

OLD SETTLERS' CEMETERY



This report was written on January 3, 1984

1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the Old Settlers' Cemetery is located on West Fifth Street, between Poplar and Church Streets, in Charlotte, North Carolina.

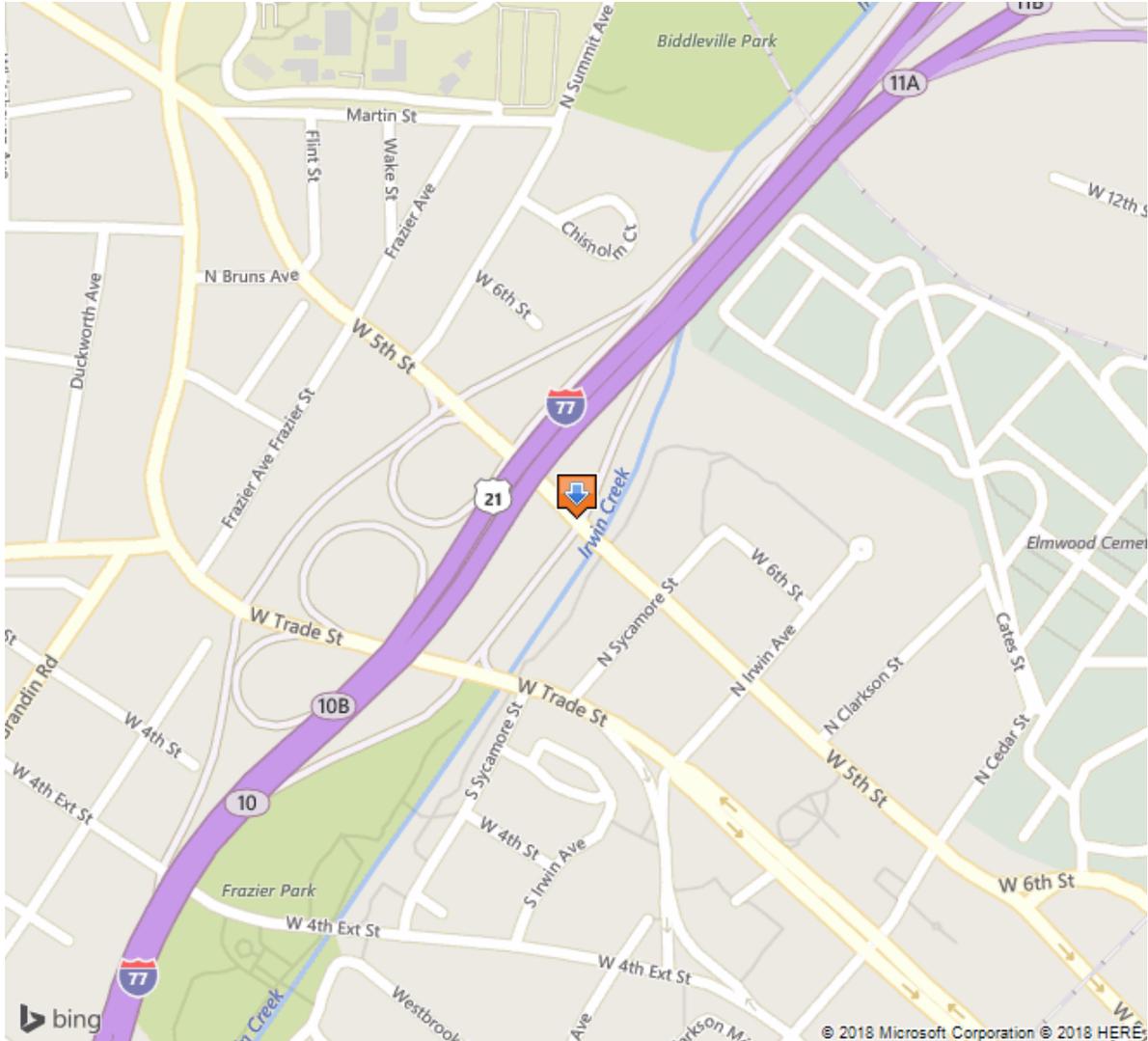
2. Name, address, and telephone number of the present owner and occupant of the property: The present owners of the property are:

City of Charlotte
600 East Trade Street
Charlotte, N.C. 28202

Telephone: (704) 374-2241

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

4. A map depicting the location of the property: which depicts 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 Register of Deeds office contains no individual Deed to this property. The Tax Parcel Number is 078-012-01.

