

The Newcombe - McElwee House



This report was written on September 9, 1997

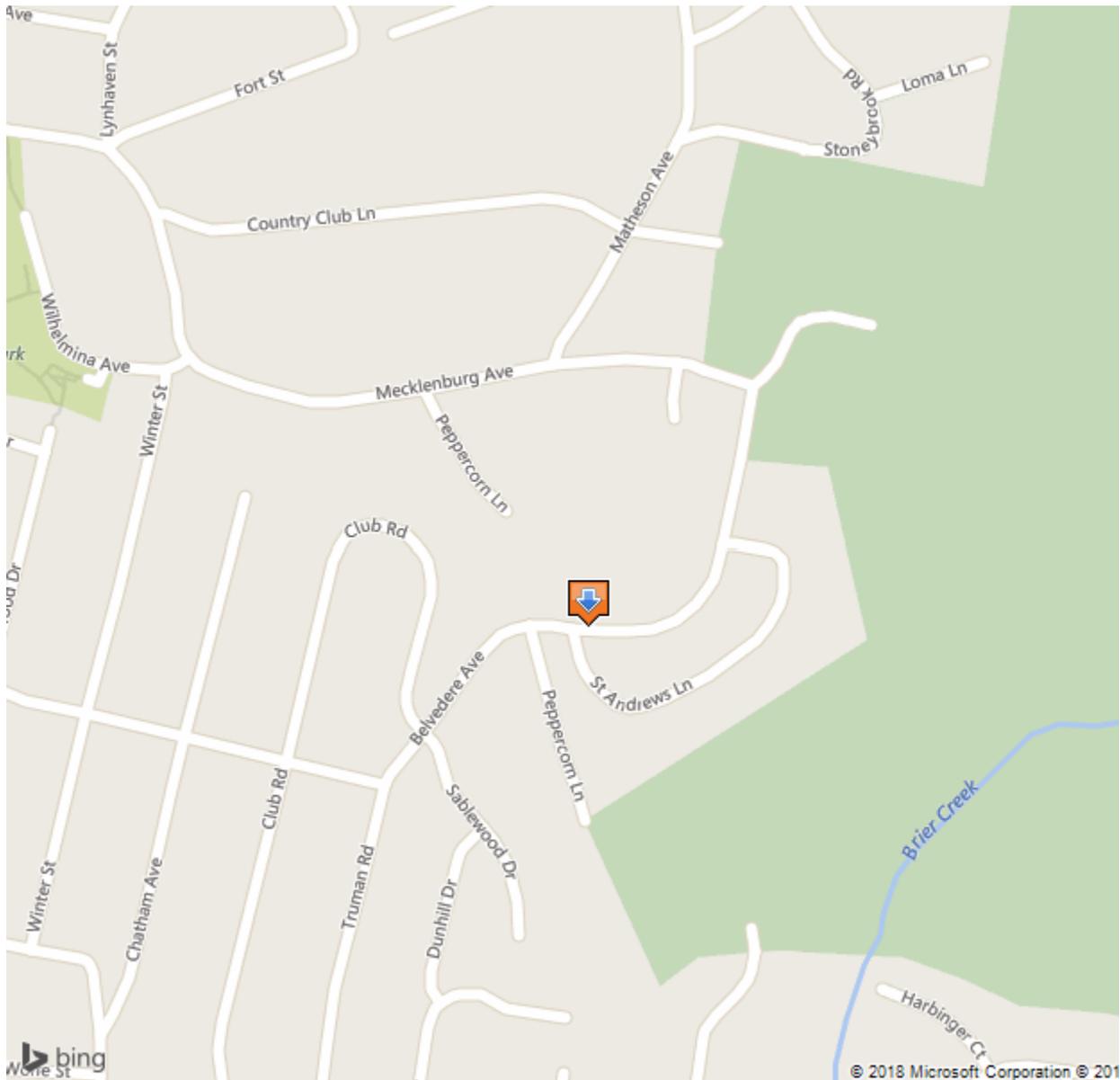
1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the Newcombe - McElwee House is located at 2817 Belvedere Avenue in the Plaza-Midwood neighborhood of Charlotte in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina.

2. Name, address, and telephone number of the present owner of the property: The owner is:
Dr. and Mrs. Thomas B. McElwee
2817 Belvedere Avenue
Charlotte, NC 28205

Telephone Number: (704) 375 - 5873

3. Representative Photographs of the property: This report contains interior and exterior photographs of the property.

4. Maps depicting the location of the property: This report contains a map depicting the location of the property.



5. Current deed book references to the property: The most recent deed to the Newcombe - McElwee House is listed in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 6891 at Pages 783 - 785. The Tax Parcel Number of the property is 09505534.

