

## The City House



*This report was written on September 12, 2005.*

**1. Name and location of the property:** The property known as the City House is located at 500 East Kingston Avenue in Charlotte, NC. The UTM coordinates for the property are: 17 513351E 3896327N (WGS84/NAD83); USGS Charlotte East Quad.

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

The present owner of the property is:

Ivan T. and Cherie Beach

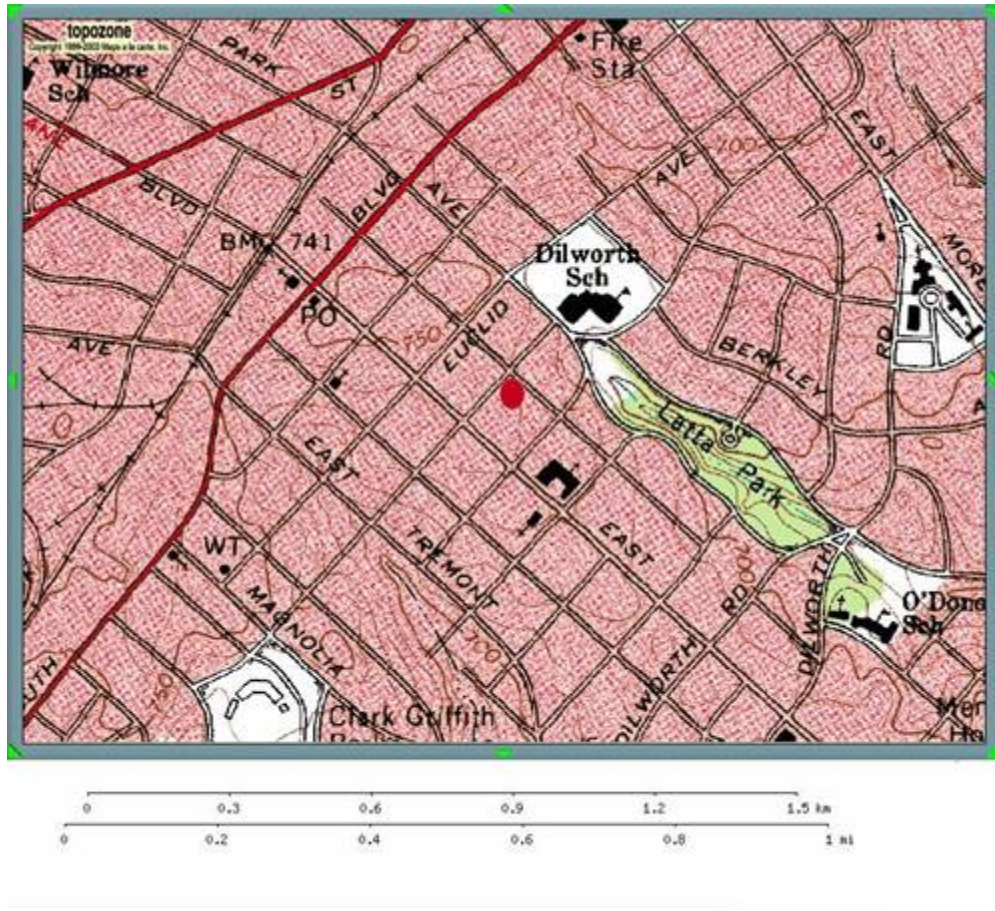
500 E. Kingston Ave.

Charlotte, N.C. 28203

Telephone: (704) 376-8364

**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 current deed to this property is recorded in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 12200, page 791. The original deed to this property on from the Charlotte Consolidated Construction Company is recorded in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 81, page 110. The Tax Parcel Number of the property is 080-104-08.

**6. A brief historical sketch of the property:**

This report contains a historic sketch prepared by Ryan L. Sumner

**7. A brief architectural description of the property:** This report contains a description prepared by Ryan L. Sumner

**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 City House does possess special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations:

- 1) The City House was constructed in 1909, and is one of the oldest suburban residence in Charlotte which was initially designed as a duplex and is the oldest recognizable suburban example of this architectural form.
- 2) The City House represents a new building type that was associated in the early twentieth century with the growing urban character of the city.
- 3) The City House occupies a prominent position in the landscape of Dilworth, Charlotte's first streetcar suburb.

**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 City 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 improvement is \$450,300. The current appraised value of the of the land is \$275,000. The total appraised value of the property is \$725,300. The property is zoned R100.

