

Survey and Research Report
on the
Calvin and Margaret Neal House



1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the Calvin and Margaret Neal House is located at 612 Walnut Avenue in Charlotte, North Carolina.
2. Name and address of the current owner(s) of the property:

The current owners of the property are:

John Caratelli and David Greer

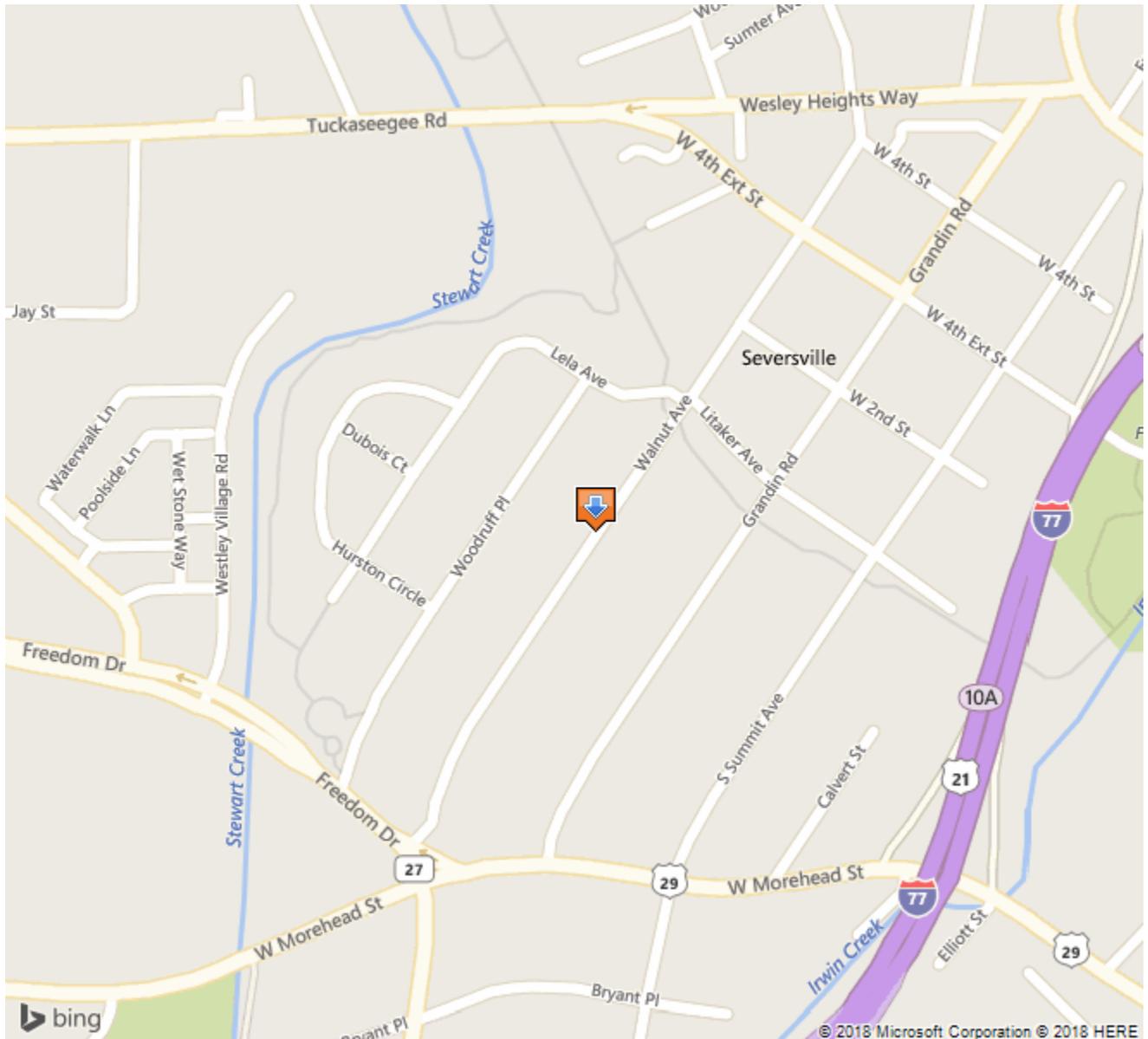
612 Walnut Avenue

Charlotte, NC

Telephone: (704) 331-0120

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 the property can be found in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 3994, p. 713. The tax parcel number for the property is 071-021-41.

