



RENFROW HARDWARE STORE



This report was written on 28 May 1991

1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the Renfrow Hardware Store is located at 188 North Trade Street, Matthews, in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina

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

Mr. Franklin M. Renfrow

Box 67

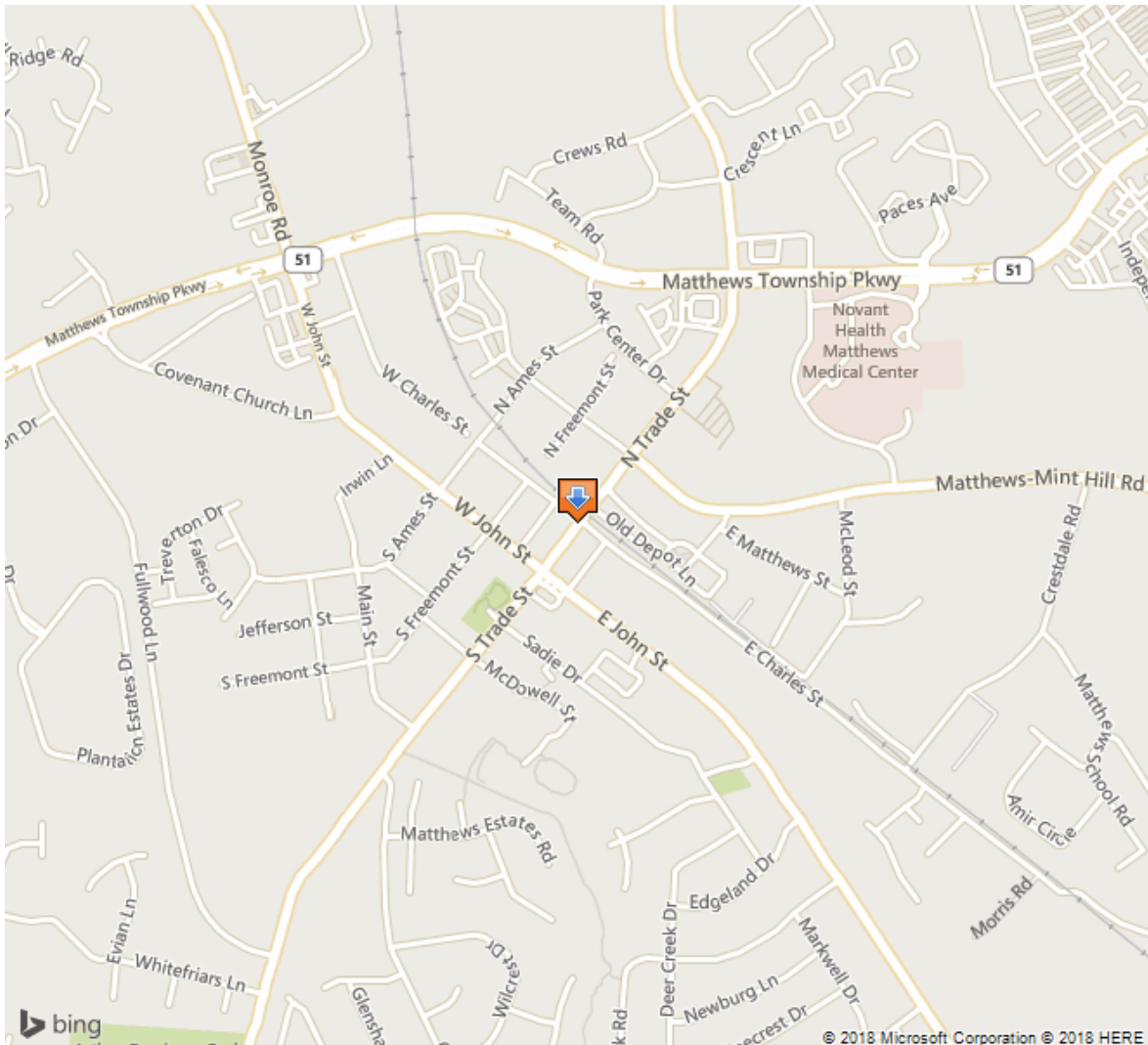
Matthews, North Carolina 28105

Telephone: (704) 847-4126

Tax Parcel Numbers: 215-013-02

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 maps which depict the location of the property.



5. Current Deed Book Reference to the property: The most recent deed to Tax Parcel Number 215-013-02 is listed in Mecklenburg County Deed Book W25 at page 467.

6. A brief historical sketch of the property: This report contains a brief historical sketch of the property prepared by Ms. Paula Stathakis.

7. A brief architectural description of the property: This report contains a brief architectural description of the property prepared by Ms. Nora M. Black.

