

# Charlotte-Mecklenburg

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## Historic Landmarks Commission



### **Stough-Cornelius/Potts Barber Shop Building**

21324 and 21328 Catawba Avenue  
Cornelius, North Carolina 28031

### **Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission Local Landmark Designation Report**

Prepared by Stewart Gray and Tommy Warlick

February 2021

## **HISTORIC NAMES OF PROPERTY**

Stough-Cornelius Company, later known as the offices of Cornelius Electric Membership Corporation or Rural Electric Administration

Potts Barber Shop, previously known as Cora's Beauty Shop

## **ADDRESS OF PROPERTY**

21324 and 21328 Catawba Avenue  
Cornelius, North Carolina 28031

## **PIN #**

00521214

## **DEED BOOK & PAGE**

Book 8845, Page 556

## **LEGAL DESCRIPTION**

N/A

## **ZONING**

C700

## **AMOUNT OF LAND/ACREAGE TO BE DESIGNATED**

0.087 acres

## **AD VALOREM TAX APPRAISAL**

The Commission is aware that designation would allow the owner to apply for an automatic deferral of up to 50% of the Ad Valorem taxes depending upon the portion(s) of the property designated as the "historic landmark." As of January 2021, the total appraised value of the property is \$182,400.

## **RECOMMENDATION FOR DESIGNATION**

The Commission recommends the exterior of the building and the property associated with the tax parcel for historic designation.

## **NAME/ADDRESS OF CURRENT PROPERTY OWNER**

Gerald M. Potts  
PO Box 454  
Cornelius, NC 28031

## **DESIGNATION REPORT CONTENTS**

This report includes maps and representative photographs of the property, a brief historical sketch and architectural description of the property, and documentation as to why and how the property meets the criteria for designation set forth in N.C.G.S. § 160D-945.

## I. Abstract

### Statement of Significance

The Stough-Cornelius/Potts Barber Shop building, which consists of two separately-constructed brick storefronts joined by a common party wall and façade, is proposed for landmark designation because of its local historical, cultural, and architectural significance. The west-side storefront (c. 1923) was constructed by the Stough-Cornelius Company, whose original shareholders included town founder R.J. Stough and town namesake J.B. Cornelius. The Stough-Cornelius Cotton Mill, started in 1891, provided the impetus for the settlement and incorporation of the town of Cornelius, and the former Stough-Cornelius Building is the final extant structure representing that company. Aside from its association with the founding of the town, the former Stough-Cornelius Building also headquartered the Cornelius Electric Membership Corporation, the town's first electric cooperative, formed in 1940 under the sponsorship of the federal government's Rural Electric Administration.

Constructed at some point between 1923 and 1938, the east-side storefront has housed since 1960 the Potts Barber Shop, generally regarded as the oldest ongoing business continuously owned or operated by an African-American entrepreneur in Cornelius, and perhaps in north Mecklenburg County. In 1972, Potts Barber Shop became the town's first racially integrated barber shop. The Potts Barber Shop Building is also notable for its longstanding role as a prominent center of social activity for the town's male population, and for its 60-year association with the family of Wilson Henry Potts, an early civic leader of the Smithville community, which is one of the oldest African-American communities in north Mecklenburg County.

Although unclear when the two storefronts were actually constructed, they remain an important surviving architectural component of Cornelius' early- to mid-20th century commercial core. The Stough-Cornelius/Potts Barber Shop building is one of only seven remaining period commercial buildings fronting what was once the bustling business and local government corridor of Catawba Avenue. The respective individual histories of the constituent structures of the Stough-Cornelius/Potts Barber Shop building – evidencing both the local economic growth driven by the traditional southern cotton industry of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and the entrepreneurial achievements and community efforts of rural African-Americans in the face of decades of Jim Crow segregation – are amplified by their physical connection and common built environment, which has been significantly encroached upon by recent development. Designation and preservation of this artifact would help preserve the commercial and foundational history, as well as the historic architectural character, of the town. It would do much to demonstrate the important roles that African-Americans played in North Carolina's small rural towns throughout the 20th century.

### Integrity Statement

- **Location:** The Stough-Cornelius/Potts Barber Shop building remains in its original location, at the heart of what was once the main business/government corridor of Cornelius. The Stough-Cornelius Building is the final extant structure representing the company

whose operations prompted the town's founding and incorporation. The Potts Barber Shop Building is the site of the town's first integrated barber shop, and the location of what is generally regarded as the town's oldest ongoing business continuously owned or operated by an African-American entrepreneur.

- **Design:** The building is one of the few surviving examples of the simple vernacular style and appearance of commercial architecture that once defined Cornelius' business district during the 1920s and 1930s.
- **Setting:** The Stough-Cornelius/Potts Barber Shop Building stands in its original setting and maintains its proximity and association to the nearby extant business district, despite contraction of that district and encroachment upon the built environment by recent and ongoing development.
- **Materials:** Much of the original material from the Stough-Cornelius/Potts Barber Shop Building has been retained, and its exterior features reveal minimal alteration since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
- **Workmanship:** The unique form and design, as well as the continued physical integrity, of each storefront are matched by the quality of the workmanship associated with each structure. The durability of each structure and its original materials demonstrates the skills of the builder.
- **Feeling:** The feeling of the building as an early- to mid-20th century commercial structure has been retained, in large part by its ongoing use for local businesses with minimal exterior updating. The building's continued proximity to both the historic commercial corridor and current downtown of Cornelius, as well as its ongoing 60-year association with the Potts family, enhance the feeling of the building's historic association with its original purpose and the founders of Cornelius.
- **Association:** The building has now been owned by two generations of the Potts family and is still used for commercial purposes. Historically, the building is associated with the founders of Cornelius, the initial commercial enterprise that prompted the creation and incorporation of the town, the first electric service made available to residents of Cornelius, a prominent local African-American family whose multigenerational civic service has long benefitted the town and the historic African-American community of Smithville, and the end of Jim Crow segregation in north Mecklenburg County.

