



OSCAR J. THIES AUTOMOBILE SALES AND SERVICE BUILDING



This report was written on July 24, 1992

1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the Oscar J. Thies Automobile Sales and Service Building is located at 500 North Tryon Street, Charlotte, in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina.

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

Morehead Properties, Inc.
1043 East Morehead Street, Suite 300
Charlotte, North Carolina 28203

Telephone: (704) 342-1352

Tax Parcel Numbers: 080-033-01 and 080-033-02

a. Special significance in terms of its history, architecture, and / or cultural importance:

The Commission judges that the property known as the Oscar J. Thies Automobile Sales and Service Building does possess special significance in terms of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations:

- 1) the property occupied by the Oscar J. Thies Automobile Sales and Service Building has been in continual use since 1865 and was occupied by a dwelling until 1920;
- 2) Oscar J. Thies held a degree in mining engineering and spent fifteen years in that field before opening his own Charlotte real estate company, the Carolina Realty Company;
- 3) Oscar J. Thies organized the Thies-Smith Realty Company in 1912 and the Thies Realty and Mortgage Company in 1936;
- 4) the Thies-Smith Realty Company built many homes in Dilworth, Myers Park and Elizabeth;
- 5) three generations of the Thies family have administrated the Thies Realty and Mortgage Company;
- 6) the Oscar J. Thies Automobile Sales and Service Building, built in 1921, was designed by Louis Asbury, Sr., Charlotte's first professionally-trained architect;
- 7) the Oscar J. Thies Automobile Sales and Service Building housed several automobile dealerships until 1930;
- 8) the Oscar J. Thies Automobile Sales and Service Building has many exterior appointments, such as the terra cotta embedded in the pilasters and the decorative front roof of tile, intact and in very good condition; and
- 9) the Oscar J. Thies Automobile Sales and Service Building is architecturally significant as one of the last examples of the 1920's commercial style building remaining on North Tryon Street in Charlotte.

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 Oscar J. Thies Automobile Sales and Service Building 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, the current appraised value of the land included in the Tax Parcels, and the total appraised value of the properties are given below. The properties are zoned UMUD.

Tax Parcel Number: 080-033-01
Improvements = \$96,120
Land = \$430,680
Total Appraised Value = \$526,800

Tax Parcel Number: 080-033-02
Improvements = None
Land = \$57,600
Total Appraised Value = \$57,600

Date of Preparation of this Report: July 24, 1992

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in conjunction with
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Historical Overview

Paula M. Stathakis

The property at 500 North Tryon has been in continual use since 1865. A deed from that year shows that James McLaughlin purchased this lot, which was at the time part of an entirely residential block.¹ Not much is known about James McLaughlin, except that he was an Irish immigrant who was in the hardware business.²

In 1874, McLaughlin sold his property fronting Tryon Street to Martha Rankin.³ Martha was married to James B. Rankin, a cotton and commission merchant.⁴ The Rankin family lived at 500 North Tryon until 1903, when they sold the property to George Fitzsimmons.⁵

In 1903, George Fitzsimmons owned Fitzsimmons Drug Company at 26 South Tryon.⁶ It is doubtful that the Fitzsimmons family ever lived at the North Tryon property. It is more likely that Fitzsimmons used this as a rental property. City Directories show that George and Marcia Fitzsimmons resided at 329 North Tryon and D.S. Yates lived at 500 North Tryon from 1903-1905. In 1905, Fitzsimmons sold the property to Joel A. Yarbrough, of Richmond, Virginia.

Joel Yarbrough made his living as a purveyor of "junk, coal and hides" in the firm of Yarbrough and Bellinger, located at 513 West Third Street.⁸ He and his wife Josephine were the last owners to use this property as their personal residence. According to the Charlotte City Directories, this property was occupied by a dwelling until 1920. The last residents were Frederick and Annie Conrad. Frederick Conrad was a real estate agent and did not own the property.⁹

Yarbrough sold the property in 1920 to J.S. Rust.¹⁰ Rust enjoyed a diverse career in the 1920s; he sold real estate with the E.C. Griffith Company, and later acquired his own automobile dealership, the Rust Motor Company, which sold Studebakers.¹¹ Within eight months of purchase, Rust sold 500 North Tryon to Oscar Julius Thies.¹²

It was under the ownership of Thies that the commercial structure that currently occupies the lot was built. The transition of this space from residential to commercial is significant because it illustrates the general trend of change in the spatial arrangement of Charlotte's city center in the early Twentieth Century. These changes were the result of the work of large forces, such as technological innovation and economic expansion.

