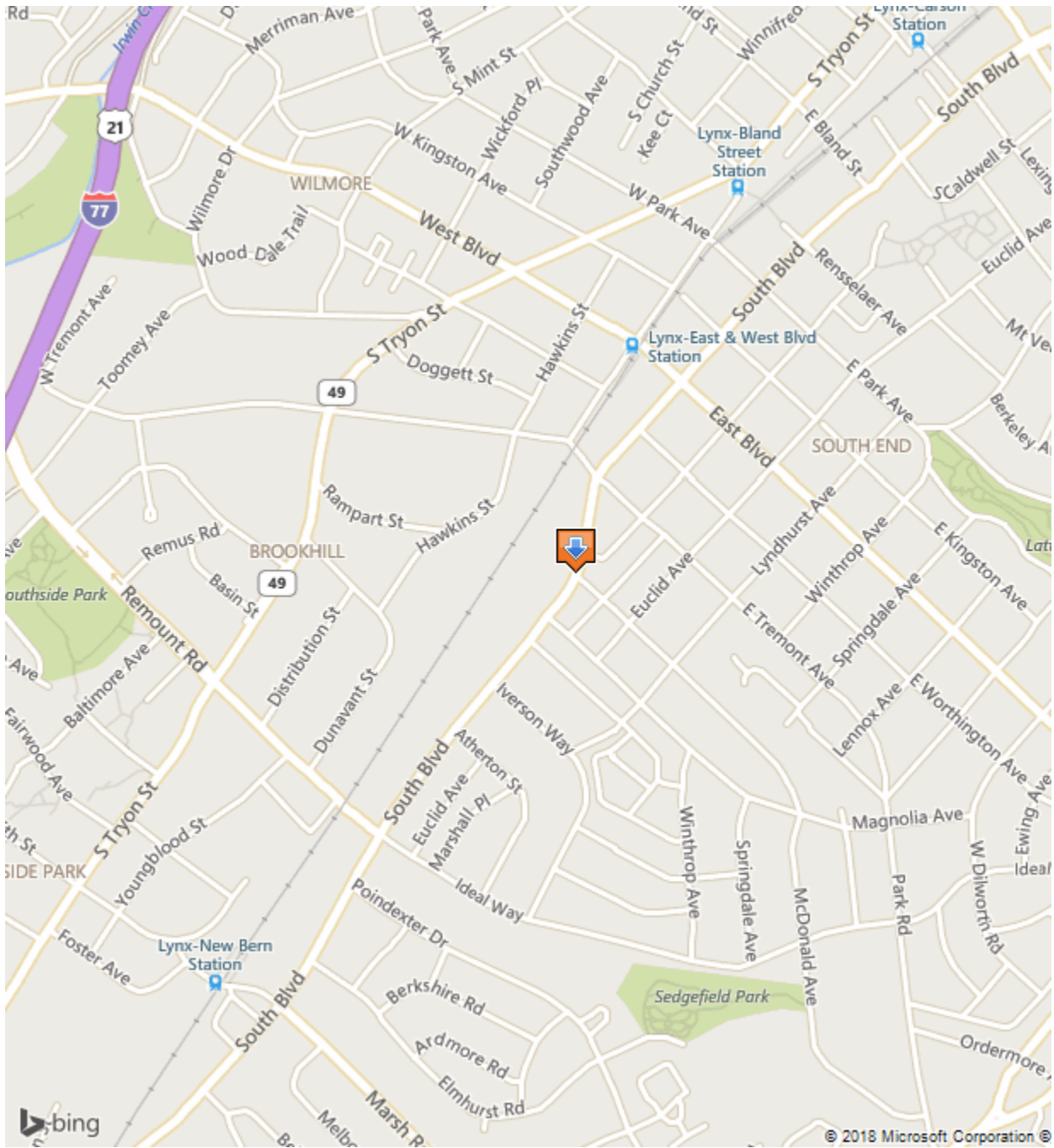
The owners of the various units in the building and the adjacent parking lot are listed on the attached sheet. The Atherton Condominium Owners Association can be contacted through:

Atherton Condominium Owners Association
c/o Meca Properties
908 South Tryon Street
Charlotte, N.C., 28202

Telephone: 704/372-0005

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 references to this property are recorded in Mecklenburg Deed Books by individual unit.

