

Survey and Research Report
on the
East Avenue Tabernacle A. R. P. Church (Former)



1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the former East Avenue Tabernacle A. R. P. Church (now known as the Great Aunt Stella Center) is located at 927 East Trade Street in Charlotte, N. C.
2. Name and address of the current owner of the property:

The current owner of the property is:

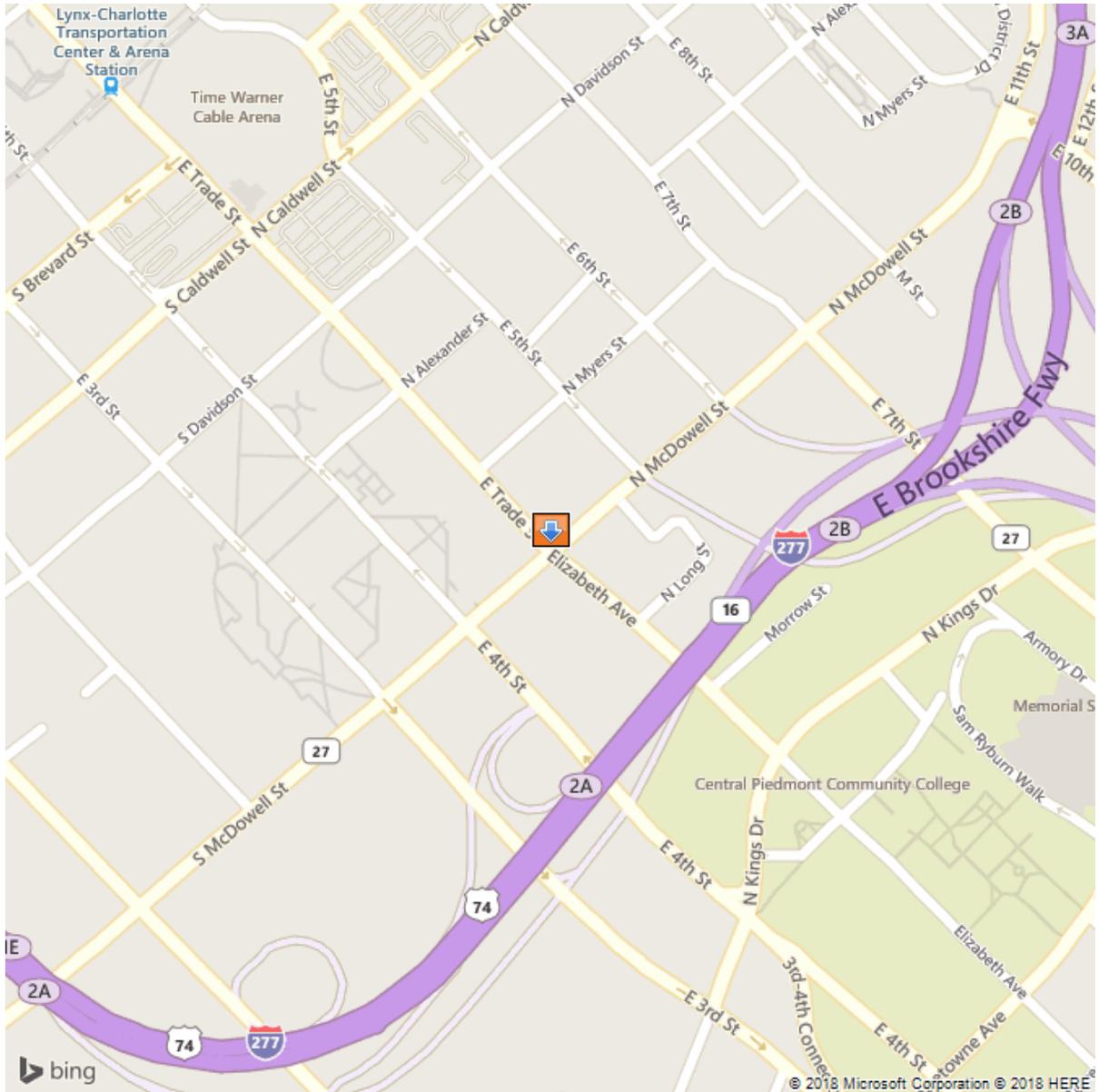
Charlotte Tabernacle LLC

926 Elizabeth Avenue

Charlotte, NC 28264

3. Representative photographs of the property: This report contains representative photographs of the property.

4. Maps depicting the location of the property: This report contains a map depicting the location of the property. UTM: 17 515066E 3897183N



5. Current deed book reference to the property: The most recent deed reference to the property is found in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 9147, page 893. The tax parcel number to the property is 125-04-203.

