

JOHNSTON BUILDING



This report was written on 27 May 1991.

1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the Johnston Building is located at 212 South Tryon Street in Charlotte, North Carolina.

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

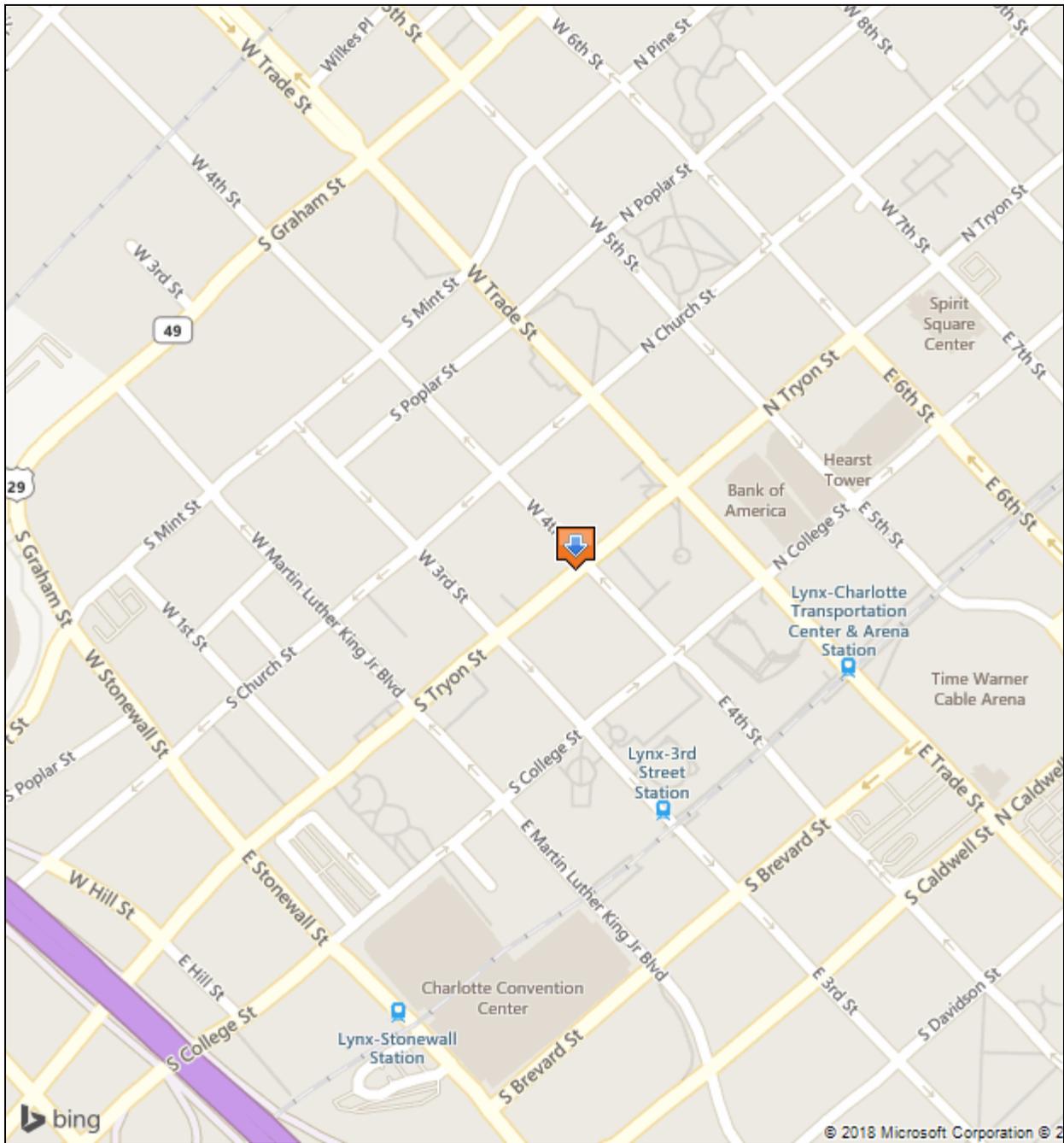
Two Hundred Twelve South Tryon Street Ltd. Partnership

212 S. Tryon Street
Charlotte, North Carolina 28281

Telephone: (704) 333-6643

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 this property is recorded in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 4407 on page 116. The tax parcel number of the property is 073-016-13.