## II. Maps

*Mecklenburg County Tax Maps*



### III. Historical Sketch

#### Cornelius and the Stough-Cornelius Company

Founded in 1893, Cornelius was a rural mill village with significant agricultural ties when incorporated in 1905. In the late 1880s, in the wake of the appointment in the city of Charlotte of an official town weigher of raw cotton, R.J. Stough, the proprietor of a successful Davidson cotton firm, felt that cotton buyers should instead weigh their own cotton. A majority of Davidson residents disagreed, voting to hire their own town weigher. In response, Stough moved his scales beyond the town limits, gradually supplementing his rural cotton weighing operation with a mercantile store, a cotton gin, a cotton purchasing business, and a cotton mill. Incorporated in 1891, the Stough-Cornelius Cotton Mill drew residents, businesses, and a second mill (the Gem Yarn Mill) by 1905, laying the foundation for the town of Cornelius.<sup>1</sup>

The success of the Stough-Cornelius Mill prompted the incorporation of the Stough-Cornelius Company in 1903 “to operate cotton gins and oil mill and deal in real estate.” Its original shareholders included R.J. Stough and J.B. Cornelius, the namesake of the new town.<sup>2</sup> The Company’s original gin was sold to Southern Cotton Oil Company in 1910, and the gin house originally constructed by the Stough-Cornelius Company was replaced in 1919.<sup>3</sup> The Stough-Cornelius Mill, which employed 230 people in 1923, was sold to the IX Company in 1944. The mill finally closed in 1988 and was demolished in 1997, leaving the former Stough-Cornelius Building (currently located at 21328 Catawba Avenue) as the sole remaining structure representing a company pivotal to the founding and flourishing of the town of Cornelius.<sup>4</sup>

It is unclear when or for what specific purpose the former Stough-Cornelius Building (also referenced herein as the “west-side storefront”) was originally constructed. The land on which it (and the Potts Barber Shop Building) currently stands was acquired by the Stough-Cornelius Company’s predecessor entity (Stough, Cornelius & Company) on September 18, 1900, directly from R.J. Stough and P.A. Stough.<sup>5</sup> According to a March 10, 1923, party wall agreement that the Stough-Cornelius Company initiated with James and Clifford Smith (the owners of the adjacent property immediately west of the Company’s parcel), the Company intended to construct a brick commercial building on the parcel and assumed responsibility for erecting the party wall on the boundary of the two parcels.<sup>6</sup> The former Stough-Cornelius Building is depicted on an April 30, 1923, map of downtown Cornelius (see below, lot number 122) without the adjoining Potts Barber Shop Building. The west elevation of the building evidences no windows or other openings,

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<sup>1</sup> Leslie B. Rindoks, *A Town By Any Other Name: A History of Cornelius, North Carolina* (Davidson, NC: Lorimer Press, 2005), 22-28.

<sup>2</sup> “State News,” *Davie Record* (Mocksville, NC), September 30, 1903, 3.

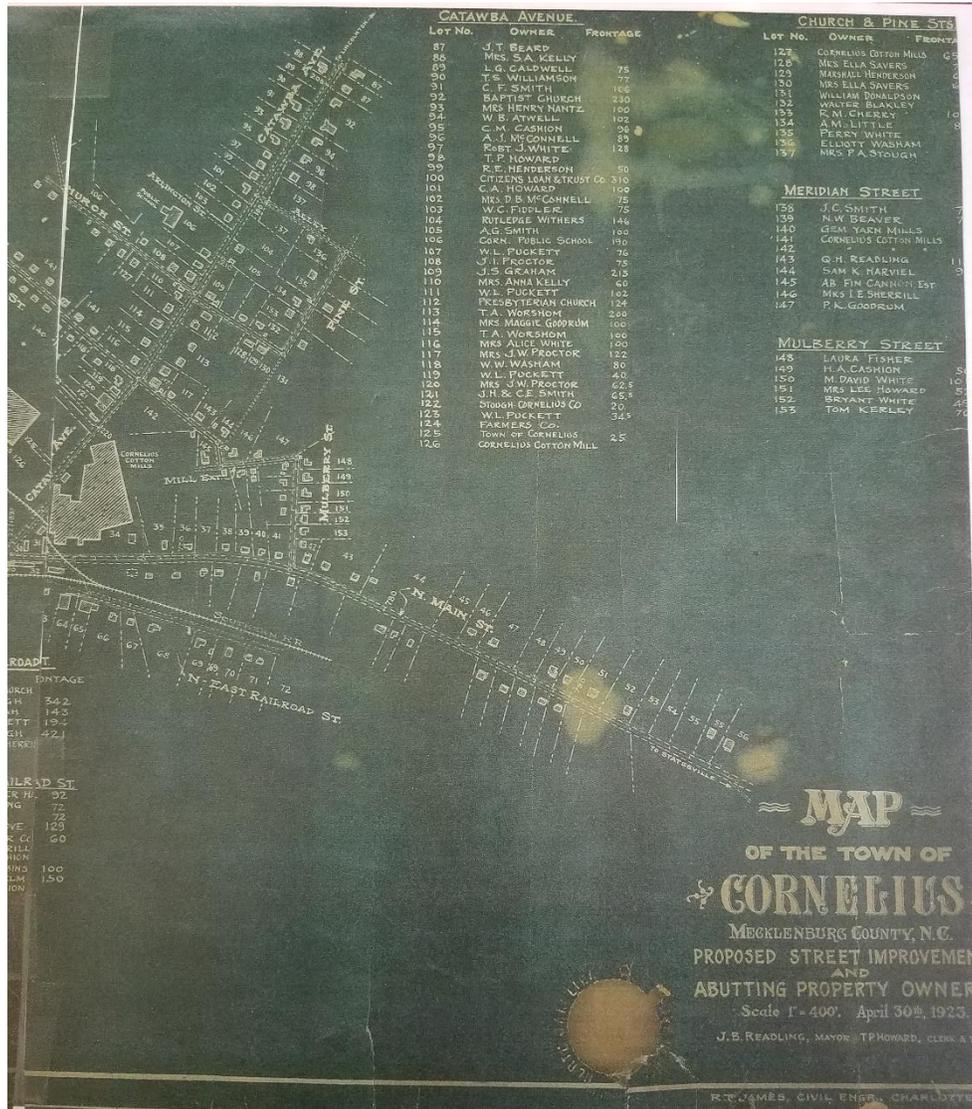
<sup>3</sup> Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, “Cornelius Cotton Gin Survey and Research Report,” 4.