8. Documentation If 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 its history, architecture, and /or cultural importance: The Commission judges that the property known as the Renfrow Hardware Store does possess special significance in terms of Matthews and Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations: 1) the Renfrow Hardware Store was begun by Captain Thomas Jefferson Renfrow in 1900; 2) the Renfrow Hardware Store is one of the earliest stores in the Matthews area that is still operational in its original form; 3) the Renfrow Hardware Store continues to be operated by descendants of the founder; 4) the Renfrow Hardware Store is architecturally significant for exemplifying the type of commercial vernacular architecture that was predominant in the small talons of Mecklenburg County in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; 5) the largely intact interior of the Renfrow Hardware Store provides insight into early mercantile complexes; and 6) the Renfrow Hardware Store is a timeless landmark and an essential component of the historic streetscape of Matthews.

b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling, and/or association: The Commission contends that the architectural description by Ms. Nora M. Black included in this report demonstrates that the Renfrow Hardware Store 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 a designated "historic landmark." The following values cover the entire Tax Parcel and all improvements; tax deferral for the historic portion of the property will be determined later by the Mecklenburg County Tax Office. The current appraised value of the improvements is \$111,460. The current appraised value of Tax Parcel 215-013-02 is, \$139,500. The total appraised value of the property is \$250,960. The property is zoned UBD.

Date of Preparation of this Report: 28 May 1991

Prepared by: Dr. Dan L. Morrill in conjunction with Ms. Nora M. Black
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Historical Overview

Paula M. Stathakis

The Renfrow General Store was begun and operated by Capt. Thomas Jefferson Renfrow in 1900. T. J. Renfrow went into the general merchandise business after working as captain of operations for the short-lived Rea Gold Mine, which began operations in 1880 and closed at the turn of the century.¹ When Renfrow's store opened on Trade Street, Matthews was little more than a crossroads. In the early nineteenth century, Matthews, known also as Fullwood and later, Stumptown, was a stagecoach stop between Charlotte and Monroe.² The arrival of the railroad in the late nineteenth century made Matthews the center of economic activity in east Mecklenburg County through the 1940's.³ As Matthews developed into a distribution center for area farmers, furnishing merchants set up shop adjacent to the railroad tracks. T. J. Renfrow's establishment was one of many such stores in Matthews, and perhaps one of the most important features of its history is its longevity. Renfrow enjoyed a prime location practically on the railroad tracks. Directly across the street was a major competitor, B. Dewitt Funderburk, who, like Renfrow offered the services of a cotton gin, but who could also provide the services of a grist mill, a blacksmith shop and a livery stable in addition to dry goods. A general merchandise and tinware store operated by Sam Grier preceded Renfrow and Funderburk in the reconstruction era.⁴ The business that Funderburk and Renfrow were engaged in was not new; these men operated as furnishing merchants in the twilight of cotton production in rural Mecklenburg.

Individuals who supplied farmers with seed, fertilizer, agricultural implements, dry goods and ginning facilities have historically played a significant role in the economic welfare of small farmers. The yeomanries in the antebellum period were traditionally self-sufficient, and were generally regarded as good credit risks. After the Civil War and in the wake of the financial collapse of the South, few yeomen or planters were able to maintain their farms without assistance. The customary sources of credit, Southern banks and cotton brokerages, were casualties of the war. The institution that saved farmers and subsequently trapped them in a financial vise was the regional furnishing merchant. These merchants were willing to conduct business with old customers, even though they had become serious credit risks almost overnight, by demanding mortgages or liens on their growing crops. Since few regional crops were in national demand and could be transported without spoiling, merchants demanded the farmers devoted their energies strictly to cash crops, such as cotton. Cotton would not spoil and could be held for a period of time which allowed the merchant to sell ginned cotton when the price was right. By using crop liens, merchants were able to force small farmers to produce for the market rather than for themselves. As cotton is a labor intensive crop, the energies of a farm family were taken up with planting, maintenance, and harvest, leaving little time for vegetable gardens or for domestic production. This system of credit allowed small farmers to survive on their land, but this survival often came at the expense of complete economic and material dependence on the merchant.⁵

If T. J. Renfrow issued crop liens, there are no records in the Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds to document it, nor is there any indication in the final settlement of his estate that he

engaged in this practice. This is not conclusive evidence that he did not engage in this practice; however, records of crop liens and mortgages have not been found in the customary places. Renfrow's store has not changed a great deal over the decades. The store still carries seed, fertilizer and garden tools as well as calf weaners, horse collars and bull rings, which are available in three sizes. The current owner, Frank Renfrow, still carries on the tradition of selling "rat cheese," a huge wheel of cheddar cheese shipped from Wisconsin. When the store first opened, area farmers who grew cotton raced to see who would have the first bale of the season ginned for free at Renfrow's.⁷ The cotton gin that stood in the back of the store, and that was instrumental in the economy of the region, was removed and dismantled by Frank Renfrow in the late 1980's. Matthews resident Sandra Donaghy saved remnants of cotton from the Renfrow gin before it was destroyed. The cotton gin was active until 1965.⁸ Thomas Jefferson Renfrow died in 1935 at the age of 88.

