

## JOHNSTON MILL



*This report was written on 26 November 1993*

**1. Name and location of the property:** The property known as the Johnston Mill is located in the 3300 block of North Davidson Street, Charlotte, Mecklenburg County, North Carolina.

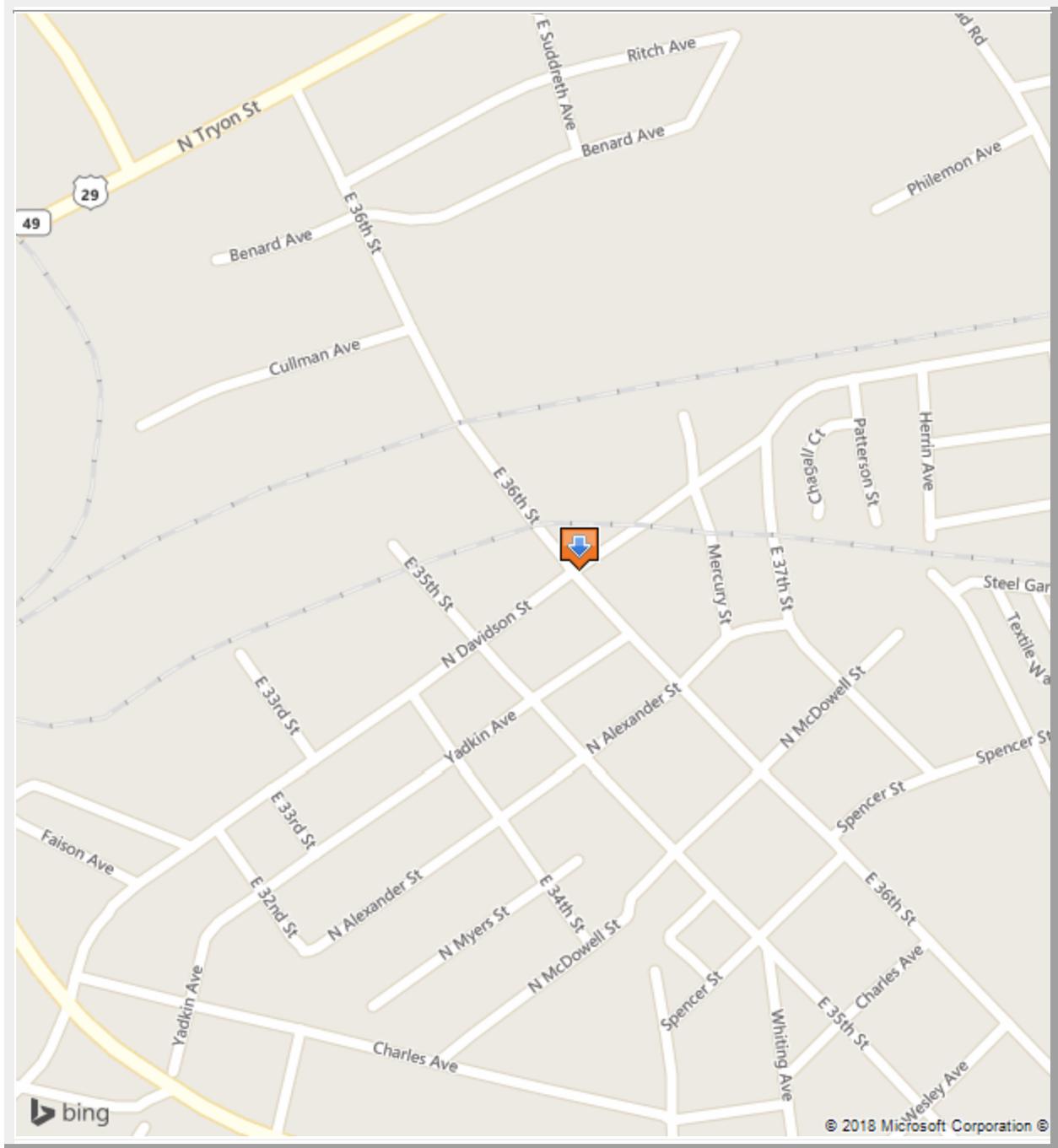
**2. Name, address, and telephone number of the present owner of the property:**

The owner of the property is:  
Johnston Mill Associates Limited Partnership  
P.O. Box 471665  
Charlotte, NC 28247

Telephone: (704) 342-4554

**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 which depict the location of the property.



**5. Current Deed Book Reference to the property:** The most recent deed to Tax Parcel Number 091-101-09 is listed in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 7138 on page 679.

