

MECKLENBURG MILL



This report was written on July 3, 1986

1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the Old Mecklenburg Mill is located on N. Davidson St., just opposite its intersection with 37th St., in Charlotte, North Carolina.

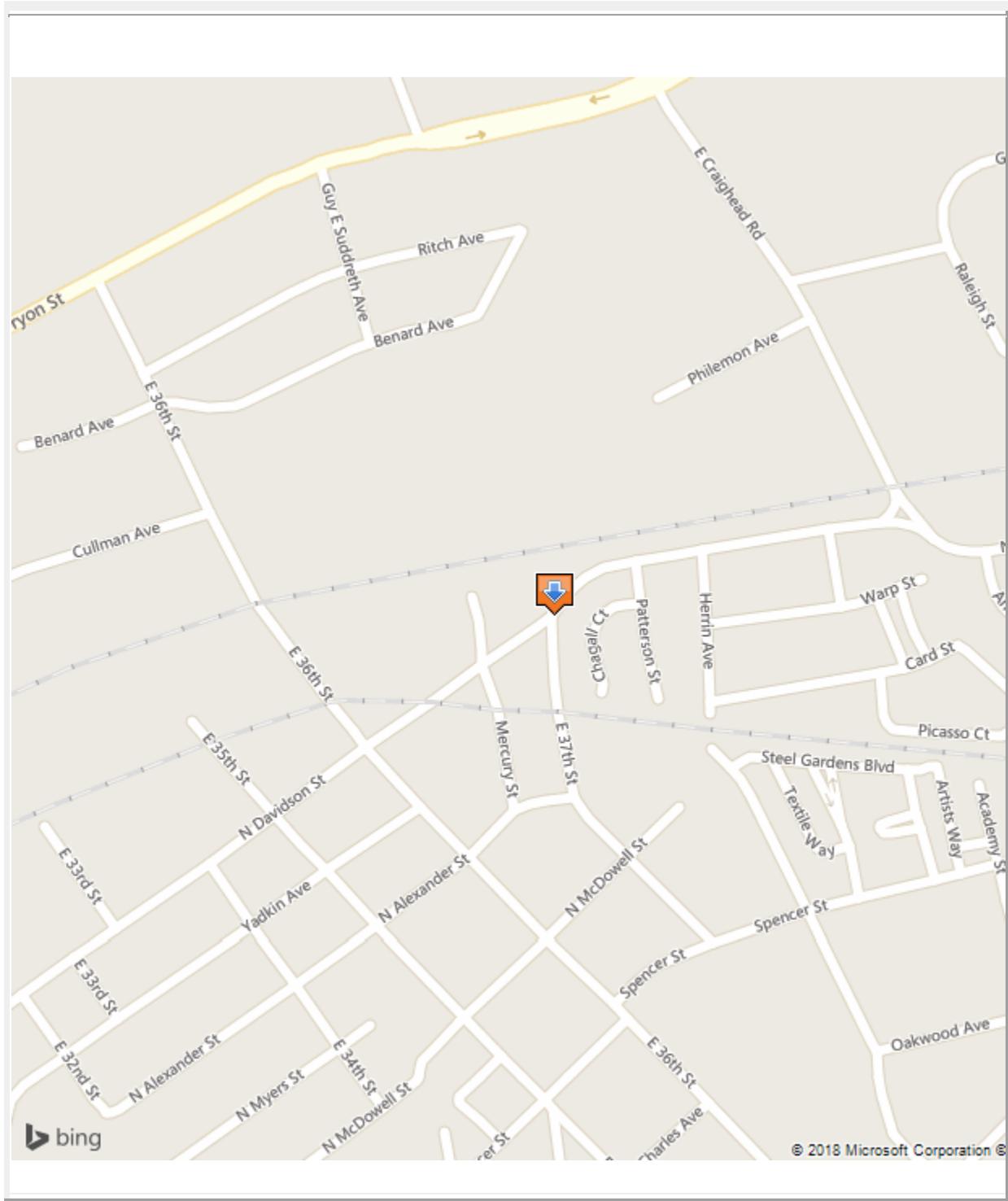
2. Name, address, and telephone number of the present owner of the property: The owner of the property is:

Robert Stark and Wife, Ava E. Stark
c/o Ava Industries Inc.
401 E. 36th St.
Charlotte, NC 28205

Telephone: (704) 376-2680

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 recorded in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 4327, page 816. The Tax Parcel Number of the property is: 091-101-04.

