

Crescent Heights

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Crescent Heights is a small, triangularly-shaped neighborhood on the near east side of Charlotte, straddling the first blocks of present-day Randolph Road. The neighborhood is wedged between Myers Park to the west, the "Rosemont" section of the Elizabeth neighborhood to the northeast, and prestigious Eastover to the south; but it is older than any of its neighbors. The distinctive semi-circular streets of Crescent Heights were laid out between 1907 and 1909 and are of historic interest, as they constitute Charlotte's first experiment with a planned curvilinear street system in a residential district.¹

The neighborhood incorporates two separate developments, which were known as Colonial Heights and Crescent Heights at their inceptions. Both were solidly middle-class, and eventually made up largely of Bungalow style houses. Several hospitals exist at the edges of the neighborhood, and their growth has contributed to the demolition, either directly or indirectly, of many of the oldest residences in Crescent Heights. The only remaining [Bungalow style](#) house on this thoroughfare is the [Ratcliffe-Otterbourg House](#) at 2100 Randolph Road, now owned and occupied by the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Preservation Foundation. Despite these changes, gently curving Circle, Crescent and Laurel avenues remain lined with early cottages, and look much as they did fifty years ago. Tree-shaded Colonial Park remains the neighborhood's focal point.



Ratcliffe-Otterbourg House

The land that is now Crescent Heights is believed to be one of Charlotte's earliest areas of white settlement. Among the first white settlers in Mecklenburg County was Thomas Spratt, who erected his home close to what is now the intersection of Randolph Road and Caswell Road. ² A monument placed in 1926 by the Colonial Dames of North Carolina on the eastern edge of Randolph Road reads:

Site of the first court held in Mecklenburg County, February 26, 1763. Home of Thomas W. Spratt, first person to cross the Yadkin River with wheels. Here was born his daughter Anne Spratt, first white child born between the Catawba and the Yadkin.

The intersection of Caswell and Randolph is certainly very old. Gravestones dating from the 1770s were excavated nearby when Mercy Hospital constructed its nursing school in the early 1950's. ³ Nineteenth century maps indicate that what is now Fourth Street was originally the major easterly route out of Charlotte. It forked at what is now Caswell Road, with one branch heading south along Caswell and Providence roads toward Providence Presbyterian Church and South Carolina, and the other branch following present-day Caswell Road and Seventh Street toward the village of Monroe, North Carolina. ⁴

By the 1890's, the area that is now Vail, Chase, Durham, Van Ness, Laurel, Crescent, Circle, Alberto, Cook, Willoughby, and parts of Randolph and Colonial streets was the site of the Vail Dairy Farm. Thomas L. Vail's house stood near where Charlotte View office tower is now situated at Randolph Road and Caswell Road. ⁵ His creamery was located approximately on the site of Charlotte Orthopaedic Hospital, or a few hundred feet north on Caswell from Randolph. Mrs. John C. Kilgo, Jr., and Miss Constance Biberstein, who grew up on once-posh Elizabeth Avenue nearby in the 1900's and 1910's, remember the dairy as an important part of Charlotte's routine business activities at the turn of the century. ⁶

In 1895, near the end of his life, Vail gave the farm to his daughters Cora Lee Vail and Florence Ida Vail Johnston.⁷ At that time Charlotte was going through one of its greatest boom periods. Textile prosperity, rapid population growth, and the [new streetcar system](#) were transforming farms at the edge of town into suburbs. The Vail daughters closed the dairy and began selling their father's many acres of grazing lands, scattered throughout the eastern part of the township, to suburban developers.⁸

In 1907 the Suburban Realty Company purchased the old farmhouse and creamery along with twenty-five surrounding acres.⁹ Suburban was headed by F. C. Abbott, who was among Charlotte's most active real estate men.¹⁰ Abbott had earlier laid out one of the city's first suburbs, Piedmont Park (now part of the Elizabeth neighborhood) along the Central Avenue streetcar line; and he was well aware of the impact trolley connections could have upon the success of residential developments. Vail saw that his farm was two blocks from the terminus of the Elizabeth Avenue streetcar line, which ended its runs from downtown at the Hawthorne Lane entrance to [Elizabeth College](#) (now the site of Presbyterian Hospital). This distance was probably too long a walk to make the Vail property desirable for the very wealthy, but Abbott most likely realized that the streetcars came close enough to attract middle-class commuters.

