

R. C. Biberstein House



This report was written on July 5, 1985

1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the R. C. Biberstein House is located at 1600 Elizabeth Avenue, Charlotte, North Carolina.

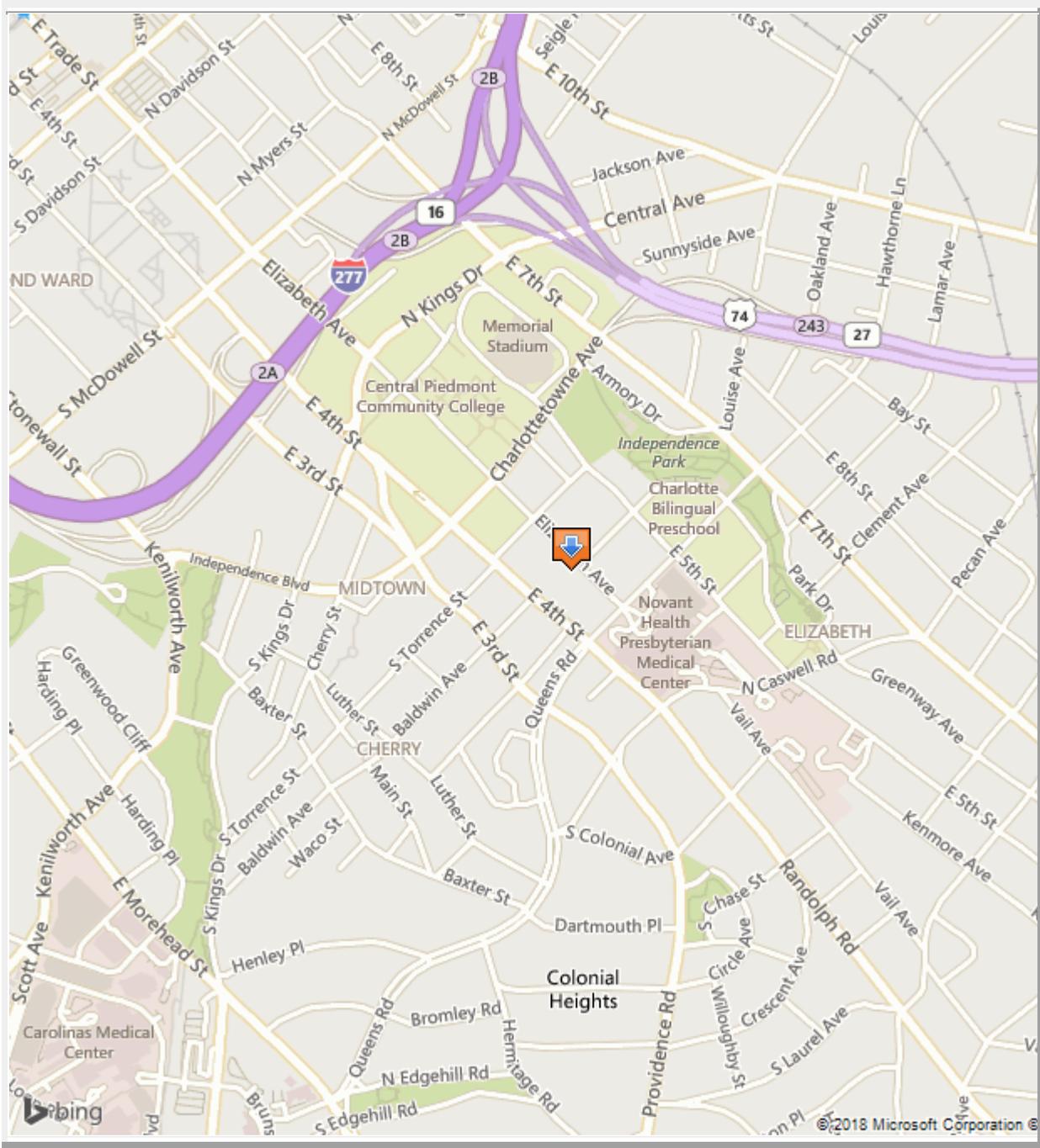
2. Name, address and telephone number of the present owner of the property:

R. C. Biberstein Estate
c/o Ms. Susan Causey
Trust Department
Wachovia Bank & Trust Co.
Box 31608
Charlotte, N.C., 28231

Telephone: 704/378-5084

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 200, Page 185. The Tax Parcel Number of the property is 125-111-21.