6. A brief historical sketch of the property: This report contains a brief historical sketch of the property prepared by Thomas W. Hanchett.

7. A brief architectural description of the property: This report contains a brief architectural description of the property prepared by Mr. Thomas W. Hanchett.

8. Documentation of why and in what ways the property or designation set forth in N.C.G.S. 160A-399.4:

a. Special significance in terms of its history, architecture, and/or cultural importance: The Commission judges that the property known as the Old Mecklenburg Mill does possess special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations: 1) built in 1903-05, the Old Mecklenburg Mill is one of Charlotte's best-preserved early textile mills; 2) the Old Mecklenburg Mill is an important historic landmark in North Charlotte, one of Charlotte's most significant textile mill districts at the turn of the century; and 3) the Old Mecklenburg Mill offers dramatic evidence of the era when textile manufacturing was a leading component of Charlotte-Mecklenburg's economy.

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 property known as the Old Mecklenburg 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 "historic property." The current appraised value of the improvements on the entire tract, which includes the nearby Old Johnston Mill, is \$168,590. The current appraised value of the 7.581 acres of land is \$128,790. The total appraised value of the property is \$297,380. The property is zoned I2.

Date of Preparation of this Report: July 3, 1986

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Historical Overview

Thomas W. Hanchett and Dr. William H. Huffman

The Mecklenburg Mill is a two-story brick textile factory located in the North Charlotte mill district on the main line of the Southern Railway. The plant was built 1903-1905, in the midst of Mecklenburg County's heyday as the number two textile manufacturing county in North Carolina. In 1986 the building is little changed from its 1910s appearance, and is of historic importance as one of Charlotte's best-preserved early textile mills.

Charlotte: Textile Boom Town

Though all the spinning mills that once hummed around the city are now silent, textile manufacturing represents a major historical force in the growth of Charlotte. Charlotte was first a trading center for the cotton farmers of the southern North Carolina Piedmont region, starting in the 1850s when the earliest railroads reached the city. Following the Civil War, leaders across the South began a drive for a "New South" based on manufacturing rather than farming. "Bring the Mills to the Cotton!" became the battle cry. In 1881 Charlotte's first mill opened to spin cotton into thread.¹ After that initial factory, Mecklenburg's industrial growth was nothing short of meteoric. By 1900 Mecklenburg County boasted sixteen mills with a combined total of 94,392 spindles and 1,456 looms, making it North Carolina's second most important cotton-spinning county, following neighboring Gaston County.²

Mecklenburg remained among the state's top three textile counties at least into the mid 1920s.³ By that time the textile belt of the Piedmont South -- stretching from Virginia through the Carolinas into Georgia -- was pulling ahead of New England to become the world's main cotton-manufacturing region. North Carolina was ranked as the number one cotton-spinning state in America.⁴ Charlotte emerged as a center not only of manufacturing but also for bankers, wholesalers, machinery dealers and others serving the vast textile region. In 1880, before the first mill opened, Charlotte was a modest town of 7,094 people, the fifth-largest urban place in the Carolinas.⁵ By the end of the 1920s it had grown to 82,675 and taken the lead as the largest city in North and South Carolina.⁶

The Mecklenburg Mill: Early Years

The Mecklenburg Mill opened at the height of this textile boom, part of the new North Charlotte mill district located along North Davidson street on the Southern Railway just outside the city. The district was begun in 1903 around the huge Highland Park #3 mill owned by William E. Holt, Jr. of Alamance County, North Carolina, and Charles Worth Johnston of Charlotte.⁷ Highland Park #3 was North Carolina's largest mill when it opened in 1904.⁸ Eventually North Charlotte held four major mills, workers' housing and a commercial

area, plus several smaller textile-related concerns including the factory of the Grinnell Company, a leading supplier of sprinkler fire-prevention systems to Southern mills.

