

Historic Retail Buildings In Center City Charlotte



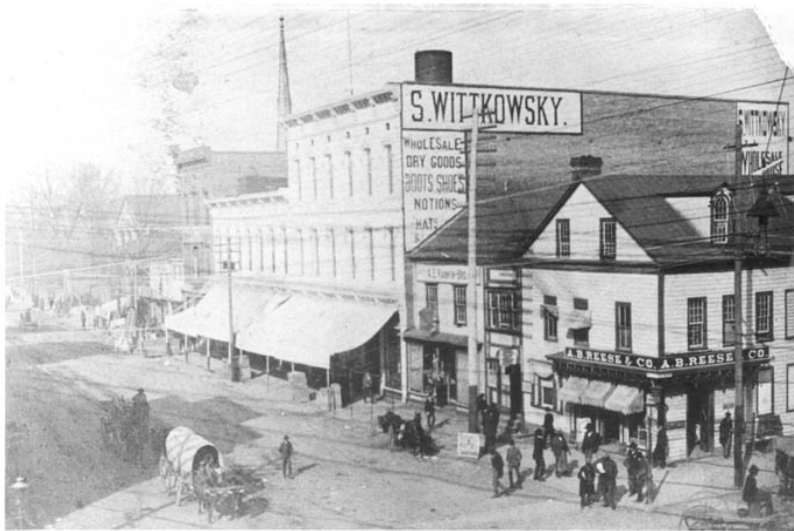
Charlotte began to become a significant regional retail and wholesale mercantile center with the arrival of the first railroad in October 1852. In anticipation of that event several local businessmen purchased what was known as the “Davidson Corner” on the southwestern corner of the intersection of Trade Street and Tryon Street, locally known as the “Square,” and divided the land into five separate store lots on which they erected a series of brick mercantile buildings, probably Charlotte’s first, collectively called “Granite Range” or “Granite Row.”^[1] William Treloar, an Englishman who moved to Charlotte in the 1850s, purchased the structures soon after they were built and named them “Treloar’s Hall.”^[2]



This 1875 drawing of the Charlotte Square shows the scale of retail structures. Granite Row are the buildings on the right just beyond the intersection.

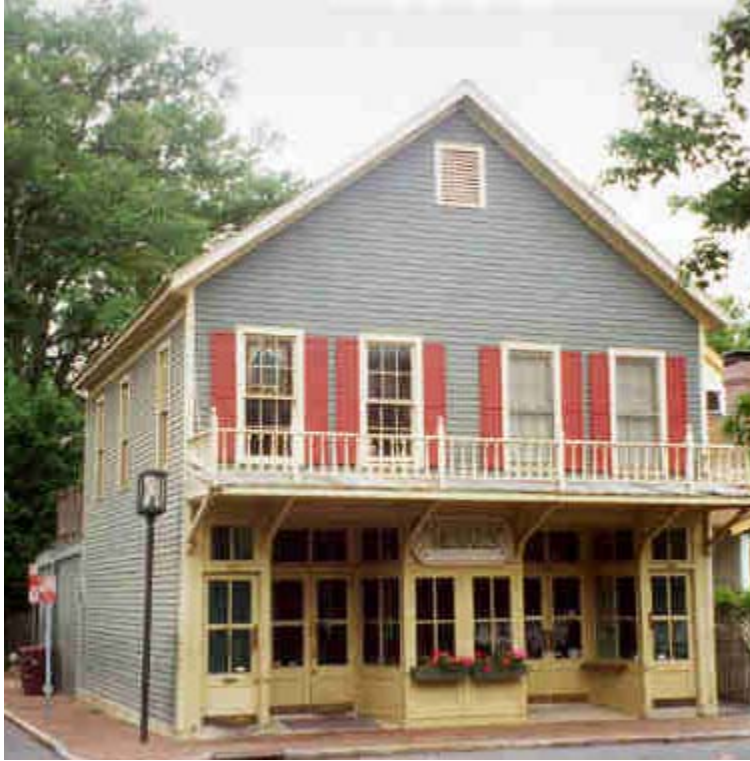
The 1850s also witnessed the arrival in Charlotte of several enterprising Jews who drew upon their experience in the mercantile trade and established retail and wholesale outlets here. Among them were Samuel Wittkowsky and Jacob Rintels. In 1862, these two men joined forces to establish Wittkowsky and Rintels, a wholesale mercantile firm on South Mint Street that would eventually become one of the leading businesses of its type in the two Carolinas. By the 1870s, Rintels and Wittkowsky were among the wealthiest men in town; and in 1874 they expanded into the retail trade in a building they leased on West Trade Street. The local newspaper began publishing advertisements that described the "new and desirable goods" that the firm received by railroad from New York City. Rintels died at the age of 40 on June 20, 1876; but Wittkowsky, who lived until February 13, 1911, remained an important civic figure for many years.^[3] In 1883, no doubt spurred by the increasing need for housing, Wittkowsky and other local investors established

