

James Morrow Coffey House



1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the Coffey House is located at 3300 Shopton Road, Charlotte, NC 28217.

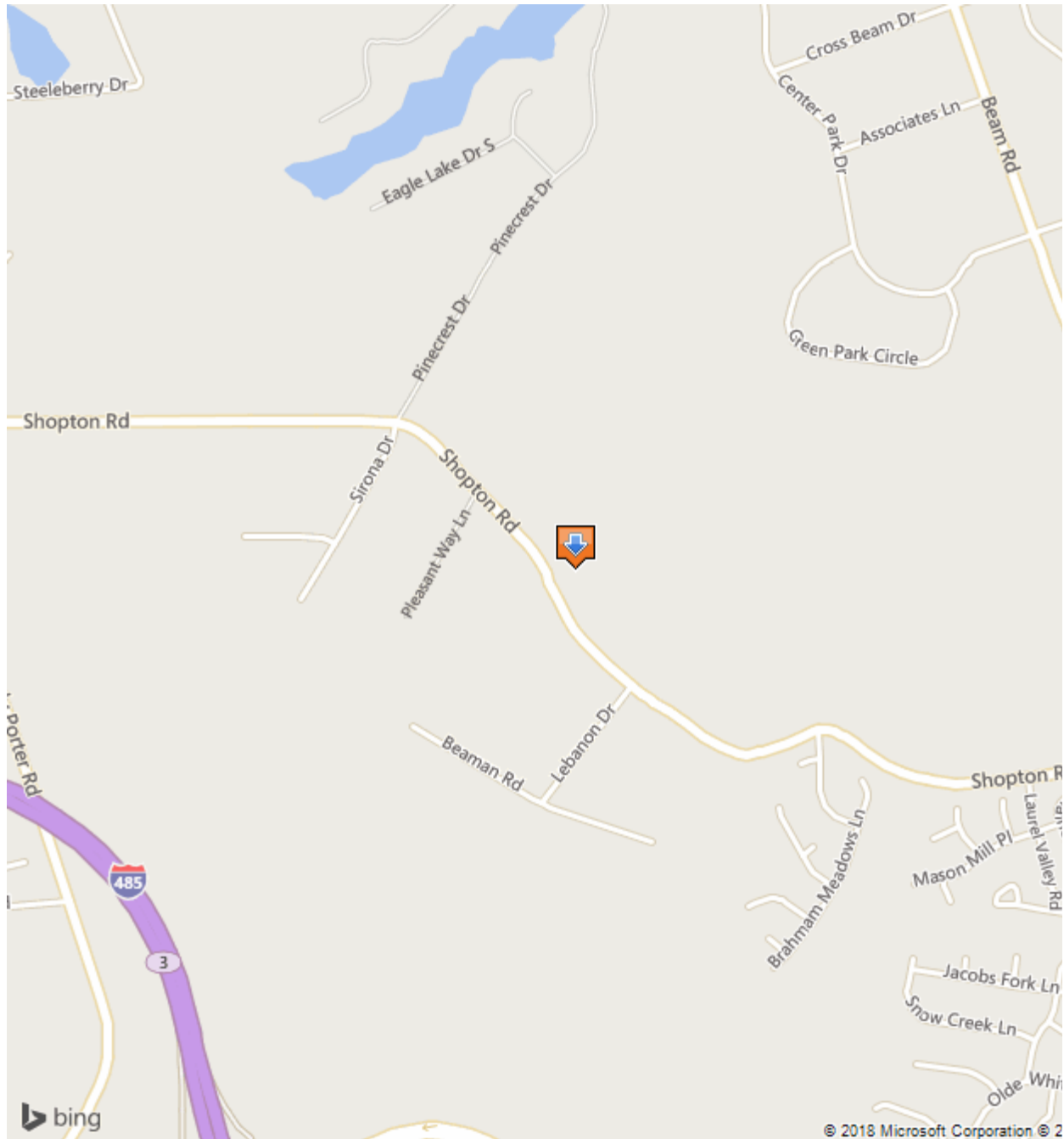
2. Name, address, and telephone number of the present owner of the property: The present owner of the property is:

Bernice Tate
3300 Shopton Road
Charlotte, NC 28217

Telephone: (704) 588-1567

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 maps depicting the location of the property.