6. A brief historical sketch of the property: This report contains a brief historical sketch of the property prepared by Dr. Richard Mattson and Dr. Dan L. Morrill.

7. A brief architectural description of the property: This report contains a brief architectural description of the property prepared by Dr. Richard Mattson and Dr. Dan L. Morrill.

8. Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets the criteria for designation 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 Atherton Cotton Mills does possess special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations: 1) the Atherton Cotton Mills was one of only three spinning mills owned and operated by Daniel Augustus Tompkins (1851-1914), a New South industrialist of profound importance in the economic development of Charlotte and its environs, 2) the Atherton Cotton Mills documents the emergence of Charlotte as a major textile manufacturing center in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and 3) the Atherton Cotton Mills was the first industrial plant in the industrial district of Dilworth, Charlotte's initial streetcar suburb.

b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling, and/or association: The Commission contends that the architectural description by Dr. Richard Mattson and Dr. Dan L. Morrill which is included in this report demonstrates that the Atherton Cotton Mills meets this criterion.

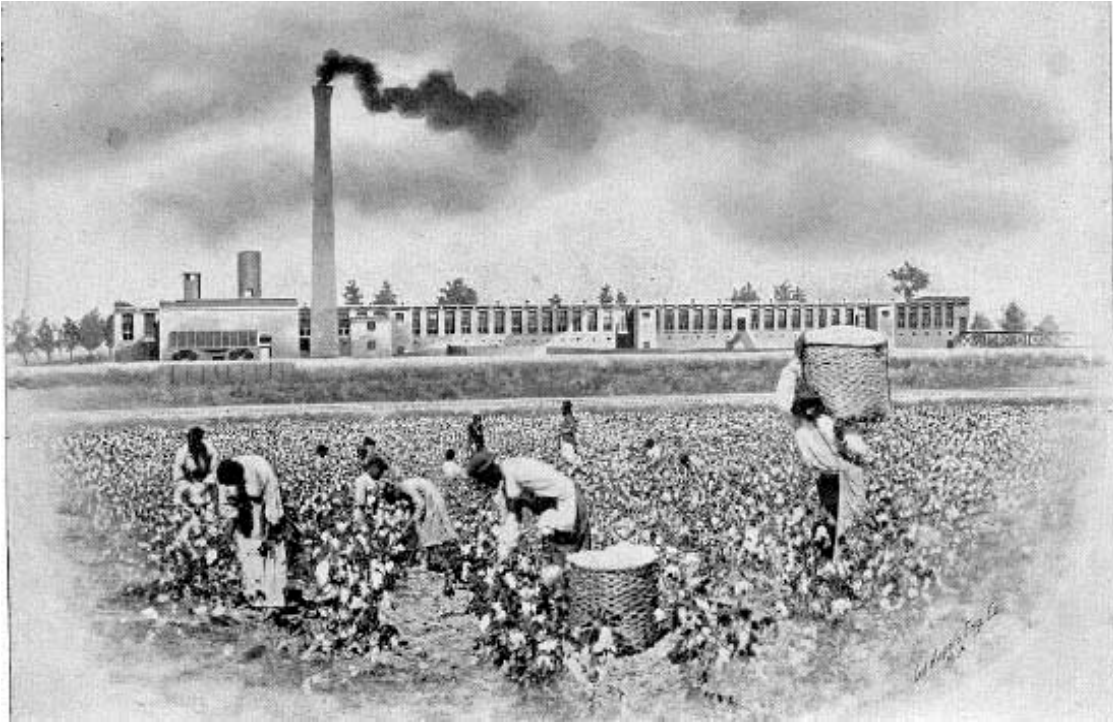
9. Ad Valorem Tax Appraisal: The Commission is aware that designation would allow the owner to apply for an automatic deferral of 50% of the Ad Valorem taxes on all or any portion of the property which becomes "historic property." The current appraised value of the improvement is \$3,771,620. The current appraised value of the land is \$1,213,000. The total appraised value of the property is \$4,984,620. The property is zoned UMUD.