6. A brief historical sketch of the property: This report contains a brief historical sketch of the property prepared by Mary Beth Gatza.

7. A brief architectural description of the property: This report contains a brief architectural description of the property prepared by Mary Beth Gatza.

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 Johnston Building does possess special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgement on the following considerations: 1) The Johnston Building is one of a number of "tall office buildings," or skyscrapers, that were built in North Carolina during the 1920's. Although tall office buildings had been built in large urban areas such as New York City and Chicago for decades, virtually none were erected in North Carolina until the prosperous decade of the 1920's. Therefore, the Johnston Building stands as physical evidence of an economic and historical trend. 2) At the time it opened, the Johnston Building was the tallest building in Charlotte.

b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling and/or association:The Commission contends that the physical description by Mary Beth Gatza which is included in this report demonstrates that the Johnston Building 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 total appraised value of the improvements is \$15,176,470. The current total appraised value of the lot is \$2,004,450. The current total value is \$17,180,920. The property is zoned UMUD.

Date of Preparation of this Report: 27 May 1991.

Prepared by:Mary Beth Gatza
2228 East Seventh Street
Charlotte, North Carolina 28204

(704) 342-2268

Historical Overview

Charles Worth Johnston (1861-1941) was born in 1861 in the Coddle Creek area of Cabarrus County. He relocated to Mecklenburg County when he became a student at Davidson College.

After leaving Davidson, he was employed as a merchant with the Stough Cornelius Company, which also controlled the Cornelius Mills. When an opening in the mill arose, Johnston applied for and became the superintendent. He moved to Charlotte in 1892 and took the position of Secretary of the Highland Park Manufacturing Company, and by 1911, was president of the company. From then on, he would have an interest in numerous other cotton mills, including Anchor Mills in Huntersville. A newspaper article printed at the time of his death described him as a "Titan among textile industrialists," and honored him with these words: "His career and achievements memorialize the old-fashioned virtues of thrift, frugality, self-reliance and industry, the honorableness of hard work, the virtue of business honor and integrity."

In 1924, the year the Johnston Building was completed, Johnston was involved with at least five different companies. The city directory for that year listed his occupations as: president of Johnston Mills Company, M & F Bonded Warehouse Company, Highland Park Manufacturing Company, Johnston Manufacturing Company, and vice-president of Commercial National Bank.² The following year, his occupations were listed as: Johnston Mills Company, Eastern Manufacturing Company, Monroe Mills Company, Highland Park Manufacturing Company, president and treasurer of Johnston Manufacturing Company, vice-president of Commercial National Bank, and the Merchants and Farmers Warehouse Company.



Johnston Building under construction. Photograph taken by E. D. Shaw.

C. W. Johnston married Miss Jennie Stough in 1882, undoubtedly having met her while living in North Mecklenburg. She bore three children before she died in 1921. There were two daughters, Rosa (1886-1958), who married R. W. Stokes, and Flora (1937), who married E. J. Braswell. The only son, R. Horace Johnston (1890-1949), was to succeed his father in business affairs. Five years after Jennie Stough's death, Johnston remarried. Mrs. Jeannett Newcombe was a widow and came into the marriage with two children, Arthur R. and Elliott H. Newcombe. Johnston was again widowed when Jeannett died in 1930.⁴