5. Current Deed Book Reference to the property: The most recent deed to the property is found in Deed Book 4472, page 931. The tax parcel number for the property is 141-071-05.

6. A brief historical sketch of the property: This report contains a brief historical sketch of the property prepared by Emily D. Ramsey.

7. A brief architectural description of the property: This report contains an architectural description prepared by Emily D. Ramsey.

8. Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets the criteria for designation set forth in N.C.G.S. 160A-400.5:

a. Special significance in terms of its history, architecture, and/or cultural importance: The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission judges that the Coffey House possesses special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations:

- 1) The James Morrow Coffey House is a tangible reminder of the importance of farming to the agrarian economy of post-bellum Mecklenburg County.
- 2) James Morrow Coffey and his descendants were influential members of the Steele Creek Community.
- 3) The James Morrow Coffey House, built in 1886, is an excellent example of an evolving 19th century farm complex the house and surrounding outbuildings reflect the diverse and self-sufficient existence led by most farmers in late 19th and early 20th century Mecklenburg County.

b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling, and/or association: The Commission judges that the architectural description completed by Emily D. Ramsey demonstrates that the James Morrow Coffey 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 a designated "historic landmark." The current appraised value of the 5.800 acres and all improvements is \$131,400. The property is zoned R3.

Date of Preparation of this Report: September 1, 2000

Prepared by: Emily D. Ramsey
745 Georgia Trail
Lincolnton, NC 28092

Statement of Significance

The James Morrow Coffey House, erected in 1886, is a property that possesses local historic significance as a tangible reminder of the importance of farming and rural life in the booming agrarian economy of post Civil War Mecklenburg County, and for its association with James Morrow Coffey and his son, Rufus Coffey, both prominent members of the Steele Creek Community's circle of well-to-do farmers and active members of the Central Steele Creek Presbyterian Church. The last half of the nineteenth century saw tremendous opportunity for

farming communities around Charlotte. Charlotte had escaped relatively unscathed from the effects of the Civil War and the continually high demand for cotton, coupled with the development of the fertilizer Peruvian guano in 1860, made the post-bellum period a prosperous time for farming in Mecklenburg County. Although James Morrow Coffey owned five slaves at the time of the Civil War, the bulk of his farming operations, like those of most farmers in Mecklenburg County, did not depend on slave labor, and he, along with his son, Rufus Alexander Coffey, was able to profit handsomely from the post-war prosperity.

The James Morrow Coffey House is also significant as an excellent example of a nineteenth century farm complex. The typical farm in late 19th and early 20th century Mecklenburg County supported not only cash crops like cotton and corn, but also an array of livestock (mainly hogs, cows, and chickens), kitchen gardens for family consumption, and fruit trees. In addition, many farmers operated their own blacksmith shops, smokehouses, and cotton gins. Most farms, therefore, consisted of an array of barns, storage sheds, and other outbuildings in addition to the farmhouse itself. The evolution of the James Morrow Coffey house, originally a simple one-pile I-house, reflects the growing and changing needs of farming families in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Mecklenburg County, and the collection of outbuildings which surround the house speak to the diverse nature of rural life in the area.

Historical Overview

The last half of the nineteenth century was a time of tremendous growth and change in Charlotte and Mecklenburg County. The coming of the railroad in 1852 and its rapid expansion before and after the Civil War made Charlotte "an excellent location for trade and industry."¹ Charlotte quickly developed into a bustling and vital trading center for a region that covered "fourteen counties in North Carolina and at least eleven in South Carolina."² By far the most lucrative business for the burgeoning city was trade in cotton. Cotton, an important crop to the area's economy before the Civil War, had become even more vital in the post-bellum period. Cotton prices skyrocketed after the war and the introduction of the fertilizer Peruvian guano in 1860 made cotton easy to grow even in the most inhospitable soil.³ These favorable economic conditions gave farmers outside the county's small circle of large slaveholders the opportunity to "replant and recover quickly" after the war.⁴

Although James Morrow Coffey owned five slaves at the time of the Civil War, the bulk of his farming operations, like those of the majority of farmers in Mecklenburg County, did not depend on slave labor, and he, along with his son, Rufus Alexander Coffey, was able to profit handsomely from the post-war prosperity.⁵ James Morrow Coffey had come to the Steele Creek area in the early 1850s, eventually acquiring over 300 acres of land along the Moore branch of Big Sugar Creek (the branch is now known as Coffey Creek). James Morrow, his wife, Eliza Alexander Coffey (granddaughter of Ezra Alexander, one of the signers of the Mecklenburg