**6. A brief historic sketch of the property:** This report contains a brief historical sketch of the property prepared by Dr. William H. Huffman.

**7. A brief architectural description of the property:** This report contains a brief architectural description of the property prepared by Dr. William H. Huffman.

**8. Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets 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 Commission judges that the property known as the Johnston Mill does possess special significance for Charlotte and Mecklenburg County. The Commission bases its judgement on the following considerations: 1) Johnston Mill was built in 1916, and played a significant role in the history of textile manufacturing in the county and of the North Charlotte mill community. 2) its architecture is reflective of early twentieth-century mill buildings. 3) it is associated with Charles Worth Johnston, a leading textile figure in the Southern Piedmont Carolinas as well as in Charlotte and Mecklenburg County.

**b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling, and/or association:** The Commission contends that the architectural description included in this report demonstrates that the Johnston Mill 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 tract is \$669,260.00. The size of Tax Parcel 091-101-09 is 5.64 acres.

**Date of Preparation of this Report:** 26 November 1993

**Prepared by:** Dr. William H. Huffman  
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## *Historical Overview*

*Dr. William H. Huffman*

The Johnston Mill was one of the last mills built in Mecklenburg County, and was the last of the three mills in the North Charlotte community to close in recent times. Built originally in 1916 by textile magnate C. W. Johnston to meet the growing demand for cotton goods due to the war raging in Europe, the mill was further increased in size during the boom of the 1920's. In addition to its importance as part of Mecklenburg County's cotton mill history, it is also significant because of its association with Charles Worth Johnston (1861-1941), who played a prominent role in the history of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County's business and civic life.

At first glance, the Johnston Mill seems a bit of a puzzle: it was built rather late for most Mecklenburg mills, was built on the land of an existing mill, and had no associated mill village. But an investigation into the circumstances surrounding its creation reveals the logic of the thought behind it. The story intertwines with the career of C. W. Johnston.

Born in Coddle Creek Township of Iredell County to Samuel and Mary Smith Johnston, he attended Davidson College for a time as a young man. His first job out of school was with the mercantile firm of the Stough Cornelius Company in Cornelius where he learned about business. In 1882, he married Jennie Stough, the sister of Richard J. Stough, whose family controlled the mercantile business and the Cornelius Mills. Johnston applied for and was hired to be the superintendent of the Cornelius Mills when that position became open. In 1891, he came to Charlotte at the request of J. S. Spencer, president of the Commercial National Bank, to become secretary of the Highland Park Manufacturing Company, and in 1906 Johnston took over as president of the firm.<sup>1</sup>

The cotton mills in Charlotte and Mecklenburg County may best be seen as part of the New South industrialization that took place following Reconstruction. Locally, that movement was spearheaded by Daniel Augustus Tompkins (1852-1914), an indefatigable participant in, and advocate of, New South industrialization. Charlotte's first cotton mill was the Charlotte Cotton Mills, which started up in 1881 under the direction of R. M. Oates, a cotton broker. A year later, D. A. Tompkins, a South Carolina native who was educated and trained in manufacturing in the North, came to the city as a representative of the Westinghouse Company. He quickly became aware of the potential for building cotton mills in the area, and so in 1884 he set up his own design, contracting and machine shop business, the D. A. Tompkins Co. Over a thirty-two year period, Tompkins built over one hundred cotton mills, fertilizer works, electric light plants and ginneries. He also changed the region's cotton oil from a waste product into a major industry through the building of about two hundred processing plants and organizing one of his own, the Southern Cotton Oil Company.<sup>2</sup>