6. A brief historical sketch of the property: This report contains a brief historical sketch of the property prepared by Emily D. Ramsey.
7. A brief architectural description of the property: This report contains a brief architectural description of the property prepared by Emily D. Ramsey.
8. Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets the 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 Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission judges that the Calvin and Margaret Neal House possesses special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations:

1. The Calvin and Margaret Neal House, constructed in 1927, is an unusual and excellently-preserved example of early twentieth-century rubble stone veneer in Charlotte. The house, one of only approximately 22 rubble stone veneer houses built in the city between 1920 and the early 1940s, is an unusual mix of architectural detailing, and, unlike most of its stone contemporaries, every major exterior feature of the house (including the front portico and porte-cochere) is covered entirely in fieldstone.
2. The Neal House is the only stone rubble house in the Wesley Heights neighborhood, a 1920s Charlotte suburb characterized by its homogenous housing stock, and is a testament to the high level of craftsmanship possible in what would otherwise be considered a common vernacular structure.
3. The Neal House, constructed most likely from stock plans, is a tangible reflection of the way in which homeowners during the twentieth century post-war housing boom found ways to individualize their homes. The unusual and striking use of masonry (both in the stonework walls and the unique brick detailing around windows and

doors) in the Neal House reflects the care with which Calvin Neal oversaw the construction of his home.

b. Integrity of design, workmanship, materials, feeling, and association.

The Commission contends that the architectural description prepared by Emily D. Ramsey demonstrates that the Calvin and Margaret Neal House 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 that becomes a designated “historic landmark.” The current appraised value of the house and two-story garage apartment is \$54,710. The appraised value of the .189-acre lot is \$7,500.

Date of preparation of this report:

February 1, 2003

Prepared by:

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2436 N. Albany Ave., #1
Chicago, IL 60647

**Statement of Significance
The Calvin and Margaret Neal House**

612 Walnut Avenue

Charlotte, NC

Summary

The Calvin and Margaret Neal House, erected in 1927, is a structure that possesses local historic significance as a rare and excellently preserved example of early stone rubble veneer construction in Charlotte and as the only stone house in the Wesley Heights neighborhood. The decade between the end of World War I and the beginning of the Great Depression in 1929 were years of significant economic and physical growth in Charlotte and throughout the country. Although advances in building technology during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century made building materials like

wood, glass, and brick more affordable and widely available to even the humblest homeowner, stone was still seen as a costly and extravagant material within the building trade—a material meant for imposing civic and commercial structures, but rarely used for residential buildings. The popularity of the Arts and Crafts Movement, which emphasized the use of local, natural materials in building, brought stone into residential areas, but it was most commonly used only as a decorative accent on porches and chimneys. Brick and wood were cheaper, easier to build with, and more widely available. Consequently, even during the post-World War I building boom, a time of unprecedented growth for Charlotte and Mecklenburg County, only around 20-25 rubble stone residences (a tiny percentage of the total number of houses built) were constructed within the city.¹ The Neal house is an unusual example of a type of construction rarely seen in Charlotte; and, within the context of the conservative, white-collar Wesley Heights neighborhood, its exuberant rubble façade breaks through the uniformity of the suburb's standard brick and frame residences.

The Neal House, most likely constructed from stock plans, is also significant as a tangible reflection of the way in which middle-class homeowners during the twentieth century post-war housing boom found ways to individualize their homes without the expense of employing an architect. The unusual and striking use of masonry—both in the nine-inch-thick stone walls and the unique brick details around the house's windows and doors—reflects the degree of craftsmanship that went into the house, and the care with which Calvin Neal oversaw the construction of his first and only home. What would have been considered a rather ordinary example of a twentieth century vernacular form takes on a completely different character when rendered in irregular, colorful fieldstone. The simple massing of the house, the front portico, and porte-cochere, accented with graceful arched entryways and side openings, serves to highlight, but not distract from, the beauty of the natural materials.

Historical Background Statement

The Calvin Neal House, like most of the houses constructed during the 1920s in Charlotte's burgeoning suburbs, was part of a post-World War I building boom that peaked in the middle of the decade and ended with the Stock Market Crash of 1929 and the beginning of the Great Depression. Charlotte had arisen during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries as a shining example of the New South. By the time the U.S. entered into World War I, local historian Thomas Hanchett writes:

Charlotte...was the headquarters of a large textile region, with a diversified economic base including banking, power generation and wholesaling. A bustling mass transit system, the backbone of big-city growth, now served an expanding ring of suburbs. In the 1910 census Charlotte...finally overtook the

port of Wilmington to become North Carolina's largest city, symbolizing the shift in the state's economy from cotton and tobacco export to textile production.²