On March 18, 1907, Abbott filed a plat creating the first two blocks of what are now Randolph Road, Colonial Avenue, Chase Street, and Vail Avenue. Vail Avenue not only took its name from the former dairy, but its route purportedly followed a path that the cows had once walked from field to barn.¹¹ Abbott called the entire small development "Colonial Heights."¹² At almost the same time that Abbott began work on Colonial Heights, the Elizabeth Realty Company paid the Vail sisters \$38,600 for sixty-eight acres immediately south of Suburban's tract.¹³ In 1909 this land was platted for additional middle-class house lots under the name "Crescent Heights."¹⁴ The name was apt because the main avenues were laid out in half-circles off Providence Road. Circle Avenue, Crescent Avenue, and the blocks of Laurel Avenue just off Providence Road formed concentric semi-circles. Tangential avenues connected the curves with the straight streets of Colonial Heights. Short radial streets cut across the semi-circles. Several were named after officers and stockholders of Elizabeth Realty: Alberto in honor of Dr. Charles Alberto Bland, Chase for Chase Brenizer, and Willoughby for Willoughby E. Chambers.¹⁵ The centerpiece of the subdivision was Colonial Park, a low-lying half-moon of land bounded by Circle Avenue and Providence Road.

The street design of Crescent Heights was likely the work of local engineer Holmes Blair who drew up the plat map. The curving avenues gave the subdivision a distinctive identity that has continued to differentiate it from surrounding developments. The rigid geometry of the streets, however, did not show the

sophisticated appreciation for natural topography that Boston planner John Nolen would later bring to the design of adjacent Myers Park.

By the mid 1910's, houses began to appear in the neighborhood.¹⁶ The first blocks of Vail, Colonial and what is now Randolph developed first, apparently due to their proximity to the trolley line. Another handful of early houses was to be found on Circle Avenue facing the park. Notable among the area's early residents was Franklin Gordon, a major Charlotte architect responsible for some of Myers Park's finest houses of the 1910's and 1920's. His own two-story Colonial Revival frame house on Vail Avenue was razed in 1982 to provide parking for Charlotte Orthopaedic Hospital. Landscape architect Earle Sumner Draper also lived on Vail Avenue during the first years of his work on the Myers Park neighborhood.¹⁷

Most early Crescent Heights residents were clerks, small businessmen and traveling salesmen- the backbone of a city built on distribution. The first residents of the 200 block of Colonial Avenue were typical of the whole neighborhood. They included three salesmen, a manager of Eckard's Cut Rate Store, general manager of Carolina Standard Gas Products, manager of the Independence Trust Company, and the owner of the Myers Hardware and Sporting Goods store. All moved into their new residences between 1921 and 1925. Surprisingly, although Suburban Realty and Elizabeth Realty laid out all the streets in the Crescent Heights neighborhood, they did not handle all of the lot sales. The exception was on the south side of Laurel Avenue.¹⁸ Originally called part of Vail Avenue, it evidently ran right along the developers' property line. In 1926 developer E.C. Griffith's Eastover Company purchased some forty-three acres that Cora Vail still held south of the street and renamed the road Laurel Avenue. The odd-numbered lots on Laurel were sold as part of Griffith's elegant Eastover suburb. This did not have much influence on the type of people who bought lots, on the south side of Laurel though, for houses on both sides of the street are similar middle-class cottages, and are quite unlike the large two-story residences found in Eastover proper.

