

SURVEY AND RESEARCH REPORT
ON THE
THE FORMER UNITED STATES POST OFFICE BUILDING
IN MATTHEWS, N.C.



Matthews Post Office in 1939

1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the Former United States Post Office Building in Matthews is located at 195 North Trade Street in Matthews, North Carolina.

2. Name and address of the present owner of the property:

Aana Lisa Johnson, Trustee of the Aana Lisa Johnson Trust

504 South Main Street

Matthews, N.C., 28105

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

4. Maps depicting the location of the property: This report contains a map depicting the location of the property. UTM Coordinate: 17525352E 3886040N



5. Current deed book and tax parcel information for the property:

The Tax Parcel Number of the property is 0193-262-09. The most recent deed reference to this property is recorded in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 9189, Page 280.

6. A brief historical sketch of the property: This report contains a brief historical sketch of the property by Matthew S. Thomas and Dr. Dan L. Morrill.

7. A brief architectural and physical description of the property: This report contains a brief architectural description of the property by Matthew S. Thomas.

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

Former United States Post Office Building in Matthews, N.C. does possess special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations:

1) The Former United States Post Office Building was the initial building in Matthews to serve exclusively as a post office and functioned as a post office from 1939 until 1962.

2) Leading citizens of Matthews, especially nine-term Mayor W. Alexis Hood, who designed the building, and prominent businessman Lester Hunter Yandle, Sr., who provided private financing, were instrumental in bringing this imposing post office building to Matthews.

3. Architecturally , the Former Matthews Post Office Building is significant as a refined example of the Neo-Classical Revival style, particularly for one of the outlying railroad towns of Mecklenburg County.

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 Former United Post Office Building in Matthews, N.C. 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 designated as "historic landmark."

Date of preparation of this report: December, 2004

Prepared by: Matthew S. Thomas and Dr. Dan L. Morrill

Historic Context Statement

The Former United States Post Office Building in Matthews, N. C. is located at the northwestern corner of the town's historic central business district. The casual observer might take the freestanding brick structure for granted; yet it played a crucial role in the daily lives of Matthews's citizens during its years of operation (1939-1962). Indeed, the town's post office, along with the Seaboard Airline railroad tracks to the immediate north of the building and the Charlotte-Monroe highway that bisected the town one block south of the post office, were the essential components of the built environment that connected Matthews to the outside world.¹

Not unlike many of Mecklenburg County's small towns, Matthews owes its origins to the railroad. Historian Richard Mattson explains that during the years following the Civil War:

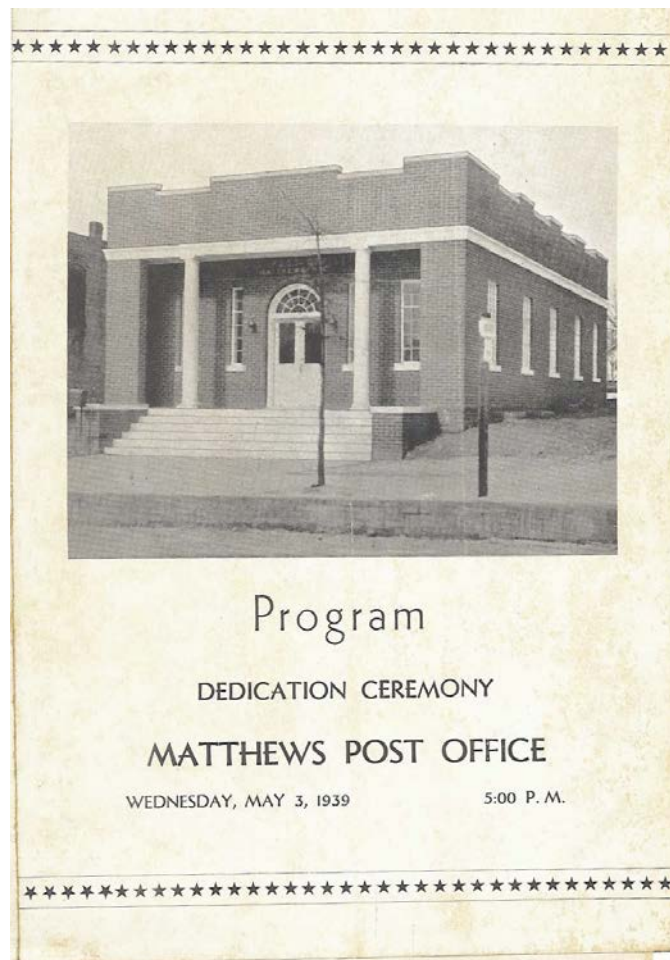
*"... new and rebuilt railways not only stimulated Charlotte's continued expansion but also spawned smaller shipping and trading points along their routes. In 1872 the Carolina Central Railway completed its line from Wilmington, North Carolina to Charlotte, locating one of its depots southeast of Charlotte, beside a stagecoach stop known as Fullwood's Store. In 1879 the Town of Matthews was born on this site, named, in fact, for a member of the Carolina Central's Board of Directors."*²