Although such rapid expansion slowed during wartime, the end of the war in 1919 ushered in another period of growth for Charlotte, characterized particularly by the development of middle-class automobile suburbs like Wesley Heights. The city's pre-war prosperity had given rise to the first generation of Charlotte suburbs—carefully planned mixtures of mansions and more modest middle class housing with public recreation spaces and, in the case of Dilworth, even an industrial corridor included. All of these suburbs were connected to the center city by a web of streetcar lines. By contrast, suburbs that were developing in the 1920s (and, to a larger degree, during the post-World War II period) tended to be strictly residential, segregated by economic class, and dependent more on the automobile than on the streetcar.³

The earliest example of this new type of Charlotte suburb is the Wesley Heights neighborhood. Plans for a suburban development began on what was originally the Wadsworth family farm northwest of the center city as early as 1911. However, active development of the land did not begin until 1920, when C. B. Bryant and local developer E. C. Griffith formed the Charlotte Investment Company and bought the tract for \$200,000 from the Wadsworth Land Company. The Charlotte Investment Company “redrew the original 1911 survey plat, laid out the lots, and added improvements, such as sidewalks and public utilities.”⁴ They named the new suburb Wesley Heights, and began selling lots in December 1921. The E. C. Griffith Company encouraged brisk lot sales and rapid construction of homes on these lots by offering incentives, discounts, and special financing for early buyers. The response was so encouraging that the Charlotte Investment Company decided to expand the boundaries of the development. A tract lying between the Piedmont and Northern tracks and West Morehead Street was hastily plotted. Principal streets like Walnut Avenue were extended southward, but no cross streets or alleyways were laid so that lot sales and home construction could begin immediately. Deed covenants regulating setback, fencing, cost of construction, and other variables assured that the entire suburb would maintain some degree of cohesion.⁵

Such precautions, coupled with the neighborhood's relatively rapid development and the growing preference among the middle-class for stock house plans in lieu of architect-designed homes, gave Wesley Heights a much more homogenous streetscape than most of Charlotte's earlier suburbs. Dilworth, Elizabeth, and Myers Park had developed over the course of several decades. The architecture of the houses in these suburbs (many of which were drawn up by professional architects) reflected changing styles over time. Wesley Heights, in contrast, was a neighborhood made up almost

exclusively of similar bungalows, Tudor Revival cottages, and Colonial Revival homes constructed of brick and wood. Fully two-thirds of the homes in Wesley Heights were constructed between 1921 and 1930.⁶

It was during this period that Calvin A. Neal bought a lot on Walnut Avenue and began the process of building a home for his wife, Margaret, and their growing family. The new suburb was a perfect fit for the Neals—Margaret Severs Neal was the granddaughter of Henry C. Severs, who had developed the small enclave of middle-class white housing known as Seversville, just south of Johnson C. Smith University, around the turn of the century.⁷ Margaret's family was deeply rooted in the northwest side of the city, and the Neals had been living with one of Margaret's relatives on Tuckaseegee Road before deciding to move to nearby Wesley Heights. Calvin Neal, a native of Charlotte, had worked his way from meter-reader to bookkeeper and accountant at the Southern Power and Utilities Company (later known as Duke Power) during the 1920s. Margaret worked for Efird's department store as a clerk until the birth of the couple's first child, Doris Jean, in 1927.

By that time, the Neals had saved enough to build a home of their own. The Moretz Realty Company signed the building permit for the house, which was most likely constructed using one of many stock plans owned by the company.⁸ The plan of the house itself was simple, with hardly any decorative detailing. To make the house distinctive from the brick Colonials and frame bungalows going up in the neighborhood, Calvin Neal decided that his home would be clad entirely in rustic rubble fieldstone—the first, and only, stone house that would be built in Wesley Heights.⁹ The stone was delivered by rail on the Piedmont and Northern line, which ran through Wesley Heights and crossed Walnut Avenue just north of the Neal's lot. Construction proceeded through 1927 on the modest single-family residence; but the Moretz Realty Company went out of business in 1928 and the Neals had to hire another contractor to finish the exterior stonework.¹⁰

The family had barely gotten settled into their new home when the Great Depression hit in 1929. Though Calvin Neal managed to keep his job with Duke Power, the company reduced his salary several times. To help make the monthly payments on their house, the Neals rented out their front bedroom during the 1930s.¹¹ By 1936, the family had grown to include two young sons, Donald and Jerry. The Neals continued to live in the house through the 1940s and 1950s. In 1946, frustrated by the lack of housing in the area after the war and needing a place of their own, Doris Jean and her husband asked brother Donald to draw up plans for a two-story garage apartment that could be built on the rear of their parents' lot. The simple frame structure remains on the property. It is no longer occupied, and the first floor garage opening has been replaced with a sliding glass door.