The most noteworthy structure in Crescent Heights dates from this period, when the neighborhood was beginning to fill up. In 1928 Charlotte architect C. C. Hook completed plans for a neighborhood fire station to serve Crescent Heights, Myers Park, Eastover, and Elizabeth, [Charlotte Fire Station No. 6](#), 249 South Laurel Avenue. Technically, this magnificent structure, designed by architect C. C. Hook, is in Crescent Heights. However, the lots on the south side of Laurel Ave. were sold as part of the Eastover neighborhood, which had just been annexed by the City of Charlotte.¹⁹



Fire Station #6

The building at 249 South Laurel was Charlotte's fourth suburban station, following the Dilworth Station (1909) at 1212 South Boulevard, the Belmont facility (1910's) at 816 Louise Avenue, and the Hook-designed Wesley Heights firehouse (1928) on Tuckaseegee Road.²⁰ Hook's plans featured a quaint stone facade that today continues to blend the Laurel Avenue station in with its residential surroundings. By the early 1930's most lots in the neighborhood had been sold.

A few vacant lots continued to have houses constructed on them into the 1950's, usually with the same class of compact cottages that had been erected in earlier decades. As Myers Park and adjacent Eastover emerged as the city's prime upper class residential areas, Crescent Heights benefited by association, never suffering the sort of disinvestment and decline that plagued some of Charlotte's other early neighborhoods. The changes that did occur in Crescent Heights were the result of other forces. The first alteration of the neighborhood's street plan had come in 1912. With the consent of the Vail sisters, Elizabeth Realty had reduced the size of Colonial Park to its present dimensions.²¹ The park had originally occupied the full half-circle bounded by Circle Avenue and Providence Road. The 1912 revision had seen Chase, Alberto, and Phil Aull streets extended through part of the park to create more house lots for sale. Another change over the years had been the extension of several streets beyond the bounds of the original neighborhood, opening up what had been a self-contained enclave. These included the extension of what is now Laurel Avenue into the Elizabeth neighborhood, and the opening of Cherokee off Laurel at Providence Road to form the main entrance to the fashionable Eastover neighborhood.

The major changes began in the 1950's, when Randolph Road was opened leading south from the neighborhood. The street had originally been a minor avenue in the center of Crescent Heights and was considered a tangential portion of Crescent Avenue known as Crescent Avenue Extension. Around 1959 the city rebuilt the street as part of a major new four-lane thoroughfare connecting the burgeoning post-World War II suburbs in the Cotswold area with the center city.²² Randolph Road became a busy radial artery, and it split the old streetcar suburb. The split widened in the 1960's, 70's and 80's, as office strip-zoning along Randolph encouraged the demolition of nearly all the street's old residences. By the mid-1980's Randolph Road in Crescent Heights had become a dense strip of new doctors' offices and banks, capped by the ten-story Charlotte View tower at Randolph and Caswell, surrounded by a half-block of parking lots where houses once stood.

The fact that the new offices on Randolph were predominantly medical reflected another change in the neighborhood. Mercy Hospital, which relocated in 1916 from the center city to the edge of the neighborhood, near the corner of Vail and Caswell streets, began to expand in the 1960's and 1970's.²³ A new wing and a large parking deck replaced houses along Vail. Across Vail at the Caswell corner, a new hospital was founded. Medi-Centers of America built a large brick nursing home on the site in the early 1970's. In 1976 the building became the home of Charlotte Orthopaedic Hospital.²⁴ A new operating wing was added to the building in 1976, and in the early 1980's the firm cleared most of the block bounded by Vail, Caswell, Providence, and Colonial avenues for parking.

Crescent Heights is now within walking distance of two of Charlotte's three general hospitals, and most of its smaller clinics. Pressure to demolish houses for parking, doctor's offices, and support facilities is intense. The neighborhood's historic residential character is all but gone along Randolph Road, the northern blocks of Vail Avenue, and the cross streets between them. Along Vail Avenue south of Van Ness Drive, and in the curving blocks of Crescent, Circle and Laurel avenues between Randolph Road and Providence Road, however, streets are still lined with bungalows. This section, the heart of Crescent Heights, continues to be a desirable middle-class neighborhood.

Notes

¹ Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office: Map Book 230, page 20; Map Book 230, page 24.

² LeGette Blythe and Charles R. Brockman, *Hornets' Nest: the Story of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County* (Charlotte: McNally of Charlotte, 1961), p. 161.

³ The stones were moved to Settlers Cemetery in the center city, where they may still be seen.

⁴ Butler and Spratt, "Map of Charlotte Township, Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, From Recent Surveys ... 1892." Copies are in the collections of the History Department of the Mint Museum, Charlotte, and the City of Charlotte Historic Districts Commission. "Plat of a portion of the Dotger Estate, Charlotte, N.C August 29, 1913" on file at Lawyers Title Company, 301 South McDowell Street, Charlotte, labels present-day Caswell Road as "Monroe Avenue." Both of these maps also show Seventh Street running into town, but the naming and the street pattern hint that Caswell Road is older than Seventh. The area's oldest roads generally fork coming out of town, as Fourth Street does at Caswell Road: Monroe Road forks into Caswell and Seventh coming into town.

⁵ Butler and Spratt map.

⁶ Mrs. John C. Kilgo and Miss Constance Biberstein, interview with Thomas W. Hanchett and Janette Thomas Greenwood, Charlotte, November 1981.

⁷ Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office: Deed Book 104, p. 549. Thomas Vail died January, 1908. Mecklenburg County Clerk's Office: will book P, p.71.

⁸ See grantor books in Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office.

⁹ Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office: Deed Book 214, p. 419; Map Book 230, p. 20.

¹⁰ Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office: record of corporations book 1, pp. 546 & 571; book 5, p. 527. Abbott's founding partners were J.O. Thomas and William F. Harding. Architect C.C. Hook became a major Suburban stockholder, and in the 1920's prominent Durham businessman George W. Watts also had an interest in the company. For an idea of Abbott's role in the real estate development of early twentieth century Charlotte read his memoir *Fifty Years in Charlotte Real Estate, 1897-1947* (Charlotte: privately published, 1947?).

¹¹ U.S.G.S. Topographic Map 1:64,000, Charlotte Quadrant (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Interior, United States Geological Survey, surveyed 1905, published 1907).

¹² When planner John Nolen drew the streets of adjacent Myers Park in 1911, he extended Colonial Avenue through to the Queens Road, and Abbott evidently became the subdeveloper for the resulting middle-class block, platted as "Colonial Heights #2", part of Myers Park. Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office: Map Book 230, p. 222.

¹³ Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office: Deed Book 218, p. 419.

¹⁴ Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office: Map Book 230, p. 24.

¹⁵ Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office: Record of Corporations Book 2, p. 154, Book 5, p. 84. Bland later became Mayor of Charlotte and Brenizer served as state senator from Mecklenburg County.

¹⁶ Information on individual structures in Crescent Heights was developed by research assistant Janette Thomas Greenwood using the Charlotte city directory collection at the Carolina Room of the Charlotte Public Library.

¹⁷ Earle Sumner Draper, interview with Thomas W. Hanchett at Vero Beach, Florida, August, 1982.

¹⁸ Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office: Book 620, p. 3. Citation courtesy of Joseph Schuchman. See also "A Subdivision Plat of Eastover...February, 1927," in the files of the E.C. Griffith Company, Charlotte.

¹⁹ A plaque inside the station gives construction information, which is echoed in an article in the *Charlotte Observer*, April 9, 1929, when the Laurel and Tuckaseegee stations opened. The city's 1928 boundary expansion is recorded on a base map on file at the Charlotte City Engineer's Office.

²⁰ Jane McKinnon, "[Old Dilworth Fire Station, Fire Station Number Two: Survey and Research Report](#)," (Charlotte: Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, 1979). Janette Thomas Greenwood, "Historic Sketch of the Fourth Ward Fire Station...", 1982, unpublished essay on file with the Charlotte Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission.

²¹ Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office: Map Book 230, p. 143. The original deed to Elizabeth Realty had specified that the park could be reduced to two acres: Deed Book 218, p. 419.

²² The 1959 date is based on examination of city directories. The opening of Randolph was part of a loose program of new arterials that began with Independence Boulevard in the late 1940s.

²³ Charles M. Strong, *History of Mecklenburg County Medicine* (Charlotte: News Printing House, 1929), pp. 96-98. Mercy's first home had been downtown, opening in 1906.

²⁴ Jean Crawford, Director of Nursing, telephone interview with Thomas W. Hanchett, December, 1983.