6. A brief historical sketch of the property: This report contains a brief 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 Ms. Lisa A. Stamper.

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 R. C. Biberstein House does possess special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations: 1) R. C. Biberstein (1859-1931), the designer and initial owner of the house, was a prominent mill architect during the era when Charlotte occupied a place of growing importance in the textile industry of the South; 2) the R. C. Biberstein House, an impressive example of the Rectilinear Style of architecture in Charlotte, is one of the few surviving residences on a once-grand suburban boulevard in Elizabeth, one of Charlotte oldest streetcar suburbs; and 3) the R. C. Biberstein House occupies a significant place in the streetscape of Elizabeth Avenue.

b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling, and/or association: The Commission contends that the attached architectural description by Ms. Lisa A. Stamper demonstrates that the exterior of the R. C. Biberstein House meets this criterion. It should be noted that Ms. Stamper could not gain access to the interior of the house. Consequently, a careful assessment of the architectural integrity of the interior could not be performed.

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." It should be noted that the property known as the R. C. Biberstein House has the current appraised value: Improvement - \$41,320. Land - \$79,200. Total - \$120,520. The property is zoned B2.

Date of Preparation of this Report: July 5, 1985

Prepared by: Dr. Dan L. Morrill
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Properties Commission
1225 S. Caldwell St. Box D
Charlotte, N.C., 28203

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Historical Overview

by

Dr. William H. Huffman

June, 1984

The Biberstein house at 1600 Elizabeth Avenue is the last, at this writing, of the many elegant houses which used to form a row of fine homes along the street that is still being used as a residence. Eighty-eight-year-old Constance Biberstein has lived in the house since she, her brothers and parents moved in the newly-built home in November, 1906. ¹

Her father, Richard C. Biberstein (1859-1931), was a noted mill architect, and was reputed to have designed more cotton mills in this region than any other individual. ² He was born in the German settlement of Fredericksburg, Texas, the son of Herman R. von Bieberstein (R. C. later dropped the "von," which denotes noble descent, and changed the last name spelling). His father was an engineer who came West in the 1840s, and laid out many of the Texas land lines that are still in use. R. C. Biberstein studied mechanical engineering at Worcester (Mass.) Polytechnic Institute starting in 1879, and graduated in 1882. After employment with the U.S. Electric Lighting Co. of Newark, N.J., the Western Manufacturing Co. in Richmond, Ind. and the Atlas Engine Works in Indianapolis, he stopped off in Charlotte on a trip and made contact with Col. Wilkes, who owned the Mecklenburg Iron Works, and began work there in 1887 as a draftsman-designer. ³

The story is told that one day a man came into the Iron Works and asked Biberstein where Col. Wilkes was. When he replied, "He's over there," the man asked him to repeat it, and Biberstein had to shout directions, for which the man was obliged. When he was subsequently introduced, the stranger turned out to be Thomas A. Edison, who came to Charlotte to try and perfect his gold-separation process by means of electricity. ⁴

About 1897, Biberstein went to work for the Charlotte Machine Company, which was a mill machinery supplier run by H. S. Chadwick. Several years before, R. C. had married Laura Einfeld of Fredericksburg, and they lived on N. Caldwell Street. In 1902 or shortly before, he left Chadwick's employ and took a position as an engineer for Stuart W. Cramer, whose company designed and built many mills in the region (including Highland Park #3 in Charlotte). About 1905, R. C. went into business for himself as a mill architect and engineer with offices in the Piedmont Building on Tryon Street. ⁵

That same year he bought a building lot on Elizabeth Avenue from the Highland Park Company for \$1250.00. ⁶Highland Park was incorporated in 1891 by ten stockholders, who included E. D. Latta, W. S. Alexander, P. M. Brown and Walter Brem among others, for the purpose of developing what is now part of the Elizabeth neighborhood, but was then known as "Highland Park." Banker-developer Peter Marshall Brown was president, and after his death he was

succeeded by W. S. Alexander, who headed the firm when it dissolved in 1915.⁷ Although Elizabeth, Charlotte's second streetcar suburb after Latta's Dilworth, contained a mix of style and size of houses on the side streets, the main thoroughfares of Elizabeth, Hawthorne, Clement and Central were graced with the fine homes of a number of the city's professional and business leaders. The trolley came down the hill along Trade Street from the Square, and back up on Elizabeth to Elizabeth College at the top of the hill (now the site of Presbyterian Hospital), made a left turn on to Hawthorne and turned back south on Seventh after passing Independence Park.

