

GEORGE STEPHENS HOUSE



This report was written on Apr 30, 1984

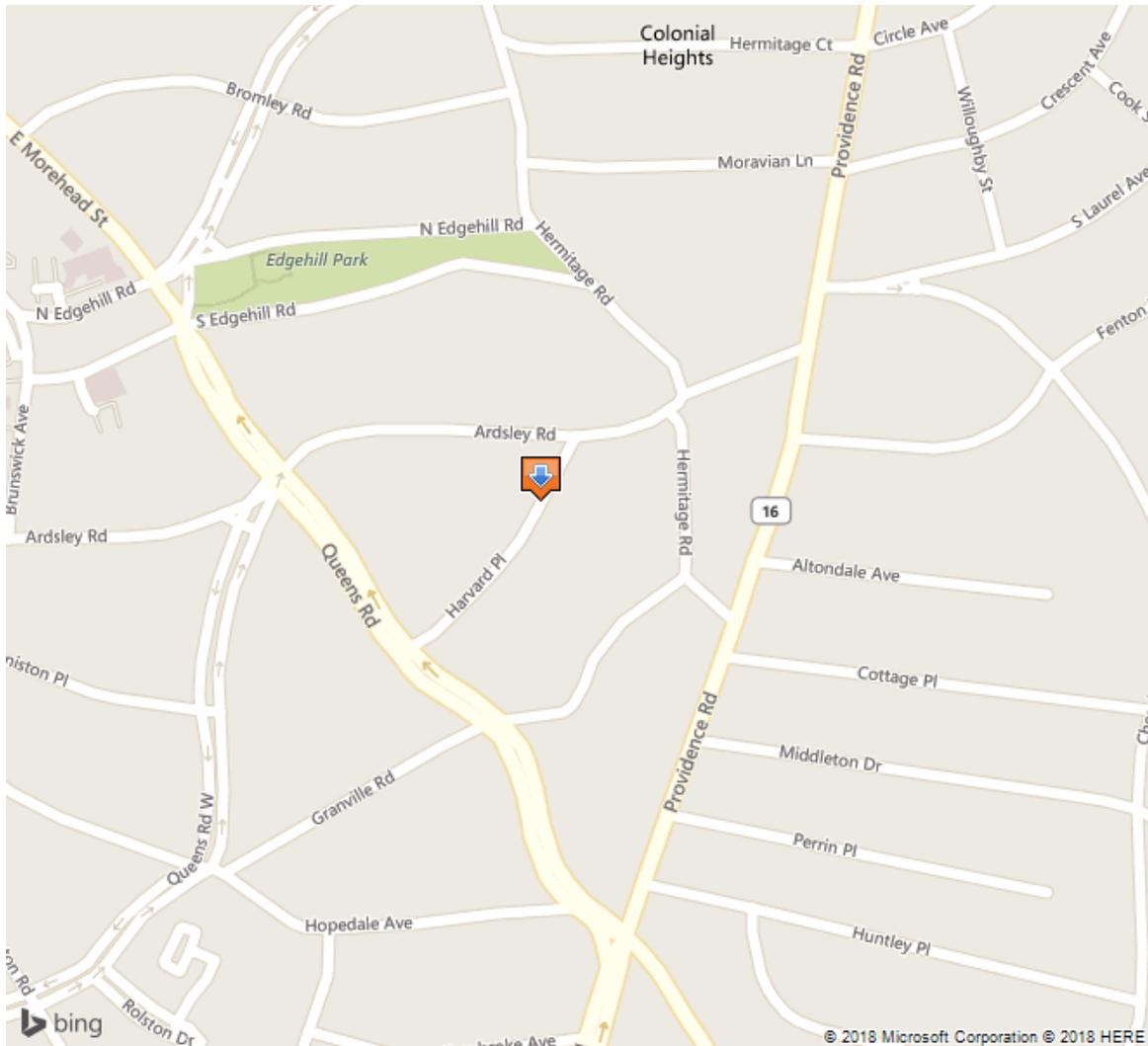
1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the George Stephens House is located at 821 Harvard Place, in Charlotte, North Carolina.

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

Mr. James P. Pressly and wife Susan T.
821 Harvard Place
Charlotte, N.C. 28207

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 a map which depicts 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 4750 at page 367. The Tax Parcel Number of the property is: 155-053-10.

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 Miss Lisa A. Stamper.

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 George Stephens House does possess special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations: 1) the initial owner of the house, George Stephens (1873-1946), was a seminal figure in the development of Charlotte in the early 20th Century, being a co-founder of the Piedmont Realty Company, a founder of the Southern States Trust Company, later the American Trust Company, and founder and president of the Stephens Company, developers of Myers Park; 2) the probable architect of the George Stephens House was L. L. Hunter (1882-1925), who designed such important local landmarks as the F. O. Hawley House (923 Elizabeth Avenue) and the Carnegie Library on the campus of Johnson C. Smith University; 3) the George Stephens House, erected c. 1915-16, occupies a pivotal place in terms of the Myers Park townscape and is one of the older houses in the suburb; and 4) the George Stephens House is an interesting local example of a sophisticated blending of Bungalow and Colonial Revival motifs.

b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling and/or association: The Commission contends that the attached architectural description by Mr. Thomas W. Hanchett demonstrates that the George Stephens House 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 current appraised value of the 1.125 acres of land is \$299,009. The current appraised value of the improvements is \$59,242. The total current appraised value is \$358,251. The property is zoned R12.

Date of Preparation of this Report: April 30, 1984

Prepared by: Dr. Dan L. Morrill, Director
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Historical Overview

*Dr. William H. Huffman
November, 1983*

The interestingly varied bungalow-style frame house with a lively charm at 821 Harvard Place in Myers Park was built about 1915-16 by George Stephens (1873-1946), the energetic developer of Myers Park, and his wife, Sophie Myers Stephens (1875-1958).

Christened George Erwin Cullet Stephens as the only child of Addison and Lydia Pierson Lambeth Stephens, he was born in Guilford County, near Summerfield. After his father's death when he was about nine years old, he and his mother moved to Greensboro, where the boy attended the school of Lina Porter (an aunt of author O. Henry). At his next school, the Oak Ridge Institute, he became interested in physical education and showed great promise as a left-handed baseball pitcher. In 1892, Stephens entered the university at Chapel Hill, and earned his way through college with an appointment as an instructor in physical education.



George Stephens

His claim to fame from his college years, however, comes from his prowess as a varsity football and baseball player. As the former, he is credited with having caught the first forward pass thrown in football in a game between UNC and Georgia in 1895, when the Carolina quarterback threw it to left halfback Stephens, who proceeded to make the only score of the game against the astonished opponents. In

baseball, Stephens was called "the best pitcher Carolina ever had," and received offers to play professionally from four of the eight National League teams of the day. John McGraw (1873-1934), the legendary New York Giants manager who led his team to ten pennants and 3 championships, called Stephens "One of the best college pitchers I have ever seen." ¹

It was not athletics that led George Stephens to Charlotte after college, however, but his college roommate and the county's part in the good roads movement. To help earn his way through college, he had learned stenography and worked as a secretary to J. A. Holmes, the state geologist, who was making a study of good roads and road materials. This prompted Stephens to write his graduation thesis on road materials and learn in the process that Mecklenburg County was number one in good roads in the state, a fact which influenced his decision to locate here in 1896. His career was launched in Charlotte in the insurance business with his college roommate, Walter Brem, Jr., and the senior Mr. Brem. ²

It was an excellent time to be in business in Charlotte, because of the rapid growth and prosperity brought about by the booming textile industry: the city was strategically located on the main rail lines in the heart of the rapidly industrializing New South Piedmont area. That combined with George Stephens's personality, drive and good business sense assured success, which indeed came in rapid steps. After only three years in the city, in 1899, he formed a partnership with Frederick C. Abbott, a Charlotte real estate man, and the following year the two of them organized the Piedmont Realty Company with B. D. Heath, a merchant, banker and textile manufacturer, and William Coleman. This company bought some rural acreage from Col. William R. Myers located about a mile to the northeast of the Square, and began to develop the suburb of Piedmont Park, now part of the Elizabeth neighborhood. ³

In 1901, a year after starting the real estate development, the energetic Stephens organized a new bank, the Southern States Trust Co., with his childhood friend, Word H. Wood, a Winston-Salem banker, and F. C. Abbott. Abbott began as president, Stephens as vice-president, and Wood as secretary-treasurer, but Stephens soon bought out Abbott and became president. Hardly content, the following year the Piedmont Realty built the city's first skyscraper, the seven-story Trust Building (on the site of the present Johnston Building), which housed the bank, the growing Southern Power Co. (forerunner of Duke Power) and others. The bank's name was changed to the American Trust Co. (1957, merged into American Commercial Bank, 1960 merged into NCNB [in 1999, the Bank of America]), and it prospered greatly during the years of rapid growth in the early twentieth century. ⁴



American Trust Company Building, 1924

To Charlotteans, however, George Stephens is best known as the developer of Myers Park. In 1902, after his successful career as a banker and developer was already launched, he married Sophie Converse Myers, the daughter of John Springs Myers (1847-1925). The latter had received 306 acres of prime farmland about two miles south of town from his father, Cal. William R. Myers, in 1869, to which he added over the years until his plantation grew to 1200 acres. Jack Myers had envisioned that one day his land might be used as a beautiful, park-like setting for an expanded Charlotte. ⁵

His dream started to become reality when son-in-law George formed the Stephens Company in 1911 with his friend Word Wood, and Arthur J. Draper, who was a textile man and descendent of the inventor of the Draper loom. Soon thereafter, William States Lee, a pioneer with J. B. Duke in the formation of what became Duke Power Company, and John M. Miller, Jr. joined the company as partners. In

competition with Edward Latta's Dilworth, which had a design laid out by nationally-known landscape architects, the Olmsted Brothers of Boston, in 1912, the Stephens Company hired John Nolen of Cambridge, Mass. to lay out a street plan and do landscape designs for some purchasers of lots. Stephens had met Nolen in 1905 when the Park and Tree Commission, which the developer helped organize, engaged Nolen to lay out Independence Park and other projects. Nolen subsequently became one of the country's best known city planners with over 400 projects to his credit. He was joined in 1915 by a young protege, Earle Sumner Draper, who took over Nolen's work in Myers Park and also became a nationally-known planner with his own firm (1917-1932), and later was head of planning for the TVA and acting director of the FHA. With Myers Park, these two expert planners were able to see some of the best ideas in early suburban planning carried out to an unusual degree. To entice town residents to move out to this semi-rural development, the Stephens Co. not only built the curved streets and parks according to the plan, offered the landscape services of Nolan and Draper for purchasers, and extended the streetcar lines, but also engaged in massive tree plantings and induced Queens College and the Homer Military School to locate on free land in the suburb. Stephens won the Queens College bidding in competition with three others, including Ed Latta, who wanted it in Dilworth, by offering them enough land and cash to be able to build new buildings for a campus and add to the endowment. Though it contains a wide variety of types and sizes of houses, Myers Park did attract some of the city's wealthiest citizens, who built architecturally important homes in the area, such as the Jamison, Moody and Thies houses on Providence, and the Wade, Brown, Duke and Lambeth mansions on Hermitage. Because of its layout by Nolen (who also did the plan for Queens College) and Draper, and the execution of their plans by the Stephens Co., Myers Park also takes on regional and national significance.⁷