On March 18, 1903, less than a month after plans for the Highland Park #3 were announced, three North Carolina businessmen chartered the Mecklenburg Cotton Mills Company. Charlotte investors Robert L. Tate and S. B. Alexander, Jr., subscribed to 100 and 50 shares of stock respectively. B. Lawrence Duke of Durham took the remaining 100 shares. Duke was scion of the famous North Carolina tobacco family, the son of millionaire James B. Duke's half-brother Brodie Duke. In 1903 James B. Duke was just becoming interested in the hydro-electric potential of the Charlotte area, an interest that would lead to the creation of Duke Power, and it may be that the nephew's textile investment and the uncle's electrical explorations were in some way connected.

On May 25 of the same year Holt, Johnston and their partner J.S. Spencer sold the Mecklenburg Cotton Mill Company land for a mill and village, to be located north of the Highland Park #3 plant.¹⁰ In August of 1904 the *Charlotte Observer* wrote:

"Within a few more months North Charlotte will be one of the busiest and most populous parts of the city or suburbs. The new plant of the Highland Park Manufacturing is nearly ready ... and the new Mecklenburg Mills ... will soon be ready to start up."¹¹

When the Sanborn Company of New York mapped Charlotte in early 1905, it noted that the Mecklenburg Mill facility was scheduled to open in summer.¹² The main section of the mill was a two-story structure with a brick exterior and a timber frame. Carding took place in the basement, spooling, warping and weaving on the first floor, and spinning on the second. A stair-tower slightly higher than the main block projected from the front of the main facade, and a similar elevator tower stood at the rear. A one-and-a-half-story boiler room wing was attached to the north side of the building. South of the building was a separate one-story cotton warehouse of wooden construction. The mill village, composed of one-story wooden single-family cottages, stretched out along what are now East 37th Street and Mercury Street in front of the building. Just north of the village was a mill pond (now drained). The pond supplied water to a tall, freestanding steel water tower in front of the mill, which in turn fed the factory's Grinnell sprinkler system.

A report by the North Carolina Department of Labor in 1910 summed up the statistics of the facility.¹³ The mill had 12,000 spindles, 300 looms, and 26 cards, ranking it among Charlotte's mid-sized textile factories. A 450 horsepower steam engine powered the plant. The Mecklenburg consumed a million pounds of raw cotton per year and produced printed cloth sold through J.P. Stevens & Co., Agents, of Boston and New York.

The only addition to the mill building occurred sometime between 1905 and 1911.¹⁴ The owners attached a one-story "cotton room" wing to the south side of the plant. Its timber frame, brick walls, large arched windows, and wooden cornice matched the original structure precisely.

Most textile workers in this era were rural folk who came to the mill villages from Piedmont farms and Blue Ridge hollows. An article in the *Southern Textile Bulletin*, December 25, 1919, gave a picture of life they found in the Mecklenburg Mill village:

"Approximately 175 operatives and helpers are employed by the Mecklenburg Mills Company.... The mill village is most picturesque and beautiful in its natural setting of native trees, with a pretty little lake nearby There are 53 neat, attractive cottages in the village [.]... equipped with electric lights and water. The management has under consideration the building of a number of new and modern cottages in the pretty grove that overlooks the lake (now Patterson, Herrin, Warp and Card streets).... Each cottage has a large space for a vegetable garden and many fine vegetables are raised both in summer and winter, also a good quantity of beans, peas, corn, etc are canned in the summer. There is a piggery where the mill community keep their hogs in a segregated spot, and many hundreds of pounds of pork is raised each year. Of course there are some chickens in the village but these are not encouraged for they are always liable to get out and do damage in the gardens. There are quite a number of cows that furnish plenty of milk and butter, and these are kept in a perfectly sanitary stables away from the houses."

The cheery tone of the article obscures the fact that workers in this mill, as elsewhere in the South, actually spent most of their waking hours in the hot and dusty factory. In the early years of this century, men, women, and children over 10 years old worked 10 to 12 hours each weekday, and six more hours on Saturday.