6. A brief historical description of the property: This report contains a historical sketch of the property prepared by Sherry J. Joines.

7. A brief architectural description of the property: This report contains an architectural description of the property prepared by Sherry J. Joines.

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 history, architecture, and cultural importance: The Commission judges that the property known as the Newcombe - McElwee House does possess special significance in terms of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations: 1) the house is significant as the work of an important North Carolina architect, 2) it has architectural significance as an unusually fine example of the Tudor Revival style, 3) it is an important part of the development of the Charlotte Country Club area and "Club Acres" during the 1930s, and 4) it has associations with prominent Charlotte citizens.

b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling, and association: The Commission contends that the architectural description by Sherry J. Joines included in this report demonstrates that the Newcombe - McElwee House meets this criterion.

9. Ad Valorem Tax Appraisal: The current Ad Valorem appraised value of the 2.77 acres of land is \$200,000. The current Ad Valorem appraised value of the house is \$326,500. The total Ad Valorem appraised value is \$526,500. The property is zoned R-3.

Date of Preparation of this Report: September 9, 1997

Prepared by: Sherry J. Joines
Charlotte - Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission
2100 Randolph Road
Charlotte, N.C. 28207

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

Sherry J. Joines
September, 1997

Location Description

The Newcombe - McElwee house is situated at 2817 Belvedere Avenue in Charlotte, N.C. Part of the Plaza - Midwood neighborhood, this area was developed as Club Acres in association with the Charlotte Country Club beginning in the 1910s, with most construction occurring in the

1930s. The lot is on the northern side of Belvedere Avenue with the front facade of the house facing south.

Landscape and Other Structures

The house sits atop a small hill and is picturesquely viewed as one rounds a bend in Belvedere Avenue. The lawn of the house, heavily dotted with large trees, rolls down to Belvedere Avenue creating a luxurious expanse. In the rear, this expansive lawn continues up the hill. The narrow drive takes the visitor to the top of the rise where one enters through a pair of brick entrance gate pillars. These pillars are about five feet tall and are capped by pineapple finials. The gate pillars finish the opening in a brick wall that runs from the side of the house to the next property line and divides the front of the house from the rear.

After passing through the entrance pillars, one may park around a circular drive. To the west, is the two story garage / guesthouse. Hipped roof wall dormers containing casement windows pierce the guesthouse's high, hipped roof. On ground level, two garage doors are located beside an entrance door at the southern corner of the front facade. To the rear of the garage is a one-story frame addition with a shed roof. Beyond the addition is a small brick courtyard enclosed by a brick wall. Matching the main house, the garage has a frieze at the cornice created by three courses of brick being corbeled outward with a repetitive pattern of protruding and areas that give the effect of oversized dentils.

Mrs. McElwee replaced much of the plant material in the landscape after she and her husband acquired the house in 1992. She recalls that the yard and plants were seriously unkempt and overgrown. Several large shade trees still exist, however, as do a few large holly bushes. One particularly huge tree dominates the back yard. She did not change the basic form or layout of the planting beds. The overall effect of the landscaping, house design, and situation is akin to the rambling "Country Place Era" estates popular among the wealthy during the 1930s.

Architectural Description

The Tudor Revival style is one of several picturesque revival styles common during the 1920s and 1930s. Others include Colonial Revival, Dutch Colonial Revival, and Spanish Revival. As the name implies the style took its inspiration from late medieval and early Renaissance English architecture. Historical accuracy in a revival style is not as important as evoking the feeling of a past romantic age, such as that of the infamous Tudor, King Henry VIII. The Tudor Revival was especially popular with the Anglophilic upper middle class. It was further encouraged by the trend in landscaping towards the picturesque "English Cottage" genre inspired by the work of Gertrude Jekyll.¹

The Newcombe - McElwee house is an excellent example of the Tudor Revival Style. Common elements of this mode are half-timbering, Tudor (flattened Gothic) arches, heavy doors simulating Medieval construction techniques, dark woodwork, diamond leaded windows, asymmetry, and picturesque detailing. Of these, the Newcombe - McElwee house displays all

but the half-timbering. Instead, the walls of the house are running bond brick veneer and rest upon concrete foundation walls.

Currently, the walls are painted white, which, with the silvery tones of the roof, make the house reminiscent of French Renaissance architecture. Whether the house was originally painted is not clear. The slate roof is almost certainly the original, however. The color of the slates varies from deep gray to pale green to rich mauve. The hipped form of the main roof has a long ridgeline extending nearly the entire length of the front facade. Two low, hipped wall dormers are found over two pairs of casement windows on the western end of the front facade.