**Date of Preparation of this Report:** September 12, 2005.

**Prepared by:**  
Ryan L. Sumner

## *Historic Narrative*

The City House, located at 500 East Kingston Avenue, is the oldest remaining residential structure that originally served as a duplex in Dilworth, Charlotte's first suburban development. The lot on which the former duplex sits was part of the Charlotte Consolidated Construction Company's initial phase of the new streetcar suburb and was first purchased in 1891<sup>1</sup>. The first owner of the lot, Colonel (ret) John E. Brown, and several subsequent owners left the lot undeveloped for a number of years, possibly awaiting the annexation of Dilworth by the City of Charlotte, which took place in 1907<sup>2</sup>. Finally, in 1908, Mr. C. B. Bryant purchased the lot, and built what is now called the City House on it in 1909. Although there are no extant building permits for Dilworth from before 1911, Mecklenburg County Deed records show C. B. Bryant mortgaging the property (originally numbered 600 Kingston Ave) to the Mecklenburg Building and Loan Association for \$4000.00, consistent with financing the construction of a duplex on the site<sup>3</sup>.

In a 1904 letter to the editor of the *Charlotte Daily Observer*, eminent Queen City architect Charles C. Hook advocated the building of adjoined residences, which he referred to as "city houses," and what we might today call duplexes or townhouses. Hook links the building of this type of home with the growing urban character of the city, cites them as models of convenience, wise real-estate investments, and very "popular with the Northern people who are locating in Charlotte."<sup>4</sup>

The City House is the oldest existing residence in Dilworth which was initially designed as a duplex. Although duplex homes would later become more common in Dilworth, of the three duplexes clearly indicated as such on the 1911 *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map*<sup>5</sup>, the City House is the only one still standing. The other two residential duplexes shown on the Sanborn map were at 12/13 Eustace Avenue and 314/316 Worthington Avenue. Eustace Avenue no longer exists; and the duplex is gone, while the Worthington Avenue lot is now the parking lot for an auto repair facility. Only the duplex at 500 Kingston remains with its original design still clearly to be seen and dating from Dilworth's earliest period of development.

From the time of its construction until the early 1960's, the City House served as an investment property, owned by absentee landlords and rented to working-class residents. Research of Charlotte City Directories indicates that the first families to reside in the City House were the Spielmans and the Simpsons, both moving from Morehead Street in 1909<sup>6</sup>. Mr. Spielman and Mr. Simpson were listed as traveling

salesman. An examination of the Charlotte City Directories shows a steady flow of teachers, salesmen, dressmakers, widows, bookkeepers, factory workers, bank cashiers and other working-class tenants, most of whom stayed in the house for only a year or two<sup>7</sup>.

The mid-1960s and 1970s were a difficult period for Dilworth and for the City House. Many Dilworth residents began forsaking the center city for the outlying suburbs, and blight and decay crept into the neighborhood. The City House sat vacant from 1963 to 1967, at which point it was divided into seven small apartments<sup>8</sup>, and three new exterior entrances were punched through, one near the center on the south-east side, and two on the north-west side fronting Lyndhurst Avenue<sup>9</sup>. City Directories from the late 1960's through the early 1980's indicate that the residents of the property were for the first time African American and were of lower social standing than previous tenants (many were unemployed). Long-time residents of the neighborhood have told the current owners many stories about the property in which it is referred to as a "flop-house" and associated with prostitution and other clandestine activities<sup>10</sup>.

By the late 1970's and early 80's a revitalization movement was taking hold in Dilworth. Two newcomers to the area, Bryan E. Robinson and Cecil J. McCullers, purchased the greatly weathered City House in 1985<sup>11</sup>. Working with two architects and under the supervision of the Mecklenburg County Historic Districts Commission, the pair set about restoring the home to its original beauty and renovating the interior as a single family home. Their efforts were successful, and the home was cited by the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission in the spring of 1989 for best residential restoration in a historic district<sup>12</sup>.

## FOOTNOTES

1. *Mecklenburg County Deed Book 81; page 110.*
2. Hanchett, *Sorting Out the New South City*, University of Chapel Hill Press, p 215
3. *Mecklenburg County Deed Book 239, p167 (Feb 9, 1909)*
4. *Charlotte Observer* (May 20, 1904).
5. *Maps of the Sanborn Fire Insurance Company*, "Charlotte, NC," (1911)

6. 1910 City Directory. The 1909 City Directory shows both these families resident on Morehead Street, indication that they were not new to the city and that they were new to the property as opposed to its simply not being listed.

7. *Charlotte City Directories* (1908 – 1989).

8. *Charlotte City Directories*, 1964-1968.

9. Two of these entrances are visible in *Architectural Analysis of Dilworth*, historic district proposal, (1978) and all three are shown on a 1983 survey of the property by Leo Zoutewelle in the files of the Mecklenburg County Historic District Commission.