Historian Thomas Hanchett, in his local study *Charlotte and Its Neighborhoods: The Growth of a New South City, 1850-1930*, describes these changes in three phases. The first phase, which encompasses the period c. 1753-1880, Hanchett calls the "walking city". Prior to mechanized personal or public transportation, residential areas were clustered around the workshops and retail houses in the center of town. During this period, it was common for the finest homes to be situated as close to the city center as possible. One's status was elevated by the shortest walk to one's office. The middle and lower classes lived out at the city fringe where the in-town commute was more difficult.

By the 1880s and 1890s, this arrangement began to change. The implementation of public transportation in all major and in most minor American cities and towns—including Charlotte—made it more attractive for the upper class to live away from the city center in larger houses with spacious grounds. In Charlotte, the development of streetcar suburbs was tremendously popular and lucrative. During this period, the

well-to-do and the less fortunate changed places: the upper class moved to Myers Park, Elizabeth, and Fourth Ward, attracted by the green grass of the suburbs and unconcerned about a nickel fare on the trolley.

The less fortunate moved closer in to town where the large homes left behind were frequently made into rental properties and carved into multi-family dwellings. As it became less important for the upper class to reside downtown, the city center began its fundamental change to an area devoted almost exclusively to business, finance, and commerce.

Charlotte changed most dramatically in the 1920s and 1930s due to the advent of the automobile. Automakers spared no effort to make their products available to upper and middle America. A car was a status symbol that could be bought on "time" if necessary, and many Americans were seduced by the advertisements that claimed a car was not only a necessity of convenience, but an object that would bestow prestige, family harmony, and a happy marriage.

In Charlotte, the automobile quickly displaced the trolley and the long-term result of this displacement entailed more than a preference of mode of transportation. Owning a car meant that living farther from the city center was not only easier, but necessary as owning a car frequently required accessories, such as garages, and driveways. As Charlotte became more suburban, and as trolley crossroads saw a decline in commercial activity, banks and shops branched into the less expensive suburban areas.¹³

It is not surprising that 500 North Tryon and the surrounding area changed from a residential to a commercial district when it did. A 1929 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map of Charlotte shows the 500 block of North Tryon already in mixed use: some houses, several apartment buildings, a funeral home, and the automobile showroom at 500 North Tryon. The showroom was built by Oscar J. Thies in 1921.

Oscar J. Thies (1870-1943) was one of four sons of Carl Adolf and Mathilde Thies. Carl Adolf made his fortune as a mining engineer, and had retired to Charlotte in 1904. Oscar Thies followed in his father's footsteps; he received a degree in mining engineering from Rose Polytechnic Institute at Terre Haute, Indiana, and spent fifteen years as a mining engineer in the Carolinas, Georgia and Alabama. In 1906, he abandoned his technical career, and returned to Charlotte to form his own real estate company, the Carolina Realty Company. In 1912, he organized the Thies-Smith Realty Company, and in 1936, the Thies Realty and Mortgage Company.¹⁴

Oscar J. Thies was involved in real estate for the remainder of his life. The Thies-Smith Realty Company built many homes in Dilworth, Myers Park, and Elizabeth, as

well as along Morehead Street, Selwyn Avenue, and Sharon Road. The Thies Realty and Mortgage Company has been administered by three generations of the family. Oscar J. Thies also diversified by organizing other businesses and investing in commercial property.¹⁵ The lot at 500 North Tryon was one of Thies' investments.

According to a building permit, Oscar J. Thies commissioned architect Louis Asbury to design an "automobile sales building" in 1921. The builder of this edifice was Thies-Smith Realty Company, and the estimated cost of construction was \$4000.00.¹⁶ By 1922, the building was completed and was occupied by the Roamer (automobile) Sales Agency. Hipp Chevrolet rented the building in 1923, and in 1925, Carolina Oldsmobile occupied the building and remained there through 1930.¹⁷

In the 1930s, the building was occupied by Tillman's Groceteria Number Two. Tillman's, owned by Claude A. Tillman, was one of several small grocery stores in Charlotte, and the only "groceteria", perhaps meant to imply that it was more modern than the average market. In 1939, Dixie Home Stores moved into the building.¹⁸

In 1940, Oscar J. Thies sold the parcel at 500 North Tryon to Robert H. and Madeline Moeller. Through the sale of this property, Thies was able to pay the outstanding balance on a Deed of Trust from 1924. Thies died three years later.¹⁹

Robert Moeller, vice-president of Chadbourn Hosiery Mills, Larkwood Hosiery Mills, and Will de Laine Hosiery Mills, owned the property from 1940 to 1986, and again for approximately one year in 1990.²⁰ During the years Moeller owned the property, the building was occupied by E.I. deNemours and Company, which sold DuPont paint, the Gold Stamps Premium Company, and the Jack Call Piano Company.²¹

Notes

¹ Deed 6-52, December 9, 1865. Mecklenburg County Court House. McLaughlin purchased two lots.

² Manuscript Census for Mecklenburg County, 1880.

³ Deed 10-53, March 2, 1874. Mecklenburg County Court House. Martha Rankin purchased lot 341 in Square 50 of First Ward for \$63300.00

⁴ Charlotte City Directory 1875-1876.

⁵ Deed 179-584, September 15, 1903. Mecklenburg County Court House. Fitzsimmons paid \$3800.00 for the lot and house.

⁶ Charlotte City Directory, 1903. By 1905, Fitzsimmons abandoned the pharmacy business and became an insurance salesman for Modern Puritans, a fraternal insurance company. Charlotte City Directory, 1904-1905.

⁷ Deed 198-394, February 20, 1905. Mecklenburg County Court House.

⁸ Charlotte City Directory 1904-1905.

⁹ Charlotte City Directory 1920.

¹⁰ Deed 419-378, March 18, 1920. Mecklenburg County Court House.

¹¹ Charlotte City Directories 1920-1924.

¹² Deed 429-692, November 1, 1920. Mecklenburg County Court House.

¹³ Information for the proceeding paragraphs was taken from Thomas Hanchett, *Charlotte and Its Neighborhoods. The Growth of a New South City, 1850-1930*. Unpublished manuscript, property of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission. Hanchett's study is purely local in outlook. For more extensive discussions concerning the effect of economic change on the residential, commercial, and manufacturing arrangement of urban centers, see David Ward, *Cities and Immigrants. Geography of Chance in Nineteenth Century America*, (New York: Oxford University Press), 1971, and David Goldfield and Blaine Brownell, *Urban America: From Downtown to No Town*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin), 1979.

¹⁴ Biographical information about Oscar J. Thies taken from Survey and Research Report, "The Thies House". Historical Sketch by Barbara M. Mull, December 1985. Property of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission. Oscar J. Thies married Virginia Juanita "Nettie" McNinch (1868-1912) in 1895. They had two children: Oscar J. Thies, Jr., and Frank Ramsay Thies. Oscar J. Thies Sr. remarried in 1920 to Blanche Austin. Thies had two children from this second marriage: Austin Cole Thies and Blanche Hegmann Thies.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Building Permit #3052. January 7, 1921.

¹⁷ See Charlotte City Directories 1921-1922, 1923-1924, 1925, 1926, 1929, 1930.

¹⁸ See Charlotte City Directories for 1934 through 1939.

¹⁹ Deed 1005-264, April 1, 1940. Mecklenburg County Court House This deed transfers the property from Thies to Moeller. Deed of Trust 537-275, September 20, 1924, O.J. and Blanche Thies owed the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company 520,000.00. Oscar J. Thies died on December 27, 1943; *Charlotte Observer*, "Oscar J. Thies, Local Realtor, Dies At Home", December 28, 1943.

²⁰ See Charlotte City Directories 1945-1946, 1950. In 1986, Moeller sold the property to Charles H. Conner Jr.; Deed 5242-13, June 6, 1986. Mecklenburg County Court House. Conner sold the property back to Moeller in 1990; Deed 6285-950, June 5, 1990. Mecklenburg County Court House. The property is currently owned by Morehead Properties who acquired the lot in 1990; Deed 6321-663, July 27, 1990. Mecklenburg County Court House. This is the current deed for the property which is zoned UMUD.

²¹Charlotte City Directories 1942 through 1986.

Architectural Description

Nora M. Black

The Oscar J. Thies Automobile Sales and Service Building is located on the south side of North Tryon Street at its intersection with East Eighth Street. The front or north facade of the building faces North Tryon Street; the rear or south facade faces a parking lot. The building, containing 6,716 square feet, is located on a rectangular-shaped lot owned by Morehead Properties, Incorporated, and houses the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Urban League. Sidewalks along the north side and the west side of the building carry pedestrian traffic on North Tryon Street and East Eighth Street, respectively.