Created as one of Mecklenburg's outlying "railroad-oriented" towns, Matthews provided provincial farmers access to both Southern seaports and Northern markets and prospered as the principal cotton processing center in eastern Mecklenburg County. Farmers also came to Matthews to purchase essential supplies. In the late nineteenth century an increasing number of businessmen established themselves along the ordered streets of the expanding downtown business district.³ It is not surprising, therefore, that Matthews acquired a United States Post Office.

Historic Overview

It became evident by the 1930s that the small, yet growing community of Matthews was ill-served by the meager quarters and frequent relocations of its post offices. Lester Hunter Yandle Sr., owner of the Matthews Drug Store, therefore stepped forward and personally financed the town's first structure built exclusively to serve as a post

office. "Doc" Yandle, as he was nicknamed by locals, decided to locate the new post office on two contiguous vacant lots he had purchased in 1919 and 1924, respectively. The two properties were situated in an ideal location, lying approximately 400 feet from the Seaboard Airline Railroad Depot and abutting the westerly intersection of Trade and Charles Streets.⁴ Yandle commissioned W. Alexis Hood, an engineer with the Southern Engineering Company (later to become a nine-term mayor of Matthews serving from 1945-1963), to design an appropriate structure, and solicited Congressman A. L. Bullwinkle of the Tenth Congressional District to lobby the United States Postal Department to authorize the project. Congressman Bullwinkle's lobbying efforts proved successful, and the Postal Department approved the new building under the department's Commercial Leasing Program. A 10-year lease agreement, with an option of renewal following the expiration of the term, was negotiated and accepted by both parties.⁵



Front of Program of Official Dedication Ceremony

The Federal Government granted a modest amount of leeway in the exterior design of most buildings intended for Federal use, but by 1939 it had established standardized interior plans for post offices. Hood almost certainly would have consulted the publication detailing post office stipulations entitled "Instructions to Private Architects Engaged on Public Building Work Under the Jurisdictions of the Treasury Department." The most common architectural styles employed in the exterior design of most Depression-era post offices were either the Colonial Revival style or, as Hood chose, the Neo-Classical Revival style in which Hood blended modern and classical elements. Locals claimed that Hood had been inspired by a similar building then situated on Tryon Street in Charlotte.⁶

By April 1939 the much-needed and long-awaited post office was almost ready, and a grand dedication was planned. Oscar L. Phillips, appointed Postmaster of Matthews by the Roosevelt Administration in 1933, served as Chairman of the Arrangements Committee. Fifteen of the town's most prosperous and well-known citizens were members of the committee, including Lester "Doc" Yandle and Edward Funderburk, president of the Bank of Matthews.⁷ The impressive new post office was a significant contribution to the civic development of the community. It sent a powerful signal to Matthews's citizenry that theirs was a motivated, forward-looking community.



Congressman A. L. Bullwinkle addresses the audience on May 3, 1939.

