

William Henry Belk House



This report was written on October 2, 1985

1. NAME AND LOCATION OF THE PROPERTY: The property known as the William Henry Belk House is located at 200 Hawthorne Lane, Charlotte, N.C.

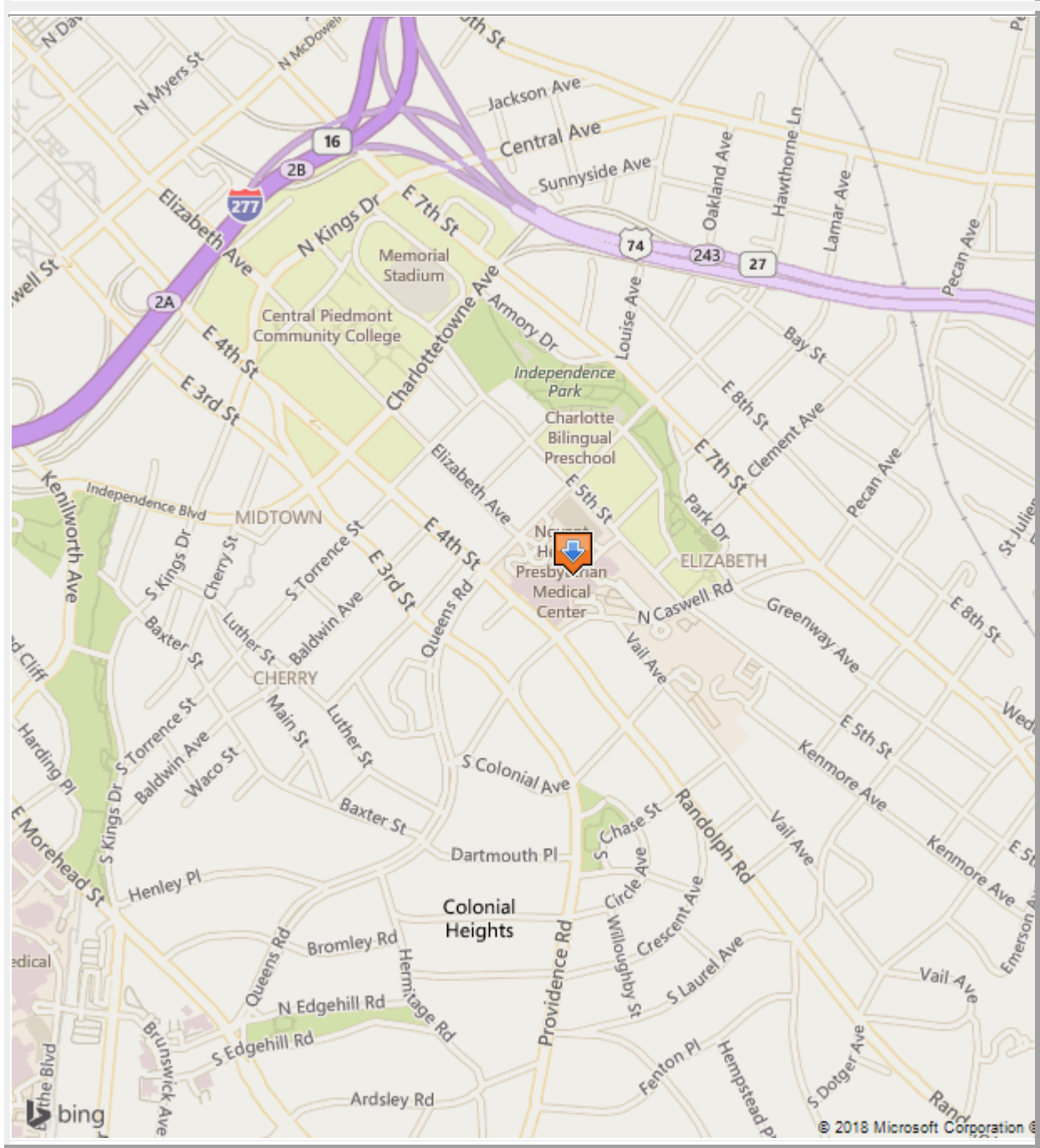
2. NAME, ADDRESS, AND TELEPHONE NUMBER OF THE OWNER OF THE PROPERTY:

North Carolina Medical Commission
Department of Human Resources
Box 12206
Raleigh, N.C., 27605

Telephone Number: 704/371-4119

3. REPRESENTATIVE PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE PROPERTY: This report contains representative photographs of the property.

