

## Industrial Buildings in Charlotte's Uptown



The historic industrial buildings located in Charlotte's Uptown are largely the remnants of a period of the unprecedented industrial growth that occurred throughout the city beginning in the late nineteenth century and continuing until after World War Two. These buildings are generally limited to this time period because the nature of the Uptown shifted dramatically after the war. Following a trend that began early in the twentieth century, heavy industry and warehouses moved away from the center city. The emergence of trucking encouraged this move away from the once critical rail lines that bisect each of the city's four wards. Many existing uptown factories and warehouses continued to operate late into the twentieth century, however new construction concentrated on the building of office and government buildings.

Most of the surviving industrial buildings in the Uptown date from the first half of the twentieth century. In 1900, Charlotte was home to only fifty-seven industrial plants. By 1910, that number was up to 108. As of 1930, there were 157 industrial facilities in the city.<sup>[1]</sup> In 1934, citing population, industrial, and financial statistics, Charlotte described itself as the center of a "rapidly developing section, the richest trading territory in the South." Despite the fact that much of the city's industrial development after 1900 occurred in the city's outlying neighborhoods such as Dilworth and North Charlotte, a significant number of historic industrial buildings in the Uptown area have survived.

## Textile Mills

North Carolina's first cotton mill was built near Lincolnton in 1813, and by 1840, there were twenty-five mills in the state, thirteen of which were located in the Piedmont region.<sup>[2]</sup> Despite the gains between 1813 and 1840, such economic and commercial influences were slow to affect the agrarian south and most ante-bellum industry was confined to New England. As of 1873, there were only thirty-three mills in North Carolina, most manufacturing yarn to be woven in Northern mills, but by the 1880s, investors began discovering the South's post-war availability of inexpensive labor, land, and raw materials. These resources created the foundation for the turn-of-the-century industrialization in the South, North Carolina's Piedmont, and in Mecklenburg County. The success of Southern mill ventures was apparent by 1906, when one observer noted, "The traveler through some parts of North Carolina is seldom out of sight or hearing of a cotton mill. The tall chimneys rise beside the railroad in nearly every town."<sup>[3]</sup>

Location was the key to Mecklenburg County's industrial development. Locally grown cotton and the availability of water as a power source made the Piedmont region of North Carolina, in which Mecklenburg County is situated, well suited to the development of mills.<sup>[4]</sup> By 1906, one quarter of the textile mills in the United States were located in North Carolina, mostly in the "central or west-central sections" where mills were the "thickest."<sup>[5]</sup> Charlotte's advantage was intensified by its transportation connections which included the intersection of two important trade and migration routes as well as five major rail lines as of 1873.



The Charlotte Cotton Mill, 1880

The first successful cotton mill in Charlotte was built in 1880 by R.M. and D.W. Oates. Named the Charlotte Cotton Mill, it housed 6,240 spindles and employed seventy people, most of them women. The mill itself was constructed in the style of the most up-to-date New England

mills.<sup>[6]</sup> Although only part of the Charlotte Cotton Mill exists today, it marks the start of Charlotte's textile revolution. By 1902, just twenty-two years after the establishment of the city's first successful cotton mill, three hundred mills had been built within one hundred miles of Charlotte, making this area home to more than one-half of the looms and spindles in the entire South.<sup>[7]</sup>

The most prominent and influential textile mill developer in the city and state was D. A. Tompkins. Tompkins, a South Carolinian, was educated at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York. After two years of employment with the Bethlehem (Pennsylvania) Iron Works, he began his thirty-one-year career in Charlotte as a sales representative of Westinghouse Engine Company, based in Pittsburgh. In 1883, he left Westinghouse to establish the D.A. Tompkins Company which specialized in designing and setting up mills.<sup>[8]</sup>

