

THE BELMONT-VILLA HEIGHTS- OPTIMIST PARK SURVEY AREA

by Dr. Thomas W. Hanchett
1985

The Belmont-Villa Heights-Optimist Park survey area is unlike any other in this study. It was built up around the turn of the century beyond the northern rim of Charlotte's nineteenth century boundary. Although the area was distinctly suburban in location and well served by streetcars, it was not built as a middle- and upper-income "streetcar suburb" like the contemporaneous neighborhoods of Dilworth, Elizabeth, Wesley Heights or Wilmore, among others. And although it contained textile mill housing, it was not the typical company-owned mill village found on the edges of Charlotte and other southern cities in the period.

The area's beginnings are to be found near the tracks of the Seaboard Railway which runs near its southern boundary and the mainline of the Southern Railway (now Norfolk Southern) which forms its western edge. ¹ These lines sparked industrial development in what had been farmland belonging to the wealthy antebellum farmer W.F. Phifer. The Alpha Mill (1889, 1901), Highland Park #1 (1891, 1895) and the Louise Mill (1897, 1900) built straight streets of cottages for their workers adjacent to the plants. ² Beginning in the 1890s, half a dozen private developers added subdivisions between the mill villages. A wide variety of single-family homes sprang up, somewhat more spacious than the mill houses, but mostly compact, wooden, and one story tall.

The area's residents were almost without exception blue-collar workers and their families. A few seem to have used the Brevard, Pegram, or Plaza streetcars which served the neighborhood to commute to jobs elsewhere in the city. But most walked to work in one of the textile mills or related industries that came to line the railroads.

Though the area has no residences built for the rich and powerful, and no structures except churches designed as showy pieces of architecture, it is not without historic sites. The Alpha Mill at Twelfth and Brevard streets is one of the city's earliest and best-preserved textile plants, an early work of industrial innovator D.A. Tompkins. Adjacent to the mill on Calvine and Caldwell streets is a cluster of Alpha Mill cottages, Charlotte's oldest surviving mill village. Several blocks of privately-developed housing near Belmont Avenue contain interesting examples of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century popular residential design. The 1000 block of

Harrill Street in particular comprises one of Charlotte's last well-preserved collections of Victorian architecture.

The area's value goes beyond these specific architectural and historical high points. The Belmont-Villa Heights-Optimist Park area was Charlotte's first entirely working-class suburban district.³ As such, it is an important reminder of this large group of people who with their labor helped advance Charlotte to its position as a leading textile producer and the largest city in North and South Carolina during the textile boom decades of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

The Mills and Their Villages:

The survey area contains three of Charlotte's five surviving pre-1900 textile mills, plus a number of related industries. The three mills were begun between 1888 and 1897, a critical decade in Mecklenburg County's economic development. In that short period the county moved from having a single cotton mill to become one of North Carolina's top three textile producers.⁴

The earliest and best-preserved of these three textile plants is the Alpha Mill at 311 East Twelfth Street. Its original section was erected in 1888-1889 and is now largely gone, with only the chimney stack and boiler room remaining.⁵ The main building today, highly visible due to its location adjacent to the recently constructed Brookshire Freeway (I-277), dates from 1901 when Orient Manufacturing took over the firm.⁶ It is a handsome two-story brick structure with a castle-like corner tower. Unlike many early mills in this region, the building still retains its segmental-arched window openings, with eight-over-eight-over-eight triple-hung wooden windows. On the rear and west sides of this structure are several one-story additions made after the facility became Mill #3 of the Chadwick-Hoskins chain in 1908 (popularly known as the Calvine Mill).⁷



The Alpha Mill

East of the mill, three parallel rows of cottages survive from what was originally a somewhat larger mill village. The dwellings were in existence by the time that the area was first covered on fire insurance maps in 1911, and they may well date back to the construction of the Alpha Mill in 1888-1889.⁸ The dwellings that line the two sides of Calvin Street are absolutely identical. Each is planned in the shape of a "T" with its side to the street. A front porch nestles into the front side of the "T", matched by an enclosed "shed room" nestled into the back side of the "T". Trim is very simple, with narrow corner-boards and window surrounds, plain boxed eaves, and six-over-six pane double-hung sash windows. There is a brick chimney with a corbelled cap at the center of the "T", and each house originally rested on brick piers.



Alpha Mill Village

The third row of cottages, along the west side of Caldwell Street, consists of slightly larger dwellings. They share the same gable roofs, weatherboarding and trim, but were built with an additional full room at the rear, rather than the small "shed-room" of the T-plan cottages. A fourth and fifth row of even larger dwellings along Brevard Street have been demolished.

The original Alpha Mill was organized by Charlotte lawyer E.K.P. Osborne and local grocer Calvin Scott. Both were active politicians and community leaders, and Osborne had been instrumental in initiating horse-drawn streetcar service in Charlotte a year earlier. For textile expertise the pair hired a thirty-six year old industrial entrepreneur recently arrived in Charlotte, named Daniel Augustus Tompkins. Tompkins designed and built the mill building, providing its machinery, and presumably built the workers' housing. The project was among the first executed by the D.A. Tompkins Company (established 1884), which went on to design over one hundred mills throughout the South.⁹



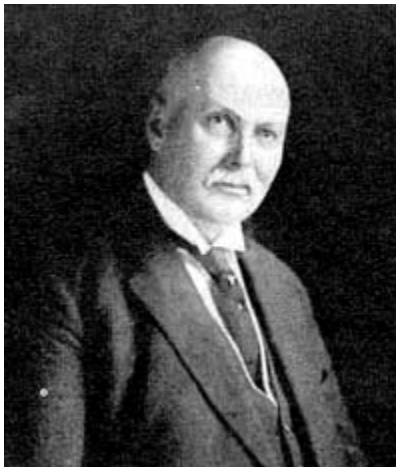
D. A. Tompkins

The mill and village are today the earliest by Tompkins that survive in Charlotte. His contemporaneous Victor and Ada mills have been demolished, although his 1892 Atherton Mill may still be seen off South Boulevard in Dilworth.¹⁰ In addition to his activities as a mill builder, Tompkins also published numerous books on mill development and design. His 1899 *Cotton Mills: Commercial Features* includes plans and specifications for a "Three-room Gable House, Cost \$325," which appears to be drawn directly from the cottages on Calvin Street.¹¹