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 a brief architectural description of the property 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 former East Avenue Tabernacle A. R. P. Church possesses special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations:

1. The former East Avenue Tabernacle A. R. P. Church, completed in 1914, was designed by locally and regionally important architect James Mackson McMichael (1870-1940).

2. The former East Avenue Tabernacle A. R. P. Church is the only remaining building associated with one of the first Associated Reformed Presbyterian congregations in Charlotte.

3. The former East Avenue Tabernacle A. R. P. Church, an impressive Neoclassical structure at the intersection of Elizabeth Avenue and East Trade Street, occupies an important place within the built environment of Second Ward, and served as a religious and social center for a number of nearby Charlotte communities.

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- b. Integrity of design, workmanship, materials, feeling, and association.

The Commission contends that the architectural description by Emily D. Ramsey demonstrates that the former East Avenue Tabernacle A. R. P.

Church meets this criterion.

9. Ad Valorem Tax Appraisal: The Ad Valorem tax appraisal for the property's .528 acres of land is \$344,990. The Ad Valorem tax appraisal for the property's improvements is \$801,490.

Date of Preparation of this Report:

August 1, 2001

Prepared By:

Emily D. Ramsey

745 Georgia Trail

Lincolnton, NC 28092

Summary

The former East Avenue Tabernacle A. R. P. Church, located on the intersection of Elizabeth Avenue and East Trade Street (East Avenue), is a property that possesses local historic significance as the only remaining structure associated with one of the earliest Associated Reformed Presbyterian Churches in Charlotte and as an important part of the built environment within the Second Ward neighborhood. Begun officially in 1898 in the basement of a modest house in First Ward, the Tabernacle A. R. P. Baptist Church took its place as only the third Associated Reformed Presbyterian Church in Charlotte during a most advantageous period in the city's history. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw Charlotte emerge as a regionally important textile manufacturing and cotton trading center, and the population boom, coupled with widespread economic prosperity, helped Tabernacle A. R. P. Church quickly gain members and accumulate funds for a formal sanctuary. By the end of 1899, the church had begun the construction of a brick Victorian church building on a triangular lot at the intersection of Elizabeth Avenue and East Trade Street. This edifice served the growing congregation until the

early 1910s, when a fire destroyed the building. Under the leadership of the Reverend W. W. Orr, former minister of the Huntersville A. R. P. Church and founder of Huntersville's first community school, the congregation had continued to attract new members from First Ward, nearby Elizabeth, and other middle-class neighborhoods during their first decade. Consequently, the Tabernacle A. R. P. Church members were able to replace the burned building with a church that would reflect their increasing importance within the urban fabric of center city Charlotte. The resulting building, an imposing Neoclassical structure with a central dome, impressive portico supported by Corinthian columns, and large Italian stained glass windows, was completed in 1914 and has remained an integral part of Charlotte's center city built environment.

The former East Avenue Tabernacle A. R. P. Church is also significant as the work of James Mackson McMichael, a nationally recognized architect who was known throughout the North Carolina piedmont for his church designs. McMichael, a Pennsylvania native who came to Charlotte in 1901, constructed a number of Charlotte's most extraordinary churches during the first half of the twentieth century, including the former First Baptist Church, the Little Rock A. M. E. Zion Church, Myers Park Presbyterian Church, and St. John's Baptist Church. The design for the East Avenue Tabernacle A. R. P. Church exhibits many elements which McMichael, who eschewed the typical Gothic style in favor of Neoclassical buildings, incorporated into many of his churches. The Tabernacle A. R. P. Church is particularly close to McMichael's designs for the former First Baptist Church and the former Little Rock A. M. E. Zion Church. These three church buildings, which once served as religious centers within Charlotte's center city neighborhoods, are also connected in that they have all been adaptively reused as community centers: the former First Baptist Church now houses Spirit Square, an arts and cultural center; the former Little Rock A. M. E. Zion Church now serves as the home of the African American Cultural Center; and, in 1997, the former East Avenue Tabernacle Church became the Great Aunt Stella Center, home to the Community Charter School and a variety of non-profit, ethnic and cultural organizations.