Later Years: A Struggle for Profitability

There is evidence that not long after its opening, the Mecklenburg Mill began to have financial troubles. Documents indicate that there was frequent turnover among principal stockholders in the late 1910s and early 1920s.¹⁵ By 1922 J. D. Norwood was president and W.T. Bush secretary, and the firm's official office was located in Salisbury, North Carolina.¹⁶ On October 17, 1923 Mecklenburg Mills declared bankruptcy, and in July of 1926 Mercury Mills, a Delaware-based corporation, bought the plant at a foreclosure sale.¹⁷

The factory became known as the Mercury Mill, and continues to be popularly known by that name today despite a string of later owners. Martel Mills, another Delaware outfit, bought the plant in 1929.¹⁸ On the eve of world War II the Johnston Mills Company acquired the factory and added it to their growing "Johnston Group" of mills, headquartered in the 16-story Johnston Building in downtown Charlotte.¹⁹ The Company was controlled by the family of North Charlotte founder Charles Worth Johnston, and among its holdings was massive Highland Park #3 Mill and the 1913 Johnston Mill, located on North Davidson Street just south of the Mecklenburg Mill.

In the early 1950s the Johnston Company reorganized its North Charlotte operations, selling off the mill houses to workers, and also donating money to build a community center, now known as the Johnston YMCA.²⁰ The company was able to operate profitably until the late 1960s, when

it began to shut down plants. Highland Park #3 closed in 1969, and the Mecklenburg Mill stopped operations at about the same time.²¹

The Mecklenburg was used for storage, then stood vacant for several years as it passed through the hands of various investors. Chavis Textile Manufacturing of Gastonia bought it in 1975, and sold it in 1976 to Confederate Textile Machinery Inc., of Greenville, South Carolina.²² In August 1980 Robert and Ava Stark purchased the property.²³ Today Stark runs a spinning operation and a textile machinery repair service in the adjacent Johnston Mill, and he hopes to renovate the Mecklenburg Mill and expand it.

The Mecklenburg Mill has felt the effects of time and low maintenance. Its windows and doors are broken and some of the frames have rotted away. All machinery and equipment is gone, except for the Grinnell Sprinkler System. Yet the basic building is in good shape. Unlike most Charlotte mills, its windows were never bricked in, and it has experienced no additions and very little demolition since 1911. Only the Hoskins Mill, across town off Rozelles Ferry Road, rivals the Mecklenburg as a well-preserved early textile mill in "as-built" condition.

Because of its importance to the development of the North Charlotte area and to the neighborhood's daily life for over six decades, because it symbolizes the significance of textile manufacturing in the growth of the city, and because of its high degree of preservation, the Mecklenburg Mill merits designation as a Charlotte Historic Property.

NOTES

¹ Dan L. Morrill, "A Survey of Cotton Mills in Charlotte, North Carolina" (Charlotte: Charlotte Mecklenburg Historic Properties Commission, 1981). William H. Huffman, "Charlotte Cotton Mills: Survey and Research Report" (Charlotte: Charlotte Mecklenburg Historic Properties Commission, 1984). For more on the importance of cotton trade and manufacture to the growth of Charlotte see Thomas W. Hanchett, "Charlotte and Its Neighborhoods: The Growth of a New South City, 1850- 1930" (1986, unpublished manuscript in the files of the Charlotte Mecklenburg Historic Properties Commission).

² *Fourteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of Labor and Printing for the State of North Carolina*, 1900, pp. 176-81.

³ *Annual Report of the Bureau of Labor and Printing for the State of North Carolina*, 1900-1926. Title varies slightly. After 1926 the state stopped publishing detailed data.

⁴ Broadus Mitchell and George Sinclair Mitchell, *The Industrial Revolution in the South* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1930), p. 29. In 1927 the South had 62% of the mills in the United States, and the value of North Carolina's product surpassed that of former leader

Massachusetts. United States Bureau of the Census, Nineteenth Census: 1970, vol. I, part 35, table 7.

⁵ United States Bureau of the Census, Sixteenth Census: 1940, "North and South Carolina: Number of Inhabitants," table A.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Hanchett, "Charlotte and Its Neighborhoods," Chapter 15.

