

Charlotte Cotton Mills



This report was written on June 6, 1984

1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the Old Charlotte Cotton Mill is located at 508 W. 5th St. in Charlotte, North Carolina.

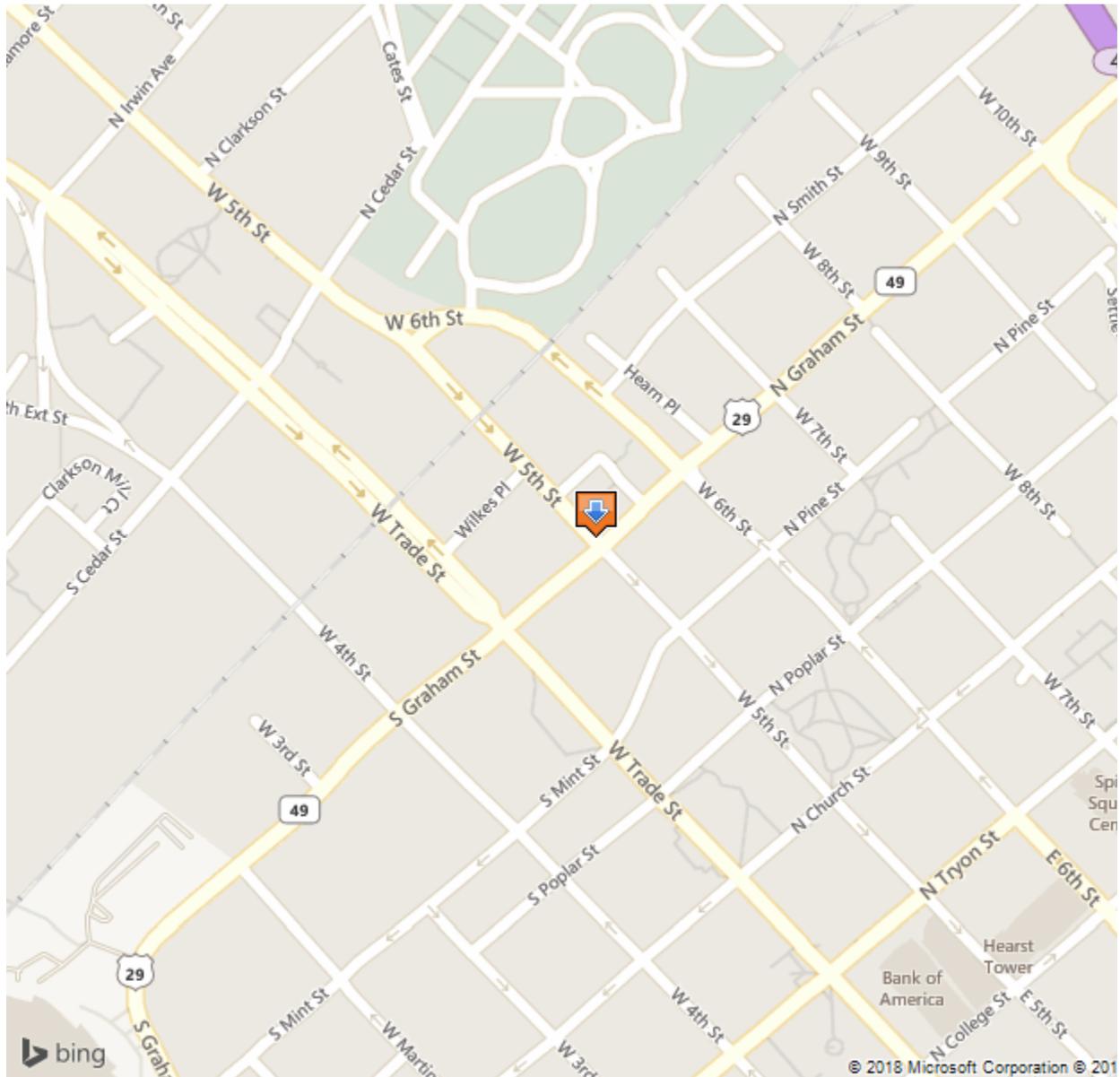
2. Name, address and telephone number of the present owner of the property:
Speizman Industries, Inc.