It wasn't until 1915 that Sophie and George Stephens got around to building their own house in the new subdivision, even though the location on Harvard Place for it, consisting of two lots, had been acquired by Mrs. Stephens in 1911 and 1912.⁸ They reportedly chose a talented local architect, L. L. Hunter, to design their new home.⁹ Unfortunately, not a great deal is known about Leonard LeGrand Hunter (1882-1925), who died at the relatively young age of 43. He was born near Huntersville in the county, the son of Mr. and Mrs. Robert H. Hunter, and came to Charlotte about 1905. At present, two of the city's fine buildings are known to have been designed by Hunter, the F. O. Hawley house at 923 Elizabeth Avenue, and the Carnegie Library on the Johnson C. Smith University campus.¹⁰ The landscaping was done by John Nolen.¹¹

Although the house was finished in late 1915 or early 1916 when the Stephens family (which had been living on Providence Road) could begin to enjoy their spacious new

home,¹² they only lived there about three years. apparently for health reasons, the family had spent some time in Asheville, and, in 1919, they decided to make that city their permanent home. From 1912 to 1916, George Stephens and Word Wood had owned controlling, later sole, ownership in the *Charlotte Observer*, and in 1919, Stephens formed the *Asheville Citizen Company* and bought controlling interest in the newspaper of that name. In addition to development activities in Asheville and Flat Rock, Stephens remained head of the Stephens Company until 1922, when he resigned in favor of Thomas T. Allison, a longtime realtor for Mr. Stephens. Among other notable achievements in George Stephens' busy life should be included the securing of Camp Greene army base for Charlotte in World War I, and being instrumental in the campaign to have the Blue Ridge Parkway located on the North Carolina side of the mountains.¹³

When the Stephens family departed Charlotte, they sold their Myers Park home to the vice-president (later president) of the Stephens Company, Arthur J. Draper (1875-1932).¹⁴ A Massachusetts native who was educated at Yale University (1897) and Harvard Law School (1900), Draper was a descendent of the inventor of the Draper loom, a significant advance in textile manufacturing technology. With E. A. Smith and others, he was one of the original incorporators of the Chadwick-Hoskins Co. (1907) in the city, which owned five cotton mills in the area (the Chadwick, Hoskins, Alpha, Louise and Pineville mills), and served as the president of the company for many years. Draper, who was a distant relative of landscape architect E. S. Draper mentioned above, was a major figure in the textile industry in the region and nationally.¹⁵

In 1930, the Drapers sold the Harvard Place house to another of the early directors of the Stephens Company, William States Lee and Mary Martin Lee.¹⁶ W. S. Lee (1872-1934) was a talented and energetic electrical engineer who combined with tobacco magnate James B. Duke to develop a great system of hydroelectric power in the Piedmont Carolinas which supplied the energy for the rapid expansion of industrialization in the region. Among his many accomplishments which earned him an international reputation were his being executive vice-president and chief engineer of Duke Power Co., president and chief engineer of the Piedmont and Northern Railway (an electric train system which merged eventually with the Seaboard Coast Line in 1969), and head of his own consulting firm.¹⁷

After Mr. Lee's death in 1932, Mrs. Lee stayed on in the house until her own death in 1969, when the house, which stood vacant for two years afterward, passed to a son, Martin Lee. The latter opened an antique business on East Boulevard and sold many of the house's original fixtures there, where (now occupied by the White Horse Restaurant) the stair railing from the Harvard Place residence may still be seen.¹⁸

In 1971, the house was sold to Dr. James and Marianne Anderson, who did much restoration in their twelve years of ownership, and under the present owner, Dr. James Pressly, who bought the property in 1983, the house is undergoing extensive work.¹⁹ Over the years, the Stephens house has apparently undergone various changes and modifications, but it has remained true to its original design. As one of the original houses in that part of Myers Park which was built by the subdivision's developer and his wife and landscaped by John Nolen, as well as the fact that it was subsequently the home of the prominent Charlotte figures Arthur J. Draper and William States Lee, the Stephens house is unquestionably of high historical significance for the city.

