

The Ratcliffe-Otterbourg House



This report was written on July 30, 1996

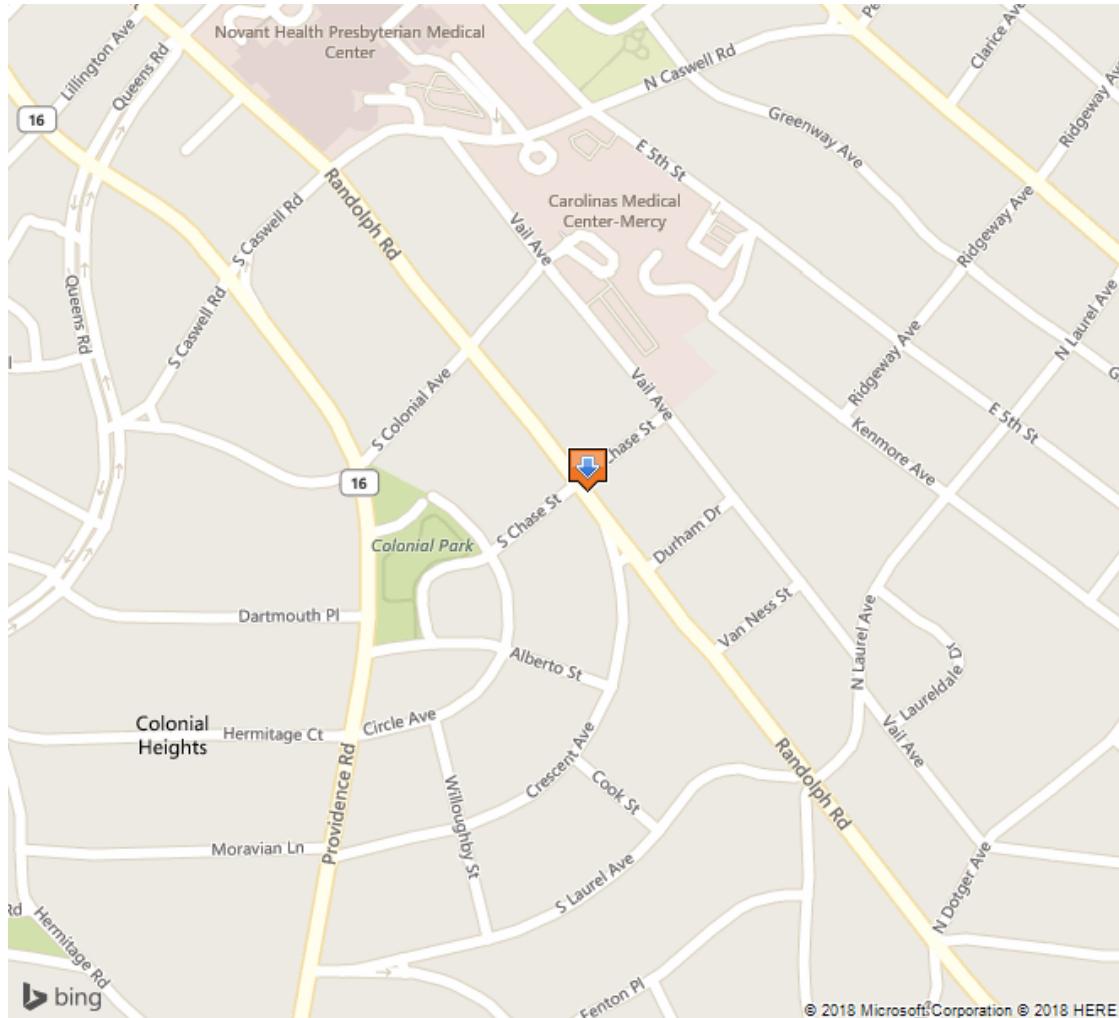
1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the Ratcliffe-Otterbourg House is located at 2100 Randolph Road in the Crescent Heights neighborhood of Charlotte, near the uptown center of the city of Charlotte in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina.

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

Charlotte - Mecklenburg Historic Preservation Foundation, Inc.
2100 Randolph Road
Charlotte, North Carolina 28207
(704) 375-6145

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 Ratcliffe-Otterbourg House is listed Mecklenburg County Deed Book 8023 at Page 171. The Tax Parcel Number of the property is 155-027-18.