10. Interview with Cherie Beach (August 10, 2005).

11. *Mecklenburg County Deed Book 5007; page 216*

12. *Charlotte Observer* (May 18, 1989).

### **Architectural Narrative**

The wood frame and clapboard structure sits on a flat lot at the corner of East Kingston and Lyndhurst Avenues, with both units fronting East Kingston Ave to the northeast. The City House was built as an upstairs/downstairs duplex, and, even after modifications over the years, the home clearly retains the architectural integrity of its original design. From the exterior, the building appears to be a symmetrical two-story rectangle of typical late Victorian design, with two front doors with transoms and side lights set in decorative casings flanking either side of the central mass. Inside, however, the two entrances, which have remained virtually unchanged throughout the various renovations to the structure, are not symmetrical at all. The original first floor entrance door leads into a small foyer only 6'8" deep which in turn opens into the main living room area. The second floor entrance door opens into a much deeper space which accommodates a stairway to the second floor and an entrance to a basement. This is one of two separate basements, the other accessible from what was originally the first floor unit. The second floor unit's foyer is similar in width to that of the first floor, but originally ended in a blank wall, closing it off from the first floor living area.

Although extensive modifications over its lifetime have made it somewhat difficult to definitively discover the entire original floor plan of the City House once past the entrance foyers, certain elements of its original design do remain, including two

rooms, one directly above the other, with identical bay windows and coal fireplaces (now used as the dining room (first floor) and as a bedroom (second floor), and two small original bathrooms, again identical in size, shape, and design, one above the other.

### *The Exterior*

The front northeast elevation is strongly characterized by a large one-story front porch with plain railing that spans the full front façade. Doric columns support a flat porch roof and a frieze ornamented with alternating triglyphs and rondels. Twin sets of steps lead from each front corner of the porch down to concrete sidewalks that cross the front yard connecting to the street. A four-foot high black painted steel fence with two gates, added in 1989 encloses the front and northwest side yards.

The main block of the structure has a low-pitched hip roof. Large brackets support the overhanging boxed eaves and dominate the cornice. Arranged in pairs, and separated by modillions, these brackets are placed on a trim band elaborated with sawn-work. A central dormer is perched on the roof and features three six-light windows.

The northwest elevation fronts Lyndhurst and is seven bays in width, with the bracketed eaves and trim motifs continued from the front. The most defining element of this face is the two-story high bay window, itself four bays wide with its own hip roof. As with most in the City House, the windows are double-hung one-over-one sash. A chimney rises from the roof, visible just behind the bay window. An examination of the brick foundation along the northwest side makes apparent the division between the original portion of the house and the later 1930s addition, which includes a second story porch with simple railing. A single shouldered chimney abuts the wall near the west corner.

A rear addition extends the footprint of the City House to the southwest and has seen extensive modifications over the years. Nine bays wide, the addition was constructed around 1930-1931. The rear is asymmetrical, with a large mass extending from the second story from the southern (right) side of the building and spanning three-fourths of the elevation. Seven large single-pane windows replaced the original two small six-over-six double hung windows in 1988. A recessed sleeping porch, extends the remaining length. Popular additions in the 1930s, sleeping porches were especially favored in the South.

The rear porch has been rebuilt at least four times. The 1911 *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map* shows a fairly wide rear porch spanning three-fourths of the way across the rear elevation. By the time of the Sanborn's next addition in 1929, a new shorter porch

was in place, as were a set of external stairs descending below grade to what may have been a newly dug cellar beneath the rear of the foundation. The 1930-1931 rear addition necessitated the demolition of the second porch and the building of another, which stood until the late 1980s. Documentary photographs show the southeast side of the City House accessed from the rear by a stoop and single door entrance with a pedimented front-gabled porch-roof; these were demolished in 1988, the door clapboarded over and the porch's shed roof extended back to span three-fourths of the elevation. Ivan Beach, the current owner was required to replace the porch in 2002 because of decay, using vinyl planks atop a cinder-block foundation. The rear yard is shielded by a 7 ½-foot cypress privacy fence, constructed in 2002. In the back yard is non-contributing storage building of corrugated pressed metal siding of recent origin. The rear yard is beautifully landscaped and is dominated by a red brick patio and walkways.