Calvin Neal retired from Duke Power in 1965; he died just one year later. Margaret Neal continued to live at 612 Walnut Avenue until 1977. The house was sold to the Dean family, who lived in the house until November of 2001, when they sold the house to John Caratelli and David Greer. Caratelli and Greer have recently finished restoring the exterior and interior of the house, utilizing National Register tax credits and adhering to the standards for restoration and rehabilitation set forth by the Secretary of the Interior.

Architectural Description and Context Statement

Architecturally, the Calvin and Margaret Neal House is significant as a rare and excellently preserved example of early twentieth-century rubble stone veneer in Charlotte. The use of masonry, and stone in particular, as a building material carries with it ideas of solidity and permanence that were established throughout North Carolina and most of the South as early as the mid-nineteenth century, when many towns and cities began the process of replacing “‘ephemeral’ wood buildings and ‘unsightly wooden shanties’” with solid, handsome masonry structures. As historian Charlotte V. Brown writes in *Architects and Builders In North Carolina: A History of the Practice of Building*, this shift from wood to masonry “was considered an especially significant accomplishment in a town’s effort to gain a ‘City-like appearance.’” In the hierarchy of building materials, stone was at the top—towns took “special pride in construction of stone buildings.”¹² It was considered “the king of building materials.”¹³ By the end of the nineteenth century, as rail lines expanded and the production of most building materials became increasingly mechanized, products such as dressed lumber, brick, and glass became more affordable and readily available to even the most modest homebuilders. Stone, however, was still seen as a costly and extravagant material within the building trade—a material meant for imposing civic or commercial structures, but rarely used for common residential buildings.

The popularity of the Arts and Crafts Movement, which emphasized the informal use of local, natural materials in building, brought rubble stone into residential areas of Charlotte during the 1920s and 1930s, but it was most commonly used only as a decorative accent on porches and chimneys.¹⁴ Even after the technique of veneering stone onto wood-framed structures was perfected in the late 1910s, “allowing smaller versions of stone houses [like the Neal House] to be built in middle-class suburbs throughout the country,” very few stone houses were built in the Charlotte area.¹⁵ A survey of stone rubble houses in Charlotte completed by Mary Beth Gatza in the fall of 2002 uncovered only twenty-two existing stone rubble houses built between 1920 and 1942. Stone rubble houses represent a minute percentage of the houses built during the city’s post-World War I building boom—a period of prosperity from which “large portions of present day Charlotte date.”¹⁶ Most of these stone structures are bungalows or Craftsman style houses with rubble stone exterior foundations and walls accented by

wooden porch supports, dormers, and detailing, such as the houses at 320 Tuckaseegee Road, 509 Sylvania Avenue, and 2204-06 Roslyn Avenue. A few, such as 2325 Crescent Avenue and 2531 Commonwealth Avenue, use stone in conjunction with painted half-timbering details and steeply gabled entryways with rounded door openings associated with the Tudor Revival style. Later examples, like the ones at 4915 Monroe Road and 203 Karendale Avenue, are basic rectangular, side-gable structures clad in rubble stone (See Appendix).

Although the Neal House is most likely not architect-designed and does not strictly adhere to any particular style of architecture, the house is a thoughtfully-executed structure with an unusual mix of simple decorative details—including a Greek Revival-influenced front pediment, unique red-brick window and door surrounds, and graceful rounded-arch openings on the front portico and porte-cochere—that are enhanced by the application of the irregular stonework. The Neal House is also unique in that, unlike most of the stone rubble houses in Charlotte, every major exterior feature of the house (including walls, portico and porte-cochere) is covered entirely in fieldstone. The use of concrete and brick in place of wood around the windows and doors are unusual accents to the all-masonry exterior. What would have been considered a rather ordinary example of a twentieth-century vernacular form takes on a completely different character when rendered in colorful and decorative masonry. In this way, the house remains a tangible reminder of how middle class homeowners like the Neals found ways to personalize stock plans without the expense incurred by employing an architect.