A classic "New South" entrepreneur, Tompkins wrote and spoke widely, encouraging industrialization, and helping establish textile and chemical engineering colleges in Raleigh and Clemson.<sup>[9]</sup> At the time, the National Association of Manufacturers called him "the foremost citizen of the South."<sup>[10]</sup> Another writer referred to him as the "best authority upon cotton manufacturing in the South."<sup>[11]</sup> Tompkins' entrepreneurial zest flows in an address made to the Southern Industrial League in Atlanta. He reasoned that because producing cotton makes money, manufacturing it into products would make even more money. Tompkins went on to say, "If we utilize the resources we now have, and put to work the idle labor now in every undeveloped section of the South, we may supply from cotton-growing states the cloth for the vast markets in different parts of the world."<sup>[12]</sup> Over the course of his career, he pioneered the development of cottonseed oil as a profitable product while his company constructed over one hundred mills, plus fertilizer works, electric light plants, ginneries, and over two hundred cotton oil plants.<sup>[13]</sup>



**Early 20th-century photograph of the Alpha Mill village west of the mill, now demolished**



**Remnants of the village to the east of the mill**

**The surviving mill in the Uptown reflect state and regional trends, which were based on the recommendations of Tompkins and another New South industrialist, Stewart Cramer. These men and the mill designers they employed were often following the standards set forth by New England machinery manufacturers and insurance mutuels. The insurance companies had developed criteria for “slow burning construction.” This meant that mills were brick, with walls not less that one and one-half brick (13”) wide on the top level that increased in width by one-half a brick for each of the floors below.<sup>[20]</sup> An elevated water tank to supply sprinklers was to be at least fifteen feet above the highest part of the roof and have a capacity of no less than 10,000 gallons.<sup>[21]</sup> This structure was usually located in the mill’s tower. Brick firewalls were prescribed to separate the main mill from the other main components: the picker room, the belt tower that housed the belts**

connecting the engine to the line shafts on each floor, and the stair or elevator tower.<sup>[22]</sup> Tompkins recommended 16" x 12" floor joists and three layers of flooring, including a layer of asbestos.<sup>[23]</sup>



Ada Cotton Mill, 1889

Architectural elaboration was usually reserved for the mill's tower and at the cornice or around the windows. The uses of brick corbelling and arched window openings were popular decorative touches. Occasionally, designs utilized quoins or stucco. The tower most often incorporated Italianate details and cresting or a finial at the roof peak.<sup>[24]</sup> D.A. Tompkins felt that the design was "not very attractive from an architectural standpoint," but was justified by increased safety and reduced insurance rates.<sup>[25]</sup>

In 1889, the D.A. Tompkins Company established two of the surviving mills in the center city : the Alpha, and the Ada. A portion of the Ada (MK 2219) is located adjacent to I-277, on Seaboard Street. It is abandoned and in deteriorating condition, but retains many of its Italianate details such as its tower with a low-pitched pyramidal roof. The Alpha is located on 12 Street. It has a brick structure with a decorative tower and segmental arch windows.

## Factories and Industries



The economic activity stimulated by the textile mills generated capital that enabled commercial and industrial diversification in towns across the state. In addition, the strong national economy of the early 1900s fostered growth across the country. In 1945, the Charlotte Chamber of Commerce reported there were as many as 243 non-textile industrial plants in the county producing products valued at \$50,000,000 per year.<sup>[29]</sup> In particular, service industries, such as the trucking and banking industries, benefited from the strength of Charlotte's economy. Thus, when Charlotte's textile industry began to decline in the 1930s, the city already had a well-laid foundation for post-World War II economic prosperity that was not based on textiles.

Supplies, products, and storage for the textile mills themselves were also common. The 1925 City Directory indicates two card clothing manufacturers, eight chemical producers, one fire extinguisher company, eight machinery manufacturers, four mill suppliers, and three cotton warehouses. Other concerns, such as the John B. Ross Bag Warehouse (c. 1905) at the corner of Johnson Street and Seaboard Street stored wrapping materials.<sup>[30]</sup> The building, which was once part of larger complex, is a one-story, brick structure with three segmental arch loading bay openings. A lower, one-story wing is attached to the east side of the building. The property originally included an angled platform adjoining the railroad tracks that are still immediately in front of the building. The Ross Warehouse is an important and relatively rare example of the smaller sort of warehouse facility from the early twentieth century.