NOTES

¹ *Charlotte Observer*, Dec. 15, 1943, Sect. 2, p. 5; *Asheville Citizen-Times*, Nov. 10, 1940, p. 1B.

² *Charlotte Observer*, cited above.

³ F. C. Abbott, "Fifty Years in Charlotte Real Estate, 1897-1947" (Charlotte: privately published, c. 1947), pp. 8-9; Record of Corporations, Book 1, p. 174.

⁴ *Observer*, cited above.

⁵ Thomas Hanchett, "Charlotte Neighborhood Survey," Charlotte Mecklenburg Historic Properties Commission, 1983; II, "Myers Park," pp. 5-6.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-30.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Deed Book 283, p. 234, 2 Oct 1911; Deed Book 303, p. 46, 6 Nov. 1912.

⁹ Interview with Kenneth Whitsett (1894-1983) by Mary Kratt, 31 August 1983.

¹⁰ *Charlotte Observer*, Feb. 21, 1925, p. 15; *Ibid.*, Dec. 28, 1905, p. 4; *Charlotte Evening Chronicle*, Oct. 29, 1910, p. 9.

¹¹ Interview with Marianne Anderson, Charlotte, N.C. 28 Nov. 1983.

¹² Charlotte City Directories, 1915-1916.

¹³ *Charlotte Observer*, Dec. 15, 1943, Sect. 2, p. 5; *Ibid.*, July 2, 1922.

¹⁴ Deed Book 399, p. 385, 19 May 1919.

¹⁵ *Charlotte Observer*, April 27, 1932, p. (?); Record of Corporations, Book 2, p. 313.

¹⁶ Deed Book 761, p. 166, 24 Jan. 1930.

¹⁷ *Charlotte News*, March 25, 1934, p. (?).

¹⁸ Interview with Marianne Anderson by James Hatley, Charlotte, N.C., April, 1982; Will Roll 69-26, Frame 1327.

¹⁹ Deed Book 3289, p. 366, 24 May 1971; *Ibid.*, 4750, p. 367, 16 Nov. 1983; interview with Mrs. Anderson 28 Nov. 1983.

Architectural Description

Lisa A Stamper
April 2, 1984

George Stephens, the developer of Charlotte's prestigious Myers Park neighborhood, built his home there in 1915-1916. The George Stephens House is an unusual, innovative Colonial Revival variation on the Bungalow style, a new form of inspiration for early twentieth-century architects. One such architect was probably L.L. Hunter. According to Dr. Huffman, Hunter designed the house while John Nolen designed the landscaping.

This interesting two and one-half story home definitely looks large, and it is. However, the slate roof contains the upper story bungalow. This steep roof has a complicated shape composed of both gambrels and gables, with a variety of shed dormers, which fill all sides of the roof and add vitality. All eaves are wide and decorated with modillions. The roof is a strong design element covering at least half the total structure, and making the home a visually interesting one.

The George Stephens House is wood framed on a brick foundation. It is sheathed with wood shingles, now painted mustard yellow. Even the cheeks of its many

dormers are covered with these shingles. Wooden trim, eaves, and columns are painted white. All porches have red tile and grout floors.

The plan is basically L-shaped, with side projections. The three story L-shape consists of a main block facing Harvard Place and a rear wing. The northeast projection has a first story porch topped by a second story bath. The southwest projection contains a first level kitchen area topped by second level bedrooms. A one story covered porch sits in front of this projection.

In the center of the front facade is a one-story portico. Plain columns support an equally unadorned entablature with a wide, modillioned cornice. In its upper section, the single door has many square glass panes, the top row containing pointed arched muntins. The bottom section of the door contains two simple wooden panels placed side by side. Flanking side lights are of the same style as the door, but are only one-half the size. The existing platform was removed by the present owners, Dr. and Mrs. James Pressly. It will be replaced with red tile and grout, believed to be the original materials used.