the Mechanics Perpetual Building and Loan Association, later the Home Federal Savings and Loan Association.^[4] Wittkowsky also headed the Masonic Temple Association in Charlotte in the late 1860s and early 1870s and led the successful fundraising campaign to establish a local lodge.^[5]



This is the "Osborne Corner." Note the name "S. Wittkowsky" on the store building on West Trade Street.

Many small shopkeepers operated in Charlotte in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; and they too took advantage of the substantial growth that was occurring here due mainly to the emergence of Charlotte and its environs as a major textile industrial area in the Piedmont. As with William Treloar, Jacob Rintels, and Samuel Wittkowsky, many moved here from the North. John W. Sheppard arrived in 1896 from New Jersey and established a drugstore on the "Osborne Corner" or the northwestern corner of the Square.^[6] Annie Augusta "Gussie" Newcomb and her sister-law, Susie A. Newcomb, who had come with their husbands to Charlotte from White Plains, N.Y. in 1879, purchased Miss Gray's Millinery Store at 24 W. Trade St. Gussie and Susie catered to the wealthier ladies of the community. Gussie would travel to New York City to acquire the finest material and ribbons. The making of the elaborate hats of that era, resplendent with ornamental trimming, was done in the store by several milliners. To say that your hat came from Newcomb's was "enough said." The store was a resounding success.^[7]



The Crowell-Berryhill Store is the oldest commercial standing in Center City Charlotte

Grocery stores occupied an important place in Charlotte's retail trade. The oldest commercial building surviving in Center City Charlotte is the Crowell-Berryhill Store at 401 West Ninth Street. A designated historic landmark, the store opened in 1897. The owner of longest duration was Earnest Wiley Berryhill (1865-1931) who was known as a gracious and considerate man, who ran a charge and delivery store. Berryhill sometimes gave free baskets of food to customers who could not pay. Working with him in the store for many years was Berryhill's longtime black employee, Amzie Roseman, who was a familiar figure to those who traded at the store and lived in Fourth Ward.^[8]

There were also restaurants and saloons in Center City Charlotte in the late 1800s and early 1900s. In April 1902, J. Luther Snyder, a Virginia native, arrived from Atlanta, where he had worked for the Coca-Cola Company for two years. He settled here to establish the first Coca-Cola bottling plant in the Carolinas. "When I came to Charlotte, the city had 17,000 people, eighteen saloons, two breweries . . . and I had a terrible time selling soft drinks with that kind of competition," Snyder remembered.^[9] According to some residents, Charlotte was "awash in booze." A.M.E. Zion Bishop Henry Lomax insisted in 1881 that "Charlotte was haunted with more drunken men, in proportion of the population, than he had ever seen and he had traveled in every State of the

Union except three.”^[10] On Christmas Day 1880 groups of young men roamed through town like participants in a “carnival of intemperance,” commented another observer.^[11] Retailer David Ovens, who arrived in 1903, noted that the only decent restaurant in town was “The Gem” on South Tryon Street. No restaurants or saloons of that era survive.^[12]



This ornate Belk Facade was destroyed in the 1990s.