	
<p>First Baptist Church (1908)</p>	<p>Little Rock A.M.E. Zion Church (1911)</p>

Historical Background and Context Statement

The establishment of the East Avenue Tabernacle A. R. P. Church at the edge of the Second Ward neighborhood, just east of Charlotte’s central business district, is intimately tied to Charlotte’s emergence as a New South cotton trading and textile manufacturing center in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century. After the Civil War, Charlotteans wholeheartedly embraced the urban, industrial philosophy of New South leaders such as D. A. Tompkins and Edward Dilworth Latta. Between 1880 and 1930, the textile industry effectively transformed Charlotte from a “dirt-street crossroads community with barely seven thousand inhabitants, where farmland was only a fifteen minute walk from the central Independence Square,” into “the center of a major new American industrial region.” and the largest city in North Carolina.¹ As the city’s textile mills and related businesses boomed, economic growth translated into physical growth, and Charlotte’s boundaries expanded to include new neighborhoods, industrial and commercial districts.

One such neighborhood was First Ward, one of four wards that defined the commercial, civic, religious and residential heart of Charlotte during the New South era. First Ward attracted a wide array of residents, businesses and congregations, from affluent and fashionable families such as Hector T. McKinnon (a cotton

merchant) and John Price Carr (who operated Charlotte's leading delivery and moving entrepreneur), who built magnificent houses along the east side of Tryon Street, along East Trade Street, Brevard Street, and McDowell Street during the early decades of the twentieth century, to working class whites near the Advent Christian Church near N. McDowell and African Americans, who attended the Little Rock A. M. E. Zion Church. Public, commercial, and civic buildings followed residents to the burgeoning community, and First Ward boasted some of Charlotte's most impressive churches and commercial structures, including the Carolina Theater, the Southern Bell Building, Belk's Department Store, William Peep's Court Arcade, the Woolworth Store, First United Presbyterian Church and First Baptist Church.² Although the East Avenue A.R.P. Church was built at the edge of Second Ward, it drew many of its members from First Ward.

The East Avenue Tabernacle A. R. P. Church was began in 1898, as a Sunday School mission - members met for Bible Study and devotion in the basement of a house in the First Ward community.³ The mission benefited from its strategic location near First Ward, which allowed the congregation to quickly attract affluent new members. By 1899, the bible study had officially become an Associated Reformed Presbyterian Church, and by the end of the church's first year, the congregation had secured enough funds to begin construction of a substantial brick Victorian building on a prominent plot at the convergence of East Trade Street (known as East Avenue within Second Ward) and Elizabeth Avenue, an easy walk for members from First Ward and the emerging Elizabeth neighborhood. The turn of the century not only brought the East Avenue Tabernacle A. R. P. Church their first building, it also saw the beginning of Dr. W. W. Orr's influential tenure as minister of the fledgling church.⁴ Dr. Orr was an established figure within the Mecklenburg County Associated Reformed Presbyterian community by the beginning of his time at East Avenue, and he was well-known throughout the county for his religious and educational work in Huntersville. In addition to serving as minister to the Huntersville A. R. P. Church (established in 1875 as the third A. R. P. congregation in the county), Orr established the first school in the small town, a parochial school operated by the church, which attracted students from across the county.⁵

The East Avenue A. R. P. Church, the fourth Associated Reformed Presbyterian Church in the county and only the second within Charlotte's city limits, thrived under Orr's leadership during the prosperous early years of the twentieth century. However, the church suffered a major setback in the early 1910s, when their sanctuary caught fire and burned to the ground. Orr and his congregation made plans to rebuild immediately, and to rebuild ambitiously, with a building that would reflect the church's increasing importance in center city Charlotte. East Avenue Tabernacle members turned to architect J. M. McMichael, who had recently designed

Neoclassical church buildings for First Ward's First Baptist Church (1908) and Little Rock A. M. E. Zion Church (1911).⁶ McMichael's design for the East Avenue Tabernacle A. R. P. Church, with its dramatic "Celtic cross" sanctuary topped with an octagonal dome and fronted by an imposing pedimented portico, was completed in 1914. The church building, rising out of the small rectangular lot facing East Trade Street and Elizabeth Avenue, immediately became a centerpiece of the community. The members of the East Avenue Tabernacle congregation were so impressed with McMichael's work, they commissioned him in 1925 to design a rear addition to the church, which housed the church's educational center, kitchen, and offices.