4. A MAP DEPICTING THE LOCATION OF THE PROPERTY: This report contains a map which depicts the location of the property.



5. CURRENT DEED BOOK REFERENCE TO THE PROPERTY: The most recent deed to this property is recorded in Deed Book 127, Page 3. The Tax Parcel Number of the property is 127-038-01.

6. A BRIEF HISTORICAL SKETCH OF THE PROPERTY: This report contains a historical sketch of the property, prepared by Dr. William H. Huffman, Ph.D.

7. A BRIEF ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION OF THE PROPERTY: This report contains a brief architectural description of the property, prepared by Mr. Thomas W. Hanchett.

8. DOCUMENTATION OF WHY AND IN WHAT WAYS THE PROPERTY MEETS THE CRITERIA FOR HISTORIC 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 William Henry Belk House does possess special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations 1) the house completed in late 1924 or early 1925, was the home of William Henry Belk, a merchant and philanthropist of local and regional importance; 2) the architect of the house was Charles Christian Hook, an architect of local and regional importance, who specialized in the Colonial Revival - Classical Revival tradition, of which this house is a striking examples and 3) the house is one of the few mansions which survives on Hawthorne Lane, which was once an elegant residential street in Elizabeth, one of Charlotte's oldest suburbs.

B. INTEGRITY OF DESIGN, SETTING, WORKMANSHIP, MATERIALS, FEELING, AND/OR ASSOCIATION: The Commission contends that the architectural description included in this report demonstrates that the property known as the William Henry Belk House 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 William Henry Belk House is \$118,790. The property is zoned 06.

DATE OF PREPARATION OF THIS REPORT: October 2, 1985

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Historical Overview

by

Dr. William H. Huffman

September, 1984

Sitting these days in the mammoth shadow of Presbyterian Hospital and surrounded by acres of parking, the Belk mansion on Hawthorne Lane, which used to be one of the most prominent structures overlooking the city, is now hardly noticed. Built in 1924 by William Henry (1862-1952) and Mary Irwin Belk (d. 1968), it was designed by one of the city's greatest architects, C. C. Hook.

William Henry Belk's rise from a farm boy in South Carolina who lost his father in the Civil War to the head of one of the South's leading retail chains has been chronicled in LeGette Blythe's *William H. R. Belk: Merchant of the South*.¹ As a youth, he worked for twelve years in the B. D. Heath store in Monroe until, with \$750 in savings, he opened his own dry goods business in the same town in 1888. After three years of operation, he persuaded his brother, Dr. John M. Belk (1864-1928) to become a partner in the business. Their marketing strategies, which were somewhat unusual at the time, resulted in success: selling good merchandise at moderate prices, for cash only; treating all customers with equal respect; and a no-questions-asked return policy.²

After a few years, the brothers Belk decided it was time to branch out into that booming city of fifteen thousand, Charlotte, and they opened their first store here on September 25, 1895 in a rented store building just off the Square on East Trade Street. Despite predictions of some locals that these country merchants would never make it in the big city, the Belk Bros. store enjoyed a steady growth parallel to that of the city itself.³ From the 1880s to the end of the Twenties, Charlotte experienced practically uninterrupted, rapid expansion driven by the prospering textile industry in the New South and the city's strategic location as a rail hub, banking and distribution center.