The southeast façade, visually obscured by the home on the adjoining lot is the least visually dramatic elevation, not really meant for viewing from the street. Eight bays wide, the bracketed eaves and trim motifs from the other elevations are continued. Thirteen windows pierce the elevation, all double hung one-over-one sash, with a single exception in the lower level of the rear elevation that is six-over-six. Two windows that look out from the upper and lower level-bathrooms are about half the height of their counterparts. Five small rectangular windows with metal security grates ventilate the foundation

### ***The Interior:***

The interior of the City House has been much altered over the years. The interior layout was somewhat altered by the 1930s rearward extension of the building. However, the most radical changes to the historic fabric most likely occurred during the 1967 conversion of the two-unit duplex into a seven-unit apartment building. Renovations and restorations in the 1980s saw the undoing of many of the 1960s changes and the conversion of the building into a single-family home. The first phase of 1980s remodeling, centered on the rear 1930s addition, was carried out in a contemporary style, and included the creation of a lofted space between the floors. The second phase cut passages between the units, opened up spaces and modernized the downstairs kitchen and den. Since this second phase was carried out using recycled architectural materials or materials that mimic the originals it is at times difficult to date the original fabric.

### ***The Lower Level:***

The front door in the north corner opens into a stair hall. A handsome stair winds up to the second story. It has a simple balustrade and square newel with paneled



sides. At the base of the stair is a built in “hall tree” or “throne” and a small door leads beneath the stair to a subterranean basement. From the stair hall, a new doorway opens into the lower unit’s living room and central hall.

The living room at the front of the house has a wide molded baseboard and a small molded cornice, motifs that are carried throughout the house. A brick running bond fireplace with mantle of white wooden molding and adjoining built-in bookcase dominates the northwest wall. A side door to the southeast connects the living room to the entrance foyer and exterior door of the lower unit, while a door at the rear of the room (southwest) provides access to the home’s central hallway.

Continuing down the central hallway, the dining room occurs to the right (northwest), behind the stair hall, and is defined by the light from the bay window and the coal fireplace; the original wall separating this room from the hallway was knocked out in favor of a more open colonnaded partition. Across the hall from the dining room are two bedrooms separated by a full bath. The bathroom features an original built-in medicine cabinet with a recycled tub and toilet removed from the Hotel Charlotte prior to its demolition.

Behind the dining room is a finely appointed and extensively renovated modern kitchen. The kitchen is separated from the den by two-tier countertop. The den occupies most of the 1930s addition area, is characterized by recent built-in bookcases and an entertainment unit, as well as the newly added fireplace with pink marble surround. The den area is additionally characterized by a feeling of openness created by light spilling in from the new large windows and lofted plan which opens the space to the second story. A contemporary staircase with steel railing rises from the south corner of the den to the second story.

Across from the den (southeast) a door access the second cellar and a hallway leads to a half-bath and a third downstairs bed-room, which is utilized by the current owners as an office.

### ***The Upper Level:***

Ascending the stairs from the front stair hall in the one comes to a central hallway that runs the length of the structure.

Behind the front façade of the City House two are two large rooms that would have originally functioned as the public areas of the upper unit. The larger of these, in the east corner is utilized by the current owners as an office space and is characterized by service style wainscot and chair rails. Nested in the far corner of this room is a small half-bath, which has contemporary fixtures, but retains the original ceiling moldings

with decorative rosettes and door surrounds with bull's-eye corners. A double door connects the office to the other front room.

Closely mirroring the layout of the lower unit, two bedrooms flank the southeast side of the central hall, both of which have been carpeted and painted with texturized paint. The two bedrooms are separated by a short hallway accessing a full bathroom—featuring a built-in medicine cabinet and an antique claw foot tub—and a linen closet with contemporary mirrored doors.

A small hall behind the front room in the north corner provides access to the attic via a large rolling door and connects to a room the current owners use as a master bedroom. The blue floral wall paper in this space is quite old and should probably be preserved if possible.

The room now utilized as the master bedroom sits directly above the downstairs dining room and is most characterized by the light from the bay window and the coal-burning fireplace. This is the only room in the house that contains picture molding in addition to the moldings used throughout the rest of the house.

Behind the master bedroom and accessed from the central hall by a screen door is a room utilized as a kitchen. The conversion of this room to kitchen use appears to be from the dwelling's days as an apartment building. The appliances and cabinets are in poor repair and are probably noncontributing elements. Interestingly, this room may have originally been open to the elements before the 1930s addition, as indicated by the screen door and the severe weathering of the floorboards. A rear door from this room opens onto the sleeping porch.

The central hall terminates at a set of double doors that open into the renovated lofted area at the rear of the house. A carpeted walkway with contemporary steel railing and balustrade looks over into the downstairs den and connects to an open office area and the descending stairway.



*Front Elevation*



*The northwest elevation*



*Rear Elevation, 1988*



*Rear elevation, 2005*