

## Lincoln Heights

The Lincoln Heights neighborhood in northwest Charlotte was developed by the Southern Realty and Development Corporation in the 1920s. As first conceived, the planned development stretched from Beatties Ford Road on the west to Kennesaw Drive (near current Interstate Highway 77) on the east, between what are now the Dalebrook and Oaklawn Park neighborhoods.<sup>1</sup> Deed restrictions on the neighborhood's lots, expressly stating "[t]his property shall not be owned or occupied by any person of the Negro race," evidenced the developers' intent that Lincoln Heights be a "white sub-division."<sup>2</sup> Sales of lots began in the mid-1920s, but the neighborhood did not grow quickly; few of the original homes that remain in the neighborhood were constructed before the end of World War II.<sup>3</sup>

In an apparent effort to drive interest in Lincoln Heights, J.J. Misenheimer, president of the Southern Realty and Development Corporation, offered 50 acres within the development in 1924 for a proposed new campus for Duke University. That parcel, located on a hill approximately three miles from uptown Charlotte, was situated between Beatties Ford Road and what was then called Davidson College highway (now N.C. Route 115), in close proximity to the Johnson C. Smith University campus. Unfortunately for the city, the Duke administration chose to remain in Durham.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> North Carolina Department of Transportation, "Intensive-Level Historic Architectural Analysis for Conversion of High Occupancy Toll Lanes on I-77 Between I-277 and I-85, Charlotte, Mecklenburg County" (December 2012), 22 (hereinafter "NCDOT Report").

<sup>2</sup> Charlotte Historic District Commission, "Oaklawn Park Designation Report," 3, [https://charlottenc.gov/planning/HistoricDistricts/Documents/OaklawnPark%20LocalDistrictDesignationReport\\_Aug2020.pdf](https://charlottenc.gov/planning/HistoricDistricts/Documents/OaklawnPark%20LocalDistrictDesignationReport_Aug2020.pdf), accessed March 15, 2021; "Negroes to Get Biddle Heights," *Charlotte Observer*, February 21, 1929, section 2, page 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Charlotte Sunday Observer*, August 16, 1925, D6; NCDOT Report, 22.

<sup>4</sup> "Offers a 50-Acre Site for Duke University," *Charlotte Sunday Observer*, December 21, 1924, A1, available at "African American Neighborhoods in Charlotte: Lincoln Heights," *Charlotte's Historic West End*,

In September 1925, the *Charlotte Observer* reported the first sale of land in the neighborhood. Mrs. Mary Wilhelm purchased two Lincoln Heights lots for \$1.<sup>5</sup> Within three years, vacant lots in Lincoln Heights were being marketed for as much as \$1,000.<sup>6</sup>

In 1942, the Southern Realty and Development Corporation again offered a donation of land within the development, this time to the Southern Presbyterian Church. Church officials accepted the parcel on Beatties Ford Road, which became the site for the Erdman Love Chapel. The new building was the first true home for a growing congregation that had evolved from a Sunday School taught in a nearby abandoned store building partially restored by congregants using donated building materials. The construction of the Love Chapel continued that tradition, incorporating building materials salvaged from an old Presbyterian church in Midland, North Carolina, that had dissolved. The chapel was later sold to Emmanuel Presbyterian Church (founded in 1876). On Christmas Day 1953, the building was destroyed by fire. Memorial Presbyterian Church, a successor formed when the Emmanuel congregation merged with Biddleville Presbyterian Church (founded in 1880) in 1961, continues as a stalwart presence within the community.<sup>7</sup>

By the late 1940s, despite developers' initial intent, two distinct communities defined by race had emerged in the Lincoln Heights area: an African-American community that retained the

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<https://www.westendcharlotte.org/african-american-neighborhoods-in-charlotte>, accessed March 21, 2021 (hereinafter "*Charlotte's Historic West End*").

<sup>5</sup> "East Ave. Building Sold by Blythe for \$45,000," *Charlotte Observer*, September 1, 1925, section 1, page 16.

<sup>6</sup> *Charlotte Observer*, October 21, 1928, section 4, page 14.

<sup>7</sup> "Site is Given to Presbyterians," *Charlotte Observer*, November 19, 1942, section 2, page 18, available at *Charlotte's Historic West End*, accessed March 21, 2021; "Services to Dedicate Presbyterian Chapel," *Charlotte Observer*, January 16, 1943, section 2, page 1; "Report of the Sub-Committee on Home Missions of the Committee on Church Extension of Mecklenburg Presbytery," *Minutes of Mecklenburg Presbytery*, October 21, 1953, 51; Memorial Presbyterian Church, "Church History," <http://memorialpresbyteriancharlotte.org/mpc1/index.php/who-we-are/church-history>, accessed March 15, 2021.

original Lincoln Heights name, and a white community called Furrstown. The pace of Lincoln Heights' development accelerated in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s, due in part to the influx of families displaced by the Charlotte Redevelopment Authority's demolition of Fourth Ward's Brooklyn neighborhood.<sup>8</sup> Local builders aggressively, and apparently successfully, marketed Lincoln Heights to prospective African-American homebuyers. According to one local realty company's ads, which expressly addressed African-American Charlotteans interested in the neighborhood, "We are trying to keep up but you are still buying faster than we can build."<sup>9</sup> In fact, the growth of Lincoln Heights may have contributed to the demise of Furrstown. By the 1960s, white residents had abandoned the area, leaving their former community to deteriorate.<sup>10</sup>

That decline prompted the 1955 formation of the Lincoln Heights Community Association. According to the *Charlotte Observer*, an initial group of 22 neighbors "pledged themselves to work to 'give something in return for what the world has invested in us.'" With the guidance of Reverend DeGrandval Burke, pastor of the neighborhood's Emmanuel Presbyterian Church, the Lincoln Heights Community Association proactively launched a community improvement effort that worked and advocated on behalf of the nearly 250, mostly African-American residents. The scope of their work included "health, living conditions, morals, recreational facilities, [and] education," as well as the community's "attitudes, and its physical appearance." Residents cleaned up streets and vacant lots, pushed for better garbage collection and fire and police protection, and worked with area healthcare professionals to improve public health and the availability of medical services. The group also pursued "Operation Bootstrap," a

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<sup>8</sup> NCDOT Report, 7.

<sup>9</sup> *Charlotte Observer*, December 2, 1957, 13B.

<sup>10</sup> *Charlotte's Historic West End*, accessed March 21, 2021; "Letter Lauds Local Police," *Charlotte Observer*, August 1, 1948, 7B, available at *Charlotte's Historic West End*, accessed March 21, 2021.

concerted effort to remedy the deteriorating “below average Furrstown” and incorporate it into what was becoming the “model community [of] Lincoln Heights.” Significantly, reported the *Observer*, the residents “expect to do the work themselves.”<sup>11</sup>

The homes built in Lincoln Heights during the 1950s and 1960s reflected an underlying trend shared by many of the African-American suburbs that arose after the Second World War. Those developments were planned much like white subdivisions, and the home designs resembled those offered white homeowners, but the houses themselves were smaller and the available house plans were limited in variety and distinctiveness. According to one historical survey, “Lincoln Heights . . . is an example of the era’s socially and racially biased views of what constituted adequate housing,” as reflected in the neighborhood’s “identical” houses, “small, hip roof ranch types with almost no architectural detail.”<sup>12</sup>

The neighborhood’s growth prompted the city to open a new elementary school in 1957. Before the end of its first year of operation, however, Lincoln Heights Elementary School was already “overflowing,” according to the *Charlotte Observer*. As a result, school board officials approved the first of several additions to the school in June 1958.<sup>13</sup> But that growth could not shield Lincoln Heights from Charlotte’s aggressive inner-city urban renewal campaign of the 1960s. Plans developed by the city and North Carolina’s State Highway Commission bisected

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<sup>11</sup> Scott Summers, “A Goal: Repay World For What It Gave Them,” *Charlotte Observer*, December 12, 1955, 1B, available at *Charlotte’s Historic West End*, accessed March 21, 2021; Scott Summers, “Community’s Citizens ‘Doing It Ourselves,’” *Charlotte Observer*, March 25, 1956, 6D, available at *Charlotte’s Historic West End*, accessed March 21, 2021; “Furrstown Eyeing ‘Heights’ Ahead,” *Charlotte Observer*, April 21, 1956, 7A, available at *Charlotte’s Historic West End*, accessed March 21, 2021; “Improvement Unit Lauded,” *Charlotte Observer*, June 24, 1956 15A.

<sup>12</sup> Sarah A. Woodard and Sherry Joines Wyatt, “Motorized Landscape: The Development of Modernism in Charlotte, 1945-1965” (September 2000), 9, <https://files.nc.gov/ncdcr/historic-preservation-office/survey-and-national-register/surveyreports/CharlottePostWWIIISurvey-2000-OCR.pdf>, accessed March 18, 2021.

<sup>13</sup> “City Classrooms Bulge at Seams,” *Charlotte Observer*, September 6, 1957, 1B, “Bond, Tax Election Backed,” March 28, 1958, B1, “Contracts Awarded by School Board,” *Charlotte Observer*, June 19, 1958, 7A.

the neighborhood with the new construction of Interstate Highway 77. As a result, “[w]hat had once been a landscape of closely linked communities became a group of islands divided by with swaths of concrete.”<sup>14</sup> The Northwest Expressway (now known alternatively as the Brookshire Freeway or I-277) also claimed much of the property associated with the neighborhood’s school.<sup>15</sup>

The Lincoln Heights neighborhood is currently home to the Lincoln Heights Neighborhood Park, the Beatties Ford Road branch of the Charlotte Mecklenburg Public Library, and the Northwest School of the Arts (located within the original West Charlotte High School), which local historian Tom Hanchett has described as “one of the most culturally vibrant and ethnically diverse places in the city.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Pamela Grundy, “Black History of Charlotte Part 4: How Redlining, Blockbusting and ‘Urban Renewal’ Victimized a Community,” *Queen City Nerve*, September 11, 2020, <https://qcnerve.com/black-history-of-charlotte-urban-renewal-development/>, accessed March 18, 2021; Katie Peralta Soloff, “Highway construction harmed Black neighborhoods in Charlotte. Now leaders are trying to ‘untangle’ past mistakes,” *Axios Charlotte*, October 20, 2020, <https://charlotte.axios.com/233636/highway-construction-harmed-black-neighborhoods-in-charlotte-how-leaders-are-trying-to-untangle-past-mistakes/>, accessed March 18, 2021.

<sup>15</sup> “Highways and the West End,” *Charlotte’s Historic West End*, accessed March 18, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Tom Hanchett, “A Guided Tour of the Northwest Corridor,” in *Let There Be Light: Exploring How Charlotte’s Historic West End is Shaping a New South*, Ron Stodghill ed. (Charlotte: Johnson C. Smith, 2014), 18.