Along with his involvement in the physical design of Southern mills, D.A. Tompkins also became known as a financial innovator whose introduction of installment stock financing allowed numerous small Southern towns to start their own mills. The creation of the Alpha Mill was among the earliest tests of this idea, and may have been the first. According to an 1888 *Charlotte Democrat* article:

It was moved that on Saturday, the 7th day of January, 1888, from 4 to 8 o'clock p.m., the subscribers to the capital stock of the company be requested to call at the store of C. Scott, on College Street, and sign the constitution and by-laws, and pay in fifty cents per share on their stock, of which twenty-five cents is the initiation fee and twenty-five cents is the first installment of dues, and the weekly payments will be made at the same place from 4 to 8 o'clock each Saturday.¹²

After the Alpha Mill, the second mill in the survey area was the Highland Park #1 Mill begun in 1892 two blocks north up Brevard Street.¹³ The company was formed in the summer of 1891 under the leadership of local real estate, manufacturing, and streetcar magnate Edward Dilworth Latta.¹⁴



Edward Dilworth Latta

Unlike Scott and Osborne, Latta had previous experience in textiles. His establishment of the successful Dilworth Pants Factory in the mid 1880s had been an important step in his rise to prominence in the city. Despite this, Latta apparently took

little direct interest in the mill, but left its direction to local banker J.S. Spencer. It was Spencer, along with D.A. Tompkins, who chose the company name.¹⁵ A long, one-story weaving mill was the plant's first building. The brick structure survives today in good condition except for bricked-up windows, as does the smaller adjacent spinning mill added in 1895 under the direction of officers W.E. Holt and Charles Johnston.¹⁶ A finishing building was added between the weaving mill and the Southern Railway tracks sometime between 1900 and 1911, but it is now gone.¹⁷

At the same time that Highland Park Manufacturing purchased land for their factory on the southwest corner of Brevard Street and present-day Sixteenth Street, they also bought land on the east side of Brevard for a mill village.¹⁸ The total purchase was ten acres from the estate of W.F. Phifer, one of the county's most important nineteenth century planters. Phifer had come to Charlotte shortly after 1849, just in time for the arrival of the region's first railroad.¹⁹ Already a wealthy man, he may well have been attracted by that harbinger of prosperity. He bought land just north of the city, soon the route of the North Carolina State Railroad, and built a handsome brick house at North Tryon and Phifer Avenue, where Confederate President Jefferson Davis conducted the last full meeting of his cabinet in 1865. According to Phifer's son, the planter fully realized the future value of his cotton farm:

He ... predicted, in spite of the jeers of his friends, a great future for this town, and said he, "In later years there will be houses and streets where my plantation now lies, for," he continued, "the prospect for a city is better than any I saw at Atlanta, on my horseback trips to Alabama."²⁰

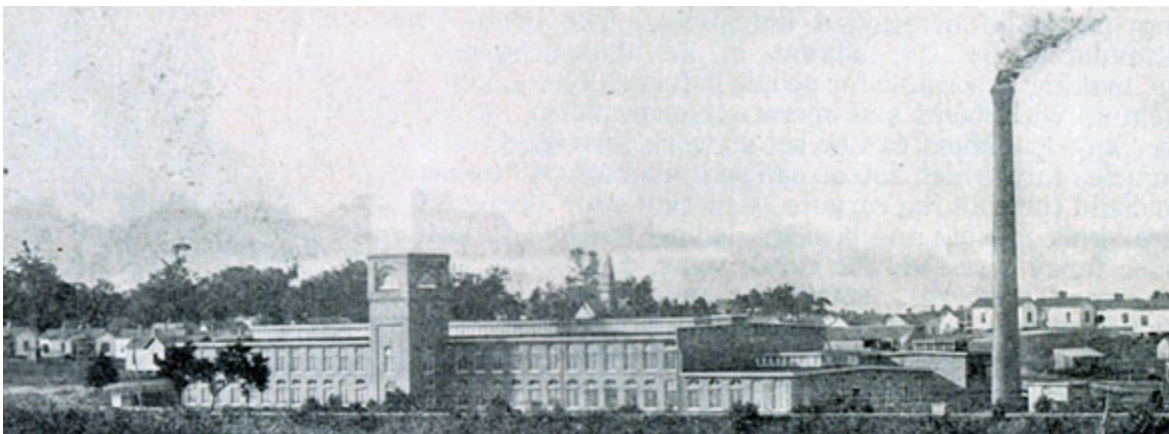
Phifer and his children began the laying out of streets in the cotton land toward the close of the century, choosing a grid-system with numbered cross-streets that clearly made the area an extension of the existing "Mechanicsville" section of First Ward, a developing area of industry along the railroad.

He had a great love for order ... he disliked crooked lines and gave his land to straighten a street on his neighbor's side. The regularity of that part of the city known as Mechanicsville, is in striking contrast to some other parts of the city.²¹

Today it is difficult to determine the boundaries of the small Highland Park #1 mill village. The tract owned by the mill extended from Belmont Avenue north to Seventeenth Street, and from Brevard to Davidson.²² Within that large rectangle, the west side of Caldwell Street between East Fifteenth and East Seventeenth streets is lined entirely with mill cottages, and the block bounded by Fifteenth, Caldwell, Sixteenth, and Brevard is also completely devoted to structures put up by the mill.

