

Helms-Bell House



This report was written on June 7, 2000

1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the Helms-Bell House is located at 2021 Euclid Avenue in Charlotte, North Carolina.

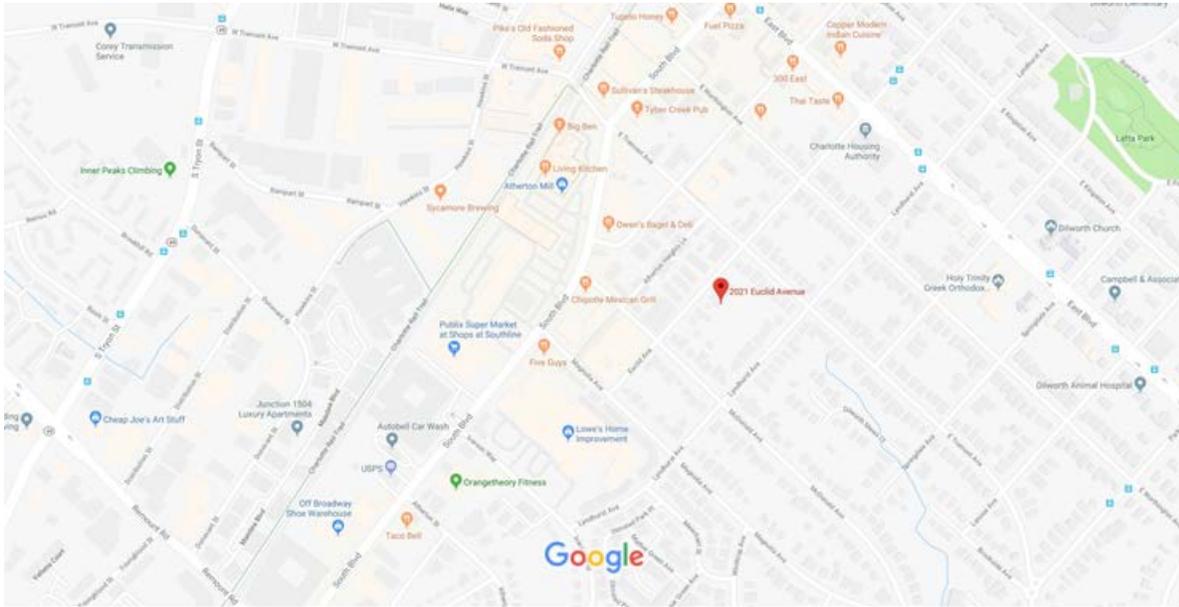
2. Name, address and telephone number of the present owner of the property: The present owner of the property is:

Mr. Allen L. Brooks
2021 Euclid Avenue
Charlotte, NC 28203

(704) 333 7004

3. Representative photographs of the property: This report contains representative black and white photographs of the property. Color slides are available at the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission office.

4. Maps depicting the location of the property: This report contains two maps depicting the location of the property.



5. Current deed book reference to the property: The most recent deed to this property is recorded in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 9611 on page 974. The tax parcel number of the property is #121-068-25.

6. A brief historical sketch of the property: This report contains a brief historical sketch of the property.

7. A brief architectural description of the property: This report contains a brief architectural description of the property.

8. Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets 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 Commission judges that the property known as the Helms-Bell House does possess special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations:

- 1) The Helms-Bell House, erected in 1899, is a rare survivor of the earliest phase of development in Dilworth, Charlotte's first streetcar suburb.
- 2) The Helms-Bell House is a significant reminder of the late-nineteenth century solution to housing the burgeoning population of middle-class professionals who were drawn here by Charlotte's expansion and growing reputation as an economic center of the New South.
- 3) The Helms-Bell House is a very good example of a Queen Anne Victorian house with good integrity and in excellent condition. It has a unusual

recessed balcony, which is attributed to C. C. Hook, one of Charlotte's first professional architects.

b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling and/or association: The Commission contends that the physical and architectural description which is included in this report demonstrates that the Helms-Bell House meets this criteria.

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 2000 total appraised value of the improvements is \$ 261,150.

The 2000 total appraised value of the lot is \$ 55,000. The 2000 total value is \$ 316,150. The property is zoned R-5.