Date of Preparation of this Report: July 14, 1997

Prepared by: Dr. Dan L. Morrill
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission
2100 Randolph Road
Charlotte, N.C., 28207

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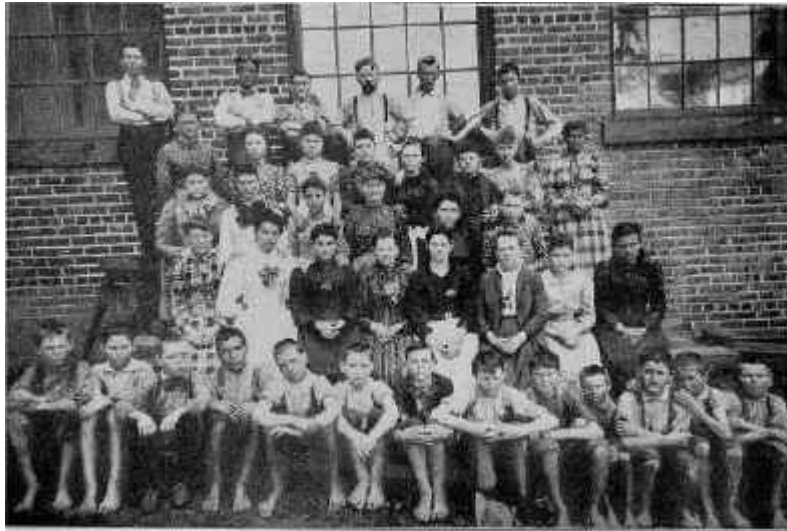
*Statement of Significance.*¹



The Atherton Cotton Mills is historically significant for its reflection of the emerging textile industry in and around Charlotte during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and for its association with New South entrepreneur Daniel Augustus Tompkins (1851-1914). Built in 1892 and completed in 1893 along South Boulevard in Charlotte, this mill was the first industrial property in the planned Dilworth factory district, and provided the impetus for the development of this industrial corridor between South Boulevard and the adjacent tracks of the Southern Railway. In the ensuing decades this area would flourish with predominantly textile-related factories, while Charlotte would become the capital of a virtual textile mini-state in the southern Piedmont. The Atherton Cotton Mills was the first mill established by the D.A. Tompkins Company. Tompkins ranks among the preeminent textile industrialists in the South, and during his remarkable career his firm constructed all or portions of 100 cotton mills as well as numerous support industries.

The Atherton Cotton Mills facility also has architectural significance. This well-preserved factory, recently converted into condominiums, clearly represents in its basic form, materials, construction, and restrained design elements textile mills erected throughout Charlotte and the region during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The mill illustrates the "slow burn," "standard mill construction" promoted by the New England Mutual fire insurance companies. In a fire, the stair tower, for example, could be closed off from the main facility, thus confining the spread of flames. The hardwood floors and thick structural timbers would char but retain their strength rather than collapsing as iron did in intense heat. The rows of

windows along the long brick walls of the mill provided air and natural light for the men, women, and children who typically labored 60 hours per week producing yarn at the Atherton plant.