Declaration of Independence) and their five surviving children lived in a series of humble log houses on their large farm.⁶ Such log homes were typical of Scotch-Irish farmers like the Coffeys, whose ancestors had learned the building techniques from German immigrants in Pennsylvania and brought the building style with them to the Carolina piedmont.⁷ The Coffey family quickly became enmeshed in the closely-knit community of farming families around Steele Creek. The Coffeys, the Spratts, the Griers, the Watts, and the McDowells were among these influential local families, who were joined by marriage, business transactions, shared religious beliefs and community social activities. James Morrow Coffey and his family were active members of the Central Steele Creek Presbyterian Church, the largest Presbyterian Church in Steele Creek, and all three of the Coffey daughters married into the Spratt family, close neighbors of the Coffeys.⁸

After his wife's death in 1870, James Morrow Coffey continued his farming operations in Steele Creek, with the help of his youngest son, Rufus Coffey. James and Rufus (who was twenty-two at the time of his mother's death) planted crops such as wheat, cotton and corn for profit, logged their acres of woodland for timber (mainly pine and hickory) and raised livestock primarily hogs and chickens.⁹ Excerpts from James Morrow Coffey's diary reveal the day-to-day operations of his farm: "February 1, 1871 Sold corn to Mr. Turner - - 5 bushels; June 15, 1871 Crops look fine today. Wheat crop is very, very fine; June 15, 1871 Commenced laying by cotton; July 7, 1871 Thunder storm and rain from the West. Powerful rain."¹⁰

In the favorable post-war economy, father and son were finally able to build a house to reflect their success and rising status in the Steele Creek community. A larger house was also needed to accommodate Rufus, his wife, Amanda Utley Coffey, and their rapidly growing family. In 1886, James Morrow Coffey and Rufus Coffey erected a new farmhouse to replace the log house that had been their home. The new house, a two-story, one-pile I-house, was a conservative choice in the Victorian era of fancy spindlework and elaborate detailing, and gave the image of a prosperous but modest family. Here, James Morrow Coffey lived out the last seven years of his life, surrounded by his son, daughter-in-law, and ten grandchildren. He remained an active member of the community, serving as elder of districts one and two for the Central Steele Creek Presbyterian Church.¹¹ Upon his father's death in 1893, Rufus Coffey (a widower since his wife's death the year before) inherited the farm in Steele Creek, including the house, the outbuildings and a substantial amount of land (over 200 acres). Here he reared his ten young children and continued operation of the family farm.¹²

Rufus Coffey's detailed diary entries provide a very vivid picture of life on the Coffey farm in the early twentieth century. Although he never remarried, Rufus Coffey shared the farmhouse (which he had expanded around 1900) with his son Willie and his two spinster daughters, Amanda Rose and Eula. Willie was given much of the responsibility over the various types of farm work as his father grew older, including the planting and tending of the cash crops of cotton and corn, the care and slaughter of hogs (the primary livestock on the farm) and the chopping, sawing, hauling, and sale of pine, oak and hickory logged from the family's land. Eula and Amanda Rose tended to the kitchen gardens and orchards, which produced an impressive array of vegetables and fruits, including "potatoes, corn, cucumbers, butter beans, cabbage, turnips, white peas, tomatoes, cherries, pears, grapes and peaches."¹³ Eula herself cared for over

ninety chickens, and the two women were in charge of all of the cooking and cleaning in the house.

Rufus Coffey's twin daughters managed to maintain an active social life with neighboring families in spite the heavy domestic workload on the farm. They often traveled to visit or stay with acquaintances and attend various social engagements, as Rufus Coffey's diary recorded: "Amanda and Eula road with the McDowell's to Shopton to a Society Meeting"; Amanda went to a Layman's Meeting; Eula at Bessie Grier's at the annual picknic [sic] of the Griers and Coffeys today"¹⁴

