

# Mecklenburg Investment Company Building



*This report was written on December 2, 1981*

**1. Name and location of the property:** The property known as the Mecklenburg Investment Company Building is located at 233-237 S. Brevard St. in Charlotte, NC.

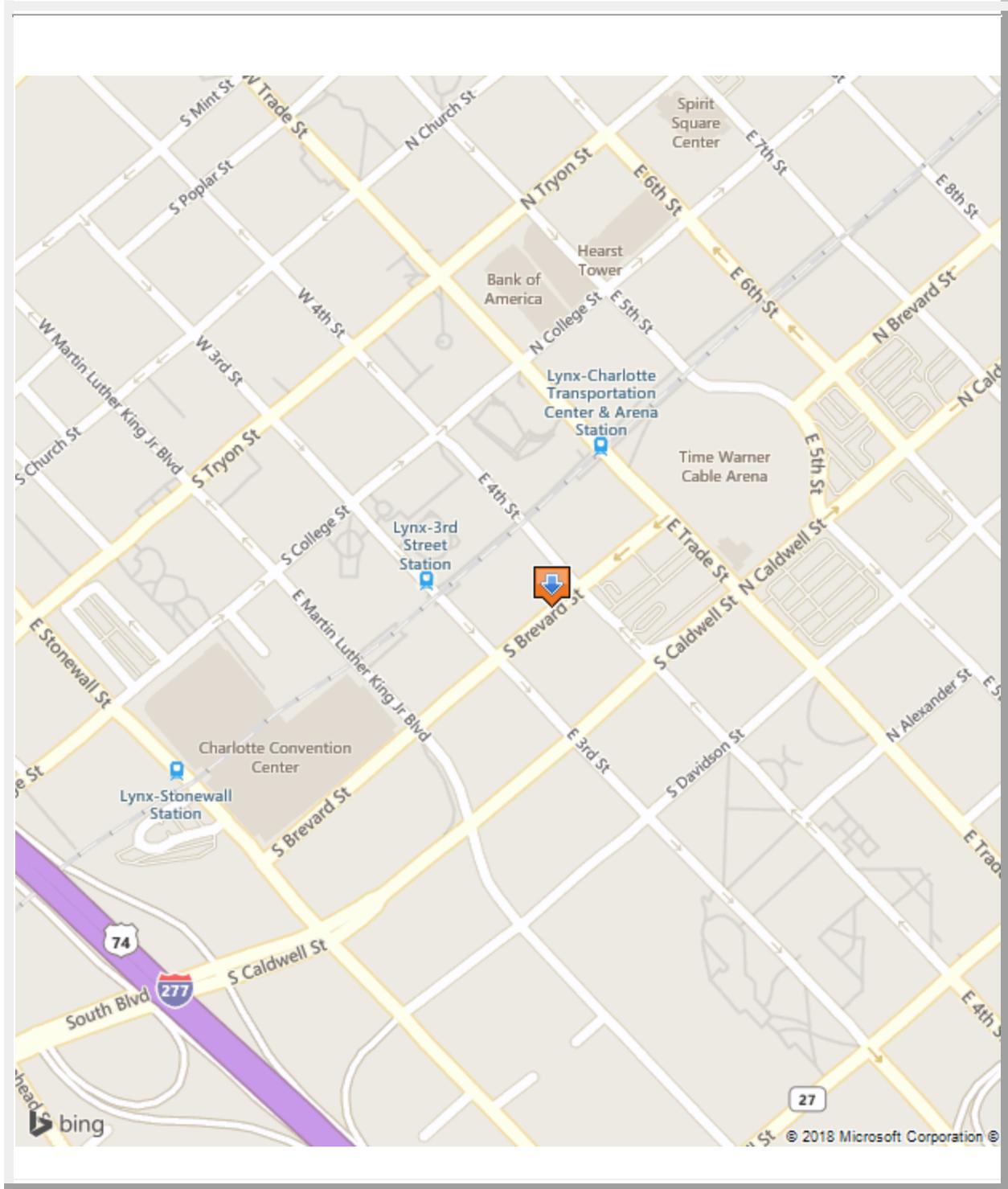
**2. Name, address, and telephone number of the present owner of the property:** The present owner of the property is:

The Mecklenburg Investment Co.  
233 S. Brevard St.  
Charlotte, NC 28202

Telephone: Not listed

**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 which depicts the location of the property.



**5. Current Deed Book Reference to the Property:** The most recent deed to this property is listed in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 454 at page 21. The current tax parcel number of the property is 125-024-06.