Young workers at the Atherton Mills

Physical Description

Location and Site Description

The Atherton Cotton Mills occupies a parcel of land along the South Boulevard industrial corridor of the Dilworth neighborhood in Charlotte. Located approximately in the middle of the block, the tract is bounded by the Norfolk Southern Railway right-of-way to the west, and the Parks-Cramer Company property to the north. Large, paved parking lots have been constructed on the east and west side of the buildings as part of the conversion of the Atherton Cotton Mills into condominiums. The proposed designation includes the exterior of the Atherton Cotton Mills building and all the land beneath and in the parking lots adjacent to the structure.

Architectural Description of the Atherton Cotton Mills Building

The exterior of the Atherton Cotton Mills building is remarkably intact, having undergone little alteration since the turn of the century, except for loss of its tower and the destruction of part of the powerhouse and machine shop during the conversion of the structure into condominiums. The Atherton Cotton Mills was housed in a single building with the longitudinal plan common

to nineteenth century textile factories. Oriented north-south, the building was constructed on a slope, which provided two floors of work space on the west side and a single story on the east, facing South Boulevard. The plan is rectangular although the powerhouse and machine shop and several stairwells and additions do project from the west side, and a small office extends from the east elevation. The building measures 498 feet long and 78 feet wide. The building has a structure of heavy mill construction, reflected in the pilastered brick exterior walls covered in stucco. The foundation is also brick. The roof is a shallow pitched gable, supported by wooden trusses. On the north and south elevations, the roof line is defined by stepped parapets, while on the east and west sides, the gable roof ends in exposed wooden rafters and a wooden fascia. The main floor has numerous tall, recessed, segmental arch windows. New wooden platforms with pipe balustrades and modified doorways have been built to permit access to the condominiums. All the entrances are elevated over a paved drainage ditch which runs the length of the east elevation and the half windows which provide light to the lower floor. The powerhouse and machine shop form one extension from the northwest side of the main mill. On the south side of the powerhouse is a tall, massive square, brick smokestack with flared base and corbeled cap.

Historical Overview

Development of the Atherton Cotton Mills

On July 18, 1892, Daniel Augustus Tompkins, R.M. Miller, Jr., and E.A. Smith, business associates in the D.A. Tompkins Company, filed incorporation papers for "The Atherton Mills," Charlotte's sixth cotton mill (Mecklenburg County, Record of Incorporations 1892). The factory location was just off South Boulevard at the south edge of Dilworth, a new streetcar suburb of Charlotte. The steam-powered mill, which drew its water from the old Summit Hill Gold Mine, was one of a host of new textile factories taking shape around the city at this time. At the end of July, 1892, the *Charlotte Observer* enthusiastically declared:

What other city in North Carolina can boast of starting two new factories in one week? The articles of incorporation of the 'Atherton Mills'--the sixth factory--had scarcely been filed, before a seventh factory was [organized] and in the course of a few months there will be seven cotton factories in full operation in Charlotte. There's no doubt about it, things are "humming" in the Queen City, and "humming" to the tune of lively progress (*Charlotte Observer*, July 21, 1892).

Tompkins, Miller and Smith, were New South entrepreneurs who were at the forefront of industrial development in Charlotte and the Piedmont. Miller (1856-1925), a graduate of Davidson College, was secretary-treasurer of the D.A. Tompkins Company, and later headed Charlotte's tenth mill, the Elizabeth Cotton Mill (Huffman 1983; Morrill 1983). Smith (1862-1933) was a native of Baltimore who first came to Charlotte as sales representative for Thomas K. Carey and Son, an industrial supply firm in Baltimore. After 1901, Smith organized the Chadwick and Hoskins mills in Charlotte, and by 1907, was head of the Chadwick, Hoskins,

Calvine (formerly Alpha), and Louise mills in and around Charlotte, and the Dover Cotton Mill in nearby Pineville, North Carolina. When these factories consolidated into the Chadwick-Hoskins Company in 1908, it was the largest textile firm in North Carolina (Huffman 1987; Morrill 1983).