<sup>4</sup> Rindoks, *A Town By Any Other Name*, 76, 100, 109, 115; Town of Cornelius, “North of Catawba Walking Tour,” <https://www.cornelius.org/DocumentCenter/View/108/North-of-Catawba-Walking-Tour-Brochure?bidId=>, accessed January 24, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Mecklenburg County, North Carolina Deeds Books, Book 150, Page 123 (1900).

<sup>6</sup> Mecklenburg County, North Carolina Deeds Books, Book 491, Page 550 (1923).

suggesting that the building's construction specifically contemplated the 1923 party wall agreement. The Company sold the property to R.E. Jetton and E.E. Jetton on April 21, 1924.<sup>7</sup>



April 30, 1923, map of Cornelius and detail (below), showing Stough-Cornelius Building (lot 122) in red circle. (map courtesy of Town of Cornelius)

<sup>7</sup> Mecklenburg County, North Carolina Deeds Books, Book 541, Page 448 (1924).



By 1960, when the Potts Barber Shop moved into the adjoining east-side storefront, the two storefronts had long been joined by the common party wall and façade, most likely when the east-side storefront was built. At that time, the adjoining former Stough-Cornelius Building was the headquarters for the Cornelius Electric Membership Corporation (“CEMC”), the town’s first electric cooperative. In 1939, local residents – most of whom had no access to electric service – mapped out a service area, hired an engineer, and drafted a proposal for presentation to the federal government’s Rural Electric Administration (“REA”). With the REA’s approval and loans, the CEMC was formed in 1940, and first delivered electricity to the town in 1941. The CEMC occupied the west-side storefront since at least as early as 1951. Subsequent tenants for the former Stough-Cornelius Building have included Bass Dry Cleaners, a men’s clothing store, and Keller Floor Covering, all prior to its current Edward Jones Investments occupant.<sup>8</sup>

### Brick Row and Smithville

In the early 1920s, just southeast of the Stough-Cornelius Mill, a row of shops arose along State Highway 115, near the intersection of the town’s Main Street and Catawba Avenue. That stretch of commercial space – known as “Brick Row” – housed a range of businesses operated by white and African-American entrepreneurs, including a meat market, insurance company, jewelry store, sandwich shop, shoe shop, and the local post office. Brick Row also featured the town’s only two barber shops, located on either side of a billiards hall. Both barber shops were segregated, serving only white customers. One shop was owned by Clarence Blakely, a white barber who opened his Brick Row shop in 1926. The other shop was owned by Rutledge “Rut” Norton. Norton was African-American.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Rindoks, *A Town By Any Other Name*, 77-78; Telephone Interviews with Mickey Potts and Jack Conard Jr.; Telephone Interview with Mayor Woody Washam, January 12, 2021; Advertisement for Cornelius Electric Membership Corporation, *Charlotte Observer*, February 19, 1951, 48-B (*Carolina Farm Observer* insert).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 51-53; Telephone Interview with Gerald “Mickey” Potts, December 8, 2020; Telephone Interview with Ron Potts, December 11, 2020.

At that time, the African-American community of Smithville remained just outside of the Cornelius town limits. Dating back to the 1880s, Smithville remains one of north Mecklenburg County's oldest African-American communities. Located east of present-day Highway 21 along Catawba Avenue, Smithville consists primarily of land from the Potts Plantation (established in the early 19th century) which Jacob Lafayette Smith sold in parcels in 1908 to black sharecroppers, many of whose descendants still live in the community.<sup>10</sup> Wilson Henry Potts (March 24, 1912 – July 3, 2000) was one of the early community leaders of Smithville. The first proprietor of Potts Barber Shop, which grew out of Brick Row's Blakely Barber Shop, Wilson Potts "built a legacy through his family business and the values of civic duty and service he instilled in the people around him."<sup>11</sup> That legacy has persisted, as Wilson's son Mickey has continued to operate Potts Barber Shop to this day, and the Potts family – including Mickey's wife Nannie, the first female and only African-American mayor of Cornelius – helped spearhead the eventual incorporation of Smithville into Cornelius in 1980.<sup>12</sup>