Box 31215
Charlotte, N.C., 28231

Telephone: 704/372-3751

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 deeds to this property are listed in the Mecklenburg County Deed Books 1909, page 288; 2037, page 303; 2791, page 499. The Tax Parcel Numbers of the property are: 078-052-02, 078-052-03A; 078-052-03B, 078-052-04.

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 an architectural description of the property prepared by 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 Old Charlotte Cotton Mills does possess special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations: 1) the Charlotte Cotton Mills, erected in 1880-81, was the first cotton mill situated in the City of Charlotte; 2) the Charlotte Cotton Mills set into motion a series of forces which made Charlotte a leading center of textile manufacturing in the United States; and 3) R. M. Oates, the principal founder of the Charlotte Cotton Mills, was a leading business figure in this community.

b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling, and/or association: The Commission contends that the attached architectural description by Miss Lisa A. Stamper demonstrates that the Old Charlotte 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 or 50% of the Ad Valorem taxes on all or any portion of the property which becomes "historic property." The current appraised value of the 1.465 acres of land is \$170,420. The current appraised value of the improvements is \$299,810. The total current appraised value is \$470,230. The property is zoned I3.

Date of Preparation of this Report: June 6, 1984

Prepared by: Dr. Dan L. Morrill, Director
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
August, 1983

The Charlotte Cotton Mills building represents the first cotton mill to be built in the city, which then set the trend for others to follow and made Charlotte an integral part and center of the growing Piedmont textile industry in the late nineteenth century. Built in 1880 and operating by 1881, the mill was only the third in Mecklenburg County, but of potentially greater influence because of its location in the city as well as being the only one operating in the county at the time.

Charlotte Cotton Mills began as an enterprise of Robert Marcus Oates (1829-1897) and his three nephews, David W. Oates (1844-1911), John E. Oates (1849-1897), and James M. Oates (1847-1925).¹ Born on a farm in Cleveland County, N.C., R. M. Oates came to Charlotte in 1853 and became a salesman in W. W. Elms grocery store. The following year he journeyed to Texas, and upon his return twelve months later went into the grocery and other cotton business with Lewis S. Williams. When the early part of the next decade brought a call to arms, in 1862 he received a lieutenant's commission in the 37th North Carolina Regiment and eventually rose to the rank of Colonel and became a brigade quartermaster. He was reputed to be one of the best quartermasters in the Confederate Army, and received a number of commendations from General Jackson. After surrendering with Lee's army at Appomattox, Oates returned to Charlotte and about 1866 started a new grocery and cotton business, R. M. Oates and Company, into which he brought his three nephews who had left their Cleveland County home after the war.

In 1872, R. M. Oates retired from being active in the cotton brokerage business, and his nephews formed a new firm, Oates Brothers, cotton factors (brokers) and buyers. The senior Mr. Oates devoted his time to refurbishing the Central Hotel in Charlotte, in which he had a half interest. In addition to being a charter director (beginning in 1866) of the First National Bank, and being elected president of the bank in 1889, R. M. Oates served various terms as County Commissioner and City Alderman. His personality was described thusly:

Colonel Oates was one person who was literally what he appeared to be. He was candid and outspoken, saying always what he thought, and meaning what he said. If he liked you, you knew it. He was strong in his convictions, conservative in his ideas, and these two characteristics together with his mental ability and correctness of life made him a tower of strength to the community.²

Much of Oates' good fortune had to do with the fortuitous timing of his business career, which paralleled the growth and development of Charlotte as a center of cotton trade and later textile

manufacturing. When he set up business trading in cotton and groceries in the early 1850's, Charlotte was just being linked with South Carolina and the rest of North Carolina and beyond through new railroad lines. In 1852, track was opened to Columbia, which gave Charlotte, for the first time, easy access to the sea, and in 1855 a line was completed to Norfolk, thus making the Queen City a booming cotton trading center. After the war, cotton trading quickly surpassed prewar levels, and, in the 1860's and 70's, more rail lines were established, including one stretching from Richmond to Atlanta.³