10. Portion of the Property Recommended for Designation: The interior and exterior of the 1899 Helms-Bell House and its lot at 2021 Euclid Avenue are currently being considered for designation. The pre-existing 1949 house on Euclid Avenue and the 1998 structure joining the two buildings are not being considered for designation at this time. **Date of preparation of this report:** June 7, 2000

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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Helms-Bell House, erected in 1899, is a very good example of a middleclass Queen Anne-style house built during the earliest phase of development in the Dilworth neighborhood. Dilworth, which opened in 1891, has great significance as Charlotte's first streetcar suburb, and serves as a case study in the history of both architecture and development patterns in Charlotte. The neighborhood was developed in three phases (1891, 1912 and 1920), and contains buildings from the 1890s through the 1940s and later. A range of academic and nationally-popular architectural styles are represented in the neighborhood--especially the Queen Anne, Colonial Revival, Tudor Revival, Foursquare and Craftsman. The

Helms-Bell House was originally located at the intersection of S. Caldwell Street and Lexington Avenue, and is the only survivor of the many turn-of-the-century residences which lined the streets around that intersection. During its early years, the Helms-Bell House served as the residence for a succession of different families. Research shows that these families were headed by men who were drawn to Charlotte from outside the area and took professional positions in industries that were fueled by Charlotte's expansion and growing reputation as an economic center of the New South. The Helms-Bell House is a significant reminder of the late-nineteenth century solution to housing

Charlotte's growing population of professionals. Architecturally, the Helms-Bell House is a well-designed Queen Anne Victorian-style house with good integrity and in excellent condition. The predominant feature is a recessed balcony in the front gable, which is unusual in Charlotte. This treatment strongly suggests that the house was designed by an architect (rather than built from a stock plan). The design is attributed to Charles Christian Hook (1870-1938), one of Charlotte's first professional architects. Hook is known to have designed other houses in Dilworth around the same time, including the 1895 Mallonee-Jones House (400 E. Kingston Ave.) and the 1901 Robert J. Walker House (329 E. Park Ave.). The recessed balcony is similar to three others known to have been designed around the turn of the century by his firm, Hook and Sawyer. None of the other examples are still standing.

Historical Overview

Dilworth

Nineteenth-century Charlotte was a pedestrian-scale city--the scope of urban development was restricted by the unmechanized transportation systems of the day. The 1890 population of slightly over 11,500 people all lived within an area roughly bounded by today's John Belk and Brookshire Freeways (I-277).

Edward Dilworth Latta (1851-1925) had a vision for a new suburb--it was to be located beyond the boundaries of the "walking city" and reached by streetcar. Latta banded together with five other men (M. A. Bland, J. L. Chambers, E. K. P. Osborne, Eli Springs and F. B. McDowell) in 1890 and formed the Charlotte Consolidated Construction Company. The Charlotte Consolidated Construction Company (nicknamed the "Four C's") bought the existing horse-drawn streetcar system in Charlotte, then expanded and electrified it. They purchased 442 acres of farmland, laid out 1635 lots in a regular, intersecting grid pattern, and proceeded with improvements (graded streets, water, sewer, gas and electricity). Their grand plan for the new suburb called Dilworth included the trolley line, a

professionally landscaped park, and a grand boulevard. The elaborate ninety-acre Latta Park included walking paths, a pavilion, a boating lake, and a racetrack with grandstand. The grand opening was held on May 20, 1891, and attracted newspaper reporters from around the region. Festivities included fireworks, a baseball tournament, a comic opera performance, and, most importantly, an auction of building lots. Seventy-eight lots were sold on the development's opening day of May 20, 1891, with prices ranging from about \$350 to \$500 (\$7 to \$10 per foot of frontage).

Dilworth developed steadily after Latta's 1893 "buy a house with your rent money" building and loan plan to finance individual home ownership. In the 1890s, Charlotte's first professionally-trained architect, C. C. Hook, arrived and contracted with Latta to design thirty-five houses in Dilworth. He was proficient in the Queen Anne style, and designed the 1895 Malonee-Jones House at 400 East Kingston Ave. (a Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmark). Hook is also credited with introducing the Colonial Revival style to Charlotte through private commissions in Dilworth (such as the 1900 Villalonga-Alexander House at 301 Park Ave. and the 1902 Walter Brem House at 211 East Boulevard).