### **Wilson Potts and Potts Barber Shop**

A family friend taught a 14-year-old Wilson Potts to cut hair in 1926. Wilson earned his barber license after an apprenticeship in a New York City barber shop during the mid-1930s. Following his return to Smithville in 1935, he took a job at the Gem Yarn Mill, supplementing his family's income by cutting hair on Friday and Saturday nights in a Smithville barber shop owned by Pete Clark. Wilson was recruited in or about 1946 by Rut Norton to become a fulltime barber in Norton's barber shop on Brick Row. Wilson worked with Norton for nearly three years before "moving 12 steps up the street" to start barbering with Clarence Blakely in his shop.<sup>13</sup> Replacing a white barber previously employed by Blakely, Wilson's hiring likely gave Cornelius its first white/black barber tandem, although the shop's clientele remained solely white. None of Wilson's three sons – James Lafayette Potts (b. 1935), Gerald Milton "Mickey" Potts (b. 1937), and Ronald Lee Potts (b. 1946) – recall any public objection to Blakely hiring their father. Indeed, according to James, business at the Blakely shop actually increased following Wilson's hiring.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> "The Barbers of Brick Row," *Old Town Cornelius*, <https://oldtowncornelius.com/flashback-friday-the-barbers-of-brick-row/>, accessed January 9, 2021; Rindoks, *A Town By Any Other Name*, 40-41, 51; Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, "Designation Report for Robert Potts, Jr. House," March 2, 1976, <http://landmarkscommission.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Potts-House-Robert-SR.pdf>, accessed January 9, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Tonya Rivens, "A Legacy Built on Hard Work, Perseverance and Pride," *Cornelius Today*, December 11, 2020, <https://www.corneliustoday.com/a-legacy-built-on-hard-work-perseverance-and-pride/>, accessed January 9, 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Cole del Charco, "Remembering Nannie Potts, 1st Female and Only Black Mayor of Cornelius," November 16, 2018, <https://www.wfae.org/local-news/2018-11-16/remembering-nannie-potts-1st-female-and-only-black-mayor-of-cornelius#stream/0>, accessed January 9, 2021; Rindoks, *A Town By Any Other Name*, 105-06.

<sup>13</sup> Telephone Interview with James Potts, December 15, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Telephone Interviews with Mickey, Ron, and James Potts.

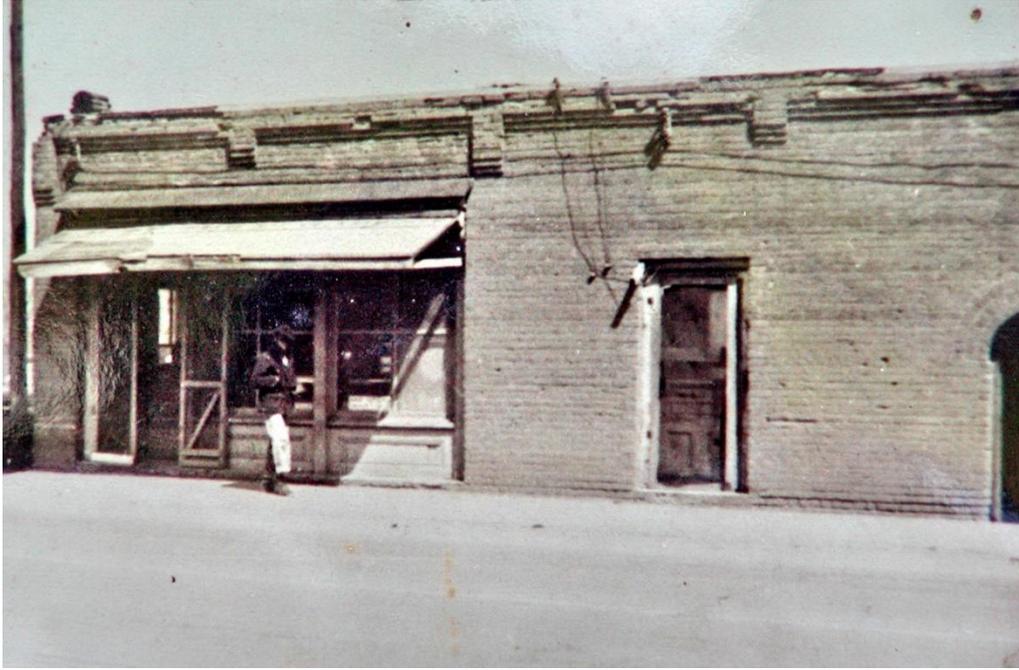


*Wilson Potts started his fulltime barber career here at Rutledge Norton's barber shop on Brick Row in Cornelius. (photo courtesy of Jack Conard, Jr.)*

The Brick Row building that housed Blakely's barber shop featured two barber chairs, a shoeshine stand, a public shower in the basement, and the "adults only" pool hall that separated Blakely's shop from Norton's barber shop. James Potts started operating the shoeshine stand as a boy, a responsibility that Mickey and Ron inherited in later years. According to Ron, the pool hall, accessible through either the back of Blakely's shop or a street entrance located between the two shops, was "off limits" to the Potts boys. However, as the eldest son, James recalls that his subsequent job responsibilities at the shop often included locking up the pool hall when its patrons left for the evening, usually long after the shop had closed for the day. The basement shower was available for male customers only. For 25 cents, the shop provided hot water, soap, and a towel.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Telephone Interviews with James and Ron Potts; "The Barbers of Brick Row."



*Wilson Potts continued his career at the Blakely Barber Shop (shown on the left), which he later purchased and operated as the original location of Potts Barber Shop. The street entrance to the pool hall is shown on the right. (photo: Jack Conard, Jr.)*

In or about 1952, Blakely’s declining health forced his retirement, leaving Wilson to manage and operate the shop. After graduating from Winston-Salem’s Modern Barber College during their high school years, both James and Mickey joined Wilson in barbering at the shop: James during his college breaks (between 1953 and 1956), and Mickey starting in 1956 on a full-time basis. In 1957, Blakely sold the barber shop to Wilson. In 1960, with Brick Row slated for demolition due to its deteriorating condition, Wilson moved the shop to its present location on Catawba Avenue, in the east-side storefront.<sup>16</sup> That combined building – consisting of both the former Stough-Cornelius Building and the Potts Barber Shop Building – is referenced hereinafter as the Stough-Cornelius/Potts Barber Shop Building or the “Catawba Avenue building.”