⁸ *Eighteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of Labor and Printing for the State of North Carolina*, 1904, pp. 93-97. Designed by noted Charlotte inventor Stuart Cramer, the Highland Park #3 was also among the region first mills designed specifically for electric operation.

⁹ Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office: Record of Corporations Book I, p. 344.

¹⁰ Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office: Deed Book 1 79, p. 206.

¹¹ *Charlotte Observer*, August 4, 1904.

¹² Sanborn Company, "Charlotte, 1905" (New York: Sanborn Company, 1905).

¹³ *Twenty-fourth Annual Report of the Department of Labor and Printing of the State of North Carolina*, 1910, pp. 172-73, 1923.

¹⁴ Sanborn Company, "Charlotte, 1911" (New York: Sanborn Company, 1911).

¹⁵ Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office: Record of Corporations Book 2, p. 390; Book 6, p. 458, Book 6, p. 518; Book 7, p. 101.

¹⁶ Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office: Record of Corporations Book 7, p. 101.

¹⁷ Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office: Deed Book 628, p. 554.

¹⁸ Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office: Deed Book 748, p. 1; Deed Book 846, p. 336. Martel was reorganized in December of 1933.

¹⁹ Johnston bought the mill November 24, 1941. Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office: Deed Book 1065, p. 279.

²⁰ Marjorie B. Young, ed., *Textile Leaders of the South* (Columbia, SC: James R. Young, 1963), pp. 110-1111, 767. *One Hundredth Anniversary: Young Men's Christian Association of Charlotte and Mecklenburg* (Charlotte: Charlotte YMCA, 1974), p. 8. For house sales see for instance Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office: Deed Book 1633, pp. 367, 411.

²¹ *Charlotte News*, March 13, 1975, August 19, 1978, *Charlotte Observer*, March 14, 1975. Charlotte's last working spinning mill was the Johnston, which closed in 1975.

²² Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office: Deed Book 3813, p. 366; Deed Book 3867, p. 640. 23.

²³ Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office: Deed Book 4327, p. 816.

Architectural Description

Thomas W. Hanchett

Today the Mecklenburg Mill is among Charlotte's best-preserved early textile factories, despite the fact that it has long been vacant. Except for a one-story south wing added before 1911, and for removal of the top story of the front tower, the brick and timber building remains much as it was built in 1903-05. The site also retains its original cotton warehouse, plus two small frame structures which housed fire-fighting equipment.

The Mecklenburg Mill is sited with the Southern Railroad at its rear (west) side and North Davidson Street at its front. The main block of the building is two-stories tall with a low-pitched gable roof. Large segmental-arched window openings divide the side facades into 9 bays and the front and rear facades into 17 bays. The rear facade differs slightly from the front in that it extends downward to provide windows for the basement level. At the edges of the building's roof, heavy curved brackets support a cornice built up of wooden molding. On the south end of the building, just below the cornice, one may still read the words "Mecklenburg Mills Co." painted on the wall. Walls are brick, alternating one course of headers with six courses of stretchers. The window arches are composed of three header courses. Each wooden window unit consists of a pair of nine-over-nine-pane double-hung sash windows, each with its own six-pane transom. The wood and glass of the windows and doors throughout the mill is badly deteriorated, but most of the original material remains. The only major exception is in the downstairs front windows, which have differently-shaped panes, and may not be original.

When the structure was built, towers were a popular feature of mill design. They provided a decorative architectural element, and also helped guard against the potential spread of fire by making stairs and elevators separate from the main building. The Mecklenburg Mill has a stair tower at the center of its front facade and a similar elevator tower at the rear. A 1919 photo from the *Southern Textile Bulletin* shows that the front tower was originally three-stories tall. Today the top story is gone but the rest of the tower survives in good condition. At the top, five courses of brick step outward to a course of limestone. Recessed panels with corbelled dentils at the top frame the windows and the window and door openings have an extra corbelled brick course in

the arches. Stone steps lead to the front door. At the rear, the elevator tower has been more severely altered. It too is two-stories tall, and portions of its walls have been replaced with concrete-block and new brick.