The Neal House, located at 612 Walnut Avenue in the Wesley Heights neighborhood in northwest Charlotte, is a one-story rectangular frame structure clad in rough rubble stone (ranging in color from light brown to deep orange and dark blue-gray) set with raised mortar joints. The building's roofline features a pedimented façade, a center cross gable, and a hipped roof in the rear. The house has three chimneys, all covered in the same rubble stone as the house. The house retains all of its original six-over-six wood windows. The façade of the house includes one set of paired windows and one set of three windows, each separated by wide concrete mullions. The front portico features rounded-arch openings on each side, and a rounded-arch entryway framing the main entrance to the house. A substantial porte-cochere on the south (side) elevation also features arched openings on each side. A side driveway leads through the porte-cochere and to the 1946 two-story frame garage apartment behind the house. A small enclosed frame porch set on a large rubble stone foundation extends from the back of the house (west elevation) off of the kitchen. Current owners John Caratelli and David Greer, as part of an extensive restoration of the house, have restored the bead board ceilings in the portico and porte-cochere, renovated the deteriorated back porch, replaced the front door with one more closely

resembling the original door, and restored the original doorway on the north elevation off of the dining room (which had been turned into a closet by the previous owner). The exterior of the house remains almost exactly as it was when it was completed in the late 1920s.

The Neal House interior is laid out on a simple floor plan—a living room and dining room (separated by original French doors), breakfast nook and kitchen on the north, and two bedrooms, a bathroom, and a front den (separated from the main living space by French doors) on the south side. The interior features three fireplaces, each one of a different material based on the importance of the room. The primary fireplace in the living room is surrounded by an impressive mantel of blue-gray rubble granite; the fireplace in the den has a painted brick surround capped with a simple wooden mantel, and the front bedroom features a light, almost delicate painted wooden fireplace surround. Although the kitchen and bathroom have been updated, the owners have taken care to preserve even the smallest original details, including the medicine cabinet and sink in the bathroom, the glass doorknobs and metal hardware on the interior doors, and original light fixtures above the granite fireplace and in the breakfast nook. The Neal House is an excellently preserved example of a building technique that is rare in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, and it remains a structure unique to the Wesley Heights neighborhood.

¹ See Appendix. This number comes from a survey of stone rubble houses completed by Mary Beth Gatza in the fall of 2002. Ms. Gatza located 22 extant stone rubble houses (including the Neal House) in Charlotte dating from 1921 to 1942. Of these, 13 were constructed after 1930, and only two examples (a house constructed in 1921 at 726 Bromley Road and the Seversville house at 315 Tuckaseegee, built c. 1925) predate the Neal House. Indeed, 1927 saw the greatest concentration of stone houses built—four in all, including the Neal House.

² Thomas Hanchett, “The Growth of Charlotte: A History,” (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, www.cmhpf.org).

³ Ibid. Mary Beth Gatza, *National Register Nomination for the Wesley Heights Historic District, Mecklenburg Co., NC* (Division of Archives and History, Raleigh, NC: 1995) 8.1-8.3.

⁴ Gatza, *National Register Nomination for the Wesley Heights Historic District*, 8.4-8.5.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid, 8.7.

⁷ *A Brief History of the Severs Family* (Charlotte: 1943), 3-4. Margaret's brother, W. A. Severs, built a house on Walnut Avenue as well, just a few houses down at 532 Walnut.

⁸ Charlotte City Directory, 1916-1929. Building Permit dated July 25, 1927. McCoy Moretz, the founder and president of Moretz Realty, had worked for E. C. Griffith Company in the late 1910s and had served briefly as the company's vice president before forming his own company in 1922.

⁹The house in nearby Seversville where the Neals had lived before moving to Walnut Avenue is a Craftsman style house that featured stone rubble walls. The house was built around 1925, and may have influenced Neal's decision to build a stone house.

¹⁰ Donald Neal, interview with Emily Ramsey on January 14, 2003.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Catherine W. Bisher, Charlotte V. Brown, Carl R. Lounsbury, and Ernest H. Wood III, *Architects and Builders in North Carolina: A History of the Practice of Building* (Chapel Hill: 1997), p.137.

¹³ Ernest Flagg, *Small Houses, their economic design and construction: essays on the fundamental principles of design and descriptive articles on construction* (New York: 1922).

¹⁴ Although most of Charlotte's bungalows were not built using stone, practically all of the stone houses that were built in the city during the post-World War I period were bungalows or Craftsman style houses, and include some of the best examples of the housing type in Mecklenburg County. 2144 Park Road is an excellent example of a Japanese-inspired bungalow, while the stone house at 724 Edgehill Road features the curved, organic lines and rounded features of an English-cottage-inspired bungalow.

¹⁵ Lee Goff, *Stone Built: Contemporary American Houses* (New York: 1997), 27.

¹⁶ Hanchett.