When Wilson moved his shop to Catawba Avenue, the street was already a burgeoning commercial corridor for Cornelius. Restaurants, grocery stores, a general store, shoe store, hardware store, and the Bank of Cornelius all lined the street at various times throughout the mid-twentieth century. The busy stretch also included the Cornelius town hall, police and fire stations, and library, as well as the Cornelius Elementary School, all in close proximity to the Stough-Cornelius Mill. Across Catawba Avenue from the mill, and next door to the Catawba Avenue building that would house Potts Barber Shop, the Farmers Company, a feed-and-seed store incorporated in 1920, sold all manner of agricultural supplies to farmers. The Farmers Company also operated the sole remaining cotton gin in town and a cotton warehouse, both situated behind the Catawba Avenue building and just north of the Gem Yarn Mill. With the notable exception of

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<sup>16</sup> Telephone Interviews with James and Mickey Potts; In-Person Interview with Mickey and Ron Potts, December 29, 2020. In 1961, prior to its scheduled demolition, Brick Row was destroyed by fire. Ibid.; “The Barbers of Brick Row.”

the Gem Yarn Mill, few of those original Catawba Avenue buildings remain today. Even the Farmers Company complex is now under demolition for a forthcoming community arts center.<sup>17</sup>



*These recent images of Catawba Avenue show the street's few extant original early- to mid-twentieth century commercial buildings. The Stough-Cornelius/Potts Barber Shop Building is indicated in each photo by a red arrow. (sources: Lake Norman Convention & Visitors Bureau, Lake Norman Citizen)*



Wilson Potts' Catawba Avenue location, nestled in the middle of two mills, the CEMC headquarters, and the area's primary destination for farmers, placed his business in the heart of the town's bustling government and commercial operations. Although both mills changed hands over

<sup>17</sup> Rindoks, *A Town By Any Other Name*, 40, 45, 50, 68, 76, 80; Telephone Interview with Jack Conard, Jr., December 17, 2020; North Carolina Secretary of State, Certificate of Incorporation for The Farmers Company, May 27, 1920; "Town Agrees to Buy Land for Arts Center," *Cornelius Today*, August 1, 2016, <https://www.corneliustoday.com/town-agrees-buy-land-arts-center/>; "Arts Center Demo Process Will Take 90-120 Days," *Cornelius Today*, September 2, 2020, <https://www.corneliustoday.com/arts-center-demo-process-will-take-90-120-days/>.

the years, the 1960 relocation placed Wilson's shop in closer proximity to a steady stream of customers, necessitating the eventual addition of more barbers and two additional barber chairs.<sup>18</sup>

It is unclear when the Potts Barber Shop Building was constructed.<sup>19</sup> It does not appear in the 1923 map of Cornelius, but the combined Stough-Cornelius/Potts Barber Shop Building is visible in a 1938 aerial image of Catawba Avenue, situated between the Stough-Cornelius Mill and the Farmers Company complex. The brick façade joining the two storefronts reflects the style and appearance of the commercial structures that characterized much of Catawba Avenue during the 1920s and 1930s, and was most likely completed contemporaneously with the construction of the Potts Barber Shop Building.



*Detail from a 1938 aerial photograph of Mecklenburg County, showing downtown Cornelius. (Potts Barber Shop building indicated by red arrow)*

The property on which the Catawba Avenue building still stands, acquired from the Stough-Cornelius Company by R.E. Jetton and E.E. Jetton in April 1924, remained within the sole and continuous ownership of the Jetton family (a prominent Cornelius family who owned and operated several area commercial properties) until they sold the entire Catawba Avenue building to Wilson Potts in 1969.<sup>20</sup> It follows therefore that the building was constructed by the Jetton family at some point between 1923 and 1938. Prior to its occupancy by Potts Barber Shop, the

<sup>18</sup> Rindoks, *A Town By Any Other Name*, 76-77, 85, 100; Telephone Interviews with Mickey Potts and Jack Conard Jr.

<sup>19</sup> Although the location of the Potts Barber Shop has not moved since 1960, its street number has changed over the years as the result of a Mecklenburg County renumbering campaign in the early 1980s. Originally identified as 225 Catawba Avenue or 225 N.C. Highway 73, the shop's number changed to 21328, and later to its current 21324 address. *Charlotte City Directory*, vol. 2 (Southfield, MI: R.L. Polk & Company, 1984), 66; *Charlotte City Directory*, vol. 2 (Southfield, MI: R.L. Polk & Company, 1985), 72; *Charlotte City Directory*, vol. 2 (Southfield, MI: R.L. Polk & Company, 1995), 52.

<sup>20</sup> Mecklenburg County, North Carolina Deeds Books, Book 3146, Page 171 (1969).

east-side storefront housed a beauty shop operated by Cora Readling, who opened the first beauty shop in Cornelius in 1937.<sup>21</sup>

Wilson owned the Stough-Cornelius/Potts Barber Shop Building and operated the barber shop until 1996, when he transferred the building and the barber shop business to his son Mickey. Like the two original barber chairs and the original shoeshine stand that also made the 1960 move with Wilson to the Catawba Avenue building, Mickey continues to serve customers at the Catawba Avenue building to this day. When Wilson retired in 1998, he left Mickey to carry on a second-generation business generally believed to be the oldest ongoing business continuously owned or operated by an African-American entrepreneur in Cornelius, and perhaps in north Mecklenburg County. Throughout its history, Potts Barber Shop has been a hub of community activity. Mickey describes the Potts shop as a “meet and greet place . . . lots of people were always there. . . . People made their rounds around town to different places and always ended up there. It was a gathering place and hang-out, usually retired folks looking to fill their day ‘cause they’d always see someone there they knew.” For much of its existence, the shop provided the hub for social and community gatherings of the town’s white male population. Indeed, according to Cornelius Mayor Woody Washam, “If it weren’t known in that barber shop it didn’t happen. . . . [A] majority of decisions that were made in this town started in Potts Barber Shop.”<sup>22</sup>

A Catawba Avenue mainstay for six decades, Potts Barber Shop has served generations of Cornelius residents. According to Mickey, most customers have patronized the shop “for years.” He has personally cut hair for at least three generations of several Cornelius families. Many Cornelius natives, including Mayor Washam and Jack Conard Jr. (widely regarded as the town’s “unofficial” historian), remember receiving their first haircuts from Wilson Potts at the Brick Row shop and continued as customers for many years long after the shop moved to Catawba Avenue. Conard recalls his inability to sit still for his haircuts, prompting Wilson to hold Conard’s head with one hand and warn him that the boy might lose an ear if he did not stop squirming. For many families, the shop is a rite of passage, as former town residents return to have their children’s first haircuts at Potts Barber Shop. At one point during its Catawba Avenue residency, the shop employed three generations of the Jerry Kornegay family “in the chair” as barbers. The shortest tenured barber currently working at the shop has been employed there for nineteen years.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Rindoks, *A Town By Any Other Name*, 68; Telephone Interviews with Mickey Potts and Jack Conard Jr.; Telephone Interview with Woody Washam, January 12, 2021; Mecklenburg County, North Carolina Deeds Books, Book 3146, Page 171 (1969).

<sup>22</sup> Mecklenburg County, North Carolina Deeds Books, Book 8845, Page 556 (1996); Telephone Interview with Mickey Potts; Telephone Interview with Woody Washam; “Smithville Community Has Been Close-Knit Through the Years,” *Cornelius Today*, April 2, 2015, <https://www.corneliustoday.com/smithville-community/>, accessed January 9, 2021.

<sup>23</sup> Telephone Interviews with Mickey Potts and Woody Washam; In-Person Interview with Jack Conard, Jr., December 29, 2020; “The Barbers of Brick Row.”



*Potts Barber Shop, circa 1960s. (photo; Jack Conard, Jr.)  
The barbers, from left to right, are Wilson Potts, Mickey Potts, and James Raeford.*

### **Segregation and Integration**

Wilson Potts began his barbering career in the midst of a rapidly-expanding national legislative movement to complicate African-Americans' continued participation in the profession. In the early twentieth century, white barbers organized to lobby state legislatures to adopt regulatory codes granting broad discretion to newly-constituted boards of barber examiners (generally comprised of all-white barbers) to test the qualifications of prospective barbers and grant or revoke licenses. By the time *The Nation* warned in 1930 that "[t]he Negroes of the South are in grave danger of being driven from one of the few remaining trades in which they are able to compete on anything like even terms with the whites," twenty-six states, including North Carolina, had already passed such barbering laws. According to that correspondent, "the Negro barbers in the Southern States are thoroughly convinced that the bills are designed to put them out of business, at least in so far as their white clientele is concerned, and they fear that foreign-born barbers will sooner or later want their colored trade as well. They also contend with emphasis that discrimination is being shown by examining boards against colored practitioners."<sup>24</sup>

Ralph W. Johnson, an African-American barber who operated a segregated barber shop for white men in the neighboring town of Davidson, North Carolina, during much of Potts Barber Shop's tenure in Cornelius, described North Carolina's regulatory scheme in his autobiography, *David Played a Harp*:

Before 1929, a barber in North Carolina could learn the trade by going into a shop and working as an apprentice under a skilled barber until he became proficient. In 1929 legislation was passed establishing a Board of Barber Examiners and requiring persons

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<sup>24</sup> Virginius Dabney, "Negro Barbers in the South," *The Nation* 131, no. 3393 (July 16, 1930): 64; Wilmoth A. Carter, *The Urban Negro in the South* (New York: Vantage Press, 1961), 107-08.

aspiring to become barbers to attend a barber school or college that provided the necessary training. Once the prescribed training was completed in the school, the applicant must then go before the Board to pass an examination as to his proficiency. If this test was passed successfully, the applicant was given an apprentice license which required him to work for a period of eighteen months under a registered master barber. At the expiration of this time, he was required to go again before the Board for a second examination. When this final test was passed, the barber was given a Master Barber Certificate which entitled him to practice barbering as a full-fledged barber without restraints.

This legislation was to have the effect in a few years of almost entirely eliminating Negro barbers from working on white patrons. This was accomplished by requiring Negro and white barber students to attend separate schools. Under this arrangement, the Negro student in the Negro barber school could learn his trade only on Negro patrons, and the white student learned on white patrons. Prior to passing of this legislation, most barbers in North Carolina, and the South as a whole, were Negroes. . . . After the passage of this law, the number of Negro barbers working white trade gradually decreased until after a few years there were not many of the old ones left. . . . I cannot say what the new law was intended to do, but I know its end result was the beginning of the end for Negro barbers who worked white trade.<sup>25</sup>

Those practices continued well into the 1970s, even prompting a successful federal class action lawsuit filed in Charlotte, North Carolina, by an African-American Navy veteran who, after completing a barber's correspondence course and serving for three years as the only barber on an integrated ship, was denied admission to the Charlotte Barber School solely because of his race. After noting that only two of the five North Carolina barber schools (in Durham and Raleigh) trained African-American barbers, and that only about 85 African-American barbers across the state's approximately 1,200 black-operated barber shops served a white trade, the court ruled that the School unconstitutionally discriminated against prospective African-American students.<sup>26</sup> Such statewide circumstances made the business relationship between Wilson Potts and his white former employer Clarence Blakely during the 1940s and 1950s all the more unique.

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<sup>25</sup> Ralph W. Johnson, *David Played a Harp* (Davidson, NC: Blackwell Ink, Inc., 2000), 283-84. Similar challenges faced African-American barbers throughout the country during that period. Hunter Oatman-Stanford, "Straight Razors and Social Justice: The Empowering Evolution of Black Barbershops," *Collectors Weekly*, May 30, 2014, <https://www.collectorsweekly.com/articles/the-empowering-evolution-of-black-barbershops/>, accessed January 14, 2021.