Tompkins' efforts started to appear in rapid succession in Charlotte when his company built the Alpha, Ada and Victor mills in 1889, the city's second, third and fourth mills.<sup>3</sup> On June 15, 1891, at the first stockholder's meeting of the new "Gingham Mill," which was to be the city's

fifth, a board of directors was elected. At the meeting of January 11, 1882, a committee of D. A. Tompkins and two others suggested the name Highland Park Manufacturing Co., which was adopted. R. H. Jordan, who owned the drugstore at the southeast corner of Trade and Tryon Street at the center of town, was elected the company's first president. He was followed by Vinton Liddell in 1893 and W. E. Holt in 1895.<sup>4</sup>

In 1891, the year Johnston joined the company, Highland Park began construction of its first mill, at Brevard and Sixteenth Streets in Charlotte, and in 1895 added a spinning mill at the same location. Originally called the "Gingham Mill," after the 1895 addition the complex was called Highland Park; Mill #1. When the company bought Standard Mills of Rock Hill, SC, in 1898, it was renamed Highland Park Mill #2. The North Charlotte community was first created when it was chosen as the site for the mammoth Highland Park Mill #3, complete with an elaborate mill village and its own power plant, all constructed in 1903-1904.<sup>5</sup> During the same period that Highland Park was building Mill #3, a smaller mill and associated houses were added to North Charlotte with the construction of the Mecklenburg Mill (after 1926, the Mercury Mill; acquired by Johnston, 1941). The latter was built on land purchased from Highland Park just to the north of Mill #3.<sup>6</sup> With 20,000 spindles, 1000 looms and a work force of 800, Highland Park #3 was by far the largest mill in Mecklenburg County.

Other mills and their presidents built in or near Charlotte during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth included: The Atherton Mill (D. A. Tompkins' own mill, 1892-3); Louise (H. S. Chadwick, 1897); Magnolia (A. C. Summerville, 1901); Chadwick (E. A. Smith, 1901); Elizabeth (R. M. Miller, 1901); Hoskins (H. S. Chadwick, 1904); and Savona Manufacturing (1908).<sup>7</sup>

Once well established in Charlotte with the Highland Park Company, C. W. Johnston began building his own textile empire. His first acquisition appears to have been the Anchor Mills in Huntersville (built 1897 as a small spinning plant, added weaving about 1902). By the time of his death in 1941 at the age of 79, Johnston headed thirteen mills in North and South Carolina. As a visible symbol of the position his textile chain occupied in the community, in 1924 he built a skyscraper, the Johnston Building, on South Tryon Street in Charlotte to house the corporate headquarters and other offices.<sup>8</sup>

When war broke out in Europe in 1914 and continued unabated in its ferocity for months which stretched into years, the European textile industry began to be severely affected. Because of the tremendous demand for uniforms and bandages and the shortage of materials, the textile plants in the neutral United States began to pick up more and more of the demand. The wary United States also started a program to expand its own armed forces, just in case. To meet this demand, the local mills began to work at capacity and around the clock, and a number of new mills were built.<sup>9</sup> In an article in the *Charlotte Observer* in December, 1915, entitled "Amazing Activity Among the Mills," the writer enthusiastically declared that: "There is greater activity in cotton mill construction circles just at present in and around Charlotte than there has been in a decade, according to the statements of the best informed mill architects and engineers of this section....It has been figured that it has been ordered and put under way more than \$3,000,000 worth of work in and around Charlotte within the past few months. There is also well founded talk of the plans

of Mr. Charles W. Johnston and his associates in the Anchor Mills at Huntersville, of building another mill or an addition to the present one at Huntersville."<sup>10</sup>

Apparently Johnston decided to build another mill at North Charlotte rather than one in Huntersville. In 1913, he had already doubled the capacity of the Anchor Mills to bring it up to 10,000 spindles and 400 looms.<sup>11</sup> A likely factor in deciding to build in North Charlotte was the excellent rail connections. Spur lines already existed for the next-door Mecklenburg Mill, and no doubt Johnston wanted to get the mill up and running as quickly as possible. Apparently he leased about half of the Mecklenburg Mill property for the new site, and by mid-1916, the new Johnston Manufacturing Company mill had been completed with 12,000 spindles running at full capacity.<sup>12</sup> Since the surrounding area had already been built up with mill houses, stores and other amenities associated with Highland Park #3 and the Mecklenburg Mill, this accounts for the fact that no mill houses were built for the Johnston Mill.