The official dedication of the Matthews Post Office began on May 3, 1939, at 5 o'clock p.m., when the U.S. Army 105th Engineer Band assembled beside the specially constructed stage that spanned the post office steps and began to play "America" in front of a crowd of

approximately 3,500 people. Postmaster Phillips then delivered a stirring introduction, followed by congratulatory remarks from Professor C. L. Pearce, principal of the Matthews High School. Paul R. Younts, Postmaster of Charlotte, next addressed the cheering crowd and introduced Congressman A. L Bullwinkle. Fourth Assistant Postmaster General of the United States. Smith W. Purdam, who had traveled from the nation's capitol to serve as the representative of the United States Post Office, delivered the principal address. At the closing of the ceremony, the Reverend S. J. Hood, Pastor of the Philadelphia Presbyterian Church, gave the benediction. The 105th Engineer Band ended the ceremony with the "Star Spangled Banner," and the dignitaries retired to the Matthews Baptist Church to enjoy a specially prepared dinner.⁸

The Former Matthews Post Office Building was a vital part of the local community for more than two decades. Sisters Margaret and Mary Louise Phillips, long-time Matthews residents and daughters of Postmaster Oscar L. Phillips, described a typical day at the post office:

*"Mr Pete" Phillips, as the postmaster was affectionately known, would arrive at the post office at six o'clock a.m. Either he or Green Lee Stewart, the post office's African-American custodian, would then walk to the depot and pick up the locked mail bags which had been delivered by rail at 5:00 a.m. They would spend the next two hours readying the office for the day and opened the doors to the public at eight. Numerous residents kept post office boxes and the many more who received their mail in general delivery were almost always waiting at the doors. As mornings such as these were repeated, the post office quickly became indispensable to the daily lives of Matthews' residents. People would continue to flow in and out of the office all day, and 'Mr. Pete' would finally close the doors at 5 o'clock p.m. Again, either he or Stewart would then take the outgoing mail to the depot to be picked-up by the train that evening. Thus, the office was routinely in operation eleven to twelve hours a day."*⁹

Mary Louise Phillips explained that residents came to rely on the post office not only as a place where they could pick-up and/or post their mail, but also as a place to visit with friends, catch-up on the comings and goings in town and exchange gossip and pleasantries. The post office, she said "was essential in tying the community together." Her sister Margaret echoed this observation: "people would often say that 'I

saw so and so today at the post office.' Now, people say 'I went to the post office and I didn't see anybody I know.'"10

Farmers and others who lived in the surrounding countryside were served by three mail carriers who often packed scales and stamps in case rural residents wanted to post mail. According to the sisters, "Mr. Pete" made a habit of going the extra mile for the post office's rural customers. If, for instance, a shipment of biddies, or young chickens was delivered by the train on a Saturday, "Mr. Pete," they said, would often take it upon himself to deliver them. The Phillips sisters told a touching story. The death notice of a young serviceman arrived at the post office during World War II. "Mr. Pete" did not want the notice just simply to be "delivered" to the young man's family who lived well outside Matthews. He took it upon himself to take the letter personally to the family so they might receive the devastating news from a friend who cared. Actions such as these soon earned Postmaster Phillips a well-deserved place in the hearts of Matthews's citizens. In February 1957, four years after his retirement, "Mr. Pete" was selected Matthews's "Man of the Year."¹¹

By 1960 the Matthews Post Office had outgrown the Depression-era building, so the Postal Department began soliciting bids for the construction of a replacement office.¹² On September 23, 1962, after twenty three years of service, the "Old Matthews Post Office" received, sorted and delivered its last batch of mail; and its days as a post office were no more.¹³ However, it has been occupied by numerous businesses of various sorts over the ensuing years.

The former United States Post Office building stands as a significant, integral component of the historic development of Matthews. The building resulted from private funds invested for the public good by the "kindest man in town," Lester "Doc" Yandle.¹⁴ It was designed by one of the most popular figures in Matthews's political history, nine-term mayor, W. Alexis "Lex" Hood. Finally, it was operated by Matthews "Man of the Year," Oscar "Mr. Pete" Phillips.

Architectural Description

Special Note: The information contained in the architectural description is largely taken from Richard L. Mattson, *Nomination: Matthews Commercial Historical District*. United States Department of the Interior, 1996.