With a myriad of railroad spurs entering the area, a cluster of industrial operations located in the blocks created by Smith, and Johnson streets. In the early twentieth century, a lumberyard was in the area. Also near-by was the John B. Ross Bag Warehouse, mentioned above, as well as the demolished N.C. Cotton Oil Company. Located at 10 and Smith streets, near the site of the NC Cotton Oil Company, is the Interstate Mill, a flour and roller mill. The complex dates from ca. 1900 and consists of several buildings, including a five-story brick building and prominent, concrete grain elevators visible from I-277. Next to Interstate Mills, and directly adjacent to the Southern Railroad tracks is People's Ice and Coal plant, which dates from ca. 1905. Just across the street from the Interstate Mills, and nearly under I-277 is D.A. Tompkins' Ada textile mill. This area is only one of many groupings of industry. Other concentrations can be found on South Cedar, West Morehead Street, South Boulevard, South Tryon, and South Mint/South Graham streets in the southwest quadrant of the city. The Piedmont and Northern and two branches of the Southern Railroad framed these areas.

Many of the mills and factories along South Cedar Street have been demolished, although survivors include a variety of 1920s warehouses and small industrial buildings. None of the buildings were textile manufacturers, but the Armature Winding Company and the Southern Spindle and Flyer Company produced textile equipment. Armature was founded in 1907 and moved to a new facility in 1915 before moving to this site in 1925. The company manufactured electric motors, transformers for Duke Power, transformer cooling fans, carbon brushes for GE, and a variety of other electrical products. The company merged with Power Products Manufacturing Company in 1975, and that company still operates in this facility. Adjacent to the Piedmont and Northern Railroad, and the planned community of McNinchville, local architect Fred L. Bonfoey, designed the Armature Winding Company's buildings.<sup>[31]</sup>

The complex's primary building is a one-story brick and steel structure with a low-pitch gable roof. The large windows are multi-pane with metal frames. The building also has exposed beams. The second building, originally a warehouse for silk and cotton products, was also constructed in 1924. This building is brick and has a raised monitor roof with clerestory windows. The original large, multi-light windows have

been replaced with much smaller units on one side, and a storefront has been added on one side.

Southern Spindle and Flyer produced spindles and rollers for textile mills. The company's circa 1928 building is five-bays wide on its front facade, but extends almost the full depth of the lot (roughly 200 feet). All of the decorative treatment is reserved for the facade, which has a decoratively capped parapet with small steps at the center. Beneath the parapet is a cornice supported by brackets. The central entry has sidelights and transom beneath a shed canopy supported by decorative brackets. Multi-light windows flank the entry. The front portion of the building housed an office. The remainder of the building was the machine shop.

The two buildings at the Queen City Foundry are the only South Cedar Street buildings not constructed from brick. The foundry began operations at this location in 1928 and remained here until at least 1985. Although the current complex dates from after 1946, likely around 1950, the buildings represent the continued importance of industry to Charlotte's economy. The larger building, the foundry, has a double monitor roof, metal frame windows, and is clad in metal. The interior features the exposed metal structure. The smaller building is a simple, gable-roof building sheathed in metal. By the late 1990s, the buildings had been rehabilitated to house offices for various professionals, including architects and interior designers. This property retains a good level of integrity and is significant as an example of a small foundry. The larger, Charlotte Pipe Foundry on Clarkson Street may retain older buildings, but these are nearly encased by late twentieth century construction, making Queen City Foundry the more intact example of this type.

Even food became a major business in the Queen City during the 1920s and 1930s. By 1935, there were eight soft drink bottlers: Big Boy, Coca-cola, Dr. Pepper, Pepsi, Cheerwine, Gary, Nehi, and Orange Crush. This number rose to thirteen by 1945. Two of these plants, Coca-cola and Nehi were surveyed during this project. Other "junk" food was produced in Charlotte in 1935 by three ice cream factories and one potato chip manufacturer (none of these plants are believed to still stand). On a more wholesome note, there were three flour or roller mills in Charlotte in that same year.<sup>[37]</sup> One of these, Interstate Mills, dating from 1917 still survives.