R. Horace Johnston was born to Charles Worth and Jennie Stough Johnston in Cornelius in 1890. When he was about two years old, the family moved to Charlotte, where he would stay for the rest of his life. He was well-educated, having studied at Staunton Military Academy (in Staunton, Virginia), Davidson College, and the University of North Carolina. Upon completing his studies, he entered into business with his father, taking over Johnston Mills and Highland Park Manufacturing Company after his father's death in 1941. Johnston married Miss Adelaide Orr and together they raised a son, David R. Johnston. In addition to their home in Myers Park, Johnston owned Whitehall Farm on York Road in the Steele Creek section of Mecklenburg County, where he bred and trained trotting horses. It was here that he died on October 22, 1949 of a heart attack. He had just returned from the dedication ceremony for the Charles Worth Johnston Memorial Gymnasium at Davidson College, which was named after his father. His son, David R. Johnston, was to carry on the family name and attain control of the family business after R. Horace Johnston's death.

That the 1920's were times of prosperity is seldom disputed, and lingering evidence of this can still be seen on the Charlotte streetscape. A publication by the Charlotte Chamber of Commerce, dating from 1927, shows that the dollar amount of investments in new buildings more than tripled between 1920 and 1926.⁶ Several landmark buildings were erected during the decade, including the Hotel Charlotte, the First National Bank, Mayfair Manor, the courthouse and the old City Hall. The Addison and Poplar apartments were also built during this era.

Anchor Mills Company purchased the lot in April 1923 from the Textile Office Building Company, which was a Gaston County corporation. The Textile Office Building Company had acquired the property in 1919, while the Trust Building was still standing on it.⁷ The Trust Building burned on December 1922, just four months before the lot was sold to Anchor Mills.⁸ The vacant lot was transferred for \$100 and a building permit was obtained immediately. The dollar value of the proposed structure was reported to be \$600,000.⁹ Hunkin-Conkey Construction Company was engaged as builder.¹⁰

The architect chosen to design the new building was William Lee Stoddart (1869-1940). Stoddart was an acclaimed designer of large urban hotels and although he practiced out of New York City, he was not unknown in Charlotte. He had designed the twelve story Hotel Charlotte, which was already under construction nearby at the junction of West Trade and South Poplar Streets. Construction began on the hotel in the summer of 1922, several months before the lot for the Johnston Building was purchased.¹¹ Johnston was an investor in the Citizens Hotel Company, which raised the capital and commissioned the hotel, and likely was familiar with the architect

and the plans. His estate was still receiving dividends from the Citizen's Hotel Company as late as 1945.¹²

The Johnston Building was the tallest skyscraper in Charlotte when it opened in 1924. Though the First National Bank, one block away at Trade and Tryon Streets, promptly superseded the Johnston Building in height and square footage, the Johnston Building was still regarded as being the epitome of style and elegance. The First National Bank building was completed in 1926, and had 160,000 square feet among its twenty stories.¹³

A contemporary newspaper article asserted that the Johnston Building, "Charlotte's tallest and newest office building, is attracting favorable comment as it nears completion because of the beauty and attractiveness of its exterior."¹⁴ It was, and still is, considered to be a fine building and a prestigious address.

Thomas Griffith was the rental agent in 1924, and was busy lining up tenants even before the building was completed. He revealed to the *Charlotte News* in January of 1924 that the building was "already largely booked as to tenants and will likely have a compliment of occupants when it is ready to open."¹⁵ The offices housed cotton brokers, insurance agents, attorneys, realty companies and numerous independent businessmen. Some early tenants included the E. C. Griffith Company (developers of the Eastover neighborhood), architect C. C. Hook, and the Honorable Cameron Morrison.¹⁶

Southern Bell Telephone and Telegraph Company was a major tenant in the Johnston Building for years. Though not an original lessee, they were occupying the entire fifteenth floor by 1926.¹⁷ The amount of space they rented increased over the years, and by 1947 they signed a lease for 42,369 square feet. They occupied the entire top three floors and had other offices scattered throughout the building. At that time, rental rates varied throughout the building, with the upper floors costing more than the lower floors. Southern Bell paid a rate of \$1.84 per square foot for floors six through seventeen, but only \$1.38 for the space they leased on the second floor.¹⁸

