



## **Survey and Research Report**

**on the**

**Grand Theater**



1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the Grand Theater is located at 333 Beatties Ford Road in Charlotte, North Carolina. UTM Coordinates: 17 512994E 3900175N

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

The current owner of the property is:

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission  
2100 Randolph Road  
Charlotte, NC 28207

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 depicting the location of the property.



5. Current deed book reference to the property: The most recent deed to the property is found in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 10228, page 458. The tax parcel number for the property is 069-011-16. The property is zoned B-1.

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

7. A brief architectural description of the property: This report contains a brief architectural description of the property prepared by Emily Ramsey and Lara Ramsey.

8. Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets the criteria for designation as 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 Grand Theater has special significance in terms of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations:

1. The Grand Theater is the only movie theater surviving in Mecklenburg County that served African Americans exclusively during the period of racial segregation known as the Jim Crow era.
2. The Grand Theater is a tangible reminder of the system of segregation enforced throughout the South during the first half of the twentieth century.
3. The Grand Theater is an integral part of Biddleville, Charlotte's oldest surviving black neighborhood and home to Johnson C. Smith University, Mecklenburg County's only black college.

B. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling, and/or association. The Commission contends that the architectural description prepared by Emily Ramsey and Lara Ramsey demonstrates that the Grand Theater meets this criterion.

9. Ad Valorem Tax Appraisal: The Commission is aware that designation would allow the owner to apply for an immediate deferral of 50% of the Ad Valorem taxes on all or any portion of the property which becomes a designated "local historic landmark." The current appraised value of the Grand Theater is \$90,970. The current appraised value of the property's 0.133 acres of land is \$10,440.

Date of Preparation of this Report:

February 12, 2002

Prepared By:

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## **Statement of Significance**

### **The Grand Theater**

333 Beatties Ford Road

Charlotte, NC 28216

### Summary

The Grand Theater, located at 333 Beatties Ford Road, is a property that possesses local historic significance as a tangible reminder of the system of racial segregation that divided white and black in the South from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, and as an integral part of the Biddleville community, Charlotte's oldest black neighborhood and the home of Johnson C. Smith University. During the first half of the twentieth century, African Americans throughout the South labored, ate, slept and worshipped under the watchful eye of Jim Crow. The failure of Reconstruction in the 1870s had opened the door for white southerners to form a rigid, legalized system of segregation that would remain in place in many Southern states until the late 1960s. Black residents of Mecklenburg County had, by the early 1920s, been largely disfranchised, relegated to second class citizenship, and separated, physically and psychologically, from the county's white population by a rapidly increasing bulk of state and local discriminatory and segregation laws and regulations, coupled with the countless unwritten codes prescribing separation of the races in almost every possible circumstance. The construction of separate movie theaters for blacks and whites began in Charlotte in the early 1920s and continued until the early 1960s. The Grand Theater, which opened in 1937 and served only African American moviegoers until its closing in 1967, is a prime example of the way in which Jim Crow laws shaped the city's built environment during the first half of the twentieth century.

Even as Jim Crow laws continually narrowed the avenues of opportunity for African Americans in the South, African Americans in Charlotte nevertheless managed to build and cultivate thriving, diverse and closely-knit communities centered around black-owned-and-operated businesses, schools, and churches. The oldest of these all-black communities, Biddleville, located at the five-pointed intersection of West Trade Street, West Fifth Street, Rozelles Ferry Road, and Beatties Ford Road, was also one of the area's most prestigious African American enclaves because of its association with Biddle University (now Johnson C. Smith University), Mecklenburg County's only institute of higher learning for African American students. As one of the only sources of public entertainment open to African Americans in Biddleville during the Jim Crow era and as a

tangible reminder of the self-sufficiency of Charlotte's early African American communities, the Grand Theater remains an integral part of the Biddleville neighborhood.