Although the East Avenue Tabernacle A. R. P. Church was adequately supported through donations of it many affluent members, the financial burden of these substantial building projects weighed heavily on the congregation after the stock market crash of 1929. Fortunately, the neighborhood church remained united, in large part because of the continuous leadership of the Orr family. Although W. W. Orr had died in 1928 after twenty-eight years as minister of East Avenue Tabernacle, his son, the Reverend Ernest Neal Orr, himself a long-time member of the congregation, immediately assumed the responsibility of his father's position.⁷ Ernest Orr served as minister until 1950, and was succeeded by Henry E. Pressley, who stayed at East Avenue Tabernacle until 1980.

Despite the stability and long term commitment of the church's ministers, East Avenue Tabernacle A. R. P. Church began losing members in the post-World War II period, when residents of First Ward and other nearby residential neighborhoods followed the rest of Charlotte (and the rest of the country) to the suburbs. As

government buildings, including a new courthouse and jail, replaced stately homes along East Trade Street, parking spaces disappeared, crime increased, and members stopped coming to East Avenue Tabernacle— by 1950, the congregation had dropped from a pre-war high of 1,200 members to 900 members, and by the 1980s, the number of active members had dropped to just under 400.⁸ Once considered a neighborhood church, by the early 1990s, East Avenue Tabernacle A. R. P. Church (under the Reverend John Hill) faced a dilemma – follow the congregation to the suburbs or stay downtown and risk extinction. In 1992, the church’s remaining members voted to abandon Second Ward and build a new sanctuary in the suburbs.⁹ This new sanctuary never materialized, and the East Avenue Tabernacle eventually merged with Craig Avenue A. R. P. Church to form Craig Tabernacle A. R. P. Church

The church and educational building at 927 East Trade Street, a neighborhood landmark and one of J. M. McMichael’s signature designs, was purchased in July of 1997 by local businessman and philanthropist Bruce Parker and converted into a multi-use community center. Parker renamed the building the "Great Aunt Stella Center," as a tribute to his Great Aunt Stella Sparrow, a mountain missionary. Thus, the former East Avenue Tabernacle A. R. P. Church joined the former First Baptist Church (now Spirit Square), the former Little Rock A. M. E. Zion Church (now the African American Cultural Center) and the former First A. R. P. Church as the fourth center city church designed by McMichael to be adapted for use as a cultural center. The Great Aunt Stella Center is currently home to a wide variety of organizations, including the Community Charter School, the Sierra Club, the Afro-American Children’s Theater, the Catawba River Foundation, Right Moves for Youth, United Family Services, and the Nigerian Community of Charlotte. The Uptown Christ Covenant Church meets in the sanctuary for Sunday services. Although the East Avenue Tabernacle Presbyterian Congregation no longer resides in the center city, their Neoclassical church building continues to operate as a religious, educational, and social center for the Charlotte-Mecklenburg community.

Architectural Description and Context Statement



Architecturally, the former East Avenue Tabernacle A. R. P. Church is significant as one of several center city churches designed by nationally recognized architect James Mackson McMichael. A native of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, McMichael first came to Charlotte in 1901, when the city was on the verge of a building boom that would last until the beginning of the Great Depression. Sensing that opportunities were opening up dramatically for architects in Charlotte, McMichael set up his practice in the city. During the next four decades (until his death in 1944), McMichael designed over two hundred buildings in Mecklenburg County, including fifty-two churches. At a time when the majority of architects were designing conservative Gothic-inspired church buildings with pointed-arch windows and tall steeples, McMichael's preference for the clean lines of the Neoclassical style proved to be a revolutionary force. One of his first commissions in Charlotte (and perhaps his most famous design), the former First Baptist Church on North Tryon Street, exhibited a "boldness, innovation and . . . flamboyance" as yet unseen in Charlotte's religious community.¹⁰ With this building, McMichael set the tone for most of his center city churches – large Neoclassical brick structures with a central dome and imposing columned frontal entrance. First Baptist was completed in 1908; three years later, in 1911, McMichael completed the Little Rock A. M. E. Zion Church nearby. By the early 1910s, when the first East Avenue Tabernacle A. R. P. Church burned, McMichael had ample experience with religious buildings in center city Charlotte, and he was an obvious choice for a congregation looking, as East

Avenue Tabernacle was, for a building that would make a bold statement within center city Charlotte.