Charlotte’s retail business expanded significantly between 1890 and 1910 to keep pace with the burgeoning population of Charlotte and the surrounding countryside. The population of the town increased from 18,091 in 1900 to 34,010 in 1910, partly due to annexation. William Henry Belk (1862-1952) opened a dry goods store in Monroe, N.C. in 1888 and persuaded his brother, Dr. John M. Belk, to join him in the business. The Belk Brothers successful formula was to sell clearly marked, quality merchandise at reasonable prices, for cash only, treat all customers with respect irrespective of their financial status, and to institute a “no-questions-asked” return policy. Belk Brothers established their first store in Charlotte on September 25, 1895. On October 6,

1910, the Belks opened a new three-story store on East Trade Street. It had an impressive, highly ornamental front façade. Live music was provided by Richardson's Orchestra for the gala occasion, which was held from eight to eleven in the evening.^[13] The building was demolished in the 1990s to make way for the present headquarters of Bank of America.



Joseph Efir as a young man

Joseph Efir

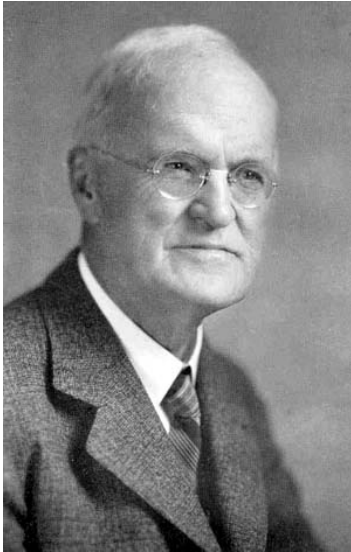


The building with the Belk sign on the side was originally the Efir's Department Store. All of these building were demolished to make way for the Bank of America Building.

The second major dry goods store to open in the early 1900s in Center City Charlotte was Efir's Department Store. Beginning operations as the "Racket Store" and soon thereafter as the "Bee Hive" on the corner of East Trade Street and North College Street, the store was bought by Anson County native Hugh Efir and two of his brothers, Joseph and Edmund, in 1907; and the name was changed to Efir's Department Store. Joseph Efir took charge of the Charlotte store after Hugh died in 1909 and oversaw the creation of a chain of stores that eventually included over 50 retail establishments across the Carolinas and Virginia, all directed from Charlotte.

Plans were announced in 1922 plans for constructing a brand new half million dollar Efir's Department Store on the much-sought-after 100 block of North Tryon Street. The site gave Efir's an advantage over its main rival, Belk Department Stores. A bronze plaque was placed on the front of the building in memory of Hugh Efir. The new flagship store was designed by locally renowned architect Louis Asbury and was built on the site of the old Charlotte Hotel next to City Hall. It was a state of the art store, five stories high with over 100,000 square feet of floor space including a bargain basement and a spacious dining room on the top floor. Perhaps the most impressive feature of the building for its time, however, were the escalators which made Efir's the only store south of Philadelphia which could boast of such a convenience, and

gave this Charlotte department store temporary bragging rights over even the renowned Macy's of New York. The building too was sacrificed in the 1990s so the present headquarters of Bank of America could be erected.^[14]



J. B. Ivey



Ivey's Department Store Building in the 1970s.

The third major department store that appeared in Center City Charlotte in the early 1900s was Ivey's. Joseph Benjamin Ivey, the son of a Methodist preacher, opened a small store room in rented space near the Square on February 18, 1900. He, like William Henry Belk and Hugh and Joseph Efird, came to Charlotte at the turn of the century to take advantage of the local booming cotton mill economy. Ivey's first day's sales totaled \$33.18. "We had to study carefully and push the lines that the other merchants did not make a specialty," the enterprising merchant explained many years later. "For instance, at one time brass buttons were quite the rage. I was careful to keep in a supply all of the time while the other merchants were not noticing and allowed their stock to get low." Among Ivey's early employees was David Ovens, a Canadian who joined J. B. Ivey & Company in 1904. "I would probably

have been satisfied with a moderate business that would make something over a living," said Ivey, "but Mr. Ovens was ambitious to make J. B. Ivey & Company a big store and the business grew rapidly under our combined efforts." A devout Methodist, Ivey insisted that the curtains be drawn in his store windows on Sundays, so that the pedestrians would not be tempted to consider matters of *this* world on the Lord's day. Happily, the Ivey's Department Building survives. This elegant structure at Fifth and North Tryon Streets was designed by architect William H. Peeps and opened as the new home of J. B. Ivey & Company in 1924. A native of London, England, Peeps came to Charlotte in 1905 from Grand Rapids, Michigan, where he had been a furniture designer. Peeps lived here and thrived as an architect until his death in 1950. Peeps would serve as president of the North Carolina Chapter of the American Institute of Architects.^[15] Ivey's was renovated and enlarged in 1939. On May 4, 1990, the company was purchased by Dillard's, another department store chain. The Ivey's Department Store Building has since been converted into condominiums.^[16]



