

# Survey and Research Report On The Rowland-Clay House



1. **Name and location of the property:** The property known as the Rowland-Clay House is located at 606 E. Charles Street in Matthews, N.C.

2. **Name and address of the present owner of the property:**

James Edward Clay and William Franklin Jackson

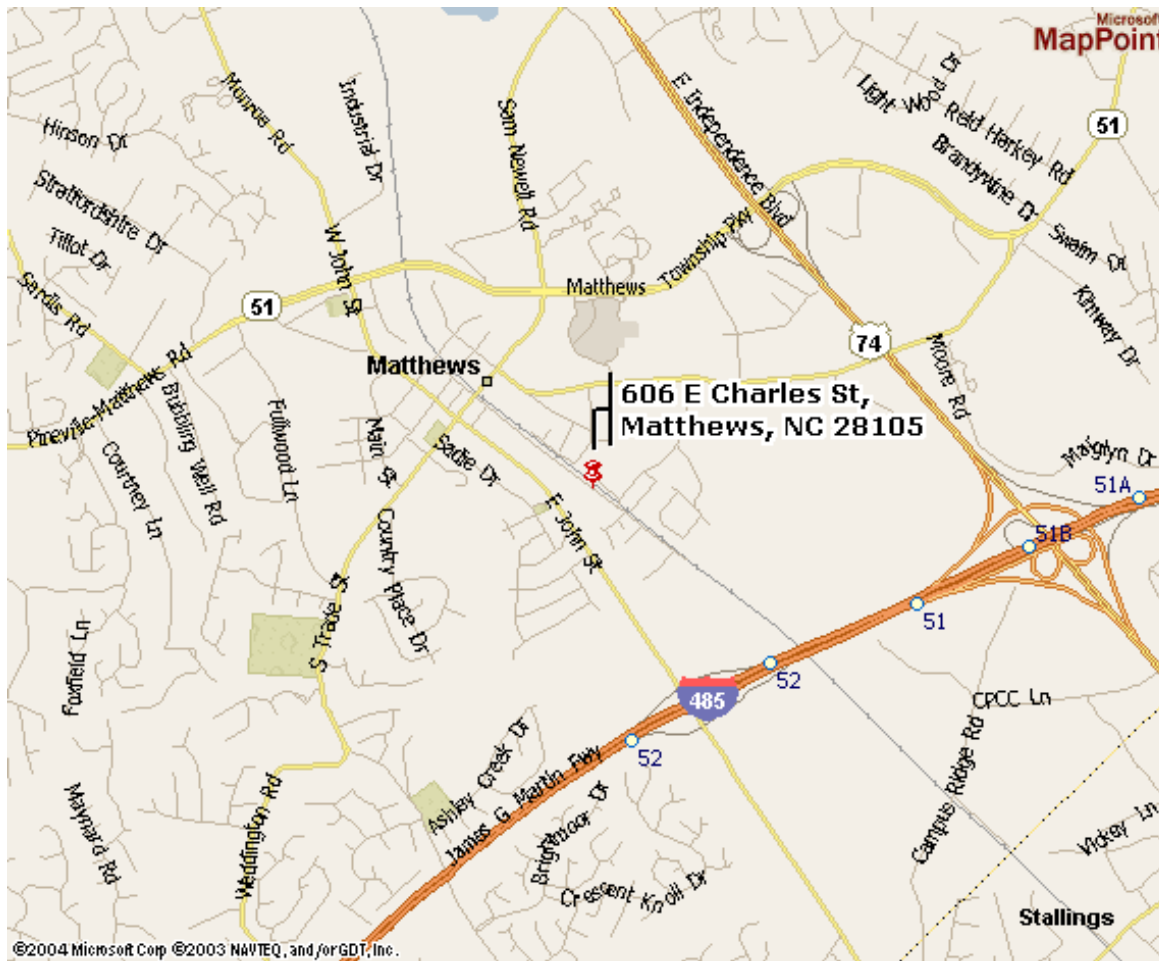
P.O. Box 213

Matthews, North Carolina 28105

(704)-845-8476

3. **Representative photographs of the property:** This report contains representative photographs of the property.