**Interstate Mills**

**Not only was Charlotte home to mills and textile-related industries, the city had begun to develop as a distribution center by the 1920s. By that time, over 700 traveling salesmen were making Charlotte their home base. Products were transferred in and out of the city via the railroads and the burgeoning trucking industry.<sup>[32]</sup> In 1927 the Chamber of Commerce publication, “Charlotte, N.C.: Diversified Industrial and Commercial Center,” promoted this new feature in the city’s economy, noting, “The location of Charlotte and its railway and highway connections conspire to make it a distribution center of considerable importance.” This publication went on to report that 350 national businesses had made Charlotte “an integral part of their distribution systems.”<sup>[33]</sup> By 1945, the Chamber was able to report that 350 national businesses made Charlotte “an integral part of their distribution systems.”<sup>[34]</sup> The reasons behind this success included the city’s geographic location, its access to diverse industries throughout the Piedmont including agriculture and furniture, and the city’s status as a center of the Carolinas’ textile industry.<sup>[35]</sup>**

## Warehouses



With a growing industrial economy that relied heavily on the movement of products in and out of the city, warehousing became an industry unto itself in the early twentieth century. Charlotte, warehouses run the gamut in terms of construction from the one-story brick building of W.C. Newell Company warehouse (MK 2208), which is built around 1926 using the “slow-burn” model to the very large, Great A&P Tea Company warehouse (MK 2256) with its concrete frame and brick infill dating to 1928. An earlier example is the c.1915 McNeil Paper Company Warehouse (MK 1859) located downtown at 305 E. 8 Street. Oriented to railroad tracks that are now disused, this warehouse stored paper so that orders could be promptly filled and loaded onto boxcars. The building is a one-story, five-bay, brick structure with a stepped parapet and segmental arch windows and doors. The windows have been filled with glass block. The most elaborate warehouse remaining in the city is located along the same rail corridor as the McNeil building. The Phillip Carey Building (MK 45) was built around 1907. The Carey company, the first tenant, made roofing materials that were stored here. The building has an unusual degree of architectural interest for a warehouse. The building is two-stories with extensive brick corbelling, round-head and segmental arched windows and a stepped parapet.



Great A&P Tea Company



W.C. Newell Company warehouse

**The Great A&P Tea Company warehouse displays the concrete frame with brick curtain wall construction method that became popular by the late 1920s. Constructed of reinforced concrete with brick curtain walls, the interior of the building features reinforced concrete girders, floor slabs. Similar construction techniques were employed in the Virginia Paper Company Building, which features large mushroom columns, so named for their wide, disc-like capital that flared smoothly from the round column supporting concrete slab floors. The slabs, girders and columns of these buildings were designed to work together to allow for wide open storage spaces without numerous posts. When combined with metal frame windows and metal stairs, the construction method also made a virtually fire-proof building. The popularity of this technology is indicated in the 1951 Sanborn map which shows that fourteen buildings in Charlotte (including warehouses, schools, automobile showrooms, and even apartment buildings) were built in this manner.**

**Typical of the industrial buildings along West Morehead Street is the 1927 Union Storage and Warehouse Company. The brick building has a cast concrete base and molded band between the second and**

third floors. The parapet is capped in cast concrete. Below the cornice are recessed panels set in the brickwork. The windows have metal frames. The facade of the building is six bays wide with the two corner bays projecting slightly to create a corner tower effect. The top of each “tower” has a stepped parapet and decorative cast concrete panel with garlands. The entry in one of the towers has a classical cast concrete surround with heavy cornice supported by small consoles.