The business was inherited by his son Richard McDowell "Dow" Renfrow. In addition to running the store, E.M. Renfrow farmed and was a salesman for the American Agriculture Company. He served as mayor of Matthews from 1943-1945, and is credited with the creation of the first sanitation department of Matthews, which collected garbage from house to house. E.M. Renfrow died in 1963 at the age of 78. The current owner, Frank Renfrow, has operated the store since his graduation from Davidson in 1957.⁹ In 1986, Frank Renfrow and other merchants on Trade Street undertook a remodeling project, primarily affecting storefronts, in an effort to create a nineteenth century atmosphere. Renfrow believed this was a good business decision, and he said of the renovations: "I think it gives us a distinctive flavor...I'm all in favor of it."¹⁰ By turning back the clock architecturally, Matthews merchants attempted to enhance the historical role played by the businesses that occupied the buildings of Trade Street. However, Renfrow's store is the only business left that can claim genuine historical authenticity. It is a legendary place where suburbanites purchase garden tools and listen to the "regulars" chew the fat around the pot-bellied stove. The Funderburk store, formerly across the street, went out of business in 1973. The lively stables associated with Funderburk's were demolished to make room for a bank. The Renfrow store is the only physical link to the past of rural east Mecklenburg that has been left essentially intact.

NOTES

¹ *Southeast News*, "Rea Gold Mine Began Operation in 1880." September 2, 1976, n.p. Matthews Public Library Clippings Notebook for Matthews History. The Rea Gold Mine was located in what is now the vicinity of Sardis Road North. Its employees were sequestered in a company town that provided housing and a store. The enterprise failed because the gold mined at this location was of such a fine texture that it was too expensive to process.

² *Southeast News*, "Matthews History began in 1880's." August 8, 1985, n.p. Clippings notebook.

³ Ibid.; Survey and Research Report on the Funderburk Brothers Buildings, February 22, 1978, Historical Essay by D.L. Morrill.

⁴ *Southeast News*, "Matthews History began in 1800's." August 8, 1985.

⁵ This is a highly simplified and condensed picture of the role of the merchant in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Most of the scholarship in this field has been done for the upcountry regions of Georgia and South Carolina. No similar study has been conducted for Mecklenburg County; however, it is not unreasonable to assume that merchant-farmer relations in parts of Mecklenburg County were similar. Records of the C.S. and S.W. Davis General Store in the Croft district demonstrate that business was sometimes conducted in this manner. For further information on yeomen, merchants, and the socioeconomic implications of this relationship, consult: Steven Hahn, *The Roots Of Southern Populism*; Thomas N. Clark, *Pills, Petticoats, and Plows; The Southern Country Store, 1865-1900*, Lacy K. Ford, "Rednecks and Merchants: Economic Development and Social Tensions in the South Carolina Upcountry, 1865-1900," *Journal of American History*, 71 (September 1984): 294-318.

⁶ Visit store; *Charlotte Observer*, "Proprietor Preserving Old Timey Atmosphere," by Wendy McBane, February 21, 1986, p. 1C; Article in Matthews History Clippings Notebook, Matthews Public Library, n.d., "The General Store Lives," by Kat Ethridge.

⁷ *Charlotte Observer*, February 21, 1986.

⁸ Mrs. Donaghy and her husband, Henry, own and live in the Grier-Furr House on John Street; *Charlotte Observer*, "Even Today Store Sells Horse Collars," by Marion A. Ellis, August 11, 1986.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Architectural Description

Nora Mae Black

The Renfrow Hardware Store, located on the southeast side of North Trade Street, is an architecturally distinguished example of the privately-owned buildings that formed a commercial district to serve residents of Matthews. The store sits in a block bounded on the northwest by North Trade Street, on the northeast by Charles Street, on the southwest by East John Street, and on the southeast by an alley. It is approximately two hundred feet west of the Seaboard Air Line

Railroad. The Renfrow Cotton Gin stood south of the rear of the Renfrow Hardware Store (on the opposite side of the alley) until it was dismantled in the late 1980's. When established in 1900, the store joined structures from the late 19th century such as the Funderburk Brothers Mercantile Complex directly across North Trade Street. An addition to the Renfrow Hardware Store abuts the southwest wall of the original building, more recently, a large warehouse/storage facility has been constructed behind the store. To the northeast of the original Renfrow Hardware Store is a lot used by "Bonnie's Vegetable Plants" for sales; beyond the plant sale lot is the Heath and Reid General Store Building which received historic landmark designation in 1981. The Renfrow Hardware Store has a one-story facade on North Trade Street divided into three distinct sections by various types and colors of brick. The oldest section, at the north end of the building, is of yellow-orange and tan bricks laid in common bond with seventh course headers. Tan mortar compliments the old brick; white mortar highlights repairs. The centered entrance on this section is the only working front entry to the Renfrow Hardware Store.

