

Atherton Mill House



This report was written May 6, 1981.

1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the Atherton Mill House is located at 2005 Cleveland Ave. in Charlotte, N.C.

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

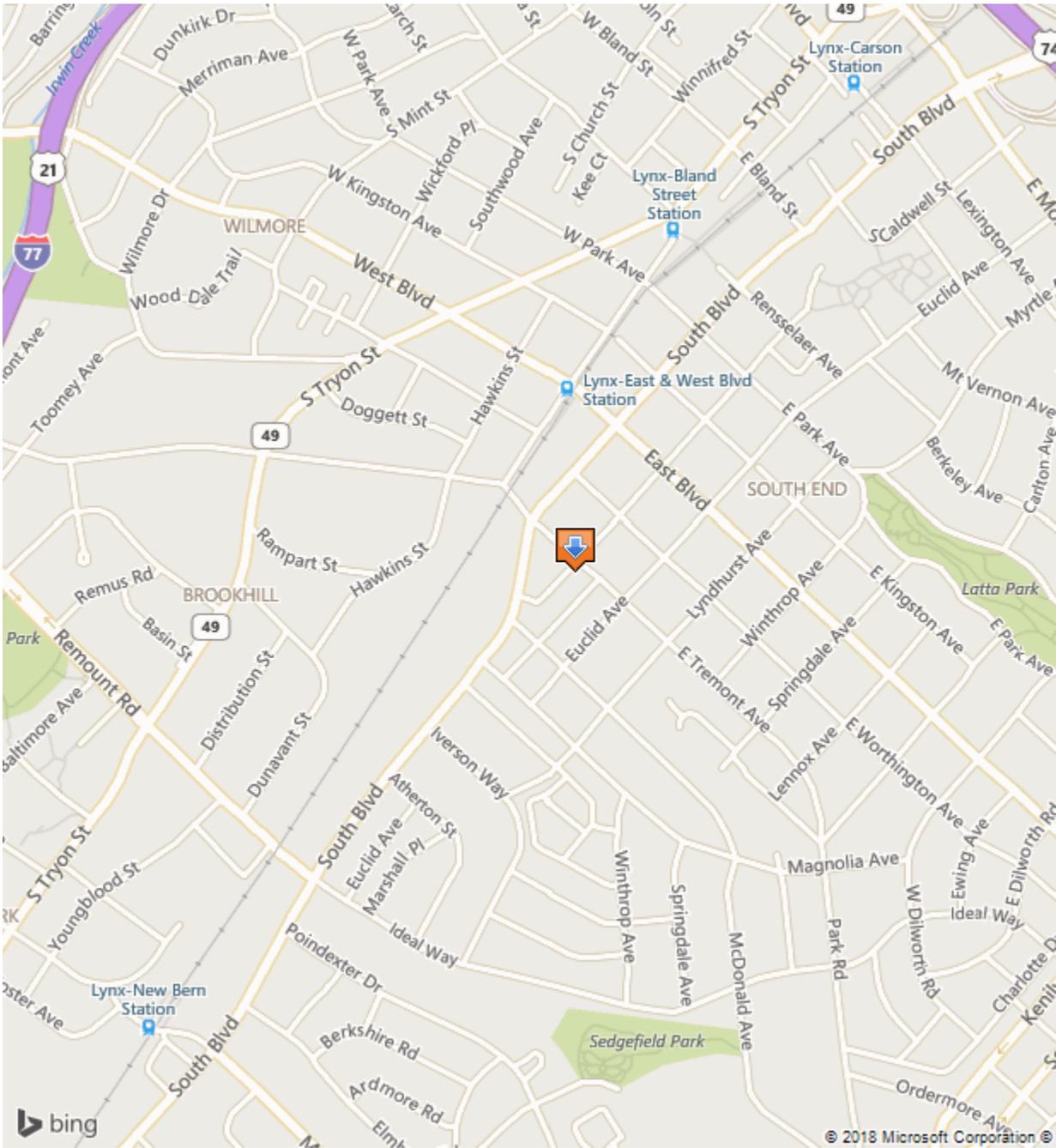
The present owner and occupant of the property is:

Ruth A. Purser
2005 Cleveland Ave.
Charlotte, N.C. 29203

Telephone: none

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 listed in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 3090 on Page 540. The Tax Parcel Number of the property is 121-067-11.