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 Ratcliffe-Otterbourg House does possess special significance in terms of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations: 1) the Ratcliffe-Otterbourg House was designed by William H. Peeps (1868-1950), an architect of local and regional importance, 2) the Ratcliffe-Otterbourg House is the only Bungalow-style house which survives on Randolph Road, once part of Crescent Avenue and a major thoroughfare in the Crescent Heights neighborhood, 3) the Ratcliffe-Otterbourg House was originally the home of Louis G. Ratcliffe (1893-1961), whose Ratcliffe Florist shop, also designed by Peeps, is one of the most distinctive early 20th-century buildings in uptown Charlotte and who occupied a prominent place in Charlotte's business life, and 4) the Otterbourg family, owners and occupants of the house for more than 50 years, was representative of the socio-economic stratum that was predominant in the Crescent Heights neighborhood in the early and middle years of the twentieth century.

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

9. Ad Valorem Tax Appraisal: The current Ad Valorem appraised value of the .228 acres of land is \$179,010. The current Ad Valorem appraised value of the house is \$31,770. The total Ad Valorem appraised value is \$210,780. The property is zoned O2.

Date of Preparation of this Report: July 30, 1996

Prepared by: Sherry J. Joines and Dr. Dan L. Morrill

Historical Overview

The city of Charlotte, North Carolina today is a product of its tremendous growth during the first fifty years of the New South period. The population of Charlotte in 1930 was 11 times greater than it had been in 1880. It is not surprising then, that many new homes in a variety of new suburban developments were built during this era. Until the 1880s, Charlotte's population had been housed near the center city or on farms in the rural areas surrounding it. The cotton mills near Charlotte flourished, and the city's businessmen grew wealthy as textile distributors and investors. These new leaders strove to emulate Northern textile cities with newly planned suburbs thriving off of streetcar lines, paved streets, and even skyscrapers. The ring of streetcar suburbs beginning with Dilworth in the 1890s was big business for the numerous land developers in the city.¹ The Crescent Heights neighborhood is an example of an early streetcar suburb in Charlotte. On the east side of the center city, this neighborhood began as two developments: Colonial Heights and Crescent Heights. Colonial Heights, including Colonial Avenue, Chase Street, and Vail Avenue was platted in 1907. The streets of Crescent Heights radiating in concentric semi-circles off Providence Road was Charlotte's first experiment with curvilinear streets when they were platted in 1907. The centerpiece of both developments was Colonial Park bounded by Circle Avenue.²

The first houses in the neighborhood were built during the mid 1910s near the streetcar line on Vail, Colonial, and Crescent Avenues. Many residents were salesmen, small businessmen, and clerks. These people served the distribution based economy of the city. Although staunchly middle-class, the neighborhood's residents held many of the same attitudes as the wealthy industrialists. There was great concern about the appearance of Charlotte during its rise to recognition. This explains why there were so many talented architects, designers, and planners at work in such a small city. Louis Asbury, Sr.; Fred Bonfoey; William H. Peeps; and Earle S. Draper were nationally recognized professionals who made Charlotte their home in the early years of the twentieth century.³

Peeps, an Englishman, came to Charlotte from Michigan in the early 1900s. At his death in 1950, he had made numerous architectural contributions to the Charlotte area including: Latta Arcade, Ratcliffe Florist Shop, Ivey's Department Store, and many prestigious suburban homes.⁴ Louis Ratcliffe began his floral shop in 1917 and returned to his Charlotte business after his infantry service in France during World War I. As Charlotte grew, many service industries, including floristry, thrived.⁵ Following many of his middle-class colleagues, Ratcliffe planned a new home for his family in the Crescent Heights neighborhood. On March 30, 1923,

Ratcliffe purchased a lot at the intersection of Crescent Avenue and Chase Street from Mrs. Pattie S. Long, a widow. The Long family had purchased the lot from Elizabeth Realty Company in 1909, but apparently had never built on the property. The lot measuring approximately 60 feet wide and 190 feet deep was to be used for building a dwelling that cost at least \$2500 and should be at least 30 feet from Crescent Avenue. As was typical for the early twentieth century South, the deed covenants also stated that the dwelling was not to be occupied by anyone "of the Negro race or with Negro blood."⁶