4. **Map depicting the location of the property:** Below is a map depicting the location of the property. The UTM coordinates are 526004E 3885540N.



5. **Current deed book reference to the property:** The most recent deed to this property is recorded in the Mecklenburg County Deed Book 7172, page 454. The tax parcel number of the property is 21504114.
6. **A brief historical sketch of the property:** This report contains a brief historical sketch of the property.

7. **A brief architectural description of the property:** This report contains a brief architectural description of the property.
  
8. **Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets the criteria for designation as set forth in N.C.G.S. 160A-400.5:**

**Special significance in terms of its history, architecture,  
and or**

**cultural importance:** The Commission judges that the property known as the Rowland-Clay House does possess special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations: 1.) The Rowland-Clay House is one of only four houses that remain to demonstrate the architecture of Tank Town, a rural community settled by freed slaves in the 1860's. 2.) The Rowland-Clay House is the only one of these extant domiciles of Tank Town that is built in the Craftsman style. Its relative grandness demonstrates the strivings of rural African American workers in the first half century after emancipation. 3.) The Rowland-Clay House is an important remnant of a rural community, and way of life, that no longer exists in Mecklenburg County, and is therefore a valuable reminder of early 20<sup>th</sup> century rural life in Mecklenburg County.

9. **Ad Valorem tax appraisal:** The Commission is aware that designation would allow the owner to apply for an automatic deferral of 50% of Ad Valorem taxes on all or any portion of the property which becomes designated as a "historic landmark." The current appraised value of the lot, which is 1.16 acres, is \$27,000. The appraised value of the building and features is \$65,700. The current total tax value is \$92,700.

Date of preparation of this report: January 2005

**Prepared by:** Hope L. Murphy

## Historical Overview

The Rowland-Clay House is located in what is now Crestdale, a historically African American neighborhood in Matthews, North Carolina. When Charlie and Vivian Rowland purchased land to build their home in 1929, the area was known as Tank Town. Dating from the 1870's, the area was called Tank Town because a railroad water tank stood near the railroad tracks that bisected the district. The first inhabitants of Tank Town were historically freeman and former slaves, many of whom were employed in operating the tank and performing other duties associated with the railroad. In 1874 the Central Carolina Railroad Company erected a depot near a stagecoach stop and post office, at a point approximately halfway between Monroe and Charlotte. When it opened, the depot was called "Matthews" in honor of Watson Matthews, a member of the Board of Directors of the Central Carolina Railroad. [\[1\]](#)

Though a number of Tank Town's residents were employed by the railroad, most were sharecroppers or day laborers in Matthews. Railway jobs were the best option available to blacks in Tank Town. The railroad provided steady employment, cash wages, housing, and later, insurance benefits. Few of the black farmers could afford to acquire land. A fifteen-acre tract in the community, now developed, once belonged to Abelola Weddington, the mulatto daughter of a prominent white farmer in the area. Abelola and her husband Green Lee Stewart farmed the land until they lost it in a crop lien. Abelola and Green Stewart were probably the only independent farmers in Tank Town. [\[2\]](#)

In 1929 Charlie and Vivian Rowland purchased six acres of land in Tank Town, for which they paid \$100. [\[3\]](#) Charlie Rowland was employed by the railroad, and though his position is not known, his income was sufficient enough to allow him to build this relatively stylish brick Craftsman style bungalow for his family. Though the Craftsman style was a popular building style for the period, very few of the Rowland's African American neighbors built such homes. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century housing for rural tenant farmers such as those in Tank Town usually consisted of the hall-and parlor style. These simple two-room homes were three-bays wide and one-room deep. After the turn of the century, rural African American communities began to adopt a larger housing style. Houses of this style were typically built on a one-story, hipped-roof, three-bay wide, four-room plan. [\[4\]](#)