The Highland Park #1 mill houses are almost entirely wooden, one-story, and single-family, like those at the Alpha Mill. However, there is some architectural variety here, rather than rows of identical dwellings. Most are three or four room variations on the theme already described in the Alpha Mill village. At least two additional types may be seen here, as well. At the corner of Seventeenth and Caldwell streets is a house consisting of a gabled, center-entry front wing, and a rear "L". At Fifteenth and Caldwell is another type with the same sort of front wing, but two rear "L"s. This latter design is similar to the "Four-room Gable House, Cost \$400" shown in Tompkins' 1899 book.²³

The third textile mill to be built in the survey area was the Louise Mill between Louise Avenue and Hawthorne Lane on the Seaboard Railroad. The two-story brick building opened May 31, 1897, and was joined by a second weave building in 1900.²⁴



Louise Mill

A two-story packing room connected these two large wings, giving the plant a "U" shaped layout not found in other Charlotte facilities. A stream which ran along the route of today's Hawthorne Lane was dammed to provide a mill pond whose water was not used for power but rather as insurance against fire: water mains ran from the pond to a pump house, and thence throughout the complex.²⁵ The facility was known as the Louise Mill, after the wife of founder H.S. Chadwick, until 1908 when it became Mill Number Four of the Chadwick-Hoskins chain.²⁶ Today the buildings remain in a much-altered state, and are used by a cookie factory.

Until construction of the mammoth Highland Park #3 Mill in North Charlotte in 1903-1904, the Louise Mill was Charlotte's largest.²⁷ Seventy-two cottages for Louise Mill workers lined parallel William (now Pamlico), Louise, and Pegram streets on the hill above the mill. Their design was quite similar to that seen in the Alpha Mill village except for minor details. Compact T-plan cottages like those on Calvine Street line Louise Avenue, while the slightly larger Caldwell Street-type dwellings are found

along Louise and Pamlico avenues. The Louise cottages often use grooved "novelty" siding rather than weatherboards, paired rather than single front windows, and possibly have slightly less steeply-pitched roofs, but otherwise the designs appear identical. Today windows, porches, and siding have been changed on many of the mill cottages, but the village survives essentially intact.

The Louise, Highland Park #1, and Alpha Mills were not the only industries in this area. By 1911 the Southern Railway was lined with cotton-related facilities.²⁸ Going north from Highland Park #1, one first passed the cotton storage buildings of the Farmers Union Warehouse Company. Next came the warehouse of the Charlotte Compress Company. Architecturally, it was composed of a series of sheet-metal clad wooden storage rooms separated by brick firewalls that rose above the low-gabled roof line. This design was typical of the city's cotton warehouses, but the Charlotte Compress Company was among the largest, stretching some 700 feet between twin railroad sidings.²⁹ At the center of the long structure was the two-story compress itself, the press which baled the cotton. From the exterior it was a square tower covered in corrugated iron and topped by a hip roof. Both the warehouse and compress tower of the Charlotte Compress Company survive in good original condition today, and are believed to comprise Charlotte's best-preserved reminder of the city's heritage as a cotton trading point.

Near the north end of the Charlotte Compress building, between the warehouse and Brevard Street, was the plant of Sanders and Smith, Cleaners and Dyers of Damaged Cotton and Batting in 1911. Further north was the large plant of Swift and Company, where cottonseed oil was pressed and refined into Sunlight brand shortening. The main building of the plant was a massive three-story brick structure with heavy corbelled pilasters and parapets at each end. Nine large oil storage tanks stood north of the building. All but one of the terra-cotta block tanks are now gone, but the original structure remains with later additions, though it is vacant and heavily vandalized.

Privately-developed Subdivisions:

At the same time that the factories, textile mills, and company-owned housing were going up along the railroads, a number of private developers were building suburban subdivisions between the industrial sites. The architecture of these streets of single-family dwellings is surprisingly uniform, a mix of wooden, one-story blends of Victorian and Bungalow influences. Occasionally a duplex or quadraplex is added for spice. But the area's many developers are instantly obvious in a glance at a map of the district. All the subdivisions follow the grid-street pattern popular in Charlotte before 1911, but seldom are any two grids oriented the same way.

The Phifer family initiated private development in the area when they extended Brevard, Caldwell, and Davidson streets northward into their farmland sometime in the 1880s or very early 1890s. By 1892 the Belmont Springs Company was making plans for development of a second tract on a hilltop across Sugar Creek.³⁰ In 1896 the company formally platted a nine block area that included the first blocks of Pegram, Allen, and Harrill Street, and parts of Seigle Street, Fifteenth Street, and VanEvery Street.³¹ Belmont Avenue ran through the subdivision's center. The plan's straight grid of streets resembled those found in the earlier suburb of Dilworth, and also like Dilworth the Belmont area was to have a park. Low-lying land between Seigle Street and Sugar Creek at the western edge of the subdivision was shown on the plan as a tree-shaded park with a winding drive called McAden Avenue.³² In the park were the spring-fed branches that gave the development the name Belmont Springs.

About 1900 Charlotte real estate developer Clayton O. Brown purchased a tract of land north of the old County Home Road (later renamed Parkwood Avenue) from an A.W. Calvin.³³ This area was marketed as the Villa Heights subdivision.³⁴ Like other areas of the period, it had a grid of straight streets, but the grid was aligned only with the existing County Home Road and was thus at an angle to surrounding developments. Included were Grace, Union, Barry, and Lola streets, plus the 1800-1900 blocks of Harrill, Allen, Pegram, Umstead, and Parson streets. Soon Brown expanded his holdings south of the County Home Road. In 1902 he platted a three-block area he called Sunnyside, southeast of the Pegram Street-Parkwood Avenue intersection.³⁵ It included present-day Kennon (originally Arlington), Umstead (originally Wilkinson after William Wilkinson from whom Brown purchased the tract), and Parson streets, plus the 1600-1700 block of Hawthorne Lane. Again the streets were straight, but Brown made no effort to align them with either the Villa Heights grid or with Pegram Street.