6. A brief historical sketch of the property:

The Atherton Cotton Mill in Dilworth, which opened in April 1893, was the first mill which the D. A. Tompkins Company, named for its founder and president, Daniel Augustus Tompkins (1831-1914), owned and operated. ¹ A native of Edgefield County, S.C., and graduate of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, N.Y., Tompkins had arrived in Charlotte in March 1883. ² Having served for several years as a chief machinist of the Bethlehem Iron Works in Bethlehem, Pa., he secured a franchise from the Westinghouse Machine Company to sell and install steam engines and other industrial machinery, and selected Charlotte as the location for his company because of the excellent railroad facilities which the community possessed. ³ The D. A. Tompkins Company opened for business on March 27, 1883. ⁴



D. A. Tompkins

Daniel Augustus Tompkins exercised a profound influence upon the socioeconomic development of the South during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Through such organs as the *Charlotte Observer*, which he established in February 1892, he became an effective advocate of the industrialization and agricultural diversification of his native region. ⁵ In keeping with his commitment to these priorities, Tompkins promoted and encouraged the establishment of cotton mills and cotton seed oil mills throughout the South. In 1887, he became a co-founder of the Southern Cotton Oil Company, which constructed and operated eight cotton seed oil mills covering a region from Columbia, S.C., to Houston, Tex. Indeed, Tompkins is regarded as a pioneer in the cotton seed oil business. ⁶ Between 1885 and 1895, for example, the D. A. Tompkins Company designed and erected at least forty-seven mills

for processing cotton seeds. ⁷ In October 1906, Tompkins stated that his firm had "built something over 100 cotton mills and not less than 250 cotton seed oil mills. " ⁸

Construction of the Atherton Mill at Dilworth began on August 23, 1892. ⁹ Containing ten thousand producing spindles and five thousand twisting spindles, the plant manufactured two to four ply yarns, sizes twenty to fifty. ¹⁰ An essential component of the operation was the mill village. On February 23, 1893, the D. A. Tompkins Company purchased an entire block in Dilworth on which to erect twenty houses for its workers at the Atherton. ¹¹ Remarkably, seven of these dwellings survive, six on Euclid Ave. and one on Cleveland Ave. ¹²

The houses in the Atherton mill village attained regional importance, because D. A. Tompkins used them as illustrations in textbooks, most notably his *Cotton Mill: Commercial Features* (1899), which he published to instruct and assist the builders of cotton mills. ¹³ According to one scholar, Tompkins' books were the "most influential of all publications in this period. " ¹⁴ In *Cotton Mills: Commercial Features*, Tompkins provided specifications and plans for five types of mill houses. ¹⁵ He also set forth the fundamental principle which undergirded his concepts of design. "The whole matter of providing attractive and comfortable habitations for cotton mill operatives in the South," Tompkins asserted, "may be summarized in the statement that they are essentially rural people. " ¹⁶ He spoke to the same point in a letter which he wrote on October 15, 1906, to a textile official in Patterson, N.J. Tompkins defended his practice of not placing closets, bathrooms or hot water in his mill houses by explaining that the majority of his laborers had grown up in rural areas, where such "modern improvements" were unknown. "Sometimes they would object to ordinary clothes closets," he reported, "on the plea that they were receptacles for worn out shoes and skirts that ought to be thrown away and destroyed." In the same letter, Tompkins answered the charge of those who insisted that he was derelict in not erecting brick row houses like those found in the industrial cities of the North. Again, he justified his actions by emphasizing the rural background of his mill workers. He argued that frame cottages on individual lots were more in keeping with the desires and proclivities which his laborers had brought from the farm. Tompkins went on to explain that his mill villages contained "three or four different standard houses" which were scattered throughout the community to create the impression that they had been built "by individuals instead of by the corporation. " ¹⁷