Daniel Augustus Tompkins (1851-1914) played a particularly significant role in the development of the Piedmont textile industry. The son of an Edgefield, South Carolina planter, Tompkins studied engineering at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York. He arrived in Charlotte in 1883, as a representative of the Westinghouse Corporation, selling steam engines and machinery to the mills. In 1884, Tompkins launched his own business enterprise in Charlotte and began a remarkable career as one of the leading New South businessmen. In that year he organized the D.A. Tompkins Company, a machine shop and among the most influential contracting and consulting firms for the rising textile industry in the South. Glass (1992, 44) writes that this company was "at the forefront" of machinery manufacturing for the southern textile mills, offering mills "a local alternative to their dependence upon northern suppliers."



D. A. Tompkins

During his lifetime, Tompkins built all or part of over 100 cotton mills, various fertilizer works, electric light plants, and ginneries. In 1889, he constructed Charlotte's second, third, and fourth cotton mills (the Alpha, Ada, and Victor), and was a principal in organizing the Charlotte Supply Company, a major supplier of textile machinery and equipment. He transformed the cotton oil of the region from a waste product to a major industry by building approximately 200 processing plants and participating in the organization of the Southern Cotton Oil Company. In 1892, Tompkins purchased the nearly defunct *Charlotte Daily Observer*, and established the *Charlotte Daily Observer*, now *Charlotte Observer*, as a major regional newspaper. He wrote books, notably *Cotton Mill: Commercial Features* (1899), that codified standard mill and housing designs and set forth investment plans to assist towns in attracting textile mills.

Tompkins was also instrumental in establishing textile college programs which would become part of North Carolina State University and Clemson. In sum, asserted the *Atlanta Constitution*, Tompkins "did more for the industrial south than any other man" (Winston 1920; Clay 1950; Young 1963; Morrill 1983; Huffman 1983; Hanchett 1985, 70; Glass 1992, 4. 32-34, 37-38). The establishment of the Atherton Cotton Mills, states Hanchett (1985), was "an important step in [Tompkins's] career, for it represented the first cotton mill owned and operated, as well as erected, by the D.A. Tompkins Company." The construction of the mill complex began shortly after its incorporation. On August 6, 1892, the *Charlotte Daily Observer* reported that the Atherton site was being cleared, and on Monday, August 8, the groundbreaking ceremony occurred. In November, the newspaper reported on the newly completed factory:

Few locations have a prettier site than the Atherton Mills. The building is in the southern part of the city, just beyond the old fair ground, a few minutes walk off the car lines, and a short distance from the Charlotte, Columbia and Augusta Railroad, which has built a side track to the mill... The management of the business will devolve upon Mr. R.M. Miller, Jr., vice-president and treasurer. Mr. A.M. Price will be superintendent. The company has commenced the construction of the houses for operatives to live in, one cottage being already completed... There will be built twelve four-room houses, six three-room cottages and four two-room cottages (*Charlotte Daily Observer*, November 27, 1892).

The Atherton Cotton Mills complex developed steadily in the 1890s. Operations began in January, 1893, with 5,000 spindles manufacturing yarn goods. The floor space was equipped for expanding production, and by 1896, the mill housed machinery for 10,000 spindles. In that year, Atherton Mill employed about 300 operatives and included a mill village. This village comprised a school and 50 one-story, frame mill houses, situated along straight streets (mostly Euclid, Tremont, and Cleveland avenues) on the east side of South Boulevard. The village school, called the Atherton Lyceum, was a two-story, frame, multi-purpose facility that taught evening class in the basics of reading and writing and also housed a general store, town hall, and Sunday School classroom (*Charlotte Daily Observer*, November 17, 1896; April 3, 1897; Thompson 1926, 145; Hanchett 1986).