The focus of the front facade is the octagonal entrance tower. The tower has a high conical roof. Located in the center of the front (southern) facade, the tower houses a massive Tudor arched doorway trimmed in stone. The narrow lancet casement windows stagger up the tower in keeping with the ascent of the curved interior stair. The effect of this is much like a medieval castle. Beside the entrance tower, on the eastern side is a hip roofed projection. The projection has a low hipped dormer on the second floor and a projecting bay window on the first floor. The western end of the building is dominated by the mass of a chimney. At ground level, small iron railings are attached to the building at each side of the chimney. Likewise, the eastern end of the house is fairly unremarkable. The rear (northern) facade of the building is marked by a hip roofed projection about three-quarters of the way down the length of the facade from the eastern corner. The projection has a curved bay window on the first floor. The small corner made by the projection at the western end of the house is filled by a one story screened sunroom. The sunroom has an awning and lattice trim at its corners. Under the awning is a decorative scalloped frieze like that found above the windows on the first floor of the front facade. A brick path leads to the entrance of the porch and around the projection to a kitchen entrance near the eastern corner. This entrance, which may not be original, has a multi-paned door with sidelights and transom. The windows on the entire rear facade are irregularly sized and spaced. There are also roof dormers, rather than the low wall dormers on the front.

Much like the exterior front facade, the interior is designed around the unique circular space in the tower. The interior of the entrance tower is dominated by the spiral stair to the second floor orchestra balcony. The balcony is gracefully curved and cantilevered out over the first floor space. The ceiling of the tower is a shallow dome lit by small lights hidden behind a cornice molding. The treads and handrail of the stair are hardwood while the balustrade is cast iron in a scallop and x pattern. The x's are embellished with gilded medallions. Entry to the house is through a heavy, Tudor arched door. The door's small panels, heavy hardware and false pegs mimic medieval construction methods. Once inside the entry tower, one steps up to the main level of the house and enters a vestibule through a doorway. The doorway has an architrave that is curved to match the curve of the tower wall.

The three major wings of the house radiate from the vestibule. Down two steps to the west is the long living room. Large, multi-paned windows light the room on its south wall. On the north wall are pairs of French doors leading to the sunroom. The top two-thirds of the doors are multi-paned like the windows, while the bottom has a raised panel. The western wall is the focus of the space. It is embellished with raised panels, where the bottom panels are not as tall as the upper panels, only about one-third of the wall height. This rhythm matches the French doors and

windows and is accentuated by the chair rail installed at this low height. The purpose of the unusual configuration two-thirds over one-third configuration may have been to accentuate the height of the room. Centered on the west wall is a carved, buff marble fireplace. Directly above the fireplace is a wide rectangular panel flanked by two narrow panels with curved tops reminiscent of the shape of a Palladian window. This curved top motif is repeated in the upper panels of doors throughout the house. Directly north of the vestibule is a den. The walls of this room are paneled with pine, and the north wall is dominated by a bowed bay of diamond leaded windows. The fireplace on the eastern wall has scrolled brackets supporting the mantle shelf and is trimmed with molding in a rope pattern. Dentils finish the crown molding in the room and fluted pine pilasters flank the fireplace.

The wing to the east of the vestibule contains the dining room. On the southern end of this room is a bay window with diamond leaded windows. At either side of the window are niches created in the corners of the room. With the bay window the effect is that the end of the room is multi-sided or bayed. The low chair rail is repeated in this room with a paneled wainscot beneath it. The large, black urns in the niches are said to be original to the house. The kitchen, pantry, and powder room are located in the northeastern portion of the eastern wing of the house. The current owners enlarged the kitchen with the removal of a butler's pantry. Thus, the kitchen was completely modernized at this time.

In the entrance tower, one ascends the curved staircase, to reach the orchestra balcony. A large passage at the balcony is framed with heavy molding, architrave, pilasters and Doric columns. Through the passage to the west is the master suite. The suite is entered through a small sitting room with built-in bookcases, which leads into the main bedroom. The hipped roof of the house creates a tray effect in the ceiling of the bedroom. The ornamentation on the fireplace, which is located on the bedroom's western wall, is similar to that of the marble, living room fireplace. The bathroom door is at the northeastern corner of the room. The dusty blue tiled bath contains both tub and walk-in shower. A second door in the bath leads back into the sitting room. North of the orchestra balcony is a wide subsidiary hall or vestibule with closets and a bathroom. The vestibule leads to a bedroom. East of this vestibule is a long, narrow hall off of which are more closets and two more bedrooms, which share a bath. Like the master bath, the two other baths on the second floor also retain their original tile, one being a dark green and yellow, the other a bright aqua with black accents. Original fixtures remain as well.