Architecturally, the Grand Theater is significant as the only movie theaters surviving in Mecklenburg County that served African Americans exclusively during the Jim Crow era. Of the five black movie theaters built in Charlotte between 1920 and 1960, the Grand Theater is the only physical reminder of the limited entertainment options open to African Americans during segregation. Although the building functioned primarily as a movie house between 1937 and 1967, the structure known as the Grand Theater also housed small front businesses (most often a barber shop or hair salon) and upstairs apartment spaces, which helped to keep the building economically viable when movie sales were slow.

### Historical Context and Background Statement

Life for African Americans in Charlotte and throughout the South during the first half of the twentieth century was largely shaped and severely circumscribed by a rigid system of racial segregation known as "Jim Crow." Although Emancipation had come to black slaves in 1865, the promises of the Reconstruction era – true political, social, and economic equality for all African Americans – failed to materialize during the post war period. The last decades of the nineteenth century, following the withdrawal of federal troops from the South in 1877, proved particularly disheartening for African Americans, as the hopes of Reconstruction gave way to an increasingly hostile, restrictive, and racially segregated environment. With its landmark decision in the 1896 *Plessy vs. Ferguson* case, the Supreme Court officially sanctioned and substantiated the Southern principle that "legislation is powerless to eradicate racial instincts" and that "separate but equal" facilities would be sufficient to ensure adequate civil rights for black citizens.<sup>1</sup>

With the federal government no longer a hindrance, Southern states, including North Carolina, moved quickly to construct a system of segregation that would minimize contact between white and black, and set up strict rules of conduct for any instances where contact might occur. Jim Crow laws prescribing racial segregation in housing, on buses and trains, in restaurants, stores, hospitals, theaters, public restrooms and waiting areas, were adopted throughout the South in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. North Carolina passed its first Jim Crow law, requiring segregation in passenger trains, in 1899; by the early 1920s, the state had passed Jim Crow laws requiring separate libraries and textbooks for blacks and whites, laws setting up segregated militias, and a law requiring segregated waiting areas in bus and train stations.<sup>2</sup>

In Charlotte, New South leaders and pillars of the white community, sure that the efforts of the liberal and racially diverse Populist Party would lead to the destruction of the community that they had created and which they continued to control, had worked tirelessly in the 1890s to strip African Americans of their civil rights (including the right to vote), while creating rifts between African Americans and poor whites within the Populist Party.<sup>3</sup> This "two-pronged attack" was particularly successful, and by 1907, when voter turnout dropped dramatically all over the South, New South leaders like D. A. Tompkins,

Edward Dilworth Latta, and their “affluent cohorts” had effectively begun the Jim Crow system of segregation in Charlotte.<sup>4</sup>

Jim Crow laws not only dictated how African Americans could act, what they could and could not do, in the public sphere; they also worked to shape the built environment of African Americans in the first half of the twentieth century. As historian Thomas Hanchett explains, “by the early 1920s” most Charlotteans “resided in a patch-work pattern of self-contained neighborhoods, each distinct in its developer-devised street system and each largely homogeneous in its racial and economic makeup.”<sup>5</sup> Most African Americans resided in Brooklyn (First and Second Ward), Third Ward, Fourth Ward, or in a series of small communities, including Cherry, Greenville, Irwinville, and Biddleville, that formed a ring of villages around the city.<sup>6</sup> Although Biddleville, the oldest of Charlotte’s black neighborhoods, was already a thriving small village by the time Jim Crow laws began forming segregated communities within the city, it became a haven for Charlotte’s African American elite during the age of Jim Crow. As the home of Johnson C. Smith University, the only institution of higher learning for African Americans in Mecklenburg County, Biddleville attracted not only students, professors, and alumni, but also a large number of middle class families “who wanted to raise their children in an intellectual atmosphere.”<sup>7</sup> Like most African Americans in Charlotte, members of the Biddleville neighborhood reacted to the constraints and limitations of segregation by turning inward and focusing on their own community. As local historian Wanda Hendricks explains:

Despite the attempts to suppress their struggle for equality, black Charlotteans were proud of their southern and American heritage. Many refused to join the great wave of black migrants seeking better economic opportunity in northern cities. Instead, they defied the systematic usurpation of their civil rights by creating and maintaining a separate existence socially, culturally, and often economically. Black neighborhoods became the social, economic and political centers for African American Charlotteans.<sup>8</sup>

In the late 1920s, the recently renamed Johnson C. Smith University and the surrounding Biddleville area experienced a period of unprecedented growth. In 1928, Samuel M. Pharr opened a small two-story brick commercial building on the corner of Beatties Ford Road and Mill Road, just steps from the JCS campus in the heart of Biddleville. The building contained space for retail in the front, with two small storefronts, and a theater space in the rear on the first floor. The second floor was reserved for apartments. The Pharr building, as it was initially known, housed a succession of unsuccessful tenants in its first years. In 1929, the Charlotte City Directory listed the Pearl Theater and two lunch counter establishments in the building; by the next year, the theater was gone (a victim, perhaps, of the plummeting economy in the wake of the Great Depression) and the storefront was occupied by Johnston’s Café.<sup>9</sup> In 1935, Samuel Pharr filed for bankruptcy and his building at 333 Beatties Ford Road was sold at auction to T. C. Wilson for \$9,000.<sup>10</sup>

Wilson fared better than Pharr with the building. In 1937, the Grand Theater opened on the ground level of the building, with Morris Nuger as general manager. The movie theater was an instant success, thanks in large part to its close proximity to the thriving university. “Most of our audience were students from Johnson C. Smith,” recalled Eloise Taylor, who worked as a ticket seller at the Grand. “They always came to the late shows and other specials.”<sup>11</sup> As one of the larger black movie theaters in the area (reportedly showing to audiences as large as 500 people), the Grand theater attracted crowds to almost every show, with movies running from one o’clock in the afternoon to nine o’clock at night, seven days a week. Unlike the Lincoln Theater in Brooklyn, the Grand showed “A-rating movies” such as *Gone With the Wind*, which Taylor remembered as being particularly popular among audiences at the Grand. On Saturday, the theater showed mainly westerns.<sup>12</sup>

The success of the Grand Theater reflected the increasingly insular and self-sufficient nature of African American communities during Jim Crow. In the early years of Jim Crow, segregation in movie theaters did not usually extend to separate facilities for white and black; more often, movie theaters simply designated certain sections of their seating as being for “whites only” and others (most often the less desirable rear or balcony seating) for “colored” patrons. By the 1920s and 1930s, however, many black communities in and around Charlotte had constructed movie theaters that catered exclusively to African American moviegoers. Although these theaters were, on the whole, much more modest than theaters that served both races, and despite the fact that many, like the Lincoln Theater in Brooklyn (the first of the black theaters in Charlotte, which opened in 1930), showed “B” movies rather than the latest releases, Charlotte’s black movie theaters were wildly popular. Movie theaters like the Grand Theater, along with the Lincoln and the Savoy (on South McDowell), were neighborhood establishments, convenient places where African Americans could gather (sitting wherever they pleased) without being scrutinized or intimidated by white moviegoers. “It was important,” Hortense McKnight, who worked at the Lincoln Theater, remembered. “[The movie theater] was the one place where mostly everyone would go and enjoy themselves. There wasn’t a lot of other places we could go. It was the major form of entertainment that people looked forward to daily and on weekends.”<sup>13</sup>

The Grand Theater remained open throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s, when the civil rights movement was in the process of dismantling the Jim Crow system of segregation in the South. However, with newer and larger movie theaters now open to the Grand’s African American audiences, attendance declined in the 1960s. Finally, in 1967, the Grand Theater, which had been a center of entertainment for Biddleville, closed its doors. In the years following, the building housed several barber shops, beauty parlors, and a convenience store. In the 1970s, the building was leased for a brief period by Johnson C. Smith University and used as a makeshift dormitory.<sup>14</sup> The building, now known as “United Plaza,” currently houses a beauty supply store and a hair salon, and the upstairs apartments are still in use.