In 1907, Dilworth was annexed by the city of Charlotte. Soon thereafter, in 1911, Latta hired the renowned Olmsted Brothers firm of landscape architects to design an expansion. The new plan followed the precepts of the "City Beautiful" movement which had swept the nation around the turn of the century, and featured curved streets, mature landscaping, and irregular lot shapes. It was a departure from the original Dilworth arrangement of straight streets intersecting at regular intervals. The southern part of this plan was implemented in 1912, resulting in the section that centers around Dilworth Road East and Dilworth Road West. In 1920, Latta proceeded with developing the northern portion of his expansion, though the Olmsted Brothers plan was not followed as closely there.

Helms-Bell House

The Helms-Bell House was built by Bessie Herring in 1899. In 1918 it was sold to the T. Edward Helms family, who lived there until 1943. From 1943 through the mid-1990s, it was the home of Miss Ethel Bell.

Herring Family

Bessie Herring (1867-1908) was born Bessie McReary in Vermont in 1867. She had married and was widowed from Jasper DeLaughter by the time she first appeared in the Charlotte city directories in 1897/98. With DeLaughter, she had

two children: Ralph, who was born in 1887 in Georgia, and Lillian, who was born in 1890 in Alabama. In 1897/98, Bessie DeLaughter and her two children were living in Charlotte at 611 N. Brevard Street. On April 6, 1898, Bessie married fifty-three year old Marcus D. Herring (b. 1843), who was a traveling salesman. They stayed at her home on N. Brevard Street for another year.

On September 2, 1899, Bessie Herring purchased an empty lot in Charlotte's new suburb of Dilworth for the sum of \$625.00. The lot fronted forty-eight feet on South Caldwell Street and ran down Oak Street (now Lexington Avenue) to a depth of 150 feet.

The Herring's built a house on this lot right away. In October, a newspaper item noted that "Mr. J. C. Herring is building a house on the corner of Oak [now Lexington Avenue] and Caldwell Streets for Mr. M. D. Herring." Bessie, M. D., and Bessie's two children were all living at this address when the census was tallied in June 1900. The Herrings left the house around 1904 and moved to nearby East Boulevard. At some point, the children left home. Ralph went to St. Louis, and Lillian moved to South Carolina. Bessie was visiting her son Ralph in St. Louis when she wrote her will on November 7, 1908. She died in Missouri thirty-three days later on December 10, 1908. Since her domicile was still Mecklenburg County, the will was probated here. In it she bequeathed a house on Davidson Street to her husband, this house on South Caldwell Street to her daughter, and nothing to her son. Lillian D. Hawkins sold the South Caldwell Street house in 1918.

Tenants

According to city directories, the house was never vacant. There was a succession of residents, all of whom were tenants of Bessie Herring or Lillian Hawkins. The first tenants were Roswell Lawrence Wommack (1867-1940) and his wife Anna. R. L. Wommack came to Charlotte from Winston-Salem, via Savannah, in 1904, and lived in the Herring house for at least a year or two. He was employed by the Charlotte Consolidated Construction Company ("the Four C's") and was superintendent of their street railway shops until 1908. Wommack transferred over to Duke Power Company in 1911, and served for many years as superintendent of the street railway and bus lines in Charlotte. He had a professional reputation throughout the southeast and was known in the business as the "street railway king."

Frederick Lee Riggsbee (1870-1948) and his wife Adelaide (Addie) lived in the Helms-Bell House from around 1905 through 1909. Riggsbee was from Chapel Hill, and came to Charlotte in 1904 to manage King's Business College. He held that position until he retired nearly four decades later.

George W. M. Aitken (1871-1919) and Barbara Aitken (1873-1964) resided in the Helms-Bell House from 1911 through 1916. They were both natives of Scotland. They were married there in 1903, though George is known to have moved to the United States around 1890. Mr. Aitken was a superintendent for the Queen City Granite and Marble Works.