In 1905, the business was doing so well the brothers bought a three-story building on East Trade to consolidate the store under one roof instead of having it operate out of several storefronts. The refurbished building with its fancy new facade opened in 1910 to live music at a gala grand opening. Fifteen years later, even greater expansion was called for, and in 1925, an adjacent building, destroyed by fire, was bought for that purpose. The new store built on the combined properties was double the width of the original, and five stories high, cost a quarter of a million dollars, and opened for business in 1927.⁴ At the time, it was not only the largest department store in the Carolinas, but was also the flagship of an ever-expanding chain of forty-two Belk stores. The nay-sayers were no longer heard from. By the time of Henry Belk's death in 1952,

there were hundreds of Belk stores throughout the South, and of course, the chain continues to expand to this day.⁵

Because of his preoccupation with making sure the business was successful, Henry Belk did not marry until he was fifty-three years old. On a Western excursion, he met Queens College graduate Mary Irwin, who was the daughter of Dr. and Mrs. John R. Irwin of Charlotte. They were married on June 9, 1915, at the bride's home on N. Tryon Street.⁶

A major force in the Belk's lives was the Presbyterian Church. In addition to being very active in the church itself, a number of Presbyterian-related institutions were the recipients of their philanthropy; these included the Belk Chapel at Queens College, and Belk Hall at Davidson College. Thus it was that they also made possible the move of Presbyterian Hospital from Mint and West Trade Street to the site of the defunct Elizabeth College. About a year after settling in a house on N. Tryon near the Irwins, the Belks bought ten acres of the twenty-five-acre property (their tract included the president's residence) for fifty thousand dollars, and endorsed a note for the remaining money needed by the hospital for the move. The main college building, located at the top of Elizabeth Avenue on the site bounded by Hawthorne, Caswell, East Fourth and East Fifth Streets was converted to Presbyterian Hospital, and the Belks took up residence in the former president's home with their baby, William Henry, Jr. The campus setting was surrounded by middle and upper middle-class houses of the Elizabeth neighborhood, which had been developed originally from the 1880s to 1915.⁷

Sometime in the early Twenties, a banker friend, Bob Dunn, suggested to Henry Belk that he ought to build a house on his spacious Hawthorne Lane property that was more suited to the excellent location (and presumably also to his position in the community) and promised that he would lend the money for the new place. Taking Dunn up on his offer, Belk hired one of Charlotte's best-known architects, C. C. Hook, to design a large new house. Charles Christian Hook (1864-1938) began practicing architecture in 1893 after three years of teaching in the public schools. At various times he was in partnership with others in the city (Frank Sawyer, 1902-1907; Willard Rogers, 1912-1916; and with his son, W. W. Hook, 1924-1938). Beginning with design work for the new suburb of Dilworth in the 1890s, Hook went on to produce many of the city's important landmarks, which included the old Charlotte City Hall, the Charlotte Women's Club, the J. B. Duke mansion on Hermitage Road, and the Belk's Trade Street facade of 1927. Among his many state-wide credits are the west wing of the state capital in Raleigh, the Richmond County courthouse, Phillips Hall in Chapel Hill and the State Hospital in Morganton.⁸

Hook's plans for the house were done by early 1924, and in March of that year, the builder, Thies-Smith Realty, took out a building permit and estimated the cost of construction to be \$75,000.⁹ The old residence was moved to the back of the property and turned to front on Caswell Road. (For many years, the Belks rented it to others; it was demolished in recent years.¹⁰) After its completion in late 1924 or early 1925, the Belks moved with baby Henry into their grand new home. It certainly was a residence befitting the commanding location overlooking the city, and the social station of its owners. The 2 1/2-story, 16-room mansion had a laundry, playroom (with shower) and vegetable storage in the basement; on the first floor, a large entry vestibule led to a double ascending staircase, and also contained a living room,

reception room, playroom, dining room, kitchen and two bedrooms; in addition to five more bedrooms, the second floor had 3 baths, a sewing and linen room, a maid's room and a sleeping porch; the attic was a large open area that could be used for a number of purposes.¹¹