To handle his various holdings, C. W. Johnston had formed at least three companies that bore his name: the Johnston Manufacturing Company; the Johnston Mills Company; and the Johnston Spinning Company (formerly Union Mills Company).<sup>13</sup> He had formed the Johnston Manufacturing Company in 1913 as a sole proprietorship (which accounts for a number of sources incorrectly citing that as the date of the mill), made it a partnership in 1914, and incorporated it in 1921. The three were merged into the Johnston Manufacturing Company in 1969.<sup>14</sup>

The Johnston Mill apparently prospered after the war, and participated in the boom times of the 1920's. In 1926, additions were made to the mill that remain as part of the present complex: an addition was made to the picker room at the rear of the main mill; and a new waste house, opener room and cotton warehouse were added to the existing cotton warehouse.<sup>15</sup> Sometime between 1929 and 1934, a two-story addition with a tower was added at the front of the mill for offices.<sup>16</sup> In 1941, Johnston Manufacturing formally bought the property it sat on and that of the nearby Mercury Mill, primarily to acquire its mill houses.<sup>17</sup>

When C. W. Johnston stepped down as president in 1938, he was succeeded by his son, R. Horace Johnston, who led the Johnston interests until his own death in the early fifties. In 1951, the last president of the company, David R. Johnston (C. W. Johnston's grandson), built the Johnston Memorial Y.M.C.A. in memory of his father, just northeast of Highland Park Mill No. 3. He also presided over the dissolution of Highland Park in June, 1969, when all textile manufacturing ceased at Highland Park #3.<sup>18</sup> The Mercury Mill, which had operated through World War II, shut down in 1945 and was only used as a warehouse thereafter.<sup>19</sup> When the Johnston Manufacturing Co. plant also was closed and sold in 1975, there was a distinct passing from one time into another for the North Charlotte mill community. Indeed, in the 1950's, '60's and '70's, Mecklenburg County, which at one time was second in textile production only to Gaston County in the state, saw the demise of its once dominant industry.<sup>20</sup>

Chavis Textile Manufacturing of Gastonia bought the Johnston Mill in 1975 when it shut down, and the following year it was sold to Confederate Textile Machinery, Inc. of Greenville, SC.<sup>21</sup> It was primarily used as warehouse space. In 1980, the plant was bought by Robert and Ava Stark, who also bought the old Mercury Mill, and ten year later, in 1990, both the former mill

properties were purchased by the present owners.<sup>22</sup> The present owners, with a one million dollar loan from the City of Charlotte, purchased both the Johnston and Mecklenburg Mills, and are converting the former to a low income apartment complex. Current plans are to convert the old Mecklenburg Mill into artists' studios at a later date.<sup>23</sup>

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Charlotte News*, July 5, 1941, p. 1; *Charlotte Observer*, July 5, 1941, p.1.

<sup>2</sup> William H. Huffman, "A Historical Sketch of the Charlotte Supply Company," Charlotte Mecklenburg Historic Properties Commission, 1983.

<sup>3</sup> Dan L. Morrill, "A Survey of Cotton Mills in Charlotte, North Carolina," Charlotte Mecklenburg Historic Properties Commission, 1979.

<sup>4</sup> Letter from Highland Park Manufacturing Company, undated (c. 1964) on file at Charlotte Mecklenburg Public Library.

<sup>5</sup> William H. Huffman, "A Historical Sketch of the Highland Park Mill No. 3," Charlotte Mecklenburg Historic Properties Commission, 1984; National Register of Historic Places Nomination, 1988.

<sup>6</sup> Morrill, note 3; Thomas W. Hanchett, "Charlotte and its Neighborhoods," unpublished typescript, Charlotte Mecklenburg Historic Properties Commission, 1986.

<sup>7</sup> Morrill, note 3.

<sup>8</sup> See note 1; Edgar T. Thompson, *Agricultural Mecklenburg and Industrial Charlotte* (Charlotte: Chamber of Commerce, 1926), pp. 142-3.

<sup>9</sup> *Charlotte News*, April 16, 1916, p.8: "Great Activity Among So. Mills: Many Running Day and Night - Best Season Since 1905."