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

**7. A brief architectural description of the property:** This report contains a brief architectural description of the property by Jack O. Boyte, A.I.A.

**8. Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets the criteria set forth in N.C.G.S. 180A-399.4:**

**a. Significance in terms of its history, architecture and/or cultural**

**importance:** The Commission judges that the property known as the Mecklenburg Investment Company Building does possess special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations: 1) the building, erected in 1921-22, was the first office building in Charlotte built exclusively by and for black professionals; 2) the Mecklenburg Investment Company had some of the most prominent black citizens of Charlotte among its officers, including such notable local persons as A. E. Spears, C. R. Blake, and Thad L. Tate; 3) the building is one of the very few remnants of old Second Ward or Brooklyn, a major turn-of-the-century black neighborhood, which survives; and 4) the intricate exterior brickwork and the original interior features demonstrate that the structure possesses architectural significance.

**b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling and/or**

**association:** The Commission judges that the architectural included in this report demonstrates that the property known as the Mecklenburg Investment Company Building meets this criterion.

**9. Ad Valorem Tax Appraisal:** The Commission is aware that designation would allow the owner to apply annually for an automatic deferral of 50% of the Ad Valorem taxes on all or any portion of the property which becomes "historic property." The current Ad Valorem tax appraisal of the entire .083 acre tract is \$25,200. The Ad Valorem tax appraisal on the improvements is \$16,650. The total Ad Valorem tax appraisal is \$41,850. The most recent annual Ad Valorem tax bill on the property was \$764.59. The building contains 10,164 base square feet.

**Date of preparation of this report:** December 2, 1981

**Prepared by:** Dr. Dan L. Morrill, Director  
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### *Historical Overview*

*Dr. William H. Huffman*

In May, 1922, construction began on a building which was unique in the city of Charlotte. The MIC Building was the first structure planned and executed by some of the black leaders of the community to accommodate black businesses, professional offices, civic and fraternal organizations. It was built as an anchor for the business and social activities of the former Brooklyn community of Second Ward by the Mecklenburg Investment Company, an investment group organized for that purpose and from which the building received its name.

The MIC was incorporated on May 6, 1921, with Mr. C. R. Blake, Sr., as president; Mr. A. E. Spears, vice-president; Thad L. Tate, treasurer; and Dr. A. J. Williams, a dentist, secretary.<sup>4</sup> The Board of Directors was composed of the above officers and eight other business and professional leaders of the black community. In addition to dentists, doctors, lawyers, other professionals and businessmen, the shareholders also included a number of members of the Johnson C. Smith University faculty. Some of the notable figures involved in organizing the MIC included the following two leaders of the community:

Thad L. Tate (1865-1951), who owned and operated the Uptown Barber Shop for many years and was quite active in the business and civic affairs of the city, which included many efforts to improve the quality of life in the black community. Through his initiatives and connections with white business and political leaders, among them Gov. Cameron Morrison, Thad Tate helped establish the Brevard Street branch of the Public Library and a local branch of the YMCA for blacks, and was instrumental in

founding the Morrison Training School for black youths in Hoffman, NC, where a building is named in his honor.<sup>6</sup>

Dr. J. T. Williams (1859-1924), an original investor and member of the board, was a prominent and respected educator, physician, businessman and public servant. In 1882, at the age of 23, Dr. Williams was the Assistant Principal of the Charlotte Graded School, from which he resigned to study medicine. Six years later, in 1886, he became one of the first three black physicians licensed to practice medicine in North Carolina, and built a prosperous surgical practice and drug company. His public service included serving on the Board of Health of Mecklenburg County, and being twice elected to the Board of Aldermen in 1888 and 1890. In 1898, President McKinley appointed him consul to Sierra Leone, a post he held until 1907. In 1921, Dr. Williams built an elegant 3-story house in the same block as the MIC building which was designed by Charlotte architect Louis Asbury.<sup>8</sup> J. T. Williams Junior High School is named in honor of Dr. Williams.