Ratcliffe hired the prominent Charlotte architect W.H. Peeps to design his bungalow style dwelling. By February 16, 1925, plans were far enough advanced for Ratcliffe to file a Building Permit with the Building Inspector. At this point, Ratcliffe's address was 512 East 5th Street, near his shop at 322 South Tryon Street. His new home was to be sheathed in stucco and estimated to cost \$6000.⁷ Louis G. Ratcliffe and his wife Hattie resided in their new home at 300 Crescent Avenue from 1926 until 1932. Ratcliffe's relationship with Peeps did not end with the completion of his home, however. Peeps was commissioned in 1929 to design a new building for Ratcliffe's Flowers. The unusual building has a Mediterranean flair and still graces South Tryon Street as a Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmark although it is no longer used as a florist shop.⁸

Louis Ratcliffe sold 300 Crescent Avenue to M.A. Otterbourg on September 1, 1932. Otterbourg was the Chief Signal and Electrical Inspector and later Superintendent for Southern Railways, an important industry in the distribution city of Charlotte. 300 Crescent Avenue held the large Otterbourg family: M.A. and his wife Katie, Marion A., Jr. (a son from a previous marriage), Louis, Edna, and Margaret. These three children of M.A. and Katie Otterbourg still reside in Charlotte and remember well their early years in Crescent Heights.⁹ Louis Otterbourg was three or four when the family moved into their new home. He and his younger sisters Edna and Peggy grew up on Crescent Avenue during the late 1930s and 1940s. During a recent interview, the three created a sense of Crescent Heights that is difficult to imagine, knowing the area as it is today. Children rode bicycles up and down the sidewalks in front of rows of bungalows. The park, they recall, was the center of their playtime with neighboring children. At home, they remember taking all but the most formal of meals in the breakfast room off the kitchen. And the bedroom adjacent to the kitchen served as a gathering place where favorite radio shows could be heard.

Their father was often away at work leaving their mother, a homemaker, with the children. The Otterbournes recall that there were a series African-American domestics who helped their mother in the mornings until the end of World War II and a gardener named Emmett Drenan. They remember summers filled with visiting on porches; the smell of oil throughout the house after it had been spread on dusty Chase Street;

Victory gardens; a playhouse in the back; and the family enjoying the piano in the corner of the living room.

The Otterbourg family owned the house after the death of M.A. Otterbourg in 1952 until Katie Otterbourg's death in the early 1980s. Until that time Edna and Margaret had lived with their mother, and they inherited the house, which they sold to Clyde N. Owensby on August 29, 1980. In 1959-1960 Crescent Road Extension was lengthened to reach the Cotswald section; hence, the house is now known as 2100 Randolph Road. Owensby rented the house to a marriage counselor firm and then to Charlotte Radiology, reflecting the dominance of medical offices in the area. The building was sold to Swisher International in 1995 and used as their office until 1996 when it was purchased by the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Preservation Foundation for use as a joint office with the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission.¹⁰

Physical Description

The original address was 300 Crescent Avenue; however the current address is 2100 Randolph Road. Situated at the corner of Randolph Road and Chase Street, the lot measures approximately 60 feet by 190 feet. The house has a small front yard facing the sidewalk and Randolph Road. A very narrow strip of yard on either side of the house gives access to the larger back yard.

Originally, the two-car garage was located in the middle of the back yard, dividing it into two different areas. Louis, Edna, and Margaret Otterbourg recall that the yard was separated from Chase Street by a tall white rose trellis. The space between the house and the garage was densely landscaped, while the area behind the garage had room for a garden and what seemed to them to be a swimming pool. This pool was most likely a garden feature built by the original owner, Louis Ratcliffe. To the children's disgust, their father, M.A. Otterbourg filled in the "swimming pool."¹¹ The landscaping in front of the house was thick enough near the sidewalk for young Louis Otterbourg to be unseen by a bicyclist until he jumped into its path. The Otterbours remember the yard filled with Norway maples, pecan trees, chinaberries, and spyrea.¹²