6. A brief historical sketch of the property: This report contains a brief historical sketch of the property prepared by Dr. William H. Huffman.

7. A brief architectural description of the property: This report contains an architectural description of the property prepared by Thomas W. Hanchett.

8. Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets the criteria set forth in N.C.G.S. 160A-399.4:

a. Special significance in terms of its history, architecture, and/or cultural importance: The Commission judges that the property known as the Old Settlers' Cemetery does possess special

significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations: 1) the Old Settlers' Cemetery was the first municipal burial ground in Charlotte, North Carolina and functioned in this capacity from 1776 until 1867, 2) the Old Settlers' Cemetery contains the earthly remains of many of the most prominent citizens of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County in the late 18th and 19th century, and 3) the Old Settlers' Cemetery forms the centerpiece of the Fourth Ward Historic District.

b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling and/or association: The Commission contends that the attached architectural description by Thomas W. Hanchett demonstrates that the Old Settlers' Cemetery 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 "historic property." The subject property is owned by the City of Charlotte and is therefore, exempt from Ad Valorem Taxes.

Date of preparation of this report: January 3, 1984

Prepared by: Dr. Dan L. Morrill, Director
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Properties Commission
1225 S. Caldwell Street
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Historical Overview

Dr. William H. Huffman

Sitting on part of the hilltop that comprises the heart of Charlotte, just two short blocks from the Square, is the city's oldest cemetery. Now as much a pleasant inner-city park as a cemetery, it shares the block bounded by 5th, Poplar, 6th and Church Streets with a modern condominium building and the old North Carolina Medical College. Since it is just to the East across 5th Street and from the venerable First Presbyterian Church, it has been assumed by many to be, or to have been, a cemetery connected with the church. Indeed, one of its old popular names was "The Presbyterian Burying Ground," but, as it turns out, this was never the case, even though it was a reasonable assumption.

The history of the church and the cemetery were intimately linked, however, in the early days of the Queen City. The town itself was established in 1768, the year following the purchase of 360

acres of land from George Augustus Selwyn (1719-1791) for that purpose by the town commissioners. Selwyn had inherited a 100,000-acre tract in 1751 from his father, Colonel John Selwyn, Esquire, an English country gentleman who had been granted the parcel from George II in 1745 for services rendered to the crown. In the 1760s, the younger Selwyn, through agents in North Carolina, began to sell off tracts, mostly plantations of 200 to 500 acres along the creeks and rivers.

Apparently the present sites of the First Presbyterian Church and the cemetery were both used for religious worship and burials, respectively, not too long after the formation of the town. It was not until 1815, however, that those two locations were officially set aside exclusively for their traditional purposes by the city. The Town Church, as it was originally known, was constructed from 1818 to 1823, and was intended for use by all denominations, but because of their greater numbers, was used mostly by the Presbyterians. Similarly, the cemetery was the only nondenominational one in town, but would have naturally contained more Presbyterians than others. Thus the name, "The Presbyterian Burying Ground," was not totally inaccurate, even though it was not an official church cemetery. In 1835, the First Presbyterian Church did acquire the Trade Street site for its exclusive use, but this did not include the old cemetery.

The oldest known burial in the Old Cemetery is that of Joel Baldwin, who died October 21, 1776, at the age of 26, and, although the site was closed in 1867, burials with special permission took place until 1884. During that time, many of Charlotte's families, from the best-known to the least, were laid to rest there, including veterans of the Revolutionary and Civil Wars. A good number of them were the founding pioneers of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County. The northwest corner of the cemetery was set aside for the servants of the families whose members were interred there.

One of the figures from the Revolutionary era there is Colonel Thomas Polk, who died in 1793, and was the great-uncle of President James K. Polk. Among his accomplishments were reported to be his holding office as one of the county's first commissioners, being treasurer and trustee of Queens College and a member of the Colonial Assembly, and signing the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence. Next to him is his wife, Susannah Spratt Polk, whose father's house, that of Thomas Spratt, was the site of the first court held in Mecklenburg County.

A hero of the Revolutionary War, Major General George Graham (1758-1826) is also interred in the Old Settlers' Cemetery. Graham came to Charlotte in 1764 from Pennsylvania, and was at the historic battle at McIntire's farm where a small group of patriots sent a detachment of 600 British soldiers back to Cornwallis with the complaint that there was a "rebel behind every bush."

Another interesting figure from the early era to be found in the hilltop graveyard is Dr. Nathaniel Alexander (1756-1808). Alexander was born in what later became Mecklenburg County, graduated from Princeton in 1776, and was commissioned a surgeon in the North Carolina Regiment of the Continental Line, where he served for four years. He practiced medicine for a time in South Carolina, then moved to Charlotte, where he eventually entered politics. After serving in the state House and Senate, he became a Member of Congress from 1803 to 1805. When Governor Turner resigned in the latter year to fill a vacancy for the United States Senate,

Dr. Alexander became the North Carolina governor, and served to 1807. He married the daughter of Colonel Thomas Polk, mentioned above, Margaret Polk Alexander (1758-1800).

An impressive obelisk monument in the cemetery contains the name of William Davidson (1778-1857), one of several with that well-known Mecklenburg name there. Davidson moved to the county as a youth, where he became a planter, and subsequently entered politics. He was a member of the state Senate in 1813, 1815-19, and 1825. After moving to Charlotte in 1820, he was elected to the 15th Congress as a Federalist to fill a vacancy, and was re-elected to the 16th Congress, serving from December, 1818, to March, 1821. After an unsuccessful run for the 17th Congress, he was again elected to the state Senate, serving from 1827 to 1830.

Some Confederate veterans were also buried in Old Settlers'. One of the remaining monuments is that of Colonel William Allison Owens, of the 53rd Regiment, N.C.T., who was born September 19, 1833, and was wounded at Snickers Gap, Virginia, on July 18, 1864, and died the following day. Owens' obelisk monument still has the distinctive iron cross marker of the United Daughters of the Confederacy in front of it, apparently the last one extant in the cemetery. Another Confederate monument was to mark the memory of Lieutenant Joseph Davidson Blake of the Confederate Navy Yard in Charlotte.



United Daughters of the Confederacy marker

In 1855, Elmwood cemetery, then known as the New Cemetery, was opened and accommodated its first burial. Its opening was necessitated by Old Settlers' reaching capacity, and on April 29, 1867, after taking in some Confederate veterans of the leading families, the city passed an ordinance closing it, which read in part, "...that the Board having opened the new Cemetery for burial purposes, now deem it expedient to forbid the interment of dead bodies in the old Grave Yard of the city, from and after the 1st day of August next....Any person violating this ordinance shall forfeit and pay \$25 for each offence...."

Forty years after its closing, the cemetery was suffering from some neglect. In 1906, the Charlotte Park and Tree Commission, with Daniel Augustus Tompkins, the noted industrialist as president, and George Stephens, the developer of Myers Park as secretary-treasurer, jointly undertook the preservation and beautification of the cemetery with the D.A.R. Auxiliary Committee for Cemetery Square. This project produced one of the unique historical features of the cemetery, the iron gate and the granite gateposts on 5th Street, which used to be the entrance.

The gate was ordered in 1842 by James Harvey Orr, at his wife's request, for their home on South Tryon Street near the old First National Bank. It was handmade at the Vesuvius Furnace in Lincoln County, which was owned by Orr's father-in-law, John D. Graham, whose grandfather, General Joseph Graham, had built the forge in 1791. The gate decorated two of the Orr's homes in Charlotte, but was removed when the second home was sold to Dr. Charles L. Alexander and demolished. A relative, Julia Alexander, who was a member of the D.A.R. committee, acquired the gate from Dr. Alexander and the two granite posts from her father, S. B. Alexander. The posts were from the home of her paternal grandmother, Violet Graham Alexander, the daughter of General Joseph Graham.

After the 1906 campaign, the historic hilltop cemetery remained a showplace for a number of years, but eventually the decades took their toll, and, after the passage of another forty-five years, once again it was in need of attention. Oddly enough, the main reason why city beautification programs were not undertaken until the early 1950s is that over the years knowledge of the ownership of the land was lost, thus thwarting all efforts. During all those years, the D.A.R. Committee, including Julia Alexander, and a few relatives, attempted to care for the cemetery themselves, sometimes hiring a landscape gardener to do the work. In the spring of 1952, Julia Alexander "personally paid to have the tombstones and monuments needing repair repaired by an outstanding marble firm of the city with the exception of one monument reset and paid for by a relative." The D.A.R., in 1925, had also planted an oak tree to commemorate the visit of George Washington to Charlotte in 1791, and in 1932 put a bronze tablet by the tree to mark the 200th anniversary of Washington's birth.

Still, the Old Cemetery was showing signs of age, and it got a boost under the administration of Charlotte Mayor Victor Shaw (served 1949-1953), who took a personal interest in the cemetery and made its renovation a top priority of his term of office. The first order of business was to determine ownership of the property, which was discovered to be that of the city. Mayor Shaw then persuaded the City Council to spend over \$10,000 to do landscaping, lay cement walkways, install electric lights and put in a fountain. The beautification project was completed in early 1953, and the following year stone benches with wood seats were also installed.

By the mid-Sixties, however, the cemetery found itself once again in poor condition from the effects of time, vandalism and vagrants. In 1968, as part of an urban beautification program for the whole city totaling \$195,000 (\$102,000 supplied by the city, the rest from a federal grant), the city decided to spend \$40,000 to restore the Old Cemetery and further make it into an attractive inner-city park. \$22,000 was spent on new landscaping, new brick walkways and benches were installed, a three-tiered fountain with colored lights was constructed in the

southeast corner, and the monuments were cleaned, all of which gave the cemetery its present-day look and reclaimed it as an attractive part of downtown Charlotte.

Whether it is called the "Presbyterian Burying Ground," the "Old Cemetery," or "Old Settlers' Cemetery," there is no question about the great historical importance of Charlotte's first public burial ground. In it rests many members of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County's founding families: Alexander, Davidson, Graham, Polk, Orr, Berryhill, Owens, Asbury, Hoskins, Springs and a number of others, to name a few. Some were government leaders, some pioneer industrialists and entrepreneurs, others were soldiers in the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, but all of them played a significant role in the establishment of the civil and economic life of the city and county. The site itself has always played, and continues to do so, a distinctive role in the features of the heart of the city of Charlotte.

NOTES

¹ William H. Huffman, "A Historical Report on Reedy Creek Park," May, 1981, p. 1.

² *Charlotte Observer*, March 26, 1939, Sec. 3, p.6.

³ *Ibid.*; Elizabeth Williams, *First Presbyterian Church*, 2 vols. (Charlotte).

⁴ See note 2.

⁵ *Biographical Directory of the American Congress, 1774-1971* (U. S. Government Printing Office, 1971) p. 194.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 829.

⁷ Monuments in Old Settlers' Cemetery.

⁸ *The Western Democrat*, April 30, 1867, p. 3.

⁹ Letter from Charlotte Park and Tree Commission to Mr. Davidson, dated 18 February 1906.

¹⁰ See note 2.

¹¹ Letter from Julia Alexander to the *Mecklenburg Times* dated 16 March 1953, printed 19 March 1953.

¹² See note 2.

¹³ *Charlotte Observer*, December 10, 1952, p. 1; *Mecklenburg Times*, September 2, 1954, p. 1.

¹⁴ *Charlotte News*, May 18, 1965, p. 1C; *Charlotte Observer*, December 31, 1968, p.18; *Ibid.*, January 18, 1969, p.18.; *Ibid.*, August 22, 1969, p.18.

Architectural Description

Thomas W. Hanchett

For more than two centuries Settlers' Cemetery has been an important public space in the heart of downtown Charlotte. It occupies nearly a full block of prime center city land, bounded on three sides by Fifth Street, Church Street, and Poplar Street, and on the fourth side by a strip of private building lots facing Sixth Street. Though it has undergone many changes through long-term neglect and periodic attempts at beautification, its ancient stones remain an important tangible link to Charlotte's early history.

Settlers' Cemetery commands a hillside site, which afforded early visitors a pleasant view north to the hill beyond Briar Creek. Today the largest number of gravestones may be found in the south quadrant, near Church and Fifth streets, which was the highest part of the cemetery. The north quadrant, at the bottom of the hill, is said to have been the burying place for slaves and servants, and no markers survive in the lower part of this area.

Gravestones are not set in rigid rows, but rather form small family groups. All burials were evidently oriented the same way, however, with feet to the east and head to the west, providing a loose sort of visual order in the graveyard. The orientation of the graves clashes with the orientation of the cemetery itself: Charlotte's 1768 street grid was not aligned with the compass points but rather angled to correspond with the two original Indian trading paths, Trade and Tryon streets.

In 1983 most surviving markers date from the 1840s, 1850s, and 1860s. Settlers' Cemetery functioned as Charlotte's main burial ground from at least the 1770s into the 1860s. Though superseded by the 1855 Elmwood cemetery a few blocks away, Settlers' continued to receive occasional new graves into the 1880s.

Markers are primarily simple tablets, with a scattering of small obelisks, and a number of raised individual crypts featuring either vertical or horizontal tablets. There is little of the ornate statuary and none of the elaborate mausoleums found in Elmwood. This may be in part due to the passage of time, such stones being especially attractive to the vandals and thieves who have obviously been quite active in Settlers' Cemetery. More likely, it is a true expression of both the limited means and simple tastes of the residents of antebellum Piedmont North Carolina.

Marble was the most common material for markers, with a scattering of limestone and a blackish, quartz-laden stone that resembles soft granite. The earliest stones, dating from the 1770s into the 1810s, are of this material, and their inscriptions are among the cemetery's most readable. A single Charlotte stone-mason likely carved them all, for they share the same Gothic lettering and awkward spacing that frequently saw the carver disregard right margins and continue words around to the side of the stone. By the mid-nineteenth century, several stone-carvers were at work, and Settlers' Cemetery boasts numerous signed examples of their art. J.W. McCoy may have been the first to sign his handiwork, in 1813. By the 1860s, "Hoot," F.A. McNinch, "Tiddy," and W.T. White had joined him. White was the most prolific, with at least seven surviving markers to his credit. There may be more, for the marble frequently used has eroded to unreadability over the years on many stones.

Several markers are worth individual note. Four of the earliest stones, dating from the 1770s, were dug up during construction of the Mercy Hospital Nurses Residence in the Elizabeth neighborhood and moved to Settlers' Cemetery as part of Mayor Victor Shaw's 1953 beautification efforts. The most elaborate of the raised crypts is a double tomb for John and Mary Irwin, which has Gothic blind arches decorating its sides. A cast iron fountain, apparently of Victorian design with water from a central jet cascading down a series of fluted bowls, decorates the north corner of the cemetery. A heavy iron gate between two stone piers, made for a private residence in 1842 and moved to the cemetery in 1906, guards the main entrance on Fifth Street.

Settlers' Cemetery has always been owned by the city, and has gone through several cycles of neglect and renewal. The first beautification efforts in 1906 were directed by planner and landscape architect John Nolen. The work was one of the first projects in the career of this nationally significant designer, who went on to execute over 400 projects nationwide, and take a leading role in the founding of planning's first professional organizations. No drawings of "Cemetery Square," as his project was known, survive in Nolen's professional papers at Cornell University. It is likely that many of the cemetery's trees follow Nolen's suggestions. They are scattered without formal pattern to achieve the sort of naturalistic effect that he admired, and include a variety of species, among them oak, pine, magnolia, and nandina.

The next flurry of beautification work came in the early 1950s. None of the concrete walks or stone and wood benches installed at this time remain in 1983, but there is ample evidence of reset and repaired monuments funded by philanthropist Julia Alexander. The most recent work dates from 1968, and is somewhat heavy-handed. Brick walkways loop through the block, focusing on an oversized circular fountain and seating area in the east corner of the cemetery overlooking Church Street. Planting beds and shrubbery lining the walks were placed without regard to the stones, leaving several tombs in the midst of dense bushes. Nonetheless, the new landscaping reinforces the park-like nature of the cemetery, which has been an important aspect of its existence since the beginning, and helps to make Settlers' Cemetery a frequently-used open space in today's city.