During the remainder of their lifetimes, the Belks raised their six children, William Henry, Jr., Henderson, Irwin, Sarah, Tom and John at the Hawthorne Lane residence, all of whom lived at home until Irwin was married in 1948. The house was from beginning considered Mary Belk's province, while the store was his, as she told it,

Mr. Belk told me soon after we were married that he'd make me a proposition - he would turn the house over to me entirely and I should run it as I thought best if I would agree to let him run the store in the same way.¹²

Even the deed to the property was solely in her name, although this was a common practice for Charlotte businessmen, so that the home would not be lost if there were disastrous business losses. The Belks were a close-knit family in which traditional values were stressed, and the home was its focal point for over forty years. It was also the site of many social, philanthropic, church-related and civic gatherings during that time. After Mary Belk's death in 1968, the house was donated to Presbyterian Hospital according to terms of her will, and it is now used for offices and receptions.¹³

The Belk mansion is not only one of the city's largest fine homes designed by the skilled and versatile C. C. Hook, but it is also associated with one of the area's best-known families. For these reasons, its preservation would maintain a noteworthy legacy of a now-gone era.

NOTES

¹ LeGette Blythe, *William Henry Belk: Merchant of the New South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1958).

² *Ibid.*, p. 63 et passim.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Charlotte News*, October 3, 1910, p. 4; *Charlotte Observer*, May 1, 1927, p. 11.

⁵ Blythe, pp. 257-263.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 199-200.

⁸ Ibid., p. 200; Charlotte , Sept. 17, 1938, p. 1; copy of C. C. Hook's drawings on file at Presbyterian Hospital.

⁹ Charlotte Building Permit No. 5031, 12 March 1924.

¹⁰ Blythe, p. 200.

¹¹ Hook's drawings, note 8.

¹² Blythe, pp. 200-201.

¹³ Will 68-E-174, 14 February 1968.

Architectural Description

by Thomas W. Hanchett

The W. H. Belk Mansion is a two story beige brick structure in the Colonial Revival-Neoclassical tradition which stands at the crest of Elizabeth Hill overlooking downtown Charlotte. It was built for the William Henry Belk family who were then gaining a reputation as the leading department store merchants in the Carolinas. Its architect was Charles Christian Hook, one of the city's best designers. The house is neither massive nor ostentatious, but rather a well-detailed example of 1920s upper-class architecture. Today its grounds have been paved to provide parking for adjacent Presbyterian Hospital, and a few partition walls have been moved, but the Belk Mansion remains in a very good state of preservation.

C.C. Hook was not Charlotte's first professional architect when he arrived about 1890, but he was the first to make his entire career in the city. From the late 1880s through the 1920s Charlotte underwent a massive boom period that saw it become the center of a new Piedmont textile manufacturing region, and move from sixth place to first among Carolina cities. Hook designed many of the growing town's most important buildings, including the first buildings of Queens College, the Charlotte City Hall on East Trade Street, and the Duke Mansion. His most important contribution to the Piedmont was his introduction in 1894 of a new architectural style then gaining popularity in the Northeast -- the Colonial Revival. Hook believed firmly in its relative simplicity and the elegance it derived from its roots in ancient Greece and Rome. He wrote:

The true classic style of architecture, which at one time predominated in the South ... is being revived. The most striking feature of the house will be its simplicity of design and convenience of arrangement. The so-called "filigree" ornamentation will not be a consideration, and only the true design will be carried out and thus give Charlotte another new style

Most of Hook's Colonial Revival dwellings shared similar massing. The Gautier-Gilchrist House (1896), the Villalonga-Alexander House (1900-1901), and the Walter Brem House (1902), all in Dilworth, as well as the Z. V. Taylor House (later expanded as the Duke Mansion) in Myers Park all were basically two-story rectangular blocks. The main entrance was in the center of the long side facing the street. Roofs were usually hipped and featured narrow dormers. At the rear would be a one-story kitchen ell.