When Rufus Alexander Coffey died in 1935 at the age of 87, the farm was divided into eight lots, a plot for each of his surviving children. The farmhouse was left to Eula and Amanda Rose Coffey, who, according to a 1948 *Charlotte Observer* article, maintained their family home as a "museum of surprises and curiosities [where] stored away in antiquated trunks, chests of drawers, and other safe places are hundreds of valuable papers and curious odds and ends historians would revel in."¹⁵ Amanda Rose and Eula carefully preserved and displayed their family artifacts - old furniture, antique china, old clothes, a Civil War blanket, and diaries kept by James Morrow Coffey and Rufus Coffey.¹⁶ Amanda Rose and Eula Coffey were the last descendents of James Morrow Coffey to live in the house. After their deaths, the house passed to Sue Coffey Cathey, then to her son, Kenneth Cathey. In 1974, Stokes and Eleanor Seegers purchased the home and five acres of the original farmland. The Seegers renovated the house, which had been vacant for several years and was in a state of disrepair. In 1981, the couple sold the house to James H. Tate and his wife, Bernice N. Tate. Bernice Tate, who became sole owner of the property upon her husband's death, presently occupies the house.

Architectural Description

Architecturally, the James Morrow Coffey House, a simple two-story, one-pile I-house with several later additions, reflects the conservatism that persisted among the rural population in Mecklenburg County. In the post-railroad period of the late nineteenth century, Victorian architecture was at the height of its popularity in America, and Charlotte-Mecklenburg was no exception. Even the most modest houses could be transformed into Victorian cottages with the addition of mass-produced Victorian spindlework and filigree. However, houses like the Coffey house demonstrate that, despite the popularity of the Victorian style, "traditional forms [the most prevalent of which was the I-house form] and simple interpretations of styles continued to hold sway . . ." in rural Mecklenburg County.¹⁷ The continually evolving floor plan of the James Morrow Coffey house - which began in 1886 as a simple one-pile I-house, and had become by the mid-twentieth century a sprawling, irregular gable-front-and-wing farmhouse also illustrates

how rural houses constantly changed to meet the growing and changing needs of farming families in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The James Morrow Coffey House is also significant as an excellent example of a nineteenth century farm complex. The typical farm in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Mecklenburg County supported not only cash crops like cotton and corn, but also an array of livestock (mainly hogs, cows, and chickens), kitchen gardens for family consumption, and fruit trees. In addition, many farmers operated their own blacksmith shops, smokehouses, and cotton gins. Most farms, therefore, consisted of an array of barns, storage sheds, and other outbuildings in addition to the farmhouse itself. The remaining outbuildings at the James Morrow Coffey house are a significant part of the site, because, as historians Richard Mattson and William Huffman explain, "the more historically complete and intact the farmyard, the more it reveals about the operations of the farm" and the diverse activities that made up daily life on that farm.¹⁸ The James Morrow Coffey Farm retains many of its original outbuildings and a sense of its original rural setting in an area where rural resources, and intact farm complexes in particular, are rapidly disappearing.

The four remaining outbuildings on the property date from the early nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. The oldest and most significant outbuilding is a small side-gable log structure with half-dovetail notching and a metal sheet roof, which most likely predates the house itself. The original use of the log structure is debated - a 1948 *Charlotte Observer* article claims the building was a slave home, and later accounts claim that it was originally a kitchen. No hearth remains to confirm that the outbuilding was either a kitchen or a slave home, although an opening does exist through the roof of the building that suggests it might have been used as a small tenant house or a kitchen after its original use was abandoned.

The other outbuildings on the property are less substantial frame buildings, suggesting early to mid-twentieth century construction. A large barn sits at the rear of the property, near the edge of a field. It is a front-gable structure with a long shed extending off of one side. A smaller side-gable frame structure, topped with a sheet metal roof, (which some reports claim was originally a granary) sits closer to the rear of the house. A small chicken coop and shed, both frame construction with slanting metal roofs, perch near the northwest side of the house.

The James Morrow Coffey House itself is of wood frame construction, sheathed in wooden clapboards and recently covered with aluminum siding. The original two-story I-house, three-bays-wide and one-bay-deep, is now partially obscured by a turn-of-the-century gable front addition projecting from the right side of the house's facade (most likely added by Rufus Coffey to accommodate his large family). A covered porch runs the length of the house's facade, and was probably added at the same time as the front addition. The porch features simple, understated square wooden posts and a hipped roof. Several ells have been attached to the rear of the house as well. The largest of these later additions is the kitchen ell - most likely a detached kitchen which was attached to the house sometime in the early twentieth century. A small second-story one-room addition was added to the rear of the house, above the kitchen ell, and a small one-story shed was built onto the rear of the house at some point. An enclosed porch and wooden deck, both constructed after 1981, extend from the rear of the house and along the kitchen ell. The house features regularly punctuated fenestration with six-over-six and four-over-

four configurations. The house's two original brick chimneys, laid in common bond with fieldstone bases, still remain, although one was rebuilt in the early twentieth century using bricks from the original chimney.