The Rowland-Clay House is one of only four remaining homes in Crestdale. The others are the Clyburn, Garris, and Thompson Homes. None of these surviving homes, of the Rowlands' more affluent neighbors, is as stylish as theirs. Manley Clyburn, who built his home on Crestdale Road was a barber

and small storeowner. He also owned several parcels of land in Tank Town on which he built rental homes. While his home still stands, none of these rental units survives. John Garris was another African American who owned a number of pieces of land in Tank Town; his home was built ca. 1920, adjacent to the Presbyterian Church. The Thompson home is the oldest remaining home in Crestdale, the deed for this parcel is dated from 1904. However, it is not as architecturally significant as the Rowland-Clay House. <sup>[5]</sup>

Mildred Clay Spring, whose parents later bought the house, remembers visiting the Rowlands as a child, before her family moved to the home. Vivian Rowland was Spring's Girl Scout leader, and meetings were held in the house. Spring recalls that the floors in the house, "shone like glass." Rowland, in an effort to preserve her fine floors, required that the girls remove their shoes prior to entering the house. If a girl had no socks, Rowland would provide her with a pair. <sup>[6]</sup>

Mildred Spring moved to the house with her parents and four siblings in 1951. Her parents, Odell and Allie Clay, bought the house, the first they had owned, after the family ceased sharecropping. The family had labored for the Funderburks, a prominent white family in the area that owned a general store, livery stable, and operated the Bank of Matthews. <sup>[7]</sup> After moving to the house Spring's father began work in construction, while her mother was employed at East Mecklenburg High School. These occupations, like Charlie Rowland's railway job, provided the steady and relatively high wages that allowed them to buy a home. Allie Clay was an active member of the nearby United House of Prayer. <sup>[8]</sup>

Allie Clay's grandson, James Edward Clay, currently lives in the house. In 1993 he and his brother, William Franklin Jackson, bought the house at auction after their grandmother passed away.

### **Architectural Description**

The Rowland-Clay House is a unique structure. It is one of only four dwellings that remain from Tank Town's early twentieth century architecture, and the only Craftsman style bungalow. The one story house is additionally significant because of its solid masonry construction. While brick veneer became common during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the vast majority of homes in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Mecklenburg County were of wood frame

construction. The house is located approximately 20 feet from the street on a 1.16 acres back sloping lot. Across the street from the house are railroad tracks, which were present when the house was built, on a steep embankment. The neighborhood is of modest homes set on similarly sized lots.

A porch extends over the entire length of the façade of the Rowland-Clay House. Substantial tapered square posts set on brick piers support the porch, with its overhanging eaves. The posts have capitals formed by molded trim. A shingled hipped-gable roof covers the porch. The front of the house is pierced by a front door, set slightly off center to the east. The door is flanked by one-over-one windows, one on each side. The front gable roof has white wood shingling with a small vent opening.

The east elevation is three bays deep. At the center of the elevation is a pair of one-over-one windows, these are flanked on either side by a single one-over-one window. The west elevation is also three bays deep, with three single one-over-one windows. The brick surface of the west elevation extends until it joins the wooden addition at the rear of the house. The white wood shingled addition is of an unknown date. Half of the addition forms a small porch. The porch is set on red painted cinder blocks and is reached by a small staircase of wooden steps. The roof of the covered porch is supported by two slender posts, set on a wooden porch rail, which is in turn supported by simple rectangular posts. There are two windows, one smaller than the other, and a door leading off of the porch, into the rear interior space of the house. A small window is set in the wood shingled portion of the addition.

There are two brick chimneys located on the interior of the west and east sides of the roof. The chimneys are decorated with a row of bricks, near the top, which alternates red and yellow brick headers.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Dan L. Morrill, "The Funderburk Brothers Buildings, Survey and Research Report (1991)," Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission.

<sup>[2]</sup> "Survey of African American Buildings and Sites in Mecklenburg County," Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission.

<sup>[3]</sup> Mecklenburg County Deed Book 735, page 104.

<sup>[4]</sup> "Survey of African American Buildings and Sites."

<sup>[5]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[6]</sup> Interview with Mildred Clay Spring, November 2004.

<sup>[7]</sup> Dan L. Morrill, " The Funderburk Brothers Buildings, Survey and Research Report (1991)," Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission.

<sup>[8]</sup> Interview with Mildred Clay Spring, December 2004.