The windows are varied in size; however, all but one is rectangular. All have wooden frames. Most of the windows are double-hung, but occasionally are casement. The double-hung windows of the front (northwestern) facade main block have nine-over-nine lights, while all the others but one have six-over-six lights or less. Sometimes, rather than creating a larger window, the architect has placed two or three windows side by side. A Palladian window is located directly above the portico on the front facade. The window is very ornate, with delicate pilasters and an elegant keystone in its round arch. An interesting feature of this window is that the two rectangular parts are false windows. One more window type incorporated into the house's design is found in the northeastern porch. It is a multi-paned casement window with a small window above it containing a single row of three panes.

One-half round vents are located at the top of all the gambrel-ends except those with chimneys. A vent is also located in the gable-end of the side projection. front gable has a small rectangular casement window in its center.

A balanced design employing both symmetry and asymmetry gives the observer the feeling of informality while at the same time leaving no doubt that a person of import and wealth resides there. This is evident in the front facade. It is symmetrical at the first and second levels, but at the third story an off centered modillioned gable and twice broken roofline obscures the balance. This balance is restored by the side projections. The northeastern projection is shorter than that of the southwest; however, they both appear to be of the same design.

The northeastern gambrel-end of the main block has a smaller projecting gable roof within its gambrel. Between the gambrel end and the gable is a simple brick chimney. The gable has one dormer on its northwestern side. Supported by two simple curved wooden brackets, a balcony projects from the second story in the gable's end. The balcony is surrounded by a decorative cast iron railing. A double door, of the same design as the window of the sunporch underneath, allows access to the balcony from inside.

The sunporch contains two columns on both outside corners and is raised a few steps above the ground. It has two sets of multi-paned double-doors; one on its northeastern side and another on its southeastern side. The screen doors on the southeast- side have rotted, but copies or those on the other side will be made to replace them.

The southwestern gambrel-end has a smaller gambrel-within-gambrel roof. An exterior chimney is located on the smaller gambrel-end. The smaller gambrel is not centered within the larger one, but shares a lower southeastern side. To the northwest of the smaller gambrel is a one-story porch, and intersecting its southeastern side is another gambrel roof.

The intersecting gambrel roofs cover a series of second floor rooms most of which are used as bedrooms. Dormers are located on all sides of the roofs. A kitchen and mud room are located on the first floor of this projection. A simple single door which enters into the mud room serves as a back entrance.

Presently, the one-story porch is enclosed with screens upon frames patterned after the windows of the porch located at the opposite side of the house. Originally, this porch was open. The two front (northeast) columns were original, and support a flat roof with wide eaves. Of course, they are decorated with modillions. This porch is also raised a few steps above ground.

The three story rear wing also has a gambrel roof, with four dormers on each side. Another chimney is located in the center of the northeast side of the wing. An open porch is partially topped by the gambrel roof and partially covered by a flat roof which runs the length of the wing's northeast side and one-half the width of the southeast end. Instead of modillions, delicately curved brackets adorn the porches white eaves. One column shaft is located at each of the southeastern corners and three more are symmetrically placed on the northeastern side. A modified capital for each column is set within the entablature and consists of a square block with four brackets. As the others, this porch also is a few steps above the ground.

The rear wing covers most of the rear (southeast) facade. The small portion which is exposed also has various dormers in its roof. The third story has two dormers, one of

which is rather small. The second story only has one dormer, but it is large enough to contain two separate windows.

The Presslys have made a few minor alterations to the exterior of the house. In the rear and the rear wing, they have put in french doors. However, these doors have been custom made to blend with the total design of the building. A set of windows previously located on the first story of the rear wing was moved to the second story, most probably keeping within the original design of the house. Also, a second story opening on the gambrel-end of the rear wing was closed.