The Johnston building was held by Anchor Mills until the mid-1970's. At that time, Mr. David R. Johnston's health was declining, and the decision was made to sell the property.¹⁹ It was transferred in fee simple to the Johnston Building, Inc. in 1975. In doing so, Johnston Building, Inc. assumed the mortgage that Anchor Mills had taken with New York Life Insurance Company in 1974 for \$2.1 million. In time, Johnston Building, Inc. became unable to make the payments and possession reverted to New York Life. New York Life sold the building in 1981 to Howard, Howard and Barnard, a California real estate company. Howard, Howard and Barnard transferred the title to a North Carolina Limited Partnership operating under the name of Johnston Building, Ltd. in March. In April of 1981, a construction deed of trust was taken out for 9.2 million dollars. Shortly thereafter, renovations on the building began.²⁰

NOTES

- ¹ *Charlotte Observer*, 6 July 1941, sec. 3, p. 4.
- ² Charlotte City Directory, 1924.
- ³ Charlotte City Directory, 1925.
- ⁴ *Charlotte Observer*, 5 July 1941, sec. 1, p. 2.
- ⁵ *Charlotte Observer*, 23 October 1949, sec. 1, p. 1.
- ⁶ Charlotte Chamber of Commerce, Charlotte, North Carolina (Charlotte: Observer Printing House, Inc., 1927), n. p.
- ⁷ Mecklenburg County Deed Book 497, p. 404.
- ⁸ *Charlotte News*, 13 January 1924, p. 2-A.
- ⁹ Mecklenburg County Deed Book 497, p. 404; *Charlotte News*, 30 December 1923, p. 11-A.
- ¹⁰ *Charlotte News*, 20 January 1924, p. A-10.
- ¹¹ Henry F. Withey and Elsie Rathburn Withey, *Biographical Dictionary of American Architects (Deceased)* (Los Angeles; Henneset and Ingalls, Inc., 1970), p. 575; Edward S. Perzel, "National Register of Historic Places Inventory--Nomination Form, " Charlotte, 1979, item 8 p. 3.
- ¹² Mecklenburg County Final Settlement Book 21, p. 167.
- ¹³ Charlotte Chamber, n. p.
- ¹⁴ *Charlotte News*, 13 January 1924, p. 2-A.
- ¹⁵ *Charlotte News*. 13 January 1924, p. 2-A.
- ¹⁶ Charlotte City Directory, 1925, pp. 1329-31; Charlotte City Directory, 1926, pp. 1086-87.
- ¹⁷ Charlotte City Directory, 1925, pp. 1329-31; 1926, pp. 1086-87.
- ¹⁸ Charlotte City Directory, 1945, pp. 132-33; Mecklenburg County Deed Book 1231, p. 93.
- ¹⁹ Interview with Mrs. David R. Johnston, Charlotte, North Carolina, 19 May 1991.

²⁰ Mecklenburg County Deed Book 3775, p. 937; Deed Book 3698, p. 409; Deed Book 4407, p. 109; Deed Book 4407, p. 116; Deed Book 4420, p. 298; *Charlotte Observer*, 15 September 1977, p. 6-B.

Architectural Description

At fifteen stories, the Johnston Building was the tallest skyscraper in Charlotte when it opened in 1924. Yet it wasn't tall enough. The upper two floors were added in the late 1920's, making the building rise seventeen stories above ground, plus one floor below street level. The internal structure of the building is a steel frame. The limestone facade and buff-colored brick walls are merely an exterior veneer--they are supported by the frame and carry no load of their own.

All seventeen stories of the facade are sheathed with limestone blocks. The same limestone is used for all the facade trim, with the exception of the bronze window and entry details. The first two stories are treated as one on the facade. There are three bays across at the street level, and each bay is marked by a two-story round-arched opening. The entry bay is crowned by a raised cartouche bearing a tree motif.