The emphasis on landscaping is not surprising for two reasons. First, the original owner of the house was Louis Ratcliffe, a prominent Charlotte florist. And secondly, the house is in the Bungalow Style. This meant that the house was designed around celebrating and enjoying nature. The most obvious characteristics of a Bungalow dwelling are its low pitched roof, wide front porch, and construction of rough natural

materials such as stucco. The result of these features was a sense of coziness and security while blending into the natural surroundings.¹³ The Ratcliffe-Otterbourg House is an excellent example of these principles. The front facade is a simple configuration of the short end of the house with the protruding front entry porch on its left. Rather than a plain gable end, the roof's peak is hipped. This motif is repeated wherever the roof ends. Decoratively cut rafter ends extend beyond the wide roof overhangs. Like many bungalows, the house is sheathed in stucco, which the Otterbourgs recall as being soft gray in color. The wide window and door trim, flared porch columns, and stickwork elements over the porch's arched opening were all cream in color.¹⁴ The base of house and porch steps are red brick creating a watertable about two feet high around the house. The one vertical element is the chimney on the left side of the building. The windows are tall, six over six panels, but are generally used in horizontal bands.

The formal front facade is in contrast to the rear of the dwelling which extrudes and is cut back creating several tiny wings depending on the size of the rooms they hold. The back porch is entered up a flight of red brick steps, which are contained by a low brick wall extending off the porch's watertable. Privatized by lattice work the porch reflects the personal atmosphere that was once present in the back yard. This lattice is all that remains of the lattice that covered the breakfast room windows and ran as a fence along Chase Street. The Bungalow Style was considered a modernization of Victorian era housing standards. Moving away from formality and concentrating on simple efficiency, builders after the turn of the century turned to source books such as *Bungalows, Camps, and Mountain Houses* (1915) for pre-prepared plans and theoretical planning advice. According to a 1921 plan book writer, the house was to be divided into sleeping quarters, family living space, and service areas. These zones should be linked by neutral spaces such as a hall.¹⁵

In the Ratcliffe-Otterbourg House, these ideas are executed with great care by the architect, W.H. Peeps. From the front porch, one enters into the living room containing a large fireplace. The hefty mantle mimics the wide roof overhang as it extends nearly a foot from the wall. The living room seems to flow into the dining area from which it is separated by French doors. Through a swinging door one can enter the small breakfast nook with its built in buffet and cupboard. To the left is the generous kitchen and the back door to the back porch. The entire south side of the house is taken up with the three bedrooms reached down a long hall. The bath, a closet, the stairs to the basement and to the attic are also located on this service hall. The Otterbourgs remember the interior window trim, baseboards, and doors being a darkly stained wood. The interior trim is now painted white and the only wood flooring that remains uncovered is in the living room. The red brick fireplace is now painted white and many of the plaster walls have been covered with wall paper. But

the most significant change was executed by the Charlotte - Mecklenburg Historic Preservation Fund when they removed the walls separating the front two bedrooms and the end of the long hall to create a large boardroom in the front right quarter of the house. With the exception of this space the building retains much of its original cozy character that made it such a wonderful family home for over fifty years.

¹ Tom Hanchett, "Overview" (from an unpublished draft in the collection of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission), p.1-4.

² Dr. Dan L. Morrill, "Crescent Heights," (unpublished essay in the collection of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission), p.1-3.

³ Tom Hanchett, "Growth of Charlotte: a History" (from an unpublished draft in the collection of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission),p. 28 and Dr. Dan L. Morrill, "Crescent Heights,"p.3-4.

⁴ Dr. Dan L. Morrill, "C.C. Coddington House," (unpublished description in the collection of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission).

⁵ Dr. William H. Huffman, " A Historical Sketch of the Ratcliffe Flowers Building,"(Survey and Research Report in the collection of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, 1983),pp.1-2.

⁶ Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office: deed book 241 page 365, deed book 268 page 205, and deed book 492 page 139.

⁷ Building Permit on microfilm (In the collections of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Library).

⁸ Huffman, " A Historical Sketch..."pp.2-3.

⁹ Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office: deed book 832 page 10. Charlotte City Directories (In the collection of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Library. Interview with Louis, Edna, and Margaret Otterbourg on June 17, 1996 with Sherry J. Joines.

¹⁰ Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office: deed book 4337 page 433 and deed book 8023 page 0171. Charlotte City Directories (In the collection of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Library).

¹¹ Interview with Otterbourg family.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Clark, Clifford E., Jr.,*The American Family Home, 1800-1960*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press,1986),p.173.

¹⁴ Interview with Otterbourg family.

¹⁵ William P. Comstock and Clarence E. Schermerhorn with new introduction by Tony P. Wrenn, *Bungalows, Camps, and Mountain Houses*, (Washington: AIA Press, 1990)p.v-21.