Helms Family

On February 18, 1918, Lillian D. Hawkins sold the house she had inherited from her mother to J. D. Short. Short turned around and sold it the next day to Taylor Edward Helms (1885-1971) and his wife, Ray Elizabeth Helms (1891-1979). T. Edward Helms was the son of Sudie Marze and Henry Jackson Helms of Mecklenburg County. He was an optician, and worked for the Pruett-Southerland Company and Charlotte Optical Company before founding the SoutherlandHelms Optical Company in the 1920s. He died on July 28, 1971 of leukemia.

Mrs. Helms, the former Ray Elizabeth Brown, was from a local family. Her parents were Genevive Johnson and Joseph Ross Brown. T. Edward and Ray were married in Mecklenburg County on April 14, 1913. Together they had two sons, Edward Jr. (1915-1977), Julian W. (1916-1989), and a daughter (b. 1918). The Helms children were raised in the house; the family resided there until 1943.

Miss Ethel Bell

Miss Ethel Bell (b. 1919) purchased the Helms-Bell House from the Helms' in September 1943. She was an accountant by profession, and lived in the house with her mother, Addie V. Bell (1901-1966). Addie and her husband, James O. Bell, were both from South Carolina families. For the 1920 census, they and their one-month old daughter, Ethel, were tallied with Addie's family in Chester County, S. C. James O. Bell died sometime prior to 1944, when Addie appears in Charlotte with her daughter, Ethel. Miss Ethel Bell lived in the house until the mid-1990s--over fifty years.

Architectural Description

Setting/Relocation

By 1997, The Helms-Bell House on South Caldwell Street had become surrounded by late-twentieth century commercial development, and was thereby isolated from the residential character of its original setting. It was sold to the YMCA of Greater Charlotte, who intended to demolish the house and use the lot for parking. To save the house, it had to be moved. The current owner rescued the house and moved it about a mile away, to Euclid Avenue. The Euclid Avenue lot was specifically chosen because it is similar to the original location in terms of character, setting, and general environment. Both lots have approximately the same frontage and the same physical characteristics (terrain, landscaping, etc.).

The Helms-Bell House is located today on the southeast side of the 2000 block of Euclid Avenue, which was included in the original 1891 plan for the Dilworth neighborhood. The streets in this section are laid out in a regular grid pattern with rectangular lots approximately fifty feet wide by 200 feet deep. The landscaping consists of mature trees and shrubbery, sidewalks and curbs. The entire block is residential, and the neighboring houses date from the early- to mid-twentieth century. The Helms-Bell House is consistent with the other houses on Euclid Avenue with regard to scale, materials, workmanship, feeling and association. Care was taken so that the setback and orientation at the new site are consistent with both the original setting and with the other houses on Euclid Avenue. The Euclid Avenue lot is included in this nomination for historic landmark status.

Physical Description

Queen Anne Victorian was in vogue across the nation in the last years of the nineteenth century, and the Helms-Bell House was designed true to the style. Characteristic features of the idiom that are found on this house include the cross-gabled roof, full-width front porch, and two-over-two sash windows. The form and massing are consistent with the style. The woodwork, both interior and exterior, exhibits Queen Anne detailing.

The Helms-Bell House is a one and one-half story frame dwelling with a crossgabled roof and irregular footprint (photo #1). The front porch runs the width of the facade and is engaged, meaning that it is contained beneath the roof

of the main body of the house (as opposed to having a separate roof of its own). The roof over the porch is supported by five Tuscan columns, which illustrate the turn-of-the-century practice of blending certain classical elements with the Queen Anne style. A frieze consisting of short vertical boards and half-diamond shingles spans the junction between the porch and the gable. Walls are covered with German siding on the first story, and with wood shingle in the gable ends. The front entrance is in the right (west) end bay of the facade. Two-over-two sash windows are found throughout the house. There are two brick interior chimneys.

The predominant feature of the Helms-Bell House is the recessed balcony centered in the front cross gable (photo #1). The opening is delineated by thick turned pilasters supporting a perfect half-round arch. Beyond the arch, a doublehung sliding-sash walk-through window provides ingress to the house. This type of balcony is unusual and rare in Charlotte.

The floorplan of the Helms-Bell House is an irregular arrangement, which is characteristic of Victorian architecture. There is an entry foyer and living room across the front; a small hall, bedroom and dining room in the center; the kitchen and a second bedroom are located in the back of the house. The bathroom was originally located in a small ell off the back of the house. The ell has been removed and replaced with a full-width addition containing a new bathroom and closets.