The entry is in the center and features a recessed double doorway. A circular motif with the initials J B (Johnston Building) in brass has been set into the recess between the sidewalk and the door. The plate glass doors (modern replacements) and windows are set in bronze trim. Florid bronze pilasters surround the door and windows and terminate in composite capitals. Above the door and windows, the bronze trim continues with a Renaissance-style entablature, another set of pilasters, and a crown molding. A fanlight above the door illuminates the vestibule beyond. A second set of doors inside the vestibule are set in brass, complete with a brass kickplate and triple bar handles. The radiator grates in both the front and rear vestibules are original and quite handsome. The grate was cast in a geometric pattern, with a floral border running around the edges.

The windows on the street level facade have the same arched openings. Tripartite plate glass windows (modern replacements) are found at both the first and second floor levels. Separating the two levels is a bronze frieze which is decorated with four recessed panels, each with a rosette surrounded by egg-and-dart molding. A thin, florid cornice tops the frieze. Above, the tripartite division of the lower windows is repeated in the round-arched opening. Precise arch stones form a neat transition between the openings and the flatter wall surfaces. The same transitional effect is achieved at the corners of the body of the building by shallow limestone quoins.

The body of the building received several different treatments, all in limestone. A shallow, florid stringcourse separates the second and third floors, and a deeper, denticular stringcourse runs above the third floor. Floors four through eleven are identical and feature six windows across, grouped by twos. Limestone quoins form a neat appearance at the corners of the building. The twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth floors are likewise identical to each other. The six windows are

slightly wider than on the lower floors, and are evenly spaced. They are separated by fluted pilasters with composite capitals. An architrave with a dentilled cornice completes this unit. The fifteenth floor was the top floor when the building was originally built. It has six evenly spaced windows, separated by raised panels and topped by a decorative cornice with bold urns at the corners. Above that, the final two floors, added later, are identical to the fifteenth, but are topped by a simpler architrave.

The side and rear exterior walls are all covered with an attractive buff-colored face brick, and the window openings trimmed with limestone. The south wall is seventeen bays deep, and the north wall has eighteen bays. On the south wall, patterning in the brick suggests divisions between every two bays from the fourth floor upwards. All windows throughout the building are modern replacements.

The first floor interior is one of the richest spaces in Charlotte surviving from the era. A central corridor with an arched, coffered ceiling runs the length of the building. The ceiling itself is divided into eight discreet units. Each unit has eight rectangular recesses in length and seven across the arch of the ceiling. Each individual coffer has egg-and-dart and bead-and-reel moldings and is separated from the others by round bead molding. Evidence remains that light fixtures once hung from the center of each of the eight sections of the ceiling.

Beneath the ceiling, light-colored marble columns correspond to the divisions between the coffered units. Each column is supported on a green marble base. The floor is paved with 12-inch square marble tiles and surrounded by a double border.

Perhaps the most outstanding feature of the Johnston Building is the massive carved marble stairway. The stair is located off of the central corridor, and is closer to the front (Tryon Street) entrance. It features bold turned balusters and a molded handrail. In place of a proper newel, the stair terminates with an oversized scroll resting on a square marble base. The marble stair, however, extends only from the basement level to the second floor. Above that, the stairwell is enclosed and unremarkable.

Four elevator cars serve the upper floors of the Johnston Building. The original "high speed" cars are no longer extant, but the elevator doors are original. Each door is solid brass and has four decorated panels. Brass and glass plates over each door read "this car up" and are original. The Johnston Building underwent extensive renovations in the early 1980's, and the remainder of the interior has been altered.

Significance Statement

Tall office buildings were made possible subsequent to the development of three things: steel framing, fireproof construction, and the elevator. Prior to the advent of the mechanical elevator, five or six floors was considered to be the maximum height for an office building. While the technology allowed for higher structures, getting up to the top was a problem, as people were not apt to climb that many stairs. The first buildings to pierce the five or six story height limit were

the Tribune Building (1873-75) and the Western Union Building (1873-75), both in New York City. They stood nine and ten stories, respectively.