<sup>26</sup> *Grier v. Specialized Skills, Inc.*, 326 F. Supp. 856, 859-60 (W.D.N.C. 1971). According to Howard Arbuckle, Davidson's former town attorney, North Carolina outlawed the integration of barber shops as late as 1968. Johnson, *David Played a Harp*, 424.

Those laws only exacerbated the tenuous position in which racial discrimination and Jim Crow segregation had long placed African-American barbers. Dating back to the late nineteenth century, many African-American barbers felt “they had no choice but to exclude black men because white men would not patronize a shop where black men were shaved. Barbers often identified this practice as the ‘rules’ or ‘policy’ of the trade.”<sup>27</sup> Ralph Johnson’s decision to continue operating his Davidson barber shop as a segregated business well into the late 1960s prompted a boycott of the Johnson Barber Shop and a series of well-publicized, often contentious on-site protests orchestrated by students of Davidson College in April 1968. A *Charlotte Observer* reporter covering those protests posed a rhetorical question asked by Johnson – “Do you know of any barber shop where they cut the hair of both races?” – to a member of the Charlotte chapter of the all-white Associated Master Barbers of America, who responded, “Gosh, I don’t know of one.” Overwhelmed by the students’ relentless activities, Johnson felt himself compelled to integrate his shop, an ultimatum that he later faulted for the loss of his white clientele, the decline of his fifty-year-old business, and the eventual closure of his shop.<sup>28</sup>

In comparison, integration of the Potts Barber Shop was uneventful. Like Johnson’s shop, the Potts Barber Shop served only white customers. In 1972, “Toot” Burton, an African-American employee of the neighboring Farmers Company store, entered the Potts shop and asked Wilson for a haircut. Without objection or incident, Wilson cut Burton’s hair and then continued his regular routine of running what had thereby become Cornelius’ first integrated barber shop. “To his credit,” James Potts recalls, “Dad told [Burton] to sit down and cut his hair with no resistance at all, collected his money and told him good-bye.” According to Mickey, “We didn’t think anything about it at the time. It was no big deal. It didn’t dawn on us as anything.” But Toots “did not have pure intentions that day,” as James and the rest of the family later suspected that, in light of the controversy surrounding integration of the Johnson shop, “the boys who hung around the feed and seed” put Burton up to approaching Wilson for a haircut. As Mickey recalls, “I guess [Burton] was looking to stir up trouble but there was none to be had.” No public outcry accompanied integration of the Potts Barber Shop, and Wilson’s sons recall no negative reaction or loss of customers as a result of Wilson cutting Burton’s hair. Mayor Washam credits Wilson’s local stature as a community leader for the successful and uneventful integration of Potts Barber Shop: “He was admired, trusted, and liked by everyone,” and as the “roots” of Smithville who later facilitated the annexation of that community into Cornelius, Washam believes it was Wilson’s “credibility and character” that alleviated any problems with the shop’s integration.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Quincy T. Mills, *Cutting Along the Color Line: Black Barbers and Barber Shops in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 83.

<sup>28</sup> Johnson, *David Played a Harp*, 355-440, 443, 446-47, 449; Jerry Adams, “Let Student Pickets Help Poor, Negro Barber Says,” *Charlotte Observer*, April 4, 1968, 1; Stagg Newman, “Mr. Johnson’s Barbershop: Economics 101,” *Davidson Journal* (December 21, 2018), <https://davidsonjournal.davidson.edu/2018/12/mr-johnsons-barbershop-economics-101/>, accessed January 14, 2021.

<sup>29</sup> Telephone Interviews with James Potts, Mickey Potts, Ron Potts, and Woody Washam; “The Barbers of Brick Row”; “Smithville Community Has Been Close-Knit Through the Years,” *Cornelius Today*, April 2, 2015, <https://www.corneliustoday.com/smithville-community/>, accessed January 14, 2021.

## The Potts Family and Smithville

In addition to launching and later integrating what is believed to be the oldest ongoing business continuously owned or operated by an African-American entrepreneur in Cornelius, Wilson Potts was a pillar of Smithville's African-American community and an influential "hand on" civic leader. During the 1950s and 1960s, he was integral to bringing running water and sewer service to Smithville, both critical public health improvements in a community dubbed "Germtown, USA" by the *Charlotte Observer*.<sup>30</sup> Wilson convinced the town of Cornelius to extend its newly-installed waterlines into Smithville on the condition that he recruit the men of Smithville to dig the ditches to lay the lines. He succeeded, just as he also successfully worked to secure electric service, street lights, and paved roads for Smithville, all long before the community's 1980 incorporation into the town of Cornelius.<sup>31</sup>

In the early 1950s, Wilson and four other Smithville men founded the Smithville Better Community Club and, in 1954, led the community's efforts to raise funds to purchase the Smithville Rosenwald School from the Mecklenburg County Board of Education. The men's club then worked to convert the school into a community center which, among other offerings, included a barber shop, as the nearby Cornelius barber shops remained segregated. In the 1970s, Wilson worked with Smith Florist, a local white-owned florist, to develop and implement landscaping and beautification projects throughout Smithville and Cornelius.<sup>32</sup>



*The Smithville Better Community Center, circa 1955;  
Wilson Potts in center indicated by red arrow. (photo: Jack Conard Jr.)*

<sup>30</sup> Rindoks, *A Town By Any Other Name*, 100; Telephone Interview with Ron Potts.

<sup>31</sup> Telephone Interviews with James, Mickey, and Ron Potts; Adrienne Babbitt, "Civil Rights-Era Barbers Featured at Event in Cornelius," *Charlotte Observer*, February 21, 2015; "Smithville Community Has Been Close-Knit Through the Years."