#### Architectural Significance and Context Statement

Architecturally, the Grand Theater is significant as the only movie theater remaining in Charlotte that catered exclusively to African Americans during the Jim Crow era, and as an integral part of the historically African American corridor along Beatties Ford Road. The majority of the city's black theaters were located in center city neighborhoods like Brooklyn. During the 1960s, when Charlotte began its widespread plan for urban renewal, theaters like the Lincoln at 408 East 2<sup>nd</sup> Street and the Savoy Theater on South McDowell fell to the wrecking ball, along with hundreds of African American houses, churches, and businesses. Because of its association with Johnson C. Smith University, and because of its location outside of Charlotte's center city district, Biddleville escaped the destructive effects of urban renewal. Today, area around Beatties Ford Road is one of the best places to see significant African American structures – not only Johnson C. Smith, but also the Excelsior Club, Mount Carmel Baptist Church (on nearby Campus Street) and the George E. Davis House (also on Campus Street) remain as reminders of the rich cultural heritage of the area. In addition, Beatties Ford Road connects a large conglomeration of small African American communities, including Biddleville, Five-Points, McCrorey Heights, Wesley Heights, and others. The Grand Theater's prominent position on Beatties Ford Road makes it an integral part of this African American corridor.

The Grand Theater, a two-story, flat-roofed brick commercial building three bays wide by eight bays deep, is located on a sloping rectangular lot on the corner of Beatties Ford Road and Mill Road in the Biddleville neighborhood in north Charlotte. The east-facing façade and the north elevation of the building are covered in a multi-colored face brick in running bond, while the south and rear elevations (secondary elevations) are white brick, also in running bond. The façade features original 6-over-1 windows on the second floor, but the storefront windows and the doors at the primary entrance have been replaced. The original arched doorway opening has been partially bricked in, and modern glass and metal doors have been installed. The metal cornice separating the first and second floors is original, and the Grand's original marquee remains, although it is in an extremely deteriorated condition. Five of the eight window openings on the north elevation have been replaced. Despite these changes, the Grand Theater remains a highly significant property in view of the fact that it is the only African American movie theater remaining in Charlotte, and because of its place within the history of the Biddleville neighborhood.

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<sup>1</sup> C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: 1974), 69-71.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, Thomas Hanchett, *Sorting Out the New South City: Race, Class and Urban Development in Charlotte, 1875-1975* (Chapel Hill, 1998) 116-121. Stephen Smith, Kate Ellis, and Sasha Aslanian, "Remembering Jim Crow," ([www.americanradioworks.org](http://www.americanradioworks.org)).

<sup>3</sup> Hanchett, *Sorting Out the New South City*.

<sup>4</sup> “A Review of Thomas W. Hanchett, *Sorting Out the New South City: Race, Class, and Urban Development in Charlotte 1875-1975*,” ([www.cmhpf.org](http://www.cmhpf.org)).

<sup>5</sup> Hanchett, *Sorting Out the New South City*.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Hanchett, “Biddleville Five-Points,” essay for the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission ([www.cmhpf.org](http://www.cmhpf.org)).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> *An African American Album, the Black Experience in Charlotte and Mecklenburg County* (Charlotte, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> Charlotte City Directories, 1929-1932.

<sup>10</sup> Mecklenburg County Deeds dated January 7, 1935 listed in Deed Books 711, p. 296; 853, p. 290; and 860, p.213, located in the Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office.

<sup>11</sup> “Gone Today, Black Theatres Were the One Time ‘Place to Be,’” Charlotte Post, June 5, 1986 (clipping found in the Vertical Files of the Robinson Spangler North Carolina Room of the Charlotte Mecklenburg Public Library).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. Charlotte City Directories, 1969-1980.