Members of the Phifer family continued to hold land in the area, and on May 8, 1903 George M. Phifer filed a plat for the subdivision of East End.³⁶ It extended west of Pegram Street from the boundary of Belmont above Fifteenth Street, northward all the way to Parkwood Avenue. As determined an individualist as any of his predecessors in the area, George Phifer used a grid that managed not to align with any of the earliest subdivisions. He continued the use of the names Pegram, Allen, Harrill, and Seigle for the north-south streets that tied into Belmont, but for the cross streets he chose proper names that were designed to set East End off from the rest of the city. Today these streets have been renamed as part of the area's overall system: Sixteenth Street (originally St. George Avenue), Seventeenth Street (Charlotte Avenue), Eighteenth Street (Jackson Avenue), Nineteenth Street (Avenue), and Twentieth Street (Lee Avenue).

Three other developments filled out the area. The Pegram-Wadsworth Land Company purchased most of the remaining Phifer land from Twentieth Street north to present-day Matheson, and extending from Brevard to The Plaza.³⁷ Catawba Street and Twentieth through Twenty-fourth streets in the survey area are Pegram-Wadsworth developments. Pegram Street, incidentally, was not developed by the company, but evidently was so named because it led to the company's property. The Phifer family continued to plat houselots in the land they retained north of the Highland Park #1 Mill.³⁸ Sixteenth through Twentieth streets were officially mapped from Brevard to Davidson in 1906, though in actuality there were already houses in place in some of the blocks. And finally in 1910, the last section of the survey area was laid out. Called Phifer Heights, the small tract included the 1800 block of McDowell Street and the 1800 block of Seigle Avenue (originally Springs Street) just north of Parkwood Avenue.³⁹ At the heart of the subdivision was a small hillside park with a spring at its center, surrounded by a narrow curving Park Drive. The greenspace was to be called Cordelia Park, probably after W.F. Phifer's stepdaughter Cordelia White. It is the antecedent of today's Cordelia Park, a large city-owned park that includes the site of the original spring.

When the United States Geological Survey mapped the area for its topographic map series in 1905, there was already more than a scattering of dwellings on most major streets.⁴⁰ Harrill, Seigle, McDowell, Alexander, and Sixteenth through Twenty-fourth streets did not yet exist, but elsewhere the Belmont subdivision now had some seventy houses. East End had slightly more than twenty, Villa Heights boasted thirty-two, Sunnyside had fourteen grouped mainly along Kennon Avenue, and the district near the Alpha and Highland Park #1 mills was thick with dwellings.

In the early 1910s the area had grown to the point where major streets were included in the city directory, giving us a glimpse of the occupations of the residents.⁴¹ The vast majority worked in the nearby factories as mill workers, molders, machinists, or overseers. A much smaller, but still significant, number worked in the building trades. Most of the earliest residents of Parkwood Avenue, for instance, were carpenters, bricklayers, or plumbers, and other streets usually had one or two such artisans.

A third occupation was storekeeper. In all of Charlotte's working-class neighborhoods in the early twentieth century, there were grocery stores and small general merchandise stores on almost every corner. Mill workers and others who spent ten to twelve hours per day at their factories, six days a week, seldom had time, energy, or means to travel downtown to the groceries and department stores patronized by more wealthy suburbanites. Dozens of small shops originally stood in the survey area. Most of the wooden ones are gone, but several substantial brick structures may still be seen, such as the two-story Belmont Pharmacy Building at Belmont and Pegram streets.

Storekeepers almost invariably lived close to their stores, and an assistant clerk or two might live nearby as well.

The survey area was already well established before trolley lines reached it around 1910. This was unlike the pattern observed in middle- and upper-class streetcar suburbs, where few houses were built until streetcar service began. The earliest line in this working-class district began service shortly before 1910.⁴² It ran from downtown out Brevard Street past the Highland Park #1 Mill and onward out to North Charlotte. Two others were added before 1914.⁴³ One branched off the Central Avenue line at Hawthorne Lane. It ran north past the Louise Mill, then up Pegram Street all the way to Parkwood Avenue. The second line ran along The Plaza in neighboring Chatham Estates (Plaza-Midwood today). Its terminus at Parkwood Avenue put most of the Villa Heights and Sunnyside subdivisions within an easy walk of the streetcar. By the mid 1910s, then, almost all of the survey area was no more than a three-block walk from mass transit, and the last remaining vacant lots filled with houses.

In addition to the factories and stores, a handful of other substantial brick buildings stood out in the sea of wooden workers' cottages. There was Tech High School, established in the early 1920s on a five acre campus on Pegram Street at Eighteenth Street. It was one of a group of three buildings -- the others were white Central High School in the Elizabeth neighborhood and black Second Ward High School -- all built circa 1920 as Charlotte's first secondary education structures.⁴⁴ It was not surprising that the most working-class of the trio was located in the Belmont-Villa Heights area, Charlotte's largest and most homogeneous concentration of working-class residents.

This consideration was likely instrumental also in the city's decision to locate its first public housing project on the edge of the survey area. Piedmont Courts opened in 1940 at Seigle Avenue and Tenth Street.⁴⁵ The location in a hollow along Sugar Creek in the shadow of the Seaboard Railroad embankment had long been a notorious shanty-town. The new housing designed by architect Martin Boyer was almost elegant in its use of historic motifs, including rounded dormers and red-tile roofs above brick exteriors. The long rows of town-house style apartments were sited so as to provide interior play yards and walkways shielded from the street. These ideas were at the forefront of residential design at the time, and they were brought to Charlotte by landscape architect Harold Bursley who had recently helped plan the federally-funded new town of Greenbelt, Maryland, considered a landmark in city planning.⁴⁶ Piedmont Courts was originally designed for indigent whites; a less elaborate project named Fairview Courts opened for blacks off Statesville Avenue across town at the same time.