In the 1870's another phenomenon took hold in the area which would benefit both the Oates family and Charlotte: the industrialization movement of the "New South." In previous years, most textile mills were located in New England, though the cotton came from the South, because of the availability of cheap water power to run the mills. With the advent of inexpensive and reliable power from steam boilers, however, mill owners began to relocate their factories in the South to be closer to raw material and have access to cheap labor. In this way, the Piedmont region began to see a growing number of mills from the mid-1870's.

As an already long established cotton trading center with good rail connections, Charlotte was a logical place to eventually host textile manufacturing as well. It was R. M. Oates who first took full advantage of the opportunity. Though a small mill was set up in the county in the 1850's and a larger one (Glenroy Cotton Mill) was in business for about eighteen months starting in 1874, the county had no operating mills in 1880 when Oates and his three nephews decided to organize Charlotte's first.⁴ They purchased the block bounded by West Fifth, Graham, West Sixth, and the Atlantic, Tennessee and Ohio (later Southern) railway tracks in February, 1880, and the contractor, R. H. Morse, commenced to make the brick locally when weather permitted.⁵

The somewhat modest, original mill building was a one story structure built in an uncommon L-shape, with rows of arched windows along Fifth Street and topped by several skylights on the tin-covered roof. Tenement houses for the workers were built along Graham and Sixth Streets (see Figures 1 and 2).⁶ All the machinery, including two large 75 horsepower capacity boilers and the 127 horsepower, one cylinder engine, came from the North.⁷ Its unusual design and potential as a draw for more business were aptly commented on in the *Charlotte Observer*:

when completed, this factory will perhaps be the best in North Carolina, and as far as the writer knows, the only one built like it, in that it has only one story. That it will add much to Charlotte's material prosperity no one doubts, and some predict that it will be the means of bringing similar enterprises into operation.⁸

Within a few years, these words proved to be right on the mark. But for some eight years, the Charlotte Cotton Mills operated as the sole enterprise of its kind in the city. Originally set up as a partnership between R. M. Oates and his nephews and operating as the Alpha Cotton Mills, the factory began limited operations in December, 1880, and by the following March, 1881, had 5800 of its planned 6240 spindles running. At that time, sixty employees, mostly women, were processing five bales of cotton a day under the supervision of G. A. Gray, who had been the foreman for C. J. Lineberger in Lowell, Gaston County. Also in 1881, it appears that the owners

decided to change the name of the business from Alpha to Charlotte Cotton Mills, and two years later the partners incorporated under that name.⁹ (Alpha was picked up and used again for Charlotte's second cotton mill, built in 1888-9 at East 12th and Brevard Streets).¹⁰

From the beginning, R. M. Oates was president of the mill, and David W. Oates, the oldest of the nephews, was secretary and treasurer.¹¹ In its first fifteen years of operation, Charlotte's population jumped from 5,500 to 19,000, and the Charlotte Cotton Mills had expanded to about 9000 spindles and added a large weaving operation with 208 looms in a separate building at the corner of Graham and 5th Streets, where sheeting was made (see Figure 3).¹² By 1895, Charlotte, as well as the Piedmont region in general, had seen many new mills come into operation, and the city had become a leading textile manufacturing center, true to the words of the *Observer* editorial writer of 1880. This was due in great part to the enterprise of Daniel Augustus Tompkins (1852-1911), a Northern-educated engineer from South Carolina who, lured in part by the success of the Charlotte Cotton Mills and the potential he saw in the city as a regional center, established a mill machinery firm (the D. A. Tompkins Company) in Charlotte in 1884. He subsequently built over one hundred cotton mills and two hundred cotton oil plants in the Piedmont and was a key figure in the industrial expansion of the region.¹³