R. C. Biberstein did the design for his own house, which was reported to be the only residence he ever did. Recalling his years living up North, he put fireplaces in nearly every room and made a double front entryway to keep out the cold air. When the family moved in during November, 1906, they lived on one of the city's finest suburban residential streets within easy reach of the city center.⁸

Sometime about 1915, when World War I was raging in Europe, but before the U.S. involvement, Biberstein gave up his downtown office and moved it to the back of the first floor of his Elizabeth home. There he practiced mill architecture until his death in 1931.⁹ Biberstein was reputed to be very exacting and demanding of perfection in detail, and it was probably that, in combination with his good education and training with the best machinery and mill designers in the area, which served him well in winning many mill design contracts.¹⁰ Another fortuitous aspect of his career is that he came to Charlotte and practiced mill architecture during the entire period when the New South industrialization of the Piedmont region, primarily cotton mills, boomed from the 1880s to the 1920s. Charlotte's designers, suppliers, investors and transportation links played a key role in this expansion.

When R. C. Biberstein died in 1931, his architecture firm, which still exists under the name Biberstein, Bowles, Meacham and Reed, was taken over by his son, Herman V. Biberstein (1893-1966), a 1914 N. C. State graduate, who had joined the firm after college and Army service. In the early 50s, the architects moved to separate offices further down on Elizabeth Avenue, and in recent years a number of businesses have rented the south half of the first floor.¹¹ Among the mills R. C. Biberstein designed were the Lancaster Cotton Mill; the Boger and Crawford Spinning Mill in Lincoln Co.; the Hudson Cotton Mill and the Dixon Mills in Gaston Co.; in Belmont, the Imperial Yarn Mill, the Linford Spinning Mill, the National and Chronicle Yarn Mills; in Mt. Holly, the Union Cotton Mill; and in Mooresville, the Mooresville Cotton Mills.¹²

Thus the stately white house at 1600 Elizabeth Avenue is not only an elegant reminder of a different era in the city's history, but it was also designed by and lived in by one of the best-known and often-engaged mill architects of the Piedmont Carolinas. It has earned the privilege of being designated as historically important to the community.

NOTES

¹ Interview with Constance Biberstein, Charlotte, N.C. 25 June 1984.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.; The Journal, Worcester Polytechnic Institute, November, 1931, p. 30; *Charlotte Observer*, September 13, 1931, p. 10.

⁴ Interview with L. H. Meacham, 20 June 1984.

⁵ Charlotte City Directories, 1889-1907; Journal, note 3.

⁶ Deed Book 200, p. 185, 23 May 1905.

⁷ Record of Corporations, Book A, pp. 235 and 335; Ibid., Book 4, p. 283.

⁸ Interview with Constance Biberstein.

⁹ Charlotte City Directories, 1915-1931.

¹⁰ Interview with L. H. Meacham.

¹¹ Ibid.; interview with Constance Biberstein; *Charlotte Observer*, Jan. 21, 1966, p. 4B.

¹² Interview with L. H. Meacham.

Special Note: At the time of the preparation of this report, the R. C. Biberstein House stands empty.

Architectural Description

by Lisa A. Stamper
June 7, 1985

In 1906, the Biberstein House was built and designed by the local mill architect, R. C. Biberstein as his family residence. This elegant though simply detailed home is of the Rectilinear Style of architecture, as is the Bruns House located only two doors down the street. Another fine

residence from the same period is located between these two historic homes. The Rectilinear Style, though derived from Victorian Styles, rejected their lavish ornamentation.

The Biberstein House is two and one-half stories high and built of clapboard siding on a brick foundation. One of its most interesting features is its wide-eaved and simply bracketed roof. The main body of the house is covered with a steeply pitched hipped roof, with small hipped sections topping architectural features such as projections, dormers, and the porch. There is one dormer featuring two single pane windows on each side of the house. The rear section of the house has a steeply pitched gabled roof. Three brick chimneys pierce this configuration. There are two exterior end side chimneys near the front of the building plus one chimney near the center of the back section.

A grand front porch wraps around the front half of the home. The southern side of this porch was enclosed in the late 1940's or early 1950's. Simple, sturdy columns support the porch roof, which is decorated with delicately dentile molding.

Almost all of the original windows, being true to the Rectilinear Style, are wooden framed and double-hung with one-over-one panes of glass. Many of them have simple shutters. They have short sills and unornamental surrounds. There are two small windows on each side of the house in the foundations. They are near the front, with the one closest to the end being a half circle and the next a rectangle.