The D. A. Tompkins Company took pride in its ability to create what it regarded as an hospitable environment for its workers. The Atherton Lyceum on South Boulevard offered evening courses for the mill hands, many of whom were women and children. ¹⁸ Indeed, examples of paternalism abounded at the Atherton. "Arrangements should be made to inspect at regular intervals the operatives houses and yards," Tompkins exclaimed. ¹⁹ Tompkins often boasted about the nurturing relationship which he had with his mill hands. For example, he acquired flower seeds and vegetable seeds for them and even gave them trees to plant in their yards. He went so far as to award an annual cash prize for the best garden in the village. On July 4, 1907, he sponsored a picnic at the Catawba River, where his workers were served sandwiches and lemonade. ²⁰ No doubt Tompkins was pleased by the comments of a group of textile executives who visited the Atherton community in May 1900. "The Atherton and its surroundings are marvels of beauty,"

one declared. "There is nothing to approach it in any factory settlement I have seen in the North."
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There is ample reason to believe that life in the Atherton mill village had its disadvantages. Tompkins used the so-called "rough rule" in assigning families to his residential units, meaning that a mill hand was to be supplied for every room in the house. The rent ranged from 75 cents to \$1.00 per room per month. ²² Cotton mills were noisy and dangerous places. Indeed, the people of Charlotte called them "hummers" because of the deafening din which their machines produced. ²³ Accidents at the Atherton were numerous, such as the mangling of a worker's hands in June 1893 or the death of an overseer in the carding room in October 1902, when he became entangled in the belting apparatus. "He was dead in six seconds," the *Charlotte Observer* reported. ²⁴

Daniel Augustus Tompkins died on October 18, 1914, at his home in Montreat, N.C. ²⁵ The Atherton Mill continued to operate until the mid 1930's, however. ²⁶ And the factory building still stands at 2136 South Boulevard. ²⁷ According to Tompkins' biographer, the three textile mills which Tompkins owned and operated, including the Atherton at Dilworth and mills at High Shoals, N.C., and Edgefield, S.C., "were the enterprises which, in large measure, molded Tompkins' social and political philosophy. " ²⁸ Consequently, these mills and their attendant mill villages possess enormous historic significance in terms of the evolution and development of the Southern textile industry in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This truth is even more obvious when comes to understand that houses like those at 2005 Cleveland Ave. in Charlotte were manifestations of standards which had a regional impact.

Notes

¹ Howard Bunyan Clay, "Daniel Augustus Tompkins: An American Bourbon," (An unpublished doctoral dissertation at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, N.C.), p. 103. *Charlotte Observer* (April 12, 1893), P. 4.

² Clay, p. 25.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁷ Ibid., p. 34.

⁸ "D. A. Tompkins to R. T. Daniel," (A letter in the D. A. Tompkins Papers in the Southern History Collection at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, N.C.).

⁹ *Charlotte Observer* (August 31, 1892), p. 4. ¹⁰ Clay, p. 104.

¹¹ Mecklenburg County Deed Book 90, Page 310. *Charlotte Observer* (March 22, 1893).

¹² The houses are at 2005 Cleveland Ave. and at 2000, 2004, 2016, 2020, 2024 and 2028 Euclid Ave. The house at 2005 Cleveland Ave. is the least altered from the original.

¹³ D. A. Tompkins, *Cotton Mill: Commercial Features* (Observer Printing House, Charlotte, N.C., 1899).

¹⁴ Brent Glass, "Southern Mill Hills: Design in a 'Public' Place" in Doug Swaim, ed., *Carolina Dwelling* (The Student Publication of the School of Design, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, N.C., 1978) vol. 26, p. 143.

¹⁵ Sketches of these designs are included in this report.

¹⁶ Tompkins, p. 117.

¹⁷ "D. A. Tompkins to J. A. Barbour," (A letter in the D. A. Tompkins Papers in the Southern History Collection at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, N.C.).

¹⁸ Clay, p. 106. For a photograph of the Atherton Lyceum, see Tompkins, *Cotton Mill: Commercial Features*, Fig. 44.

¹⁹ Tompkins, p. 118.

²⁰ Clay, pp. 110-111.

²¹ *Charlotte Observer* (May 12, 1900), p. 8.

²² Clay, p. 105.

²³ *Charlotte Observer* (November 27, 1892), p. 4.

²⁴ *Charlotte Observer* (June 28, 1893), p. 4. *Charlotte Observer* (October 14, 1902), p. 5

²⁵ Clay, p. 317. His house at Montreat survives.

²⁶ Hill's Charlotte City Directory 1934 (Hill Directory Co., Richmond, Va., 1934), p. 602. Hill's Charlotte City Directory 1935 (Hill Directory Co., Richmond, Va., 1935), p. 645.

²⁷ The old Atherton Mill is at 2136 South Boulevard and houses the Stacey Knit Company.

²⁸ Clay, p. 164.

7. A brief architectural description of the property: This report contains an architectural description of the property prepared by Dr. Dan L. Morrill, Director of the Commission.

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 Atherton mill house does possess special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations: 1) it is one of the few extant mill houses in Charlotte-Mecklenburg which was initially owned by the D. A. Tompkins Company; 2) it is the best preserved remnant of the Atherton mill village; 3) it is one of the oldest houses in Dilworth, Charlotte's initial suburb; and 4) it is one of the earliest examples of a type of mill house which D. A. Tompkins promoted in his influential textbooks for mill owners.

b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling and/or association: The Commission judges that the architectural description included in this report demonstrates that the property known as the Atherton mill house meets this criterion.

9. Ad Valorem Tax Appraisal: The Commission is aware that designation would allow the owner to apply annually 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 Ad Valorem Tax appraisal on the Atherton mill house is \$860. The current Ad Valorem Tax appraisal on the .146 acres of land is \$5,080. The land is zoned for industrial use.

Bibliography

Charlotte Observer.

Howard Bunyan Clay, "Daniel Augustus Tompkins: An American Bourbon." (An unpublished doctoral dissertation at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, N.C.).

Brent Glass, "Southern Mill Hills: Design in a 'Public' Place," in Doug Swaim, ed., *Carolina Dwelling* (The Student Publication of the School of Design, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, N.C., 1973) vol. 26.

Hill's Charlotte City Directory 1934 (Hill Directory Co., Richmond, Va., 1934).

Hill's Charlotte City Directory 1935 (Hill Directory Co., Richmond, Va., 1935).

Records of the Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office.

Records of the Mecklenburg County Tax Office.

D. A. Tompkins, *Cotton Mill: Commercial Features* (Observer Printing House, Charlotte, N.C., 1899).

D. A. Tompkins Papers in the Southern History Collection at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, N.C.

Date of the Preparation of this Report: May 6, 1981.

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Architectural Description

In his *Cotton Mill: Commercial Features*, D. A. Tompkins sets forth the plans and specifications for what he calls a "Four-Room Gable House." Moreover, he includes a photograph of this type of abode (Fig. 37). The house at 2005 Cleveland Ave. is a remarkably well-preserved example of this style, which Tompkins estimated in 1899 would cost \$400 to erect. It is a one-story frame house with horizontal clapboard siding which is painted white. The structure rests upon brick piers, some of which have been replaced, with cinder or concrete block in-fill of more recent origin. The roof of the three-bay wide by one-bay deep main block is a gable roof of asbestos shingle with a cross gable at the center front. Diamond-shaped ventilators appear in the gable ends and in the cross gable. Rear ells extend from both sides of the back. The windows are four-over-four, double-hung sash throughout. Two brick chimneys with simple, corbeled caps pierce the roof. The original rear porch is unchanged except for the addition of a water closet.

This writer was unable to obtain permission to enter the house. However, he did talk with the daughter of the owner, and she indicated that the interior was essentially unchanged from the original. Initially, the house would have contained four bedrooms, two on each side of a center hall. It is reasonable to infer that they would have been devoid of ornamentation.