The Oscar J. Thies Automobile Sales and Service Building was designed by Louis Asbury, Sr., Charlotte's first professionally-trained architect. Asbury, who lived from 1877 to 1975, practiced architecture in Charlotte for nearly fifty years. The building is a high style interpretation of a commercial building that replaced the livery stable. The back and sides of the building are utilitarian in their design. The street facade,

however, is an engaging mix. The tiled roof, with its small brackets, lends an Italian Renaissance air. The cast concrete bands and geometric motifs on the corners bring a touch, albeit restrained, of the Modernistic, Art Deco style to the building. The west side of the building, seen from East Eighth Street, has more ornament than the east side. The ground plan is a deep linear plan with a basement entered at the rear of the building. The building presents a symmetrical, two-story, three bay elevation to North Tryon Street.

The North Tryon Street facade is constructed of creamy golden brick laid in running bond. A green tiled roof, with gray metal cornice and brackets, projects from the face of the building. The front corners have pilasters with vertical projections above the roof line to give a vertical emphasis to the street facade. Each corner projection has a concrete coping and two horizontal concrete bands decorated with a stylized shield motif. Two-story ribs (each rib only one tile wide) of green terra cotta tiles give additional vertical emphasis to the building. Soldier courses of brick emphasize the terra cotta tiles and the tops of the windows.

The front elevation is three units wide. The widest units are the two bays of windows on either side of the recessed front door. The wide, double doors form the center bay. Brick pilasters with concrete bases, concrete capitals and the previously mentioned terra cotta ribs define the entry. Marble bulkheads set on concrete bases support the storefront windows. The two large windows on the first floor storefront are divided into three vertical panes of glass. The second floor windows of each side bay are divided into six vertical panes of glass. The window of the second floor center bay is divided into two vertical panes of glass. The storefront has an interesting rhythm set up by the progression from the larger first floor panes of glass, to the narrower second floor panes of glass, and finally to the bricks set in soldier course above the windows. That rhythm, combined with the vertical corner emphasis, gives the building a sense of greater height.

The north end of the East Eighth Street facade is dressed with the same gold brick used for the front facade. Only the first floor has a large window in this section. It consists of two vertical panes of glass supported by a gray bulkhead. This section of the facade is decorated with concrete banding and terra cotta tiles to match the North Tryon Street facade. The majority of the East Eighth Street facade, however, is more utilitarian in nature. The red brick is laid in Flemish bond with Dutch corners. A soldier course of brick defines the first floor level; a second soldier course defines the second floor roofline. The East Eighth Street parapet, topped with a concrete coping, steps down in four sections from the front to back. A square chimney at the second parapet step is missing part of its concrete coping. The East Eighth Street facade had an entry for automobiles (shown in the copy of the 1926 newspaper ad on page 8). That entry has been replaced by a window with the balance of the opening infilled

with brick. Both the first and second floors have six rectangular windows. Each window consists of a fixed sash set on a concrete sill with a soldier course of brick serving as a lintel.

The east side of the building adjoins the parking lot for the tenants. The decorative gold brick and terra cotta is only used to form a pilaster at the northern end of the east facade. The majority of the east facade is a strictly utilitarian wall of various colors of red-brown brick laid in common bond with seventh course headers. There is a modern door, with red canopy and brick staircase, located at the approximate midpoint of the building. Both the first and second floors have three windows near the south end of the wall. Each window consists of a fixed sash set on a brick header sill with a soldier course of brick serving as a lintel. A soldier course defines the second floor roofline. The east parapet, topped with a red glazed tile coping, steps down in three sections from the front to back. A square chimney on the third parapet section has a single corbel band. One section of the parapet rises almost a story above the rest. Near the door mentioned above, it shields the housing for an elevator.

The south, or back, facade of the building is similar to the east facade. All utilities are housed on the south facade. Differences in the color of the brick indicate that some door and window openings have been closed over the years. The windows on the back facade do have concrete sills. A double door to the basement is located on the east end of the back wall; a single door is located on the west end. There is only one window at the first floor level. The second floor has three windows. A soldier course defines the second floor roofline. A new white aluminum gutter drains roof runoff into two downspouts.

It should be noted that the original windows, both the sash and glass, on both sides and the back of the building have been replaced. Each window has a metal sash with a single rectangular pane of thermal glass. The substitution was for security and energy efficiency.

The Oscar J. Thies Automobile Sales and Service Building provides a last vestige of the original commercial development of North Tryon Street. It is vital to an understanding of Charlotte's development because of its connection with the automobile. The finishes and decorative motifs of the building are well-contrived and carefully executed architectural details. The admirable attention to detail is found in other Asbury designs. This handsome building, now in use everyday, could become a catalyst for development along the important North Tryon Street corridor.