<sup>32</sup> Town of Cornelius Historic Preservation Commission, "Designation Report for Smithville Community Center/Smithville Rosenwald School," 3, August 11, 2006, <http://landmarkscommission.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Smithville-Rosenwald-School-SR.pdf>, accessed January 14, 2021; Telephone Interviews with James, Mickey, and Ron Potts.

#### IV. Architectural Assessment



*Before Potts Barber Shop moved into the building in 1960, the east-side storefront was occupied by Cora Readling's beauty shop (left), and the west-side storefront was occupied by the Cornelius Electric Membership Corporation headquarters (right; CEMC Director Ben Washam and office manager Lillian Smith in front of CEMC office), circa 1950s. (photos: Jack Conard, Jr.)*

*Front elevation*



The Stough-Cornelius/Potts Barber Shop Building is indicative of the restrained vernacular style of brick commercial architecture that characterized Catawba Avenue during the 1920s and 1930s. The building faces north and abuts the sidewalk along Catawba Avenue. It is located on a vacant 0.087-acre lot, surrounded by a gravel parking lot and gravel drives. To the west is a narrow vacant lot, followed by a row of four early to mid-20th century masonry commercial buildings. To its immediate east lies a small gravel parking lot and the current construction site for what will become the Cain Center for the Arts, which also wraps around the rear of the property.

The one-story brick building is comprised of two separate storefronts, constructed at different times and separated by a party wall. The west portion of the building was constructed before 1923 and includes a partial basement, accessible from an outside door on the rear elevation. The addition was constructed sometime before 1938, and it appears that the resulting façade was unified with a veneer of wire-cut brick laid principally in running bond. The two storefronts are separated by a brick pier that fronts the party wall and supports two metal lintels that form the storefront openings. Each lintel is accented with a brick soldier course. Above the lintels the wall is blank, and is topped with a parapet. The parapet features a corbeled rowlock cap.

The west storefront is wider than the east storefront. Each storefront is topped by a large transom composed of seven rectangular sashes, both with discernable fenestration. The east storefront features a recessed door located in the easternmost section of the storefront. The door features a large single light and large lower wood panel. Three plate glass direct-glazed windows sit on a wire cut brick bulkhead that is recessed slightly from the façade and angles back to the door.

A replacement slab door is recessed and centered in the west storefront and is bordered by full-height direct glazed sidelights. The glass in the transom-sash have been painted. Below the transom it appears that much of the west storefront's material has been replaced over time. On either side of the recessed entrance, angled sections of the storefront are composed of direct-glazed plate glass sitting on plywood sheathed bulkheads decorated with wood lattice.



*West elevation*

The west elevation appears to be the party wall contemplated by the 1923 agreement between the Stough-Cornelius Company and James and Clifford Smith. The blank wall is composed of plain brick laid in common bond. The wall is topped with a three-part stepped parapet featuring a simple corbelled brick cap constructed with a course of stretchers topped with a course of headers. A simple interior brick flue abuts and rises above the parapet.

Like the west elevation, the east elevation is composed of plain brick laid in common bond, and is topped with a three-part stepped parapet featuring a simple corbelled brick cap constructed with a course of stretchers topped with a course of headers. Two flues are integrated into the parapets. The frontmost flue features a gabled cap. The front third of the elevation is pierced by two half-round window openings with corbelled sills. Each opening is highlighted by a half-round course of rowlock bricks. The frontmost opening contains a five-light radially divided sash. The second window contains an air conditioner and is shielded by a metal canopy.



*East elevation*



*Detail of east elevation semi-circular windows*



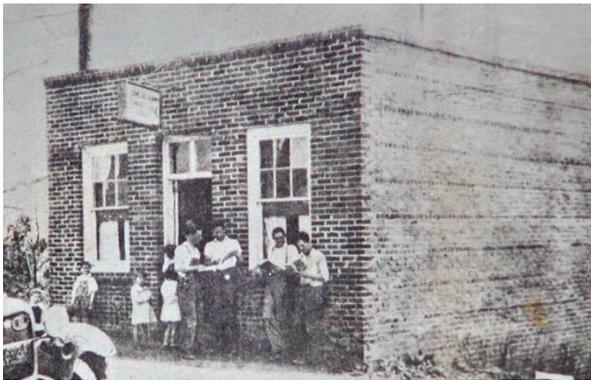
*Rear elevation*

The rear elevation is five bays wide featuring three segmental-arched window openings now infilled with plywood. The fenestration of the windows remains, and the plywood is not on a character defining elevation. The window openings feature corbelled sills and brick lintels composed of two courses of stretchers. The door openings on the rear elevation are also topped with segmental-arches, and now contain replacement doors. The doorway on the eastern section of the rear elevation is taller and originally features a segmental-arched transom, now containing an air conditioner. The doors exit onto a simple wooden porch. A ground-level arched doorway on the west side of the rear elevation contains a horizontal-board door and provides access to the basement. The east portion of the building has no basement, but does include a small arched doorway for crawlspace access adjacent to the east elevation.

On the rear elevation the separate construction of the two portions of the building is evidenced by the color of the brick and finish of the mortar. A parapet rises from the wall that separates the two sections of the building, and is visible from the rear.



*Rear elevation*



*Catawba Avenue once featured several vernacular one-story brick commercial buildings of similar construct to the Stough-Cornelius/Potts Barber Shop Building, including the first Cornelius Public Library, where town business was transacted by the Town Clerk (left; circa 1930) and Puckett's Grocery, later the town's second public library (right; circa 1950), both buildings located to the immediate east of the Stough-Cornelius/Potts Barber Shop Building. Neither building remains. (photos: Jack Conard Jr.)*

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