There were a number of handsome brick churches scattered throughout the survey area. Early structures include the striking blond brick Gothic style Belmont Park

United Methodist Church (original sanctuary, occupied by Northside Nazarene Church since 1968), built at Pegram and Fifteenth streets in 1909.⁴⁷ The small brick chapel now known as Christ the King Center was erected by the Episcopal Church in 1920 at Caldwell and Seventeenth Streets.⁴⁸ It replaced an earlier wooden structure that had been built as a company church for the Highland Park #1 Mill. Perhaps the area's largest church is the handsome Palladian Neoclassical style Allen Street Baptist Church (St. Paul Baptist since 1969), which opened at 1401 Allen Street in the late 1910s or early 1920s.⁴⁹ Of more recent vintage are the 1934 First Church of God at 1501 Pegram Street (now a United House of Prayer), the 1950 Duncan Memorial Church at the corner of North Caldwell and Fifteenth streets, and the new 1952 sanctuary of the Belmont Park United Methodist Church on Hawthorne Lane.⁵⁰

The most architecturally noteworthy church in the area is the former Villa Heights Associated Reform Presbyterian Church (Parkwood Institutional AME Church since 1968).⁵¹ Located on a hilltop at 1021 Parkwood Avenue, it is an unusual blend of Gothic and Prairie Style motifs. A wide-eaved hip roof, a parapet-roofed front entrance, and very geometric use of buttress-like shapes show strong influence of the Prairie School of architecture popularized by Chicago architects and found in many parts of the United States in the early years of the twentieth century. The architect of the Villa Heights structure, which opened about 1910, hedged on total acceptance of the new style. He used Gothic blind arches on the side windows. Even so, he was one of the boldest designers around, for today the former Villa Heights ARP Church is Charlotte's only real example of pre-World War II Prairie Style architecture.

Recent Years:

A close look at the church cornerstones reveals a major change that the survey area experienced in the mid 1960s. Belmont, Villa Heights, and the other subdivisions in this area were built during the era of Jim Crow. Like most other Charlotte suburban areas, this area had only white residents. In fact, as late as 1962 there were virtually no black residents in the survey area north of Belmont Avenue.⁵²

This changed radically by 1970. Urban Renewal-funded demolition destroyed thousands of housing units in Brooklyn, Greenville, and other historically black sections during the decade of the 1960s. These changes created a tremendous demand for affordable housing by black renters and former homeowners. Today the survey area's residents are almost entirely black.

To the historian or architectural historian, the area covered by this survey is a unified whole. It is full of housing of the same vintage and economic level, and is bounded on the south, east, and west by bands of non-residential land use. To the north is the later,

World War II-era, development known as Plaza Hills, created from land once held by the Pegram-Wadsworth Company.

Planners, however, consider the area to be part of three neighborhoods.⁵³ The primary one is known as Belmont, including the old Belmont Springs, East End, and Sunnyside subdivisions, and extending roughly from Tenth Street north to Parkwood Avenue between Sugar Creek and Hawthorne Lane. The Villa Heights subdivision is still unofficially known by its original name, due to the presence of the Villa Heights Elementary School near its edge. But officially it is considered part of the Plaza Hills neighborhood. The third neighborhood is just beginning to develop a conscious sense of identity in the 1980s. It is Optimist Park, consisting of Brevard, Davidson, Caldwell, Alexander, and North Myers streets from Twelfth through Twenty-third streets. With the help of an organization called Habitat for Humanity, sponsored by area churches, houses in this area are being rehabilitated with private funds and new units constructed for low-income residents.

With the demolition of most housing in Charlotte's center city, the Belmont-Villa Heights-Optimist Park area has become the city's most important early working-class residential district. Its streets of humble homes are a reminder of the thousands of laborers who helped built up Charlotte to be the largest city in the Carolinas by 1930.

Notes

¹ The later Norfolk and Southern line, built in 1911 and not to be confused with the present-day Norfolk Southern, ran right along the west side of Brevard Street and provided additional service to many of the industries.

² Dan L. Morrill, "A Survey of Cotton Mills in Charlotte, North Carolina..." (Charlotte: Charlotte Mecklenburg Historic Properties Commission, 1979). This brief study was the pioneer effort in uncovering Charlotte's textile heritage.

³ Such working-class suburban areas are recognized by urban historians as quite different from the more well-known "streetcar suburb" phenomenon. Sam Bass Warner's classic study *Streetcar Suburbs: the Process of Suburban Growth in Boston, 1870-1900* (New York: Atheneum Press, 1973), pp. 9, 53-57, found that streetcar suburbanites came from "the upper-income half of Greater Boston's population." This included the wealthy ("large storeowners, successful manufacturers, brokers, wholesalers, and prosperous lawyers"), the central middle class ("owners of small downtown stores, successful salesmen and commercial travelers, lawyers,

schoolteachers and large contractors"), and the lower middle class ("small shopkeepers, skilled artisans, the better paid office and sales personnel, and the like"). There are, however, some well-known suburban working-class districts from this period, such as the "Back of the Yards" district in Chicago.

⁴ *Annual Report of the Bureau of Labor and Printing of the State of North Carolina*, 1894, 1899.

⁵ William H. Huffman, "Old Alpha Mill: Survey and Research Report" (Charlotte: Charlotte Mecklenburg Historic Properties Commission, 1984).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid. The Calvine name is said to honor founder Calvin Scott's daughter.

⁸ Sanborn Insurance Map of Charlotte, 1911, plate 41. No earlier building map of the city covers this area in detail, unfortunately.