The Mecklenburg Investment Company purchased the lot for the building in July, 1921, from Nancy Kerr Brown Young and her husband, Dolph M. Young.<sup>9</sup> Mrs. Young had inherited the property from her father, Peter Marshall Brown (1859-1913), a prominent nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Charlotte businessman and a major owner of downtown real estate in the city. He was the son of Col. John L. Brown of Charlotte, and was president of the Traders Land Company.

On April 29, 1922, the contractor, W. W. Smith, obtained a building permit from the city for the construction of the building.<sup>12</sup> William W. Smith (1873-1924) was an experienced designer and builder who specialized in brick structures. He was a member of the nearby Grace A.M.E. Zion church located in the same block, which he had also built in 1900-1902. Thad Tate, Dr. J. T. Williams and a number of MIC shareholders were also members of the Grace Church. Since the building permit indicated that there was no architect, W. W. Smith probably designed the structure himself, which was estimated to cost \$28,000.00. The three-story building was planned to accommodate six stores on the first floor, sixteen offices on the second, and four offices and an assembly room on the third.

In late 1922, the MIC building was completed, and a number of black doctors, dentists (including Dr. A. J. Williams, the first MIC secretary), lawyers, other professionals and businesses, who were scattered in various parts of the city, often in unsuitable quarters, moved into the building. For some forty years the building served as a center for social, business, and professional activities for Charlotte's black citizens. Yancey's Drug Store operated in a corner shop, followed by a popular restaurant, the Savoy Inn, and a number of Charlotte's black Masonic lodges began in the meeting room on the shirt floor. Social clubs there often heard the music of Jimmy Gunn's dance band (J.

H. Gunn was also a school principal after whom J. H. Gunn school is named). According to MIC's president, who is a grandson of Thad Tate, the building was a financial success to the extent that the mortgage was retired in less than ten years, and thus was not a problem when the Great Depression struck.

In the 1960s, the character of downtown Charlotte changed, which affected the prosperity of the building. As Brooklyn and other downtown neighborhoods decayed, many blacks moved to West Charlotte. During that time streetcar service from the newer areas to downtown was discontinued, urban renewal destroyed Second Ward as a residential neighborhood, and integration facilitated many blacks moving to newer offices throughout the city, and thus tenancy in the MIC Building dropped considerably.<sup>17</sup> As a part of an increasingly revitalized downtown, however, a renovated MIC Building could still play a vital role in the business life of Charlotte, and at the same time a unique part of the city's history could thereby be preserved as a cultural link with its past, which helps identify the city's distinct character.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Charlotte Observer*, May 2, 1922, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Aurelia Tate Henderson, Charlotte, NC, 15 May 1981.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Secretary of State's Office, Raleigh, NC.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Mr. Ray Booton, President, MIC, 26 May 1981.

<sup>6</sup> *Charlotte Observer*, March 30, 1951, p. 22A and March 31, 1951, p. 12A; interview with Mrs. Henderson cited above.

<sup>7</sup> *Charlotte Observer*, June 9, 1924, p. 10.

<sup>8</sup> Building Permit, City of Charlotte, 14 June 1921.

<sup>9</sup> Deed Book 454, p. 21, 2 July 1921. Part of the compensation was shares in the MIC; Interview with Dolph Young, Charlotte, N.C. 15 September 1981.

<sup>10</sup> Beer's Map of Charlotte, 1887, Will Book Q. p. 323, probated 7 May 1913; Deed Book 345, p. 8, 8 Feb. 1915; Interview with Mr. Young, cited above.

<sup>11</sup> Mecklenburg County Certificate of Death, Book 2, p. 934.

<sup>12</sup> Building Permit, City of Charlotte, 29 April 1922.

<sup>13</sup> William H. Huffman, "A Brief History of the Grace A.M.E. Zion Church", April, 1980.

<sup>14</sup> See note 12.

<sup>15</sup> *Charlotte News*, July 25, 1980: "On Our Street" by John Vaughan.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Ray Booton, cited in note 5.