Thus by 1895, Charlotte boasted four yarn mills (Atherton, 1893; Ada, 1889; Victor, 1889; all were set up by the D. A. Tompkins Company); a gingham mill (Highland Park, 1891); a sheeting mill (Charlotte Cotton); a towel factory (Crowley Manufacturing); a stocking plant (Cold Crown Hosiery Mills, headed by R. M. Oates, Jr., son of D. W. Oates); and a sash cord manufacturer (Robbins Cord Factory).¹⁴ In the ensuing eighteen years, nine more cotton mills would be added to the city's total. In 1897, Charlotte's cotton mills alone totaled about 75,000 spindles, which consumed 20,592 bales of cotton per year. The cotton mills were operated by 1345 workers, who received annual wages of \$253,240; this was about \$5.00 per week for an eleven-hour day, less 20 cents per room rent every week for living in a mill-owned house.¹⁵ In the next seven years, seven more large mills were added to this total, clearly making Charlotte a major textile center.¹⁶ However, the firm that started this enterprise, Charlotte Cotton Mills, because of its limited size, could not remain competitive forever in the booming textile market. After R. M. Oates' death in 1897, the nephews continued to run the business until 1910, when the firm was dissolved and the land sold to the Southern Real Estate Loan and Trust Company.¹⁷ So, after thirty years of operation, Charlotte's pioneer cotton mill passed into the annals of the city's history.

Southern Real Estate subdivided the property into several lots, and the building itself was divided into four main sections and sold to various businesses and investors. Over the years, some of the occupants of the former mill have been the Charlotte Leather Belting Company, Southern Dairies, the Model Steam Laundry Company and the J. B. Ivey Company (warehouse). In the 1940's, Morris Speizman opened a textile machinery business in part of the old mill, and over the years has expanded to take over all the old Charlotte Cotton Mills land and what remains of the building.¹⁸ A few reminders are still visible of Charlotte's first cotton mill however: the brick arched windows on 5th Street, and the name of the narrow street parallel to and between 5th and 6th, Oates Street.

As the building which represents the engine that pulled a long train of textile related businesses into the city, the Charlotte Cotton Mills is beyond doubt one of the most historically significant structures of the city's industrial past and richly deserves designation as such.

NOTES

¹ Dates from monuments in Elmwood Cemetery.

² *Charlotte Observer*, December 28, 1897, p.6; Jerome Dowd, *Sketches of Prominent Living North Carolinians*(Raleigh: Edwards and Broughton, 1888), pp. 283-4.

³ Tom Hanchett, "The Growth of Charlotte: A History," Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Properties Commission, 1983, p.13.

⁴ Dan Morrill, "A Survey of Cotton Mills in Charlotte," Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Properties Commission, 1979, pp.1-2.

⁵ Deed Book 23, p.394, 9 February 1880; *Charlotte Observer*, February 5, 1880, p. 3.

⁶ *Charlotte Observer*, May 27, 1880, p. 3.

⁷ *Ibid.*; *Ibid.*, August 21, 1880, p. 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, May 27, 1880, p. 3.

⁹ *Ibid.*, December 21, 1880, p.3; *Ibid.*, March 9, 1881, p.3; Act of Incorporation, 13 February 1883, Secretary of State's Office, Raleigh.

¹⁰ Morrill, cited above, p. 2.

¹¹ Charlotte City Directories, 1884/5, et. seq.

¹² *Charlotte Observer*, December 28, 1897, p. 3.

¹³ George Winston, *A Builder of the New South: Being the Story of the Life Work of Daniel Augustus Tompkins*, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1920.

¹⁴ *Charlotte Observer*, August 4, 1895, p. 5.

¹⁵ Ibid., December 28, 1897, p. 3.

¹⁶ Morrill, pp. 2-4.

¹⁷ Deed Book 269, p. 93, 3 October 1910.

¹⁸ Charlotte City Directories, 1910-present; Deed Book 2908, p. 98, 10 November 1967; Deed Book 2791, p. 499, 22 September 1966; Deed Book 1909, p. 288, 1 April 1957; Deed Book 2037, p. 303, 7 January 1959.