<sup>10</sup> *Charlotte Observer*, December 30, 1915, p.6. 1

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, January 16, 1913, p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, July 8, 1916, p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> Mecklenburg County, Record of Corporations, Book 19-C-486.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.; Charlotte City Directory, 1916; Mecklenburg County, Record of Partnerships, File No. 5; Thompson, note 8.

<sup>15</sup> Records and plans of Biberstein, Bowles, on file in Special Collections, Atkins Library, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Charlotte, NC.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Martin Luther (Luke) Brackett, last president of Johnston Mills by William H. Huffman, Charlotte, NC, 10 November 1993.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.; Mecklenburg County Deed Book 1065, p. 279, 24 November 1941.

<sup>18</sup> Letter, note 4; Huffman, note 5.

<sup>19</sup> Brackett interview, note 16.

<sup>20</sup> *Charlotte News*, March 3, 1975, p. 1; *Charlotte Observer*, March 23, 1975, p. 19.

<sup>21</sup> Mecklenburg County Deed Books 3318, p.366 and Book 3867, p. 640.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., Book 4327, p.816; 6348, p.612; and 7138, p.679.

<sup>23</sup> *Charlotte Observer*, July 18, 1993, Mecklenburg Neighbors Section, p. 1.

### ***Architectural Description***

*Dr. William H. Huffman*

The Johnston Mill is located in the North Charlotte community about 2.7 miles northeast of the Square, and in recent times carried the address of 3315 North Davidson Street. North Charlotte was a separate mill community created around the Highland Park Mill No. 3 and the Mecklenburg Mill (after 1926, the Mercury Mill), both finished in 1904 with mill villages, and was connected to Charlotte by rail lines for freight and a streetcar line for passengers. The original Johnston Mill was built in 1916 on the Mecklenburg Mill property, and had no village of its own.

The Johnston Mill complex is located on a 5.64-acre parcel of land that is bounded by the Norfolk Southern Railway tracks on the north, the Mecklenburg/Mercury Mill property on the east, North Davidson Street on the southeast, Norfolk Southern Railway tracks on the south, and East 36th Street on the southwest. The tract slopes gently downward from northeast to southwest.

The mill complex contains five buildings (number-keyed to attached map): 1) the main mill building; 2) new opener room; 3) the cotton warehouse, waste house and opener room complex; 4) the machine storage building; and 5) the Mecklenburg Mill house.

### **1) Main Mill Building (1916; additions 1926, c. 1930 and other dates unknown)**

The 1916 original part of the mill is two stories with brick walls laid in a modified Flemish bond with alternating headers and stretchers every sixth row. The 1926 addition on the north end is brick laid in common bond one-to-six. Both have brick segmental-arch windows with brick sills on both stories. A low-gable wood roof is covered with built-up tar and gravel, and has a small overhang supported by exposed rafters with curved ends on the original mill, and brick parapet walls capped by corbeling and ceramic tile on the 1926 addition. A single tower was built on the east side of the original mill for access and bathrooms. The c.1930 addition on the south end of the mill next to Davidson Street is two stories with walls of brick laid in the same modified Flemish bond as the original mill. Built for office space, it has a two-story stair tower facing Davidson Street with brick pilasters and is capped by plain stone capitals. It is equipped with large window openings with flat metal lintels and concrete sills that formerly held industrial metal-sash windows, and has a roof with overhang and brackets that are similar to the original mill. This addition also added two towers on the north side opposite Davidson Street, one for stairs and the other for bathrooms and showers. Recent one-story additions on the south, east and west sides of the mill were removed to expose the original facades.

The interior of the original mill and the 1926 picker room addition on the north side have intact wood floors and wood post-and-beam construction with square posts. The wood beams on the first floor have been reinforced by the addition of steel I-beams flanking the wood beams. A partial basement work area was added to the original mill about the late 1930's and has concrete floors and wood post-and-beam construction. The office addition on the south side also has wood floors, round steel posts and steel I-beam construction, and has concrete stairs with a plain metal handrail in the tower. The floors in the mill building are being covered with gypcrete for leveling and stability. All the main mill building is being adaptively rehabilitated for use as low-income apartments.