The Belk Mansion is an elegant restatement in brick and stone of this theme that Hook had been working with, usually in wood, for a quarter of a century. The basic hip-roofed block is seven bays wide and five bays deep. It is enlivened on the north side by a two-story gabled bay and a flat-roofed porte-cochere, and on the south side by a one-story segmental bay. The rear kitchen ell has a low mansard-like roof. All roofs are of long-lasting terra cotta tile, green in color. Four dormers pierce the front roof, with the center pair joined in such a way as to produce a Palladian effect. The dormers have projecting gable cornices with returns, pilasters, and round-arched windows with keystone-like decoration. The four dormer arrangement is repeated on the rear roof, and there is one dormer on each side roof. The house's five chimneys are placed on the side and rear roofs to reduce their visibility from the street.

Below the roof is a wooden modillion cornice. Second-story windows are rectangular six-over-six-pane double-hung sash units and have no sill or lintel trim except for a stretcher belt course that extends around the building at sill level. At the center of the front facade a three-part window framed by brick pilasters accentuates the main entrance below. On the rear facade the second-story windows are grouped more informally than on the front, reflecting the presence of baths and sleeping-porches inside. At the center of the rear facade is a full-fledged Palladian window above the back porch.

The first-floor front windows are all actually French doors. The twelve-pane double units open out onto the front terrace. Each is topped by a round-arched fanlight and surrounded by a band of corbelled brick surmounted by a keystone. The wide entry bay has an elliptical fanlight, twelve-pane sidelights, and a pair of twelve-pane doors, all surrounded by a band of corbelled brick. A heavy one-story porch shelters the entrance and the two flanking French doors. It has heavy brick posts supporting a flat roof crested by an iron railing. Four Doric columns add to the decorative effect. The porch floor is covered with figured green tile and extends out beyond the roofed area to form a terrace across the entire front facade. The terrace wraps around the north side under the porte-cochere, which continues the post and column motif of the main porch. It also wraps around the south side where it is sheltered by a smaller porch. Both the side porch and the port-cochere have iron railings that make them useful as second-floor balconies as well. At the center of the rear facade is a glass-enclosed back porch which includes a small greenhouse added for Mrs. Belk.

Inside, the house boasted seven bedrooms for the family plus six baths. The first floor was arranged for entertaining. The spacious stair and entry hall was crossed by a transverse corridor, dividing the downstairs into four quadrants. The two across the front of the house held the living room, entry hall, reception room, and library. These main public areas were all connected by large sliding doors that could be thrown open to create one continuous space. The southeast rear quadrant held the dining room and behind it the kitchen spaces. The northeast rear quadrant held a pair of bedrooms with a connecting bath.

One comes into the entry hall through a small tile-floored vestibule. The hall has a wide, simple cornice. Heavy cornices with carved scroll brackets surmount the doorways to the living room on the left and the reception room on the right. A chair rail and molded baseboard extend around the walls of the hall, and the floor is of blond wood with two inlaid bands of dark wood near the walls. Radiators are set into the wall on either side of the front door and are covered with iron doors pierced in a rectilinear motif. Coming through the front door one is confronted by the horseshoe-shaped grand stair which rises to a landing beneath the Palladian window at the rear of the house. The balusters are of iron with a carved wooden handrail and slender turned wooden newel posts. Under the stair landing to the rear of the entry hall is the play room sheathed in knotty pine paneling. French doors allow it to be closed off from the entry hall, but when the doors are open there is an unbroken flow of space from the front door to the back entrance, located at the rear of the playroom. It is likely that this space was often left unimpeded, for it provided the visitor a glimpse of the Belk's rear gardens. The narrower transverse corridor crosses the entry hall at the base of the stairs. It continues the parquet floor, chair rail, and cornice of the entry hall.