William H. Peeps



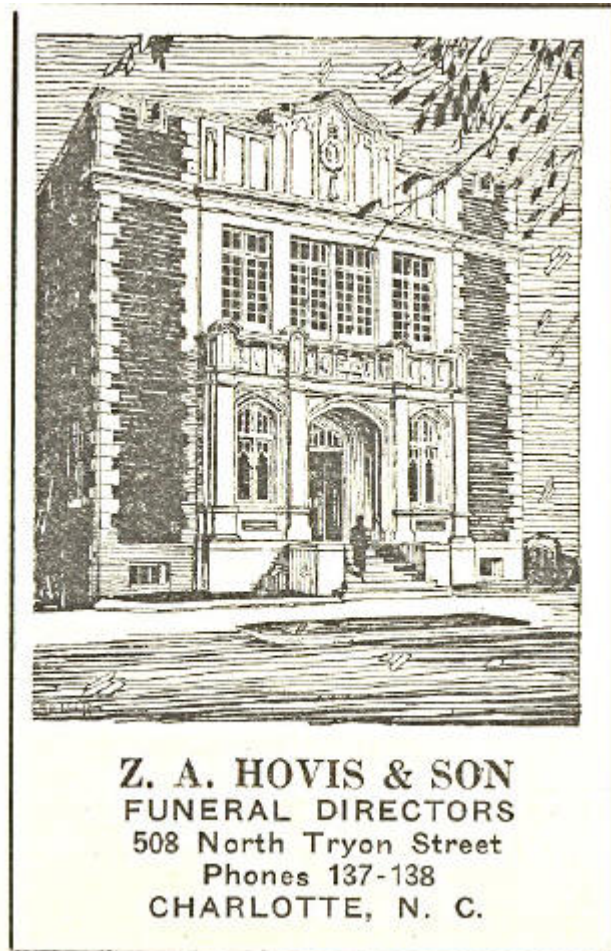
Latta Arcade

Peeps was also the architect of the Latta Arcade and the Ratcliffe Florist Shop on South Tryon Street and the Hovis Funeral Home on North Tryon Street – all constructed in the first three decades of the twentieth century. Opening in 1914 and inspired by the Grand Central Palace Exhibition Building in London, the two-story Latta Arcade housed the offices of the Charlotte Consolidated Construction Company, the developers of Dilworth, plus a range of other offices and retail outlets.^[17]

In 1917, Louis G. Ratcliffe, a native of Henrico County, Virginia, opened a florist shop next to the Latta Arcade. After military service during World War I, he returned to Charlotte and was a civic leader in this community for more than 50 years. He died in 1961. So successful was Ratcliffe at supplying flowers for weddings, funerals and other special occasions that he decided to erect his own building in 1929. The Ratcliffe Florist Shop, which has recently been moved a short distance and incorporated into a large mixed use project, is an almost whimsical expression of Mediterranean motifs.^[18]



Ratcliffe's Florist Shop Building



Hovis Funeral Home Building

Another pre-World War Two commercial building designed by Peeps that survives on Tryon Street is the Hovis Funeral Home Building. Erected in the 1920s, this eclectic Classical style building served for many years as the site of the Z. A. Hovis & Sons Funeral Home. As with Peeps's other buildings in Center City Charlotte, the Hovis Funeral Home draws upon traditional patterns

of design, including arches and quoining. Also, the building underscores the role of Tryon St. as the principal upscale commercial street in Charlotte in the first half of the twentieth century.^[19]

Peeps was not the only notable local architect who fashioned commercial buildings in Center City Charlotte in the first half of the twentieth century. Louis H. Asbury (1877-1975) was the son of S. J. and Martha Moody Asbury of Charlotte. In addition to being one of the first carriers of the *Charlotte Observer*, the young Asbury assisted his father, who was a builder of houses in Charlotte in the 1890s. He subsequently matriculated at Trinity College, now Duke University, and graduated from that institution in 1900. Having acquired his professional training at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Asbury returned to Charlotte and established his architectural practice in 1908. In the succeeding decades, Louis H. Asbury assumed a position of prominence and leadership in the architectural profession. He was the first North Carolina member of the American Institute of Architects and played a leading role in organizing the North Carolina Chapter of the A.I.A.^[20]