### **2) Opener room (late 1960's)**

The new opener room was built in the late 1960's next to the Southern Railroad tracks, and was used to open the cotton bales so that the cotton could be fed into the mill through a suction device. It was constructed to hold new opening equipment acquired by the mill.<sup>1</sup> The building is one story, and is constructed of concrete block with some brick infill. It has a flat roof constructed of precast concrete beams, with parapet walls at the east and west ends capped with ceramic tile. It originally had two large doors at the east and west ends, which are being closed in for smaller doors. Four fifteen-light metal sash windows pierce the walls on the south side, and three of the same kind are on the north wall. The floor is concrete. This building is being unfitted as a day care center for the tenants of the project.

### **Cotton Warehouse, Waste House and Opener Room Complex (1916, 1926)**

The original cotton warehouse was built in 1916 with the main mill, and was doubled in size in the 1926 addition. It is a raised one-story structure of wood post-and-beam construction resting on brick piers. It was constructed of clapboard siding, a low gable wood roof, and wood floors.

Sometime later a basement was constructed by pouring concrete floors and putting brick infill between the piers.

Built in 1926, the opener room is a one-story building of brick laid in common bond one-to-six. It has wood floors, and a sloping wood flat roof with a stepped parapet wall on the south end that is capped with ceramic tile. Three twenty-light metal sash windows pierce the south wall, and four of the same kind of window are on the east side.

The waste house was also part of the 1926 addition. It is a two-story building of brick laid in common bond one-to-six, and had a flat wood roof, wood post-and-beam construction and wood floors. The original interior wood beams, flooring and roof collapsed from deterioration, and are being replaced. The parapet walls are capped with ceramic tile.

For the new project, the cotton warehouse is planned as a covered recreation area, the waste house as an indoor recreation area, and the opening room as a community center.

#### **4) Machine Storage Building (1916)**

The machine storage building was built in 1916 with the main mill. It is a one-story building with basement and brick walls laid in common bond one-to-seven. It has segmental-arch windows with brick sills, and a flat wood roof with side and front parapet walls capped with ceramic tile. The interior was constructed of wood floors and wood post-and-beam configuration. The wood posts in the basement level have been replaced with round steel columns. The original windows have been replaced with one-over-one double-hung sash. The roof has a skylight that faces to the north. On 36th Street, the original facade has been replaced by one of modern brick laid in common bond one-to-six. This building has been converted to twenty-one apartments.

#### **5) Mecklenburg Mill House ( 1904)**

The mill house was built as part of the mill village for the Mecklenburg Mill in 1903-1904. It is one story with twin front gables on a cross-gable roof and faces east toward the Mecklenburg Mill building. Judging from its size, proximity to the mill and quality of interior finish, it seems likely that the house was occupied by someone in a supervisory capacity at the mill. The house rests on a brick foundation laid in running bond and is covered throughout with plain weatherboarding. The replacement windows are two-over-two double-hung sash with simple, unadorned surrounds, and replacement four-panel wood doors are in the front and rear entrances, also with simple surrounds. A single-light fixed transom is just above the front door. A small louvered opening with the same simple surround pierces the wall just under the peaks of the gables in the front facade. The replacement one-story front porch spans most of the front elevation, with four square wood posts supporting a hip roof. A simple, wood balustrade with square balusters lines the sides, front and sides of the wood stairs leading to the wood-floored porch. A gable-roofed kitchen addition projects to the rear on the southwest side, which in turn has a shed roof addition attached to it at the center of the rear of the house. The house has a center hall plan, with two rooms, one in the front and one in the rear, on either side. Two interior chimneys permit fireplaces to be in the center of the north-south interior wall in all four rooms. All the original mantels, wood trim and floors are intact and restored. The kitchen has been

modernized. The house has been carefully restored, and is being used as offices for the Johnston Mill Limited Partnership, the developers of the project.

### **Conclusion**

The adaptive re-use of the Johnston Mill property will preserve important architectural features of the buildings described in this report. The major exterior and interior characteristics, including material, form and setting are being left sufficiently intact so as to maintain the historic integrity of the buildings while adapting them to a new use that will keep them in service for an indefinite time into the future.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Martin Luther (Luke) Brackett, last president of Johnston Mills, by William H. Huffman, 10 November 1993.