It appears as if the interior plan has not changed significantly from the early 1900s. Some believe that additions might have been built onto the house; however, inspection or the 1929 Sanborn map shows the basic outline of the house to be almost identical to the present shape. The only difference is the Sanborn map fails to show the rear wing porch to continue around to the rear (southeast side).

As one enters the great hall from the front portico entrance, the stair is located in front, the living room to the left, and the dining room to the right. The stair begins on the first floor and goes up to the third floor. As one continues down the hall, the butler's pantry and a half-bath is also on the right, while a storage area is to the left underneath the stairs. One may walk through this area to the living room. Another stair, located between the pantry and the kitchen in the right projection, gives access to the basement and second floor bedrooms.

The second story consists of five bedrooms, all of which have connecting baths. Only two of these rooms have to share a bath. The master bedroom has a sunroom to its rear.

It is probable that the third floor was used by the servants. One room, which might have been a bedroom, has two closets and two sets of built-in cabinets with adjustable shelves. The bath has two pedestal sinks, complete with metal cup holders. It lacks a tub, but it does have a marble shower stall with a metal framed glass door. In another room, possibly a work room, a wooden ironing board folds up into a wall cabinet, and a long storage room is connected to one side.

Throughout the years, most of the lovely mantels, fixtures, moldings, railings, etc. have been removed and sold; however, a few original remnants can be found. Many of the bathroom fixtures are original, although not always found in their original bathrooms. The cabinets in the butler's pantry, the adjustable shelves in a second floor bedroom, and the shelves on the third floor are all intact and appear to be original. Unique, pine floors are in good condition. Their boards were cut so knots in the wood would not show.

All original mantels, except possibly one or brick in the sunporch, have been removed. One original marble mantel which looks of Tudor design is stored in the basement, and may be used in the second floor master bedroom. The mantel in the living room is believed to be a sixteenth-century Italian one. The mantel in the kitchen has been replaced by a modern stove.

The basement, surprisingly enough, is an interesting place. It stores an original mantel; original kitchen cabinets complete with metal flour bins; an elegant early kitchen stove, and a few other odds and ends. At the bottom of the stairs, the room to the left was used to store coal. Many tools used to handle the coal, as well as a good layer of coal chips, were left inside. On the outside of the door, the instructions for running the furnace, from "Combustioneer, Inc., Springfield, Ohio," are still posted. Almost directly opposite from these instructions is a wooden plaque painted with information helpful in the operation of a hot water heater.

The surrounding site has undergone quite a few changes since 1915. The George Stephens House was originally located on land large enough for two lots. The site has since been redivided into two lots, one of which is pie shaped, faces Ardsley Road, and which has recently had a new brick home built on it.

Another change involves the John Springs Myers' farmhouse, which used to stand behind the George Stephens House. At one point it was used as a garage and possibly housed servants as well. The 1929 Sanborn map shows the farmhouse and a separate garage, both behind the house. Neither of these structures exist today.

It is not likely that much of Nolen's landscape design still exists, except perhaps for the brick pathways close to the house, trees, and a small garden to the northeast of the house. The drive with access on Harvard Place used to run past the southwest side of the house and then curved around to the back garage. It is now stopped by a brick wall at the end of the house. A pool and some sheds were built behind the wall and house.

The Presslys have constructed a wooden deck on the rear of the house, and plan to build a tile porch between the enclosed sunporch and the open porch. They also are in the process of erecting an antique cast iron fence around the northern corner of the building. However, they are very interested in planting shrubs, flowers, etc. which might have originally been used in the landscape design.

The George Stephens House is a stimulating variation on the Bungalow style; a style of which Charlotte has precious few examples meriting recognition. Luckily, its exterior is in good condition, and its present owners are actively interested in preserving the historic ambience of the interior, exterior, and site. This home is one of fifteen built in Myers Park in 1915, one of the best years for the suburb's

development. The architectural and historic merit of the George Stephens House is obvious. Its location in an area rich in historic significance for the city and threatened by high-density multi-family redevelopment further enforces its need for protection and recognition as an historic property.