Oscar J. Thies Automobile Sales and Service Building



Montaldo's Building

Louis Asbury was responsible for two noteworthy commercial structures that still stand on North Tryon Street. Montaldo's, a retail outlet for expensive women's attire and accessories, opened in the 1920s and was expanded in 1950s. Asbury designed the original or northern part of the building; and his son, Louis Asbury, Jr., was the architect for the southern half of the store.^[21] Louis Asbury was the architect of the Oscar J. Thies Automotive Sales and Service Building at 500 North Tryon Street. By the 1920s, automobiles were becoming increasingly available for purchase by the middle class; and businessmen such as Thies sought to take advantage of this expanding

market. The Thies Building was completed in 1922 and was occupied by the Roamer (automobile) Sales Agency. Hipp Chevrolet rented the building in 1923, and in 1925, Carolina Oldsmobile occupied the building and remained there through 1930.^[22]



This Cottage Style service station stood on North Graham Street until 2004. It was demolished as part of a road improvement project.

The demands of the automobile increasingly shaped the built environment of Center City Charlotte as the twentieth century progressed. Additional automotive dealerships appeared, including the Thomas Cadillac Company and the Frye Chevrolet Company (1934) at 416 West Fifth Street.^[23] Service stations also came into existence. The only pre-World War Two example that survives in Center City Charlotte is the former Standard Oil Company Service Station at 1010 North Tryon Street.^[24] Even more profoundly, the automobile forced retailers to provide ample parking. The most graphic example of the transformation that began to occur in Uptown retailing in the decade immediately following World War Two was the decision of Sears Roebuck and Company to erect a complex of buildings and a large parking lot on North Tryon Street and North College Street. On May 5, 1949, Mayor Herbert H. Baxter joined civic leaders, including Charlotte Chamber of Commerce president J. Norman Pease, and Sears officials at opening day, ribbon-cutting ceremonies for a large Sears Roebuck and Co. retail store and parking lot on North Tryon St.^[25]



The Sears Store on S. Tryon Street had no parking lot and was designed for pedestrian traffic.

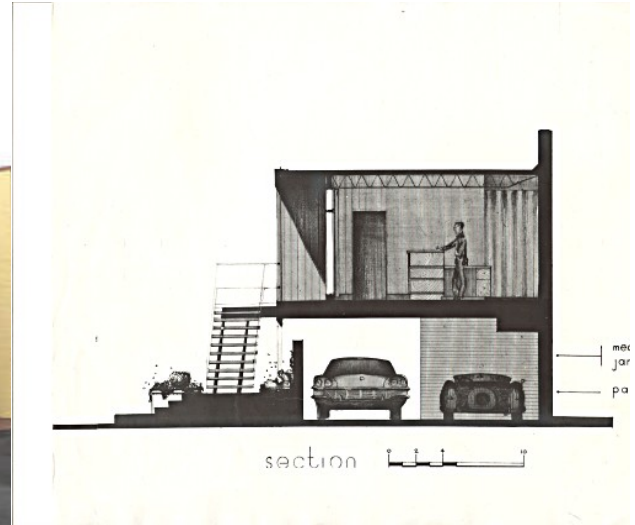


The new Sears Store on N. Tryon Street followed an essential suburban model.

South Tryon Street was also dramatically impacted by the advent of the automobile. Charlotte architect J. Norman Pease, Jr. , who had been educated in the Modernist tradition at North Carolina State and Auburn University, designed an award-winning building for the Home Finance Company in 1958. The structure exhibits many of the best characteristics of Modernism. Devoid of applied ornamentation and exploiting contemporary materials, the Home Finance Building has expansive windows to allow large amounts of light to enter the second floor offices. The stairway and hallway are on the outside of the building, thereby allowing a more efficient use of interior space. Originally, the lower floor was used for customer parking. The concept was that customers could park on the lower level rather than needing a large area paved outside the building. Unfortunately, the bottom floor has since been enclosed for additional office space and a parking lot has been built, thereby depriving the Home Finance Company Building of some of its integrity.²⁶