Stokes and Eleanor Seegers, who purchased the house in 1974, installed central heat, insulation, extra wiring, plumbing, bathrooms, modern appliances and new cabinets in the kitchen. They also filled in the house's foundation (originally the house sat on brick piers) with bricks "from sections of downtown Charlotte that were being razed."¹⁹ Despite these changes, many significant interior details remain. The original fireplaces are sealed off, but still intact, and the Seegers left all of the house's board and batten walls and ceiling, as well as the beaded paneling in some of the rooms, exposed. All of the house's original wooden doors are intact, as are the hardwood floors. The board and batten staircase features simple turned newels and square posts. The James Morrow Coffey House remains an excellent example of a late-nineteenth century farm complex, and a visible reminder of the evolving needs of farmers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Notes:

¹ Thomas W. Hanchett, "The Growth of Charlotte: A History" (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, 1985). By 1861 four railroads converged in Charlotte: the Charlotte and South Carolina Line to Columbia, SC; the North Carolina Railroad through Greensboro and Salisbury, NC; the Atlantic, Tennessee and Ohio line to Statesville, NC; and the Wilmington, Charlotte and Rutherford Railroad connecting Charlotte and Lincolnton, NC.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid. Sherry J. Joines and Dr. Dan L. Morrill, "Historic Rural Resources in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina" (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, 1997).

⁴ Joines and Morrill, "Historic Rural Resources in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina."

⁵ *Eighth Census of the United States: Slave Schedule, Mecklenburg County (1860)*. James Morrow Coffey owned five slaves in 1860: one female, age 39; one male, age 19; one male, age 10; one female, age 5; one female, age 2.

⁶ *Charlotte Observer* (May 30, 1948), Sec. 4, p. 1. Ezra Alexander Family Tree, researched by Tom Taylor. James Morrow Coffey and Eliza Alexander Coffey had six children: Mary (1828-1893); Margaret (1833-1887); James S. (1835-1858); Benjamin (1842-1952); Sarah (1845-1930); and Rufus (1848-1935).

⁷ Dr. Richard Mattson and Dr. William Huffman. "Historical and Architectural Resources of Rural Mecklenburg County." (North Carolina Division of Archives and History, July, 1990), Sec. F, p.2 & 16.

⁸ Caroline Wells, "Historical Sketch of the Coffey Family." p. 1-2 (Charlotte, 1998).

⁹ *Ninth Census of the United States: Agricultural Schedule of Mecklenburg County (1870)*.

¹⁰ *Charlotte Observer* (May 30, 1948), Sec. 4, p.2.

¹¹ Linda Lawless Blackwelder. *A History of Central Steele Creek Presbyterian Church* (Charlotte 1984), p.132.

¹² *Estate Records Office Index to Wills 1763-December 1, 1968*, Vol. A-D, Book M, p.230. Rufus and Amanda's ten children were: James M. (1873-1957); Claude (1874-1910); Sue A. (1876-1950); Lelia B. (1872-1952); twins Eula and Emma Utley (1884-196?); Jessie B. (1875-1945); Lamar A. (1888-1889?); William "Willie" Howard (1890-???) and Amanda Rose (1892-1984).

¹³ Caroline Wells, "Historical Sketch of the Coffey Family." p. 3 (Charlotte, 1998). Entries from Diary of Rufus A. Coffey, dated January 30, 1922 & February 27, 1923.

¹⁴ Entries from Diary of Rufus A. Coffey, dated February 27, 1923 & August 3, 1933.

¹⁵ *Charlotte Observer* (May 30, 1948), Sec. 4, p.2.

¹⁶ *Charlotte Observer* (June 6, 1948), Sec. 8, p. B.

¹⁷ Mattson and Huffman. "Historical and Architectural Resources of Rural Mecklenburg County." Sec. F, p. 18-19.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 26.

¹⁹ *Charlotte News* (January 1974).