The East Avenue Tabernacle A. R. P. Church is a two story brick Neoclassical structure on a Celtic Cross plan, topped with an octagonal-based dome and situated on the triangular lot at the eastern face of the intersection of East Trade Street and Elizabeth Avenue. A large, four-story brick addition, designed by McMichael and completed in 1925, stretches east from the rear of the main building. The façade of the main building, facing East Trade Street, features an imposing pedimented portico decorated with dental molding and visually supported by Corinthian columns and pilasters. The sanctuary appears almost circular from inside the building, and the entire interior is lighted by intricate stained glass windows. Church legend holds that the stained glass for the windows was custom made for the church in Italy, and was about to be shipped when World War I broke out. The stained glass stayed in Italy, unharmed, until the war was over, and then was shipped safely across the Atlantic. The most impressive of these windows depict simple farming scenes on the north and south sides of the sanctuary – farmers scattering seed and reaping the fruits of their labor. Abstract designs decorate the glass covering the opening at the base of the central dome. The four-story addition is, in contrast, a plain rectangular structure with regularly punctuated six-over-six windows and a simple stringcourse along the top perimeter of the structure. The exterior of both the sanctuary and the educational building remain much as they were in 1914, with original massing, brickwork, windows, doors, and detailing. The only recent alteration to the exterior is an elaborately carved wooden handicap ramp on the south side of the sanctuary, completed in 2000 by the Executive Woodmen.

As impressive as the exterior of the building is, the interior is an even more spectacular space. From the double-doored central entrance, one enters a small nave, with staircases on each side leading up to the sanctuary's balcony level. A large stained glass window greets visitors, flanked by doors leading to the main interior space. A large pipe organ dominates the stage space, with exposed golden pipes forming an arched focal point within the space. Simple, dark wooden bench pews and individual seating (most likely added during the adaptive reuse in the late 1990s) fill the sanctuary floor, a hardwood floor covered in large part by dark wine carpeting. Doors on each side of the stage area (on both the lower and upper levels) lead to staircases and give access to the large educational building.



Although the educational building is now occupied by a large variety of charitable organizations, foundations, and operations, the interior has remained largely unchanged. Each floor is accessed by end staircases connected by a wide central hall. Large rooms, once school rooms, open off of each side of the central hall, and feature wide window expanses, high ceilings, and polished light-colored pine flooring.

The East Avenue Tabernacle A. R. P. Church, one of J. M. McMichael's signature Neoclassical church designs, formed an integral part of the early twentieth century built environment of the Second Ward neighborhood, and, as the Great Aunt Stella Center, remains an important part of Charlotte's center city community.

¹ Thomas W. Hanchett, "Overview: Charlotte and Its Neighborhoods: The Growth of a New South City, 1850-1930" (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission,), 1.

² Ibid, Significant Properties: Center City: First Ward.

³ "Members Ponder 'Where' of Church's Future," *The Charlotte Observer*, July 14, 1986, 14-E.

⁴ Documents (pictures, tablets) located in the former East Avenue Tabernacle A. R. P. Church building, now the Great Aunt Stella Center

⁵ LeGette Blythe and Charles R. Brockmann, *Hornet's Nest: The Story of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County* (Charlotte, 1961), 421-422.

⁶ Hanchett, "Charlotte and Its Neighborhoods."

⁷ "Congregation Pays Tribute to Orr Couple," *The Charlotte Observer*, January 23, 1950.

⁸ *Charlotte Observer*, July 14, 1986, 14-E.

⁹ "What next for a Historic House of Worship?" *The Charlotte Observer*, July 25, 1992, 9-C.

¹⁰ Dr. Dan L. Morrill and Dr. William Huffman, "Survey and Research Report on the First Associated Reformed Presbyterian Church" (Charlotte Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, 1987), 4.