As Charlotte grew, and as it became easier for people to travel there, the city became a hub for the distribution and storage of motion pictures. The city’s transportation links attracted movie distributors who needed a regional shipping, storage, and screening base. The various studios grouped their facilities together on South Church Street to compete for business with local theater owners who periodically visited the city to preview movies and make booking decisions. Fox opened its facility in 1921, followed by Goldwyn and Paramount in 1923 and Columbia and United Artists in 1926. Chamber of Commerce officials reported in 1929 that all national film companies maintained facilities in Charlotte, transacting an annual aggregate volume of business valued at roughly \$2,250,000.<sup>[36]</sup> None of the film exchange buildings appear to be extant.

The surviving historically significant warehouses in the Uptown were all built oriented towards the railroad lines. By the time that warehouses relying solely on truck transportation were being built, industry and warehouse had begun to move away from the center city.

## Architectural Trends

Most of Charlotte’s late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century industrial buildings utilized standard forms that were derived from the earlier Italianate-influenced mill designs. Early examples such as the Ada Cotton Mill have clear Italianate references. Some later buildings, such as the Armature Winding complex (dating to 1925) have the simple forms of the earlier buildings, but lack any stylistic detail. Another group of buildings including the Standard Oil of New Jersey (c.1916) have clear classical references. Finally, a few buildings from the Depression era and immediately thereafter demonstrate a new, simpler mode of industrial architecture that was the precursor to the Modernist designs of the postwar era. One example of this sort of building is the Union Storage and Warehouse Company (c.1938), which is a simple, two-story, brick building ornamented only with cast stone-capped brick pilasters,

cast stone coping, and metal frame windows. Building technology was also diversifying rapidly between the 1910s and the 1940s. Construction methods moved away from the load-bearing masonry with timber trusses and posts, like that found at the Ada Cotton Mill, to more modern methods such as steel and reinforced concrete. The latter was especially important in warehouse buildings, but can also be observed in the mid-1920s additions at the Standard Oil complex. Yet, traditional construction methods persisted well into the 1930s. The architectural significance of the city's warehouses lies in their fire resistive features, such as building materials of brick or concrete, and in their designs that maximized interior space.

With more modern building techniques came changes in style. By the 1920 modernity was a factor in industrial design. But whereas office buildings may have reflected Art Deco or Art Modern, it was more likely that industrial buildings would be constructed in a spartan minimalist style that helped demonstrate the newest building material and techniques. The best example of this trend among the Uptown's industrial buildings is the Great A&P Tea Company building.

### **Significance**

Surviving industrial buildings in the Uptown are significant for their representation of the broad patterns of the city's commercial growth, but they are also important reminders of the particular history of the center city. These surviving buildings demonstrate that historically the center city was a dynamic place with mills, factories, and warehouses in close proximity to the city's office buildings and residential neighborhoods. This proximity itself vividly illustrates patterns of growth and development of the city before the prevalence of the automobile and the modern highways. These buildings can also serve as a reminder of the city's past industrial success. A success that ushered in much of present industry, such as banking, that now dominates the Uptown landscape.



**Virginia Paper Company with late  
20th-century high rises in the  
background**

**PLEASE NOTE**

**Much of the previous contextual essay was adapted from "Industry, Transportation, and Education: The New South Development of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County," an essay prepared by Sarah A. Woodard and Sherry Joines Wyatt, for David E. Gall, AIA, Architect in September 2001. The essay was a product of a thematic survey sponsored jointly by the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission and the North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office. The purpose of the 2001 survey was to identify properties throughout Mecklenburg County that were potentially eligible to be listed on the National Register of Historic Places.**

**[Click Here To View the Report From the 2001 Survey](#)**

**[Click Here To View the Properties That Were Found Eligible for the National Register](#)**

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**[5] Huffman, section 8, 1.**

**[6] Charlotte Chamber of Commerce, "Charlotte, N.C.: Distribution Center in War and Peace, c.1945."**

**[8]Charlotte Chamber, "Charlotte, N.C., c.1945."**

**[10]Charlotte City Directory, 1925 and Sanborn Insurance Map, Charlotte (New York: Sanborn Insurance Company, 1911).**

**[14]Craig Fleming, "Survey and Research Report on the Armature Winding Company, 1998," unpublished student report for Dr. Dan L. Morrill, UNC-Charlotte.**