On the interior, the original woodwork remains in place to further identify this house as a Queen Anne Victorian. The visitor enters through the front door into an entry hall. In the doorway leading out of this entryway is an original bracketed, lath and spindlework screen which makes an immediate impact (photo #5). All doors and windows in the house are trimmed with molded surrounds, base blocks and bullseye corner blocks. The cross-panel doors have original pressed steel hardware and black ceramic knobs. An interesting feature is the turned finial blocks at the baseboard junctions found in the rooms without wainscoting. Wide-board pine floors run throughout the house. Vertical beadedboard wainscoting is found in the entry hall, dining room and kitchen. The brass light fixtures with hanging globes that are in the living room and entry hall are original to the house. The dining room has some built-in cabinetry, including a glazed cabinet door whose treatment echoes door and window trim elsewhere.

There are three fireplaces in the house with original mantels. The primary fireplace is in the living room (photo #7). It has a shelf, an overmantel with a beveled mirror, and a classically-influenced surround consisting of square pilasters with Ionic capitals and a plain architrave. The fireplace in the first bedroom is in one corner of the room and has a mantel with applied, turned columns and a high shelf (photo #8). The mantel in the second bedroom is simpler and has a pair of turned pilasters supporting a plain shelf. An enclosed

stair rises up from the hallway to the garret (visible in photo #5). The interior space upstairs is characterized by the sloping ceilings of the cross-gabled roof structure. The recessed balcony on the front of the house is accessed from this room, by a large walk-through window.

Alterations

There have been two periods of alteration, and one complete renovation in the one hundred year lifespan of the Helms-Bell House. At some point during the 1920s or 1930s, the Helms family updated the living room. They added a Craftsman-style colonnade with square wood columns to mark a transition between the entry foyer and the living room (photo #6). They installed the narrow-board oak flooring which was in vogue at the time on top of the original wide-board pine floor. The fireplace mantel was replaced with an Arts and Crafts-inspired brick surround. At this time, they simply moved the original mantel (with its mirrored overmantel) into the dining room, thereby keeping it intact. Fortunately, they left the pine flooring untouched beneath the new finish. Miss Ethel Bell also spruced up the house, probably in the 1950s. Her renovation was limited to sheathing the exterior with asbestos shingles. Happily, all of the original German siding was found intact when the asbestos was removed, and has now been repainted and returned to its original appearance.

Mr. Allen Brooks, the current owner, renovated the house when it was moved to Euclid Avenue. The asbestos shingle was removed from the exterior. Most of the changes made by the Helmses were reversed, including uncovering the wide flooring in the living room and returning the living room mantel to its original position. The Craftsman-style Colonnade still remains. In addition, Mr. Brooks changed the configuration of the stair slightly. The staircase originally began with winders at the interior corner of the dining room and ended in the unfinished attic. It accessed the finished room in the front gable which opens onto the recessed balcony (it may have been a servant's room without a fireplace). Now it is in the same position, but it runs straight up from the hallway, and turns at the top to open into the completely finished home office. The same treads and risers were used--the winders were simply moved from the bottom to the top.

Some additional changes are planned for the exterior. Sanborn maps from 1911 show an open porch pergola at the right front (now the northwest) corner. It ran from the front porch to the first floor bedroom window, whose sill is at floor level. The owner intends to restore that element as well as recreating a period porch balustrade that resembles the overhead screen in the front foyer.

Additions

When it was moved to Euclid Avenue, the Helms-Bell House was attached to a small pre-existing house, which dates from 1949. The small house was pushed to the back of the lot, stripped of its brick veneer, wrapped in weatherboard siding, and attached to the Helms-Bell House (photo #4). In full compliance with building codes, the two structures were joined with a two-story hyphen of new material (photo # 3). The two-story section was carefully designed to successfully blend the 1899 and the 1949 sections of the building into one harmonious whole. The hyphen echoes the 1899 house in materials and scale, and yet the use of smaller, fixed-sash windows clearly identifies it as being from a later construction period. This approach is in accordance with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Historic Preservation Projects (the federal guideline for restoration procedures).