A striped canvas awning shades the wood framed display windows and recessed entry. Paneled window dados have centered ventilation grates. Above the awning is a wooden bracketed cornice. The buck mason added a brick corbel cornice of the same color of bricks. The longest pendant of the cornice is centered over the door; somewhat shorter cornice pendants grace the corners. Between each of the corner pendants and the long center pendant, there are two short, narrow cornices. The corbels project about four inches from the wall giving it a sense of depth and rich detail. Next to the oldest section there is another storefront of roughly equal size designed to resemble the oldest section. It is constructed of red brick laid in running bond joined with white mortar. Some repairs of cracks are evident in this section as well. The centered entrance on this section is used as a display area for many items including wash tubs and an enormous pair of overalls. Like the previously described storefront, this section has a striped canvas awning, wood framed display windows, recessed entry, paneled window dados with centered ventilation grates, and a wooden bracketed cornice. This section also has a brick corbel cornice of the same color of bricks. Again the longest pendant of the cornice is centered over the door, but there is only one shorter cornice pendant at the southwest corner of this section. There is only an illusion of symmetry of the cornice pendants; the illusion uses one of the corner pendants of the oldest section to trick the eye.

Another difference in the brick corbel cornice is the use of only one short, narrow cornice pendant between each of the corner pendants and the long center pendant. Again on this section, the corbels project about four inches from the wall adding depth and detail. The third section of the street facade appears symmetrical at first glance. Upon closer inspection, it is seen to be asymmetrical with six bays. The three doors of this section are not recessed but are flush with the street; this helps give the overall impression of a smooth wall. The dark red brick, laid in running bond, is joined with white mortar. Soldier courses of the same color brick form rectangles above each bay; the corners of the rectangles are squares of white concrete. Soldier courses also form the lintels over the windows and transom lights. A concrete coping tops a parapet built in the form of a low battlement. The first bay of the third section of the street facade has two ten-light windows beneath a transom light. The second bay consists of a double door with each door having a four light window and two wooden panels at the bottom. The double door is beneath a four light transom. The third bay, like the first bay, has two ten-light windows beneath a transom light. The fourth bay consists of a single paneled wooden door and a two light transom. The fifth

bay has three large plate glass windows; each has a single light transom covered with latticework. The sixth bay was a large opening that has been infilled with white siding; one full light door and a narrow window pierce the siding. In front of the third bay of this section there is a rustic streetside gas pump. Obviously not in working order, it is a reminder of the past, a of a time before huge gas stations. The side walls and the rear wall are of variously colored brick, predominantly red, laid in common bond with sixth course headers; the header courses are a dark red brick providing lines of contrast on the undecorated walls. The coping on the parapets is of brick rather than concrete. There are six large windows on the southeast side wall; they are covered with plywood panels.

About half of the back of the building is hidden by a new warehouse/storage building; however, there are three windows, one overhead door, one single door, and one double door on the back wall. The north wall of the original section of the Renfrow Hardware Store has no openings. The brick parapet wall steps down from the height of the street facade in three steps. Twelve five-point star heads, made to hold metal tie rods, are visible on this wall. The interior of the Renfrow Hardware Store covers approximately 10,500 square feet. Other small areas are used by other businesses. In the first and second sections (the oldest parts) of the Renfrow Hardware Store, the interior has wooden floors and beaded board ceilings. The third (southwest) section of the building has concrete floors and exposed trusses. Walls are of painted plaster and brick. Most of the Renfrow Hardware Store's original fittings seem to have survived over the years and are still in use. Open bins beside the front door hold seeds ready to be scooped into brown paper bags for customers. Site walls are lined with display shelves that appear to be original. Lacking strong lighting, the interior is dim and shadowy. The warm summer air is filled with the odors of fertilizer and various oils. Along the long rows of old and new merchandise, one can find almost any hardware item needed around the house. The Renfrow Hardware Store Building provides a solid architectural presence on North Trade Street. Most of the original fabric unchanged and in very good condition; that is a testament to the care the Renfrow family has given the building. But the importance of the building is that it is still serving the Town of Matthews as a functional, viable hardware store after almost a century -- one hundred years of nuts and bolts and seeds and overalls.