Home Finance Company Building



Automobiles were to park beneath the building

In summary, the retail stores of Center City Charlotte have continuously evolved in response to changes in the marketplace. New forms of transportation have been especially significant in this regard. Before 1852 customers had to walk or ride in buggies or wagons to get from one place to another. The coming of the railroad in 1852, horse-drawn streetcars in 1888, and the opening of electric streetcar or trolley service in 1891, gradually transformed Charlotte's built environment and gradually gave rise to the appearance of suburbs. The arrival of the automobile in the first decade of the twentieth century and the enormous expansion of their numbers following World War One gave even greater momentum to this process. Although totally understandable, these powerful inducements for change have meant that very few retail buildings endure in Center City Charlotte. Indeed, the Center City is now entering a new era as more residential units are being built, thereby giving rise to more pedestrian traffic. In some sense history does repeat itself.



This 1955 photograph at the rear of the Johnston Building demonstrates how the automobile was transforming the built environment of Center City Charlotte.

^[1] Dr. William H. Huffman, “Survey and Research Report on the Garibaldi and Bruns Building,” June 5, 1985.

^[2] Dr. Dan L. Morrill, “Survey and Research Report on the William Treloar House,” July 3, 1984.

^[13] Dr. Dan L. Morrill, “Survey and Research Report on the McManaway House,” June 1, 1977. Jacob Rintels House stood on West Trade St. but was moved to Queens Road in Myers Park in 1916 by its new owner, Dr. Charles McManaway. The house still stands at 1700 Queens Road.

^[14] Dr. Richard L. Mattson, “Survey and Research Report on the Home Federal Savings and Loan Building,” November 25, 2001.

^[15] Dr. Dan L. Morrill and Jack O. Boyte, “Survey and Research Report on the Masonic Temple,” n.d.

^[16] Dr. Dan L. Morrill and Nora M. Black, “Survey and Research Report on the John W. Sheppard House,” January 29, 1992. The John W. Sheppard House still stands at 601 North Poplar Street.

^[17] Dr. Dan L. Morrill, “Survey and Research Report on the Berryhill House,” n.d. Gussie Newcomb’s House still stands at 324 West Ninth Street.

^[18] Dr. Dan L. Morrill, “Survey and Research Report on the Crowell-Berryhill Store,” July 7, 1982.

^[19] <http://www.cmhpf.org/essays/cocacola.html>

^[100] <http://danandmary.com/hisofcharlottechap8new.htm>

^[111] <http://danandmary.com/hisofcharlottechap8new.htm>

^[122] <http://landmarkscommission.org/educationovens.htm>

^[133] Dr. Dan L. Morrill, “Survey and Research Report on the Belk Façade,” April 3, 1985.

^[144] Christina A. Wright, “Survey and Research Report on the Withers Efird House,” June 30, 2000.

^[155] Frances P. Alexander and Dr. Richard L. Mattson, “Survey and Research Report on the Latta Arcade,” July 20, 1994. Hereinafter cited as Latta Arcade.

^[166] Dr. Dan L. Morrill, “Route VII. Uptown Walking Tour Part 2” (landmarkscommission.org), n.d.

^[177] Latta Arcade.

^[18] Dr. Dan L. Morrill, “Route VII. Uptown Walking Tour Part 2” (landmarkscommission.org), n.d.

^[19] Dr. Dan L. Morrill and Stewart Gray, “Survey of Historic Buildings in Center City Charlotte,” November 2004.

^[20] Dr. Dan L. Morrill, “Survey and Research Report on the Advent Christian Church,” November 2, 1987.

^[21] Ibid. Mecklenburg Iron Works Drawings, 1945-1968 (UNCC Manuscript Collection 190 in the J. Murray Atkins Library).

^[22] Dr. Dan L. Morrill and Nora M. Black, “Survey and Research Report on the Oscar J. Thies Automotive Sales and Service Building,” July 24, 1992.

^[23] <http://cmhpf.org/Frye%20Chevrolet.htm>.

^[24] <http://cmhpf.org/uptownsurveystandardoil.htm>.

^[25] <http://cmhpf.org/uptownsurveyhistorysears.htm>

26. <http://landmarkscommission.org/uptownsurveyhomefinance.htm>