Atherton Lyceum

The mill complex was both typical of the textile-mill operations appearing throughout the Piedmont, as well as a model which Tompkins could describe in his books on mill construction and design (Glass 1978, 139-142, 147-148; Hall et al. 1987, 115-116; Crawford 1992). Some of the two, three, and four-room mill houses in the Atherton village were illustrated in Tompkins' s book *Cotton Mill: Commercial Features*. The mill's siting in a rural setting outside the city limits of Charlotte was also a common practice, which avoided local property taxes and helped control the activities of workers outside the mill (Tompkins 1899; Hanchett 1985; Glass 1992, 41-42).

In May, 1896, the *Charlotte Daily Observer* described the Atherton Cotton Mills as "situated in a beautiful oak grove in the southern suburb [Dilworth] of the city," with mill housing "kept in good repair, neat and nicely painted." The newspaper declared that "the product of the mill has an enviable reputation; it is well-known in all markets and one hears of it in the East, as much, possibly more so, than any other yarn mill in the South" (*Charlotte Daily Observer*, May 20, 1896). Yet this glowing account obscures the sometimes harsh realities of working in the southern textile industry in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Work was often tedious and dangerous, and men, women, and children labored at low wages, 10 to 12 hours each weekday, and six hours on Saturday. And, while mill families achieved a measure of independence, life in the company-owned mill village was also largely regulated by mill owners and their supervisors. Guided by a combination of paternalism and pragmatism, owners sought to develop a stable and loyal work force by creating villages which were a tightly controlled and all-encompassing social system (Hall et al. 1987, 114-182). Newspaper accounts of injuries and fatalities at the Atherton Cotton Mills documented the perils of working in the textile factories. Through the years, reports appeared of picking room fires, mangled fingers, and even the death of an overseer, who was entangled in the steam-driven belts in the carding room (*Charlotte Daily Observer*, June 28, 1893; October 14, 1902).

The location of the Atherton Cotton Mills clearly reflected Charlotte's emerging status as the hub of the Piedmont textile industry, as well as Dilworth's role as an industrial as well as residential suburb. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Charlotte was

transformed from being principally a trading town for local cotton farmers to a major textile center and symbol of the New South.

After the Civil War and the rebuilding and expansion of railroads in the South, leaders of the region began a drive for a New South based on manufacturing and urban growth rather than agriculture (Lefler and Newsome 1954, 474-489). The South's new economic base was to rest largely on cotton textile production. The Piedmont region was particularly well suited for the textile industry, possessing a good supply of local capital, access to raw materials, good rail connections, and a great supply of labor drawn from nearby tenant farms and the Appalachian mountains (Mitchell 1921; Crawford 1992, 141). Charlotte's central location in the region led to its rapid industrial growth. Between 1889 and 1908, 13 textile mills and a host of support industries appeared in the city or at its outskirts. As early as 1906, Charlotte boosters celebrated the fact that "within the radius of 100 miles of Charlotte, there are more than 300 cotton mills, containing over one-half the looms and spindles in the South" (Hanchett 1985, 70). By 1910, Charlotte had surpassed the port of Wilmington as the largest city in the state. By the 1920s, the Piedmont South had become the world's preeminent textile manufacturing region, and Charlotte, boasted a local newspaper article, had become "unquestionably the center of the South's textile manufacturing industry" (*Charlotte Observer*, October 28, 1928; Mitchell 1921). The city had become a major New South metropolis, with a population that had skyrocketed from approximately 7,000 in 1880, to over 82,000 by 1929, the largest urban population in the Carolinas (Sixteenth Census 1940).