Of course the portico is located in the front (northeast side) of the house. The pedimented roof is incorporated into the porch roof. The portico has more elaborate brackets and more pronounced molding than the rest of the porch. The wooden double doors at the entrance are also of simple design, with horizontal panels at the bottom and a single glass pane at the top of each. A rectangular transom heads the doors. Today, wooden framed screened doors cover the wood and glass ones.

The southern half of the front porch has been enclosed and until just recently has housed various small businesses. A door leading into the enclosed porch has been placed to the left of the original door. To the other side of the main entrance is a single window. The second story of the front facade has three symmetrically placed windows.

The southeast facade is cluttered with various additions on both stories; however, an original two-story bay projection is still intact. Although it is difficult to discern the original features of the back half of the facade, the front half retains its early-twentieth century ambiance with a single window in the second story front and one window in each of the bay's sides. The first story of the bay projection has a typical window in one side and a horizontal rectangular window in another. The remaining original side is covered behind the enclosed porch.

It appears that the northwest facade resembles the original southeast facade in balance of composition. The front porch extends to the rectangular projection located almost in the middle of the building. Both the first and second story front sections have two typical windows. The

first story back section has one horizontally paneled door then three windows. The second story, which is approximately one-half the length of the first, contains a single window.

The treatment of the rectangular projection is quite interesting. The foundation brick extends approximately halfway up into the first story. One door and one window are symmetrically placed in this brick on the northwest side of the projection. Above the brick wall on this side is a set of two windows, then a horizontal single paneled rectangular window is set above those. On the northeast side of the projection a small, delicately framed oval stained glass window is placed in the second story. The only opening in the southwest side of the projection is a small rectangular window set into the brick wall.

The only major change from the original design of the southwest (rear) facade of the residence seems to be the enclosing of a first story, small, squarish porch on the south corner. Next to the enclosed porch is a single door. Next to that is a six-over-six paneled window. Two symmetrically placed windows are located near the north corner. A three four-paneled window set is located in the foundation underneath these northern windows. The second story gabled end contains only one six-over-one paneled window.

The present condition of the interior can not be determined without taking a look inside. Unfortunately, this was not possible since the owner, Miss Constance Biberstein is no longer living in the home. Also, the business which occupied the south corner of the building has relocated. However, the original interior plan may be assumed from studying architect's sketches of proposed renovations drawn in the 1940's and 1950's and presently located in UNCC's archives.

The plan seems to be of Victorian Style, which is not surprising. One enters through the entrance doors, then through another door, and into the reception hall. Sliding doors (a common Victorian feature) connected the reception hall with the adjacent parlor. One may walk straight through the reception hall to an enclosed area containing the great stair, and a side door leading down to a couple small rooms and another door opening to the outside. The dining room is located behind the parlor and beside the great stair. It has a door entering into the parlor, the great stair, and a small room most probably used as a pantry, since the kitchen is located directly behind that. From the plans available, the rest of the first floor areas are not clear.

To give the first floor interior plan some reference to the exterior, the stairwell is located within the rectangular northwest projection. The exterior wall of the dining room is part of the southeast projecting bay. Therefore; the social areas were located in the front of the home while the more private and utilitarian areas were located in the rear. Of course all the main rooms had fireplaces.

The second floor plan sketch shows three large rooms resembling the same location and shape of the first story reception hall, parlor, and dining room. The original rear rooms can not be clearly defined. Usually the second floor of a residence is used for sleeping. It is safe to assume that most of these upper level rooms had fireplaces.

To the rear of the Biberstein House is a small building almost totally covered with shrubs and overgrowth. According to the 1925 Sanborn Map, it is located in the same spot that a garage was

shown to have been standing. It is possible that this building is the original garage. Two other outbuildings shown on the Sanborn Map are missing from the present site. Today, an unpaved parking lot is located between the Biberstein House and its early twentieth-century neighbor. The three early residences left standing together on Elizabeth Avenue are surrounded by many modern one story rectangular commercial buildings.

Most of the exterior architectural features of the Biberstein House are still intact. Only the southeast side of the home seems to be marred by additions. Since almost all of the upper middle-class homes along early Elizabeth Avenue have been destroyed, the Biberstein House, the Bruns House, and their common neighbor are especially precious examples of the neighborhood's post-Victorian architecture.