⁹ Dan L. Morrill, "Atherton Mill House: Survey and Research Report" (Charlotte: Charlotte Mecklenburg Historic Properties Commission, 1981). For more on Tompkins' role in Charlotte history see the section of this manuscript entitled "The Growth of Charlotte: A History."

¹⁰ Ibid. The stuccoed structure stands at the western end of McDonald Street, just south of Tremont Avenue.

¹¹ Reproduced in Brent Glass, "Southern Mill Hills: Design in a 'Public' Place," in Doug Swaim, ed., *Carolina Dwelling: Towards Preservation of Place...* (Raleigh: North Carolina State University, 1978), p. 148.

¹² *Charlotte Democrat*, January 6, 1888, as quoted in Huffman, "Old Alpha Mill...."

¹³ Morrill, "Charlotte Cotton Mills...."

¹⁴ Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office: records of corporations book A, p. 221.

¹⁵ Highland Park Manufacturing Company memo, with penciled date July 25, 1964, in the files of the Carolina Room of the Charlotte Public Library.

¹⁶ Ibid. The spinning mill is the building closest to North Brevard Street, and the original weaving mill is immediately west of it.

¹⁷ Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps of Charlotte, 1900, plate 20; 1911, plate 80. Portions of the floor and walls of the demolished finishing building were still visible in 1985.

¹⁸ Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office: Map Book 7, p. 25.

¹⁹ J.B. Alexander, *The History of Mecklenburg County From 1740 to 1900* (Charlotte: Observer Printing House, 1902), p. 169.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Based on the holdings of the company when it sold its non-industrial real estate in 1953. Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office: Deed Book 1580, p. 499.

²³ Glass, "Southern Mill Hills...", p. 144.

²⁴ Morrill, "Charlotte Cotton Mills...."

²⁵ Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps of Charlotte, 1900, plate 22; 1911, plate 76.

²⁶ Morrill, "Charlotte Cotton Mills...."

²⁷ *Charlotte Daily Observer*, August 31, 1903.

²⁸ Sanborn Insurance Maps of Charlotte, 1911, plates 41, 78, 80.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, plates 78, 80.

³⁰ Butler and Spratt, "Map of Charlotte Township, Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, From Recent Surveys ... 1892." Copies are in the collections of the History Department of the Mint Museum, Charlotte, and the City of Charlotte Historic Districts Commission.

³¹ Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office: Deed Book 112, p. 8.

³² This was replatted with straight streets in 1900. Deed Book 151, p. 43.

³³ The shape of the farm tract and the identity of its owner are recorded on the Butler and Spratt, "Map of Charlotte Township ... 1892."

³⁴ Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office: Deed Book 146, p. 59.

³⁵ Ibid.: Deed Book 173, p. 377.

³⁶ Ibid.: Deed Book 173, pp. 582-583.

³⁷ For the plat of this area see Ibid.: Map Book 230, p. 1. Most of these streets were not actually built up for several decades.

³⁸ Ibid.: Deed Book 209, p. 458.

³⁹ Ibid.: Map Book 230, p. 78.

⁴⁰ United States Geological Survey, "Charlotte Quadrangle, 1:62500," surveyed 1905, printed 1907, reprinted 1927.

⁴¹ Streets studied include Belmont Avenue (first appeared 1913), North Davidson Street (1903), Harrill Avenue (1915), Parkwood Avenue (1915), Parsons Street (1915), Pegram Street (1912), and Fourteenth Street (1902).

⁴² The line is not shown on the 1905 U.S.G.S. topographic map, but does appear on a later map circa 1910 in the collection of the Charlotte City Engineer's Office.

⁴³ Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office: Deed Book 325, p. 330. This sale of the Charlotte Electric Railway to Southern Public Utilities Co. sets forth the existing routes in detail. Information courtesy of Gaston County rail historian Earl Long.

⁴⁴ Harry P. Harding, "The Charlotte City Schools" (Charlotte; typescript by Charlotte Mecklenburg School System, 1966), pp. 64-65. A photocopy of this report is in the Carolina Room of the Charlotte Public Library.

⁴⁵ LeGette Blythe and Charles R. Brockman, *Hornets' Nest: the Story of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County* (Charlotte: McNally of Charlotte, 1961), p. 181. See also William A. Simmons and John G. Hayes, "Fairview Homes Modernization: A View from the 1940s to the 1980s" (Charlotte: Charlotte Housing Authority, 1984).

⁴⁶ Bursley is identified as planner of Greenbelt (in partnership with Hale Walker) in Arthur C. Comey and Max S. Wehrly, "Planned Communities," in *Urban Planning and Land Policies: Volume Two of the Supplementary Report of the Urbanism Committee to the National Resources Committee* (Washington, D.C.: U.S.G.P.O., 1939), p. 75. For a sampling of Bursley's subsequent designs in the Carolinas, see photocopies of his professional portfolio in the archives of Duke University and the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

⁴⁷ Information from cornerstones of new and old churches.

⁴⁸ Information from church cornerstones. See also Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps on microfilm at Charlotte Public Library.

⁴⁹ Information based on the city directory collection in the Carolina Room of the Charlotte Public Library.

⁵⁰ Information from church cornerstones.

⁵¹ Information from church cornerstone.

⁵² Charlotte Mecklenburg Planning Commission, "Residential Blight in Charlotte, September, 1962" (Charlotte: Charlotte Mecklenburg Planning Commission, 1962).

⁵³ See 1980 map of city neighborhoods prepared by the Charlotte Mecklenburg Planning Commission and published in James W. Clay, ed. *Atlas of Charlotte-Mecklenburg*, 2nd ed. (Charlotte: University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 1981), p. 18.

SIGNIFICANT SITES

In the Belmont-Villa Heights-Optimist Park Survey Area

| | |
|--|---|
| 1313 N. Brevard Street | Charlotte Cotton Compress Co. Building (c.1891) |
| 900 blocks of Calvine and Caldwell streets | Alpha Mill cottages (1888?) |
| 1021 Parkwood Avenue | (former) Villa Heights ARP Church (1910) |
| Tenth & Seigle Streets | Piedmont Courts (1940) |
| 311 E. Twelfth Street | Alpha Mill (1888, 1901) |
| 412-426 E. Sixteenth St. | Highland Park tenements (1910s?) |

CHARLOTTE COTTON COMPRESS CO. BUILDING

(circa 1891)

1313 N. Brevard Street

Charlotte's rise to prominence as a southern city began with its development as a major regional cotton trading market during the second half of the nineteenth century. Within months of the opening of the area's first railroad in 1852, Lincolnton diarist Robert Hall Morrison wrote:

I was in Charlotte last week. You would be surprised to see its change. It has become the market for the whole country around. I went down and sold two loads of cotton and bought all my groceries for the year on as good terms as we could formerly in Columbia or Cheraw.

By the 1870s the town's population had quadrupled and Charlotte had "reached the exalted position of being the first and principal cotton market in the state," according to local boosters. It was the booming source of income that allowed Charlotteans to begin banking and industrial development in the 1880s and 1890s.

The Charlotte Cotton Compress Company Building, located between the Southern Railway mainline and Brevard Street opposite Seventh Street, is Charlotte's most important nineteenth century relic of this cotton trading heritage. The structure consists of a long string of cotton warehouse units with the press tower near the center. Extending some 700 feet, it must have been one of the city's biggest buildings when it was built. Each warehouse unit is approximately 140 feet long and 80 feet wide, and is of wooden construction with a gable roof. The wood is sheathed in corrugated sheetmetal, originally due to danger of fire from sparks produced by steam locomotives on the Southern Railway. There is a brick firewall between each unit which extends above the roofline, a standard practice throughout this region. In the middle of the structure is a hip-roofed unit with a hip-roofed square tower at its center, also covered in corrugated metal. Here was located the massive press that squeezed cotton into compact bales for shipment or storage.

The Cotton Compress building is believed to have been built in the early 1890s. It was only the city's second such facility, joining the original Charlotte Cotton Compress which was located in the downtown block bounded by Brevard Street, Fourth Street, College Street, and Third Street. The new compress on the northern edge of the city was built and operated by the Richmond and Danville Railroad and its successor the Southern Railway, major shippers of cotton in the region. It was built shortly after 1889 but before 1892, when it appeared on Butler and Spratt's "Map of Charlotte Township." The 1893 city directory lists G.H. Rutzler managing the facility.

About 1920, the downtown compress closed, and a private Charlotte Compress Company was formed by Charlotteans C.B. Bryant, L.W. Sanders, and H.H. Orr to acquire the newer suburban facility from the railroad. Sanders had been active in running the old compress, and he chartered his new company "to compress and store cotton, and to buy and sell cotton, cotton seed and products." On October 3, 1919, the Charlotte Compress Company leased the building and business from the Southern Railway. In 1926 University of North Carolina economist Edgar T. Thompson noted the facility's importance to the region:

This is the only Compress in Charlotte Sixty colored men are employed to compress cotton in order save space in the warehouses and to facilitate handling. About 75,000 bales are compressed each year.... Cotton is sent up from the ginneries and cotton buyers in the Carolinas to be pressed and thence sent to the mills or exported.

In the 1980s the Charlotte Cotton Compress Co. Building is used for warehouse space by a firm which manufactures cotton bagging. All pre-1900 downtown buildings associated with the cotton trade are gone, and this "suburban" structure is believed to be the last nineteenth century reminder of this vital era.

ALPHA MILL COTTAGES

(1888?)

900 blocks of Calvine and Caldwell streets



The remaining three rows of wooden mill houses just north of Twelfth Street near the Alpha Mill constitute Charlotte's oldest surviving mill village. There are twelve one-story wooden structures: four on the west side of Calvine Street, three on the east side of Calvine Street, and five along the west side of Caldwell Street. The cottages are believed to date from construction of the original Alpha Mill building in 1888-1889, an early project of industrial innovator D.A. Tompkins.

Tompkins was one of the most important figures in the late-nineteenth century campaign to "Bring the Mills to the Cotton!" of the South. The *Atlanta Constitution* wrote that Tompkins "did more for the industrial south than any other man." Among his many accomplishments was establishment of the D.A. Tompkins Company in Charlotte in 1884, which designed and built all or part of more than 100 cotton mills throughout the region. Tompkins also published numerous books on mill financing and design which helped set trends in factory and mill village layout.

The design of the Alpha Mill, which began construction in 1888, was among the Tompkins Company's early projects. Presumably the mill village was built at the same

time, because the mill site was then beyond the edge of Charlotte settlement, and there was no existing housing for workers near the factory. The design of the cottages on Calvin Street appears to be the prototype for the "Three-room Gable House, Cost \$325" illustrated in Tompkins 1899 book *Cotton Mills: Commercial Features*.

The Calvin Street dwellings are weatherboarded, one-story cottages with gable roofs. They are absolutely identical. Each is planned in the shape of a "T" with its side to the street. A front porch nestles into the front crook of the "T", matched by an enclosed "shed room" nestled into the back of the "T". Trim is very simple, with narrow corner-boards and window surrounds, plain boxed eaves, and six-over-six pane double-hung sash windows. There is a brick chimney with a corbelled cap at the center of the "T", and each house originally rested on brick piers.

The third row of cottages, on Caldwell Street, consists of slightly larger dwellings. They share the same gable roofs, weatherboarding and trim, but were built with an additional full room to the rear. Trees planted along Calvin and Caldwell streets in front of the houses in their early years are now at maturity, providing a handsomely-shaded residential setting.

(FORMER) VILLA HEIGHTS A.R.P. CHURCH

(circa 1910)

1021 Parkwood Avenue

By the late 1900s the Villa Heights and East End subdivisions along Parkwood Avenue were beginning to fill up with houses. In 1910 the Villa Heights Associated Reform Presbyterian Church opened under the leadership of pastor E.G. Carson. This handsome church building was presumably built at that time. It commands a hilltop site looking back toward downtown Charlotte.

The church building shows influence of the Prairie School of architecture. The style was developed by master designer Frank Lloyd Wright and his colleagues in the Chicago area during the 1890s and 1910s. It spread all across the United States, though it never achieved the popularity of the contemporaneous Colonial Revival or Rectilinear styles. The style used wide eaves to give structures a ground-hugging horizontality, and it called for the abandonment of all historic ornament in favor of geometrically-derived trim.

The architect of the Villa Heights A.R.P. Church used straightforward massing and geometric, though historically inspired, detailing. The building is a simple rectangular block with a hip roof that has wide, plain eaves, a massing found in no other Charlotte church. A parapet section marks the front entrance. The main decoration of the brick exterior consists of buttress-like brickwork that recalls both Gothic precedents, and

also some of Frank Lloyd Wright's detailing. The architect of this building used Gothic blind arches above his rectangular side windows, an overt bow to tradition. Though the building is not a pure example of the Prairie School, it is Charlotte's only early specimen of America's first "modern architecture."

PIEDMONT COURTS

(1940)

Tenth and Seigle Streets

Piedmont Courts is Charlotte's first public housing project. It was constructed in 1939-1940 by the Charlotte Housing Authority, and funded by a loan from the then-new United States Housing Administration. Piedmont Courts was intended for white residents, and opened a few weeks before Fairview Homes opened across town for blacks. Both developments shared the \$2,104,000 federal loan, and also a "Garden City" design approach.

Architects for the massive housing project were Martin Boyer, the city's most skillful "revivalist" designer, and J.N. Pease Associates, best-known for its ability to carry out large projects smoothly. The team created a prototype rectangular block of townhouse apartments. Each two-story brick unit had a gabled slate roof and massive chimneys to recall the popular Colonial-Revival residential style. Large double-hung sash windows provided plentiful light and air, and small metal-columned porches shielded the paired entryways. The design was both solid and very home-like, quite similar to middle-class apartment blocks of the day (for instance, see the Myrtle Apartments on Myrtle Avenue in the Dilworth neighborhood).

After the prototype building had been drawn up, numerous replicas were scattered around the site on Sugar Creek at Tenth and Seigle streets, formerly occupied by shanties of the poor. The arrangement was far from random, however. It was carefully thought out to provide interior walkways and play areas separate from automobile driveways and parking lots. This site planning is believed to have been carried out by Charlotte planner Harold Bursley, who had just returned from designing the federally-funded New Town of Greenbelt, Maryland, a national showplace for such planning theories.

OLD ALPHA COTTON MILL

(1888,1901)

311 E. Twelfth Street



The Alpha Mill complex holds an important place in the history of Charlotte and of the entire Piedmont textile-manufacturing region. Erected in 1888-1889, it was one of the city's first mills, and marked the beginning of a movement that would see Mecklenburg County become North Carolina's second largest producer of cotton yarn by 1900. It was one of three built at the same time for different investors by D.A. Tompkins, who stood at the dawn of a career as one of the New South's leading mill builders and promoters of industrial growth. Only the Alpha Mill, founded by Charlotte political leaders E.K.P. Osborne and Calvin Scott, remains of those three 1888-1889 facilities, and it has been much altered.

The most noteworthy aspect of the Alpha's founding was the method which Tompkins developed to fund it. Stock was sold to the general public under an installment plan of twenty-five cents down and twenty-five per week. Tompkins later championed this method throughout the South to great effect. "So far as is known," writes historian

William Huffman, the Alpha "was the first mill in the region to offer its stock on a weekly installment plan."

Subsequent owners greatly expanded the Alpha over the years, and today only the original chimney stack and boiler room remain. The present main building was constructed by Orient Manufacturing in 1901, a two-story brick building with a castellated corner tower. In 1985 this structure retains its huge triple-hung windows, and is one of the city's few well-preserved early mills. When the mill became part of the Chadwick-Hoskins chain in 1908 -- then North Carolina's largest textile corporation -- additional structures were added to the rear of the Orient building.

HIGHLAND PARK # 1 MILL TENEMENTS

(1910s?)

412-426 East Sixteenth Street

It is difficult to date this row of sturdy two-story brick apartments. They are believed to have been erected in the 1910s, and are definitely known to have been built after founding of the Highland Park Mill #1 on Brevard Street in 1892, but before publication of the 1929 Sanborn Fire Insurance map of the district, which shows the building in place. Earlier maps indicate that the Highland Park Manufacturing Company built a number of so-called "tenements" -- then the common name for apartment quarters -- on the west side of Brevard Street close to the cotton mill, but today only this one structure survives surrounded by one-story wood-frame single-family mill cottages.

Company-owned housing was the norm in the boom decades of the Piedmont textile region. Workers flocked from the farms to live and work in newly-built mill villages located outside existing towns. While the one-or-two-family cottage was most common, most villages also had a "hotel" or rooming house for transient and unmarried laborers. Few, however, were as substantial as this Highland Park structure.

The Alpha Mill tenement building takes up almost one whole side of a block on a side-street just east of the mill. It is a long rectangle of brick with a gable roof. Three two-level porches with gable-roofs and square wooden columns add interest to the main facade. A pair of front doors opens onto each porch level. Window and door openings on the front facade have flat arches, while side windows have segmental arches. There is also a corbelled brick water table. Six brick chimneys pierce the front roof. Windows are double-hung sash units with twelve panes in the upper sash over a large single pane in the lower sash, a popular residential motif in the 1910s and 1920s.