<sup>17</sup> See note 15.

### *Architectural Description*

*Jack O. Boyte*

In Charlotte's teeming Second Ward in the years following the first World War, a group of leading black citizens banded together to build the Mecklenburg Investment Company Building. On a South Brevard Street location close by a neighborhood branch of the Carnegie Free Library and the early home of the AME Zion Publishing House, the group sponsored a structure unique in Charlotte's history. Facing uptown at the corner of East Third Street, the building escaped demolition during Charlotte's relentless urban renewal of the 60s and 70s. There it remains -- an extraordinary example of early architecture built by and for the city's black community.

The three story rectangular brick structure has shops along the Brevard and Third Street sidewalks. Walks which even today are still edged with granite curb stones put down when the first paved streets were installed downtown. The sturdy building is 42 feet wide and 98 feet deep. The three bay front facade along Brevard is a carefully composed pattern of ornamental buff brick in varying shades and textures. Red brick soldiers and headers offer stark contrast in patterned inserts here and there. Here a

center door with an arched transom opens to a tile floored foyer from which a wide stair leads to upper floors. On Third Street there is an elongated facade with eight equally spaced wood sash windows on the upper floors. The brick and stone veneer on this wall is a less elaborate combination of ornamentation.

The building's architecture cannot be categorized in the usual sense. Its fenestration follows no rigid academic guide, though the composition was obviously influenced by the widely popular commercial style of the 20s. So the intriguing blend of cliches, borrowed from other designs, creates a structure of rare charm and significance. The nearby AME Zion Publishing Company building, demolished in recent times to make way for a clean modern structure, was remarkably like the M. I. C. building. The similarities occur primarily in the unique and imaginative patterns worked into the main facade of stone and brick veneer, as well as the comfortable walk-up three story plan. There is no record of a professional designer or architect having been employed on the structures, but it is known that both were built by William W. Smith, a successful and busy black brick mason who lived nearby on South Caldwell Street. It is most likely that Smith designed and built both structures -- certainly an appealing, while conjectural, notion. As noted above, the front and side street facades where special elaborations occur have rudimentary suggestion of elements which are consistent with more formal classical compositions of the time. There is a beginning, a middle, and an end in the Sullivan tradition.

Ground floor veneer has horizontal recessed bands which reflect traditional rustication. At the second and third levels are rows of windows separated by horizontal projecting bands of brick headers and cast stone. Spandrel panels of patterned flashed headers with lighter colored plinths give emphasis to the window stacks. On the front each corner is punctuated vertically with repeated triple course quoin stacks. Completing the tripartite theme of the fenestration is an elaborate cornice. Laid just above the third floor cast stone window lintels is a series of closely spaced corbeled brick brackets. Over this is a broad brick band divided to match the window bay spaces embellished with diamond patterned brick headers. Finally, the crowning cornice consists of another band of brick brackets supporting three stretcher courses -- each slightly corbeled as they rise to form a high parapet.

In the usual mode of the first quarter of this century, the building has load bearing exterior brick walls and interior floor and ceiling systems of wood. Joist spans were determined generally by the location of corridor walls, yet at times are strangely inconsistent. There appears to be no predetermined floor framing pattern. This is a further suggestion of a provincial origin for the design.

Interior finishes are unadorned. Woodwork is simple with few molded shapes. Walls are all plaster on wood lath. Floors are narrow tongue and groove pine strips. At the

head of the entrance stair a center corridor runs the length of the second floor. Along each side are evenly spaced two paneled doors which open to side offices. The floor above is an open meeting hall still used for lodge meetings. It remains unaltered since first erected. The rear and left sides, which were expected to be concealed from view, are colorful facades of common red brick laid in American bond of one headed course for each four or five stretcher courses. Window openings have skillfully laid arched brick lintels of double headers. Sills are projecting stretcher courses supported by a single header course.

There is little questions that this is an important building in Charlotte's preserved architectural inventory. It is the sole remaining commercial structure near the Square, whose origins abide in black history. Furthermore, the likelihood that its designer and builder was a skilled black craftsman, W.W. Smith, lends it added significance. The center of town is enriched by its presence.