The elevator was invented in 1852 and demonstrated at the New York World's Fair a year later in 1853. Suddenly, it was possible to move people vertically with no trouble. The first tall office building constructed with an elevator in place was the Equitable Life Assurance Building (1868-70) in New York. Early elevators, however, ran on steam power and the machinery was cumbersome, and therefore prohibitive. It was not until W. van Siemen invented the electric elevator in 1880 that office buildings began to soar.

Architectural historians disagree as to which building deserves the designation of being the 'first' skyscraper. The Equitable was the first to be designed with an elevator, but at five stories it rose only 130 feet. The nine-story Tribune Building stood twice as high, and the Western Union Building was close behind at 230 feet. None should dispute, however, that the Home Insurance Building (1883-85, designed by William LeBaron Jenney) in Chicago fathered the skyscraper revolution. It stood only ten stories tall, but was the first of its kind to use true "skyscraper construction."¹ That is, the exterior masonry 'skin' was entirely supported by the interior steel frame.

Building with a steel frame was such a superior method that it quickly superseded load-bearing masonry construction. The last building to be built entirely of masonry was the Monadnock Building (1889-91) in Chicago, designed by Burnham and Root. In Charlotte, the first steel-frame skyscraper was the Independence Building, was erected in 1909 at the junction of Trade and Tryon Streets.

It was not until the 1920's, however, that significant numbers of tall office buildings were built in North Carolina. Once the boom began, though, skyscrapers appeared on the cityscapes of Asheville, Greensboro and, especially, Winston-Salem in addition to Charlotte. As the decade began, there were only three tall buildings in North Carolina. The Independence Building in Charlotte was the first, erected in 1909 and rising twelve stories. The Wachovia Building in Winston-Salem was constructed in 1911, with an additional story added six years later. Also in Winston-Salem, the eight story O'Hanlon Building was built in 1915. Both buildings are still standing.

Four more skyscrapers were built in Winston-Salem during the 1920's. The Hotel Robert E. Lee (twelve stories) went up in 1921, the Nissen Building (eighteen stories) was constructed in 1926, and the Carolina Hotel (eleven stories) was erected in 1928. Begun in 1927 and completed in 1929, the R. J. Reynolds Building was the tallest in the state. At twenty-two stories, it towered over the others.² In western North Carolina, the thirteen story L. B. Jackson Building was built in Asheville in 1923. In Greensboro, the mammoth Jefferson Standard Building went up in 1923 and stood seventeen stories. It claimed the honor of being the tallest skyscraper in North Carolina until the R. J. Reynolds Building was completed in 1929.

In Charlotte, the Johnston Building was in good company when it opened in 1924. It stood among the Independence Building, the Hotel Charlotte and the Commercial National Bank, all of which stood twelve stories. When it was completed, the Johnston Building was the tallest on

the Charlotte skyline, although the First National Bank was already under construction. The First National Bank was completed in 1925 and at twenty stories it superseded the Johnston Building as the tallest building in town.

In 1927, the Chamber of Commerce reported that there was about 500,000 square feet of floor space in "first class" office buildings in Charlotte. At 125,000 square feet, the Johnston Building accounted for one quarter of that space. Only the First National Bank Building had more, at 160,000 square feet. Other significant tall office buildings included in the tally were the Wilder Building (52,000 square feet), the Independence, Commercial National Bank, Professional, and Contractors buildings.³

The Johnston Building stands as physical evidence of historical and economic trends that marked the prosperous decade of the 1920's. Although buildings in excess of fifteen stories high were built during the decade, the Johnston Building was the tallest structure on the Charlotte skyline when it was completed.

Notes

¹ Henry-Russell Hitchcock, *Architecture: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. (Baltimore: Penguin, 1971), p. 338.

² Gwynne Stephens Taylor, *From Frontier to Factory: An Architectural History of Forsyth County*(Winston-Salem, 1981), p. 58, pp. 192-3.

³ Charlotte Chamber of Commerce, Charlotte, North Carolina (Charlotte: Observer Printing House, Inc., 1927), n.p.