**[15]Hanchett, "Growth of Charlotte."**

**[16]Charlotte Chamber of Commerce, "Charlotte, NC., 1927."**

**[17]Charlotte Chamber of Commerce, "Charlotte, NC, c.1945."**

**[18]Charlotte Chamber of Commerce, "Charlotte, NC, 1927."**

**[19]Hanchett, "Growth of Charlotte."**

**[20]Chamber of Commerce, "Charlotte, NC, 1927."**

**[21]Mattson, Alexander, and Associates, Inc., "Crane Company Building National Register Nomination, 2001," North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office.**

**[22]"Charlotte One of the Big Trucking Centers in the Nation," 28 February 1950, I and photocopy of article in vertical file, "Trucking," at Spangler-Robinson Local History Room, Charlotte-Meklenburg Public Library.**

**[23]Charlotte City Directory, 1945 and Charlotte Sanborn Map, 1946.**

**[24]Hanchett, *Sorting Out*, 194.**

**[25]Charlotte City Directory, 1935 and 1945 .**

**[26]Charlotte City Directory, 1934.**

**[27]** Ibid; and Charlotte Chamber of Commerce, “Charlotte, NC, 1927” and Charlotte Chamber of Commerce, “Charlotte, NC: Distribution Center in War and Peace, 1945.”

**[28]** Please see Appendix C for complete list of schools surveyed during this project.

**[29]** LeGette Blythe and Charles Raven Brockmann, *Hornet’s Nest: The Story of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County* (Charlotte: McNally, 1961), 220, 222.

**[30]** Keane, 3-4.

**[31]** Ibid., and North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI), *The History of Education in North Carolina* (Raleigh: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 1994), 9.

**[34]** D.A. Tompkins quoted in Winston, 157.

**[35]** Keane, 4-5.

**[36]** R.D.W. Connor and Clarence Hamilton Poe, *Life and Speeches of Charles Brantley Aycock* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1912), 218-219.

**[37]** This controversy is discussed in detail in James Leloudis, “A More Certain Means of Grace’: Pedagogy, Self, and Society in North Carolina, 1880-1920” (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1989), Chapter 4, “Voices of Dissent,” 179-235.

**[38]** Ibid.

**[39]** Blythe Brockmann, 220, 222.

**[40]** NCDPI, 12; and Kelly Lally, *The Historic Architecture of Wake County, North Carolina* (Raleigh: Wake County Government, 1994), 214.

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**[10]** Charlotte Chamber of Commerce, “Charlotte, NC: Diversified Industrial and Commercial Center” (Charlotte: privately published, 1927).

**[14]** Ibid.

[15] Holland Thompson, *From the Cotton Field to the Cotton Mill: A Study of the Industrial Transformation in North Carolina* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1906), 74.

[16] Hanchett, "Charlotte's Textile Heritage."

[17] Thompson, 76

[24] D. A. Tompkins, address quoted in George Tayloe Winston, *A Builder of the New South, Being the Story of the Life and Works of Daniel Augustus Tompkins* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1920), 127.

[25] Hanchett, "The Growth of Charlotte."

[27] Glass, 42.

[28] *Ibid.*

[29] Tompkins, 35.

[30] *Ibid.*

[31] *Ibid* and Glass, 42.

[34] Tompkins, 163.

[35] *Ibid.*, 160.

[36] *Ibid.*, 163.

[37] *Ibid.*, 164.

[38] Glass, 38.

[39] *Ibid.*

[40] Tompkins, 167-168.

[41] *Ibid.*

<sup>[42]</sup>Dan L. Morrill, "A Survey of Cotton Mills in Charlotte and Mecklenburg County." Report prepared for the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, 1997. The report is available at [www.cmhpf.org](http://www.cmhpf.org). Also, "Mill Town: Charlotte's Cotton Mill Past Lives in Remaining Buildings," *Charlotte Observer*, 25 May 1986, 1, 9-10.