Stairs descending to the basement are reached via a door near the first floor entrance. The only finished area of the basement is paneled with pine on one wall and has windows and window wells below exterior grade. The room also has exposed beams and a fireplace. Dr. McElwee remembers this room being a playroom when he was a child. The numerous classical elements mentioned in the above description indicate a version of the Classical Revival style on the interior. This is an interesting combination with the heavy Tudor Revival exterior. The Classical Revival was another of the popular revival styles common during the 1930s. It was often associated with the Colonial Revival because Colonial and Early American architecture (like the Georgian and Federal styles) had classical inspirations.

The Newcombe - McElwee house retains a remarkable level of integrity due mainly to the limited number of owners. Moldings, doors, and most room configurations are original.

Although the kitchen was extensively remodeled, its location at the northeastern corner of the building limits the impact these changes had on the rest of the house. The house still retains the elegant, formal feeling in vogue among the newly developing "country club set" of the 1930s.

Historical Overview

Sherry J. Joines
September, 1997

The history of the Newcombe - McElwee house is fairly simple since only two families have owned it. Elliott Hill and Mary Duke Lyon Newcombe purchased a portion of Lot 28 from Edward and Mabel Kuhn on October 9, 1934. The Kuhns had acquired the lot from Mr. and Mrs. O.J. Thies and Mr. and Mrs. George Stephens totaling 3.93 acres on July 15, 1921. Thies, a Realtor, and Stephens, founder of Myers Park, both held interests in the several companies developing the Charlotte Country Club and Club Acres. Stephens had acquired Lot 28 from one of these companies, the Mecklenburg Realty Company.² Although only associated with two families, both of these families were prominent Charlotte citizens. Elliott H. Newcombe was the stepson of C.W. Johnston, founder of Johnston Mills. Mr. Newcombe began his career as president - treasurer of the textile supply company, Southern Specialties. He later headed the Charlotte division of Old Dominion Paper Box Company, eventually founding the Atlantic Coast Carton Company. His civic achievements included his work in founding Charlotte Country Day School and the Squash Hill Hunt Preserve. Mrs. Newcombe, known as Dukie, was the grandniece of tobacco and utility tycoon James Buchanan Duke.³

Mrs. Newcombe's uncle, George Watts Carr designed the house, which was constructed around 1935. Carr was a noted Durham architect who also worked on the Snow Building in that city.⁴ The Newcombes had moved into their new home by 1936. The current owner, who grew up in the house, remembers the Newcombes and their children as being the centerpiece of the neighborhood. Mr. Newcombe, he remembers, was a large, mirthful man who enjoyed smoking and having a cocktail everyday. The Newcombes sold the property to Ross S. and Doris E. McElwee, Sr. on April 16, 1959, but continued to live in the neighborhood.⁵ Mrs. Newcombe passed away on February 28, 1969, followed by her husband on September 23, 1976.⁶ Ross S. McElwee, Sr. was a surgeon and his wife a homemaker. The couple had four children: Ross, Jr., a filmmaker (his work including *Sherman's March* and *Time Indefinite*); Dede, a homemaker; Thomas B., who joined his father's medical practice; and another son who was killed in a 1965 boating accident.⁷ Mrs. Doris McElwee passed away on April 1, 1973, preceding Dr. McElwee, Sr. whose death occurred February 6, 1988. Dr. Ross McElwee had remarried and his widow, Ann T. McElwee, transferred ownership of the house to Dr. Thomas B. and Sarah Y. McElwee on May 28, 1992.⁸

Dr. McElwee grew up in the house and fondly remembers playing in the basement and back yard. He recalls his mother falling in love with the house because it looked like a French

chateau.⁹ Dr. Thomas McElwee married Sarah Young on January 5, 1985. Mrs. McElwee is a graduate of University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and attended law school there. The couple resides in the house with their three children: Tom, John, and Sarah.¹⁰

¹Catherine Bishir, *North Carolina Architecture*, Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1990, pp. 440 - 443.

²Mecklenburg County Deed Book 277, page 408; 451, page 343; and 860, page 29 and Hanchett, Dr. Thomas W., "Plaza - Midwood Neighborhood," for the Charlotte - Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission.

³Hanchett, "Plaza - Midwood."

⁴*Ibid.* and Bishir, *North Carolina Architecture*.

⁵Hanchett, "Plaza - Midwood," and Charlotte City Directories: 1933 - 1936.

⁶Mecklenburg County Vital Statistics.

⁷Interview with Dr. and Mrs. Thomas B. McElwee, November 18, 1996, conducted by Nathan Kellett.

⁸Vital Statistics and Interview.

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰Interview.