

THE STEELE CREEK PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH AND CEMETERY



This report was written on 28 August 1990

1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the Steele Creek Presbyterian Church and Cemetery is located at 7407 Steele Creek Road in Charlotte, North Carolina.

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

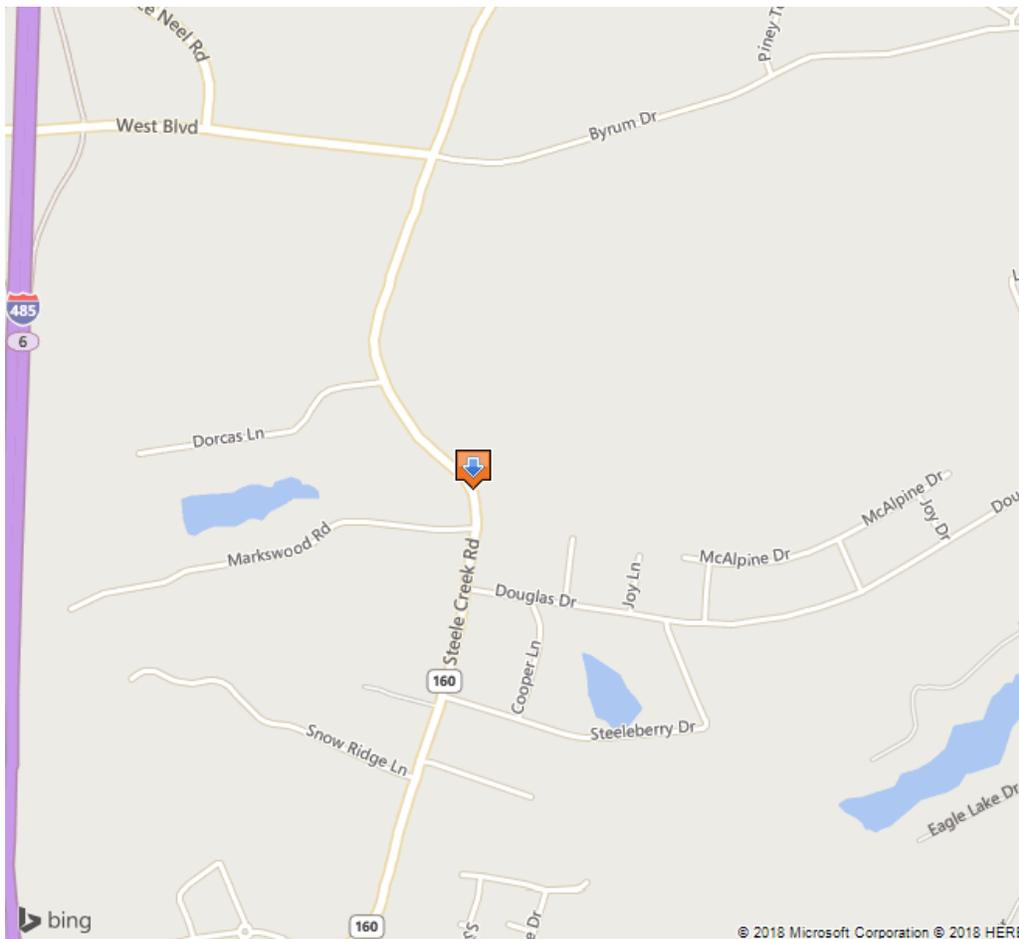
Steele Creek Presbyterian Church
RFD 2, Box 350, 7407 Steele Creek Road
Charlotte, North Carolina 28210

Telephone: (704)588-1290

Tax Parcel Number: 141-041-09

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 this property is listed in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 0003 at page 869. The Tax Parcel Number of the property is 141-041-09.

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

7. A brief architectural description of the property: This report contains a brief architectural description of the property prepared by Dr. Richard Mattson.

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 its history, architecture, and cultural importance: The Commission judges that the property known as the Steele Creek Presbyterian Church and Cemetery does possess special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations: 1) the boundaries of Steele Creek Presbyterian Church were organized by the Presbyterian Synod of New York and Philadelphia in 1764, 2) Steele Creek Presbyterian Church was one of the first seven churches established in Mecklenburg County by Scotch-Irish settlers, 3) the boundaries of the present cemetery encompass the sites of the first three meeting houses dating from the middle to late 18th century; 4) the ca. 1889 sanctuary is architecturally significant as a fine example of the Gothic Revival style; 5) the Steele Creek Presbyterian Cemetery contains basically intact headstones dating from 1763 to the present; 6) the headstones demonstrate the excellence and variety of designs carved locally in the Bigham workshop, and 7) Steele Creek Presbyterian Church is an excellent example of the role of the church in early Scotch-Irish communities.

b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling, and/or association: The Commission contends that the architectural description by Dr. Richard Mattson which is included in this report demonstrates that the Steele Creek Presbyterian Church and 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 a designated "historic landmark." The current appraised value of the improvements is \$1,337,530. The current appraised value of the 37.575 acres is \$131,500. The total appraised value of the property is \$1,469,030. The property is zoned R-15.

Date of Preparation of this Report: 28 August 1990

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Architectural Description

Located on a spacious, approximately 40-acre, tract southwest of Charlotte, NC, Steele Creek Presbyterian Church and Cemetery represent outstanding historical, artistic, and architectural symbols of the profound Scotch-Irish influence in Mecklenburg County. The setting reflects the area's historically rural ambience, though residential and commercial development to the south and east is graphic evidence of the county's recent growth and of the fragility of the rural character that still remains in this section of Mecklenburg County. To the north of the church grounds is Steele Creek Nursery, and to the west stand small, early 20th-century houses scattered on large lots. These properties help to reinforce the feeling of openness that the church grounds provide.

The Steele Creek Presbyterian Church property is visually dominated by the distinguished 1889 Gothic Revival style sanctuary. Facing west, this building commands a rise of land shaded by mature oak trees overlooking Steele Creek Road (NC Hwy. 160). The winding Steele Creek Road is a historical stage route linking Salisbury, NC with Camden, SC. To the east of the sanctuary (and attached 1923 educational wing) stands a complex of three brick-veneered, two-story buildings erected between the 1950s and 1989 for classrooms, offices, a chapel, and gymnasium. Although now attached to each other, these three buildings, erected separately, are counted in this nomination as three Noncontributing structures. This complex is connected to the sanctuary by a covered walkway. A paved parking lot is located to the east of the complex of buildings and south of the sanctuary. Parking space is also located to the north and east of the church buildings, and farther east, shaded by trees, is a small playground. Neither the parking lots nor the playground interferes with the architectural integrity of the sanctuary or the artistic integrity of the cemetery, and, therefore, are not classified in this nomination as Noncontributing. Bounded by a dry-laid flagstone wall measuring about four feet high and one foot thick, the Steele Creek Presbyterian Cemetery stands northwest of the church buildings. A Contributing site in this nomination, the cemetery comprises approximately three acres and includes headstones from 1763 to the present.

Sanctuary

The handsome Gothic Revival sanctuary represents the sixth house of worship built by the Scotch-Irish congregation at Steele Creek. In 1888, the congregation's 1858 sanctuary burned to the ground, and the following year the present one was completed on the site. The bricks were made by members of the congregation from a generous supply of clay on the grounds. The building contractor was H. J. Norris, a member of

the congregation. The sanctuary's brick walls, laid in a common bond, measured 80 feet long (six bays) and 52 feet wide (three bays). Today, the exterior of this well-executed sanctuary survives largely intact. Its Gothic Revival Style is evident in the pointed arched sash windows with textured glass in the over-lights, the pointed arched entries, and steeply pitched roof parapet. Shallow buttresses define the five bays of the main facade, as well as the six bays comprising the side elevations. Flanking the front facade, and originally signifying the sanctuary's two main doorways, are a pair of crenelated entry towers with small copper caps and finials. A course of corbeled brick dentils accents the steeply pitched center gable, which features a circular vent surrounded by raised brick. Set directly below this vent, and above the present main entrance, are a pair of pointed-arched vented windows framed within a segmental arched brick corbeling. The major alteration to the exterior was the replacement, in 1968, of the principal pointed arched windows located between the two corner entries by a main central entrance way. At this time new paneled doors and matching paneled surrounds were added to the side entrances, and pointed arched metal roofs and fascia installed.

Attached to the east end of the sanctuary is a two-story educational wing that was completed in 1923. Four bays deep (approximately 40 feet), this addition has common-bond brick walls and granite window sills and lintels. Slate shingles cover the hip roof. The original sashes have been replaced, and the interior was modernized and partly integrated into the interior of the sanctuary in 1951.

Noncontributing Buildings

The Noncontributing resources consist of three brick-veneered buildings joined together by later infill construction. They are arranged in a row facing west, several yards to the east and south of the Contributing 1889 sanctuary and rear 1923 educational wing. Each is in good repair and serves its original function. At the north end of this complex is a Sunday School building completed in 1954. Joined to the 1923 educational wing by an arcade, it has a slate pent roof and stone-faced entrance. To the south is the church office building, representing the 1968 renovation and expansion of a community house (1926). This building, too, has a slate pent roof and is decorated with simple Gothic-inspired window and doorway treatment on the main facade. Directly to the south is the church's new chapel and gymnasium, dedicated in 1989. The gable-front chapel is treated with restrained Post-Modern elements alluding to the Gothic.

Steele Creek Presbyterian Cemetery

Steele Creek Cemetery comprises a remarkable collection of basically intact (though sometimes moss-covered) headstones, dating from 1763 to the present. There are

approximately 1,700 headstones in the cemetery to date; and about 200 date between 1763 and ca. 1820. These earliest markers were crafted by local artisans, and notably by members of the Bigham family of headstone carvers. The Bighams, who lived nearby and donated land to the church, operated their workshop in this vicinity between about 1765 and 1820 (Gatza 1988; Little-Stokes 1982; Clark 1989). While generations of Bighams cut gravestones in the vicinity of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania as well as in the Carolina Piedmont, "the best and most varied collection of their works can be found in the cemetery next to the Steele Creek Presbyterian Church. . ." (Clark 1989, 37). Among the variety of traditional designs executed by the Bighams and evident in the Steele Creek cemetery are the Scottish Thistle, the Tree of life, the Dove of Promise, rear-face decoration (11 examples identified), and family coats of arms (34 examples).

All of the gravestones in the cemetery are arranged in parallel rows running north-south, and they face east. The early stone markers are located primarily in the south half of the burial ground (south of the site of the first four churches) and were made from soapstone, granite, and marble. Those markers that post-date the work of the Bighams, and erected between the 1830s and turn of the century, often have traditionally restrained designs, with simple descriptions and flat, curvilinear, or occasionally pedimented tops. A number of them are marked with names of local and regional headstone manufacturers.

According to church tradition, the stone wall that surrounds the cemetery was constructed with slave labor during the antebellum period (Grier 1941). The wrought iron gates on the south and east entrances appear to be original, though the wall, in places, has been reconstructed and reinforced with cement mortar. In 1912, for example, stonemason Plato Price rebuilt part of the wall and may have been responsible for reconstructing the wall's north side (Grier 1941).

Historical Overview

The Steele Creek Presbyterian Church and Cemetery are outstanding historical, architectural and artistic symbols of the Scotch-Irish influence in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. Situated on a tree-shaded rise of land overlooking Steele Creek Road, the 1889 Gothic sanctuary is architecturally significant under Criterion C for its handsome expression of this style. When erected at the end of the 1880s, it was the finest, most pretentious expression of church architecture in rural Mecklenburg. (See Associated Property Type 4 - Churches and Cemeteries.) The cemetery

associated with the church contains the county's finest collection of headstones dating from late 18th and early 19th centuries, as well as a handsome, representative array of stones from the second half of the 19th century and early decades of the 20th. Bounded by a solidly built dry-laid stone wall with iron gates, this cemetery includes both traditional and popular gravestone designs reflecting the work of important local artisans - notably the Bigham family - and, subsequently, the products of larger manufacturers based not only in Charlotte, but in such cities as Columbia and Chester, South Carolina. The cemetery is therefore eligible under Criterion C. The church and cemetery are also eligible under Criterion A, because of their role in the early settlement history of the county (See Content Statement - Early Settlement). It was one of the first seven churches established in the county by the early Scotch-Irish settlers.

In 1764, a commission appointed by the Presbyterian Synod of New York and Philadelphia reorganized and adjusted the boundaries of the churches in North Carolina, and calls were sent out for pastors for Steele Creek, Providence, Hopewell, Centre (now in Iredell County), Rocky River, and Poplar Tent. Sugar Creek, to the northeast of Charlotte, already had a pastor. These were the first seven churches established in the county by the early Scotch-Irish settlers, and were sometimes known as the pre-Revolutionary "Pleiades", or "Seven Sisters." ¹

In the first history of the church written by Rev. John Douglas (served 1866- 1879), it was thought that a church was first established in the Steele Creek area as early as 1760, but later research suggests that a church was active there as early as 1745. ² Another former pastor, J. W. Orr (served 1912 - 1920), who wrote a historical sketch in 1915, also suggests that there was preaching at the site twenty years before the church was officially organized in 1760. ³

The early Scotch-Irish members of the congregation were farmers, whom Orr typified as "industrious, thrifty and upright...and...splendid citizens." ⁴ (See Early Settlement and Agriculture contexts.) Before the church was formally organized, these farmers were served by traveling preachers. Among these early "circuit riders" were Rev. Hugh McAden, Rev. Elihu Spencer, and Rev. Robert McMordie. ⁵ The first "settled pastor" was Rev. Robert Henry, who served both Steele Creek and Providence Churches from 1766 to 1767. In the latter year he died, and from that time until 1778, the church had neither a "settled" minister nor regular supply pastor until the Rev. James McRee took up the post and served from 1778 to 1797. Under his pastorage, the small church stabilized and gradually increased in numbers. ⁶ His introduction of *Watt's Psalms & Hymns*, however, split the congregation and resulted in the loss of a number of members who left to form other churches in the township: Central Steele Creek (1794); Lower Steele Creek (1794) and Little Steele Creek (1800). These

churches were the result of the unwillingness of several members of Steele Creek to compromise on the issue of singing hymns, not over dissension about doctrine.⁷

Rev. McRee left in 1797, and the church had no regular pastor again until 1804, when the Rev. Humphrey Hunter came, who served until 1827. He was succeeded by the Rev. Samuel Lytle Watson (1828-40).⁸ In the early 1800s. Steele Creek was considered large and important, even though it only had one hundred white and about twenty black members. But from the turn of the nineteenth century to 1832, the congregation was "so infected with intemperance, infidelity, Universalism and Unitarianism that strife and erratic church attendance were frequent." But in 1832, a wave of illness, (quite possibly the influenza epidemic of that year) and emigrations seemed to steady the congregation.⁹

The next major concern for the church came with the Civil War. Two hundred and four men from Steele Creek enlisted for service and one hundred and one are buried in the church cemetery. The minister during the war was Rev. Samuel Carothers Alexander (1861 - 1865), who was a native of Pennsylvania. There was continuous conflict between the minister and the congregation, such that the latter asked the Presbytery to dissolve his relationship with the church.¹⁰

After the war, it appears that the worst struggles for the church were over. The new minister, Rev. John Douglas (1866-79), wrote the first history of the church. His successor, Rev. J. T. Plunkett (1880-82) recruited 110 new members to the fold, which helped to make up for losses due to illness and the war. The Rev. A. P. Nicholson, who served from 1882 to 1886, is remembered as an austere and upright man; he had "no patience or place for modernistic views which became popular in some places at this time."¹¹

The end of the century also saw the enthusiasm with which the members of Steele Creek threw themselves into missionary and building programs. Missionary support began in the 1880s through the establishment of various church organizations: the Childrens Band of Earnest Workers (1898); the Ladies Aid Society (1880); the Young Ladies Missionary Society (1888); and the Gentlemen's Foreign Missions Society (1896).¹²

Exactly how and when the land was assembled for the church in its present configuration cannot be determined from the deed records. The first known mention of the property is in a deed dated January 7, 1771, in which William Bigham and his wife, Sarah (see Bigham family, above), sold 300 acres to a Robert Brownfield. In the description of the land, the following appears: "(Four acres of said land including the Old and New Meeting Houses the grave yard and spring on the North side of said Meetinghouses Only Excepted and Exempted in the Deed for the use of

Congregation)." ¹³ The next recorded deed was the acquisition of an adjoining 9-3/4 acres in 1837, ¹⁴ and in 1858, they bought another adjacent 6-3/4 acres. ¹⁵ In 1883, the trustees added another 2-1/2 acres. ¹⁶ By the descriptions in the deeds, however, it is not possible to determine exactly how these parcels fit together.

The first church at Steele Creek was made of logs, "like Solomon's temple...paved with love, but had no silver pillars or coverings of purple." About 1780, the meeting house was enlarged into an octagonal shape. Soon after the arrival of the Rev. Humphrey Hunter as pastor, about 1804, a third church was built a few paces south of the old church. It was sixty-five feet long and forty feet wide, made of wood frame and weatherboards, hip roof, wood shingles, and eventually had a gallery put in for slaves. ¹⁷ These early churches were within the boundaries of the present cemetery.

Around 1858, the congregation put up a fourth church about 175 yards southeast of the previous one, which is the site of the present church. The fourth church burned on January 24, 1888, and four days later, the congregation determined that they would build a new church on the same site. A building committee was formed, and H. J. Norris was hired as the contractor. The fifth church was, for the first time, built of brick, which was made from clay at the bottom of a hill near the church. The new sanctuary measured fifty-three by eighty feet, had a gallery across the front, a twenty-four foot ceiling, and could seat about 1,000. The women furnished the new church with carpets, chandeliers, and indeed, everything but the pulpit, which was a gift of the twelfth pastor, Rev. W. O. Cochran (served 1887-1889). The students of Davidson College supplied a Bible, Minnie Robinson Price (Mrs. P. D. Price) provided a hymn book and the Sunday school class led by Maggie Whiteside provided a baptismal bowl and Sunday school bell. The new sanctuary was completed in March, 1889, and the dedication service took place on the following April 7th. ¹⁸

Plans for a building expansion program began in the early twentieth century. The Rev. J. W. Orr indicated in a 1915 pamphlet that there was a great need for a Sabbath School building. In that year, the push for financial support for the project began under the "every Member" plan in which every member contributed to the church on a weekly basis. ¹⁹ The result was the completion of a two-story educational building in 1923 and a community house in 1926 (which was given a brick veneer and completely renovated for offices in 1968). The sanctuary was renovated and given its present form in 1950, and in 1989, a new chapel and gymnasium were added to the south of the office building. ²⁰

The church cemetery has some of the oldest graves in Mecklenburg County. Among them are to be found the names of many pioneering families of that part of the county: Allen, Bigham, Davis, Grier, Hart, Herron, McDowell, Neely, Porter, Sloan, Tagart, and Vance. Thirteen veterans of the Revolutionary War are buried there, and a

number of families who buried members as far back as 1763 still attended in the 1970s, and thus span seven generations: Berryhill, Bigham, Cathey, Clark, Freeman, Grier, Herron, Knot, Mitchell, McDowell, Neel, Neely, Porter, Price, Sloan, Spratt, Stilwell, Whiteside and Wilson. ²¹ The cemetery has four sections: the eastern quarter was the original burying ground; the western quarter was used after 1840; the middle between the two was opened in 1884; and the north side was added in 1884. ²²

The Steele Creek Presbyterian Church is an excellent example of the founding Presbyterian churches of the early Scotch-Irish settlers in the county and the role it played as the center of that rural community.

Notes

¹ *The History of Steele Creek Church* 3rd Ed. (Charlotte: Steele Creek Presbyterian Church, 1978), p. 23.

² R. E. McDowell, Historical Committee, Steele Creek Church, "Historical Summary of Steele Creek Church," dated October 14, 1980.

³ J. W. Orr, "Historical Sketch," 1915.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ *The History of Steele Creek Church*, p. 21.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 2-31.

⁷ Ibid., p. 53.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 39ff

⁹ Ibid., p. 48.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 62.

¹¹ Rufus Grier. "Steele Creek Presbyterian Church: A Historical Sketch," 1935, p. 4.

¹² Ibid., p. 6.

- ¹³ Mecklenburg County Deed Book 5, p. 328.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., Book 24, P 44
- ¹⁵ Ibid., Boot K, p. 869.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., Book 34, p 247.
- ¹⁷ History, pp. 105.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 7B and 14B.
- ¹⁹ Orr, cited above.
- ²⁰ "Historical Summary," cited above. History, pp. 149-150.
- ²¹ History, pp. 191ff.
- ²² Ibid., p. 203.

Bibliography

- Clark, Edward W. "The Bigham Carvers of the Carolina Piedmont: Stone Images of an Emerging Sense of American identity." In Richard E. Meyer, ed, *Cemeteries and Gravemarkers: Voices of American Culture*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1989.
- Gatza, Mary Beth. "Architectural Inventory of Rural Mecklenburg County." 1987. On file at North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh.
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Little-Stokes, Ruth, ed. "Southern Tombstones." *Newsletter of the Association for Gravestone Studies*. Special issue. 6 (1982): 2-10.

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