The Matthews Post Office is a single story, flat roofed, dark red brick building of Neo-Classical Revival styling. It is a rectangular, five-bay-wide and five-bay-deep structure and is set-back with front and side lawns. The front and side elevations are characterized by formality, featuring symmetrical fenestration, continuous stone cornice and a stepped parapet topped with metal flashing that conceals the flat roof. As one faces the main facade, one is met by five stone risers, enclosed within two brick cheek walls which are capped with thick, flat stone. Situated on the portico are two stone Tuscan columns *in antis*. The front elevation boasts two pairs of tall, narrow twelve-pane windows with prominent stone sills which flank the central double-door entrance which is topped by a lunette transom. The double doors and lunette transom are enclosed by a brick, stacked-header arch. Wider metal framed, multi-paned casement windows, also with stone sills, but with the added addition of metal security bars, grace the side elevations. The rear three-bay facade is characterized by the central double-door entrance which is sheltered by a shed roof. The interior of the structure is unobstructed, and birch hardwood floors run the length of the

building. Crown molding wraps the tops of the walls, and the ceiling is set at 11 feet. Every detail described above is original to the structure except replacement leaded glass which is a recent addition to the front double door entrance.

The building derives its structural integrity by its 8-inch thick brick walls, and the interior flooring of the structure is supported by numerous brick piers situated at regular intervals in the crawl space. The exterior veneer is comprised of a 4-inch scratch-faced brick laid in a running bond. Soldier courses line the tops of all window lintels. At floor level, a single out-set header course comprises a belt that runs the entire perimeter of the building. Two striking brick patterns distinguish the parapet. The first is a rectangle composed of two stacked, opposing header courses connected at the top and bottom by two rowlock courses (the front elevation's rectangular pattern is highlighted by a half-arch at the center of its upper rowlock course). Running bonds fill the square. The second is a square, similarly constructed. A single brick chimney, once used to vent the coal-fired furnace, rises from the roof on the northwestern side of the building. Immediately behind the post office sits a small outbuilding originally used for coal storage. It is constructed with a shed roof, and its brick walls are laid in a running bond.

1. Paula H. Lester, *Discover Matthews: From Cotton to Corporate* (Matthews, North Carolina: the Town of Matthews Tourism Council, 2000), p. 56.2 Richard L. Mattson, *Historic Landscapes of Mecklenburg County: The Small Towns*. July 1991.

2. Richard L. Mattson, *Historic Landscapes of Mecklenburg County: The Small Towns* (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission).

3. Ibid; Claudia Brown and Richard L. Mattson, *Nomination: Matthews Commercial Historical District*. United States Department of the Interior, 1996. Sec. 7., p. 1; One of the most intriguing features of Matthews's historical development is that it did not develop a robust cotton milling industry during its formative years of 1880-1920 as did its sister railroad towns of Pineville, Huntersville and Cornelius. Matthews, therefore, escaped the paternalistic and exploitive nature so often associated with textile manufacturing in North Carolina's Piedmont during the early twentieth century. As a result, Matthews's remained unencumbered by "mill village" development.

4 John Long, ed., "Matthews, Post Office History Intertwined," *The Southeast News*, 30 August, 1978; Deed Book 418, p. 63. 15 November, 1919; Deed Book 533, p. 168. 27 February, 1924; According to sisters Margaret and Mary Louise Phillips, long-time Matthews residents and daughters of Oscar L. Phillips, Matthews's Post Master from 1933-53, the two lots sat vacant for fifteen years while "Doc" Yandle concentrated on establishing his drug store. During that period, the Phillips sisters recalled, the lots were frequented by a "snake oil salesman" who would pitch several large tents and sell his elixirs in a "carnival" like atmosphere. Mary Elizabeth laughingly remembered sitting on the front porch of her father's home adjacent to the lots watching the "Medicine Man," as he was known by locals, and the crowds he

attracted "hoop and holler." Both sisters believed that the lots were also the site of the towns watering trough.

5. Interview with Lester H. Yandle Jr., Matthews, North Carolina. 13 October, 2004.

6. Beth M. Boland, "How To Apply The National Register Criteria To Post Offices," *National Register Bulletin* 13 (1994); p. 4; Interview with Margaret and Mary Louise Phillips, Matthews, North Carolina. 14 October, 2004.

7. Program of Dedication: Matthews Post Office, 3 May, 1939.

8. Program Dedication; Interview with Margaret and Mary Louise Phillips.

9. Interview with Margaret and Mary Louise Phillips.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid; "Matthews Man of the Year," *The Charlotte Observer*, 14 February, 1957.

12. "Matthews to Get New Post Office," *The Mecklenburg Times*, 1 September, 1960.

13. "A Dedication – And a Rally," *The Charlotte Observer*, 23 September, 1962.

14. Lester, *Discover Matthews*. p. 19.