

Potts Barber Shop Recommendation for Historic Landmark Designation

by Abigail Jennings 7-23-20

21324 Catawba Ave, Cornelius, NC 28031

PIN 00521214

This recommendation for landmark designation is based on community knowledge and memories rather than historical documents. It is only the beginning of the needed research to accurately record this important and culturally significant property.



According to tax records, this historic commercial building was built in 1941. Mr. Gerald M. "Mickey" Potts, the current owner, believes it was built and owned by a member of the Jetton family, a prominent family in the community for which Jetton Park and Jetton Road were named. I have been told it was built as a barbershop and beauty shop.

Mr. Wilson Potts, the founder of Potts Barber Shop and Mickey's father, began as a barber in a location called "brick row" which was nearby between the railroad tracks and Hwy 115. In reading recollections of Jack Conard Jr. on Cornelius barbershops, Conard stated, "There used to be two barber shops in the north end of brick row, next to the railroad, across from where Catawba Avenue ended at Main Street. One shop was run by Clarence Blakely, and the other one was run by "Rutt" Norton. Wilson Potts first worked with Norton, then moved and worked with Blakely, and later took over Blakely's shop when he retired. There was one pool table in the room between the two shops, accessible through a screen

door, and through the arched doorway and down the stairs, one could take a hot shower for 25 cents. These shops operated till brick row was burned down in 1961. Then Norton moved to Davidson and Potts moved to the shop on Catawba Avenue where he and his son Mick still run the business.”

Mr. Gerald M. “Mickey” Potts continues his father’s legacy operating the shop and I have been told it is the oldest continually operated, black business enterprise in Cornelius and in North Mecklenburg County.

Wilson Potts purchased the business in 1952, during the time of segregation, and they only cut white men's hair for many years. When segregation ended, and a black man walked in to get a haircut, Wilson Potts did not turn him away. This was unlike the story at the black barbershop in Davidson, in which a demonstration ensued after the barber turned away two black men from getting haircuts (see link below for more on this story). Mickey is proud of this historic moment at his father's shop and this important moment for desegregation in Cornelius, NC. Mickey worked with his father and carried on the business after his father's passing. Due to the encroaching development in this area, he is concerned that this historic site will be lost if not landmarked.

This property is not specifically named in the Study List for Cornelius, but the group of historic commercial properties on Catawba Avenue is mentioned in the list.

Also, an additional historic connection of importance is the connection to the nearby The Potts Plantation, a National Register property. Mickey's great-grandparents were enslaved people on this plantation.

In addition, Mickey's late wife, Nannie Potts, was the first female and only African American Mayor of Cornelius. She passed away in 2018.

Lastly, Mr. Wilson Pott's legacy in the African-American community runs very deep. In addition to being an important business owner in the town, he was also a prominent figure in the historic Smithville Community of Cornelius.

Mickey hopes to preserve the property’s history through securing a historic landmark designation, which I believe is clearly warranted. I am mailing the application today and sponsoring the application fee on behalf of the property owner.

Please let me know if you have any additional questions. I hope the Commission will see the importance of this property and will prepare the Designation Report for this landmark on behalf of the owner. I am happy to help in any way as well, and I look forward to working with you on this potential landmark for Mecklenburg County.

Additional sources and information:

<https://www.charlotteobserver.com/news/local/community/lake-norman-mooresville/article10590854.html>

<https://oldtowncornelius.com/flashback-friday-the-barbers-of-brick-row/>

<https://www.wfae.org/post/remembering-nannie-potts-1st-female-and-only-black-mayor-cornelius#stream/0>

<https://davidsonjournal.davidson.edu/2018/12/mr-johnsons-barbershop-economics-101/>

<https://www.corneliustoday.com/smithville-community/>