At the south side of the main block is the one-story "Cotton Room" wing added sometime between 1905 and 1911. It is six bays long and four bays wide, with one of the end bays being a door. In its gabled roof, cornice, brickwork, and windows the wing matches the original structure exactly, indicating that it was probably the work of the same designer and builder.

At the north side of the main block is an asymmetrical one-story-and-basement wing. This collection of rooms originally held the steam boilers, engines, and belt shafts which powered the factory. Windows here are smaller than in the main structure. Near the northeast corner of the wing, a one-story extension holds the pump which transferred pond water to the water tower. At the north end of the wing is the tall, round, free standing smokestack, constructed of brick.

The interior of the mill is characterized by wide open spaces with no decoration and virtually no partitions. The brick walls around the windows are painted white, a color chosen to reflect the most light and thus give workers the best-lit working conditions. The main block and the one-story Cotton Room wing exemplify fire-resistant "standard mill construction" developed in New England at the behest of fire insurance companies at the end of the nineteenth century. The visitor might be surprised that wood is used for the columns, beams, and floors, but it consists of massive pieces of hardwood that are extremely slow to burn and will not bend in a hot fire as metal will. The first floor of the main block is a good place to see this construction. Three rows of round wooden columns run the length of the space, set on 10' x 27' centers, according to fire insurance maps. At the top of each column is a cast iron collar-plate. On the columns and collar-plates rest the huge beams that carry the second floor -- solid timbers approximately 1' x 2'. Resting on the beams is a thick sub-floor, which is covered by thinner floorboards. Running near the ceiling are the pipes and sprinklers of the Grinnell fire prevention system (which is controlled by valves located near the front of the basement).

This same construction is found with minor variations throughout the main block and Cotton Room wing. In the second story of the main block, the columns hold the angled roof beams. The main block originally had a full basement, where thick brick piers were substituted for most of the wooden columns. A brick wall across the basement separated it into a north half and a south half. Recently owner Robert Stark removed the flooring and beams above the south half and filled the basement with earth, taken from an excavation in front of the mill.

The mill's one-story-and-basement north wing is built a bit differently. Here brick walls divide the space into three units. The most northerly unit originally held the coal-fired boilers of the steam power - plant. Today a wooden first floor extends over only half of the space, forming a balcony. Beyond the balcony is a huge coal-fired furnace of brick and metal, reached by steel catwalks. This is probably not part of the original steam power plant, but rather a later heating system. The next unit -- between the boiler room and the main plant -- is labeled as a "dynamo room" on early maps. In recent years this space seems to have been used for offices, and portions of wooden office partitions remain. Originally the space may have held two engines: an electric generator which ran the mill's lighting system; and a second engine which provided power to the

looms, cards and spinning frames by means of a system of belts and shafting throughout the mill. Early maps label the high-ceilinged third unit, adjacent to the engine room as a "beltway." Today a wooden floor separates it into a main level and a basement level. It is possible that this area was once completely open, and held the wide leather belts which connected the steam engine to the metal power shafts on each floor of the main block. Unfortunately, all traces of engines and shafting are gone today.

Inside the front stair tower is the single stair which serves the main block. It is of wood with a solid tongue-and-groove balustrade. A wooden lattice-work door seals off the topmost landing. Inside the rear elevator tower, the wooden elevator gates may still be seen behind slicing sheet-metal fire doors. The Charlotte-manufactured elevator cage is intact, complete with a cast-metal control panel carrying the raised letters "PARK ELEVATOR CHARLOTTE N.C." The elevator motor is gone.

The mill site contains notable structures in addition to the main building. Behind the mill is a small railroad trestle where coal cars unloaded. South of the mill is the original cotton warehouse. It is a one-story board-and-batten structure with sliding doors. A red brick firewall, extending above the roof, divides the building into two unequal bays. In front of the cotton warehouse and in front of the mill are a pair of tiny "German" sided wooden buildings, each about the size and shape of a outhouse. These date from the mill's earliest years (one is shown in the 1919 Southern Textile Bulletin photograph) and still perform their original function -- holding spools of firehose connected by underground pipes to the Grinnell system. Across North Davidson Street, beyond the mill site proper, the old Mecklenburg Mill water tower and many of the workers' cottages can still be seen.