The northwest quadrant of the first floor, to the left of the entry hall as one enters, held the living room. It is now the Presbyterian Hospital uniform salesroom, but the elaborate cornice and the thin strips of molding applied to the walls to create vertical panels survive in excellent condition. It is said that the original pink marble fireplace remains intact behind wallboard at the end of the room. The southwest quadrant of the downstairs, on the right of the entry hall, contains the reception room and the library. Both are in good original condition, especially the library with its dark wood paneling and small glass-fronted built-in bookcases topped with dentilled cornices.

The southeast quadrant holding the eating and food preparation areas of the household was the largest, for it extends back into the kitchen wing. Guests entered the dining room through an archway at the end of the transverse corridor. The arch has been filled with a glass partition and a door in recent years, but otherwise the dining room is in excellent original condition and remains the most ornate room in the house. The segmental bay on the side of the house means the room is a more interesting space than the standard rectangular box. A heavy molded plaster cornice, said to have been imported from Italy, accentuates the room's shape. The cornice features dentil molding and ornate modillions. Below it, paired strips of molding break the wall surfaces into panels. Behind the dining room were a breakfast room, pantry, kitchen, and porch. This area has been heavily altered in recent years. Most interior walls have been removed and new ones added to create a corridor of small offices. Only the tile exterior wall in the old kitchen

hints at what was there. A small service corridor off the dining room does remain intact. It leads to the tightly turning servants' stair which is hidden next to the grand stair.

The final downstairs quadrant contains two bedrooms. Each has a wood and tile mantel, and a coved molded cornice. The bathroom between the two has its original pedestal sink and high tiled wainscot, though other early fixtures are gone. A partition has been added in the center of one bedroom to break it into two office spaces, but this appears not to have harmed the cornice or the wide molded baseboard.

Upstairs, bedrooms open off a transverse corridor similar to the one on the first floor. There are five bedrooms and a maid's room. Each pair of rooms, including the maid's, had a connecting bath in Hook's original plans. The spacious maid's room is on one's right at the back of the house as one reaches the top of the grand stair. Next to it, at the northeast rear corner is bedroom one which features a sleeping porch. Adjoining it on the front of the house is bedroom two. It has a large carved mantel of gray-white marble. This is perhaps the most important piece of stonework in the house, and is a good indication that this was designed as the master bedroom. Next to it, at the center of the front facade, is bedroom three. Much like the downstairs living room and dining room, it has thin strips of molding which break its wall surfaces into panels. Adjacent to this room is a small sewing room, entered off the corridor. It has an entire wall of linen storage cabinets and drawers added after the dwelling's construction at Mrs. Belk's suggestion. Bedroom four at the southwest corner of the residence rounds out the front rooms and has its own fireplace. Bedroom five is at the southeast rear corner. It has its own bathroom done in pink tile with a laundry chute hidden behind the medicine cabinet. This space is shown as a closet on Hook's plans, and may have been added some time after the house was built.

A small service corridor is nestled between bedroom five and the grand stair. It contains the service stair, closets, and the stairway to the attic. The attic is a large low-ceiling room with painted rough-plaster walls. The dormer windows give plenty of natural light, and small closets line the room under the eaves. One of the closets holds an immense wooden crate full of spare pieces of plaster molding from the living room and dining room. The three-part front center dormer window provides a grand view through the trees toward downtown. Standing here it is not hard to imagine the time sixty years ago when William Henry Belk built the finest house on Elizabeth Hill and had it sited so that he could look out toward his growing department store.

Today Elizabeth Hill has changed greatly. The grassy campus of Elizabeth College has been replaced with the crowded brick buildings of Presbyterian Hospital. The Belk grounds have been paved for parking. Most of the houses that once lined the Elizabeth Avenue trolley line on its way up the hill from downtown have given way to business buildings. Yet one can still see some of the grandeur in the Belk Mansion, and in the nearby St. John's Baptist Church (1925) and the James Staten Mansion (1912c). All use the same yellow brick and share similar stylistic use of motifs from ancient Greece and Rome. Each possesses individual architectural and historic significance, and together they remind us of those textile boom years when Charlotte became a leading city.