The New South investors in Charlotte funded not only factories but also a ring of streetcar suburbs, which both reflected and contributed to the local prosperity. Dilworth, situated southeast of downtown Charlotte, was the first of these neighborhoods, beginning in 1891, the same week that trolley or electric streetcar service went into operation. Developed by the Charlotte Consolidated Construction Company (locally known as the Four Cs), whose president was Edward Dilworth Latta, the original Dilworth plan included not only residential streets and a recreational park, but also a factory district. A predecessor of the modern suburban industrial park, this district was located at the western edge of Dilworth, between South Boulevard and the Southern Railway (Morrill 1985, 302-303; Hanchett 1986; Oswald 1987). The first factory established in Dilworth, the Atherton Cotton Mills and its village provided the impetus for both industrial and residential development in the new suburb. Until Tompkins announced the construction of this textile factory complex, the sale of lots in the suburb had been slow, and the Four Cs was in financial peril. Writes Morrill (1985, 303), "[Tompkins's] mill marked the beginning of the factory district that saved Dilworth from financial failure." Within a few years this district also included such factories as the Charlotte Trouser Company, the Southern Card Clothing Company, the Charlotte Pipe and Foundry Company, a sash cord plant owned by O. A. Robbins, the Charlotte Shuttle Block Factory, and the Park Elevator Company, producers of pumps, heaters, and elevators (Morrill 1980; Morrill 1985, 302-304; Hanchett 1986). In October, 1895, the *Charlotte Daily Observer* described Dilworth as "the Manchester of Charlotte," and several months later the newspaper observed, "It does one good to go out to Dilworth and see the signs of prosperity and progress. The factories draw the people. Dilworth is beginning to be not only a social but an industrial center" (*Charlotte Daily Observer* October 23, 1895, January 31, 1896).

The corridor between South Boulevard and the railroad tracks continued to expand throughout the early twentieth century. By the 1920s, the district had also attracted not only the Parks-Cramer complex, but the Lance Packing Company, makers and distributors of snack-food crackers which occupied the 1300 block of South Boulevard, the Tompkins foundry and machine shop (located just north of Parks-Cramer), the Nebel Knitting Mill, the Hudson Silk Mill, a pipe and foundry plant, and assorted laundries, wholesalers, building suppliers, stores, and residences.

The first suburban fire station in Charlotte was located near the north end of the corridor, near Morehead Street, while just west of South Boulevard stood the Exposition Hall for the Made-in-the-Carolinas expositions, which were held during the 1920s to promote the industrial progress of the Carolinas (Miller's Charlotte City Directory 1929; Bradbury 1992, 53-63). The Atherton Cotton Mills and the Dilworth industrial corridor thrived into the post-World War I years. In 1922, as part of the continuing process of consolidation of individual mills into chains of ownership or large corporations, the Atherton Cotton Mills was purchased by a group of Gaston County textile plant operators headed by John C. Rankin and S.M. Robinson, and reorganized as Atherton Mills, Inc. The Atherton corporate headquarters were also moved to Lowell, North Carolina, in Gaston County (Mecklenburg County, Record of Corporations 1922). The Dilworth industrial corridor began to lose factories by late 1920s and during the Great Depression, as firms shut down or started relocating to larger industrial tracts. In 1933, Atherton Mills, Inc. lost ownership of the South Boulevard plant in foreclosures on deeds of trust that occurred throughout the city. Vacant until 1937, the factory was then owned and operated until the early 1960s by J. Schoenith Company, Inc., manufacturer of "high grade" candy, baked goods, and peanut products. During the Schoenith tenure, a warehouse was constructed north of the mill, on the site of a cotton warehouse, and an office building was erected immediately east of the mill, facing South Boulevard. In recent years the main factory and warehouse have been used by wholesaling and textile-related manufacturing companies, and the former office building has been converted to a restaurant. More recently, the Atherton Mill has been converted into office and residential condominiums.

Notes

¹ The authors wish to acknowledge the 1987 draft of the "Survey and Research Report on the Atherton Cotton Mill," written by Dr. William H. Huffman and Nora Mae Black, and prepared in 1988 by Dr. Dan L Morrill. In particular, the present "Historical Sketch" is based largely on Huffman's well-researched essay, and, upon consultation with the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, is meant to be considered a final edition of that work. A copy of the draft report is available at the Historic Landmarks Commission, Charlotte, North Carolina.

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