

Charlotte and Its Neighborhoods (1986)

By Thomas W. Hanchett for Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Properties Commission

SECTION III

Streetcar Suburbs

Historical context

Streetcars turned U.S. cities inside-out. Back when nearly everyone walked where they were going, the most desirable residential addresses were as close as possible – the shortest walk – to the heart of town. In the late 1880s and the 1890s, the new technology of the electric streetcar became practical. Suddenly, it became relatively easy to commute from downtown to the suburban rim. Land developers took excited notice. They laid out subdivisions of new streets, which blossomed into middle- and upper-income neighborhoods.

This section examines Charlotte's main suburbs from the streetcar era. Beginning with Dilworth in the 1890s and continuing through Myers Park and parts of what is now Plaza Midwood in the 1910s and 1920s, a ring of neighborhoods surrounded the previously existing town (today these are considered in-city neighborhoods, located just outside the Interstate 277 loop). They shared some tendencies:

- They were mostly middle- and upper-income. A streetcar ride cost a nickel each way – a substantial expense that was out of reach for blue-collar households.

- Each area that is considered one neighborhood today was initially made up of several small “subdivisions.” The landowner/developer filed a “plat map” at the county Register of Deeds Office showing the streets and lots that he intended to lay out and sell. Once a plat map was filed, other people – carpenters, contractors, individual future residents – built the actual houses one-by-one. (There is much more architectural variety in streetcar suburbs than in later neighborhoods where a single developer might lay out streets and build rows of houses.) Once a plat map was filed, typically most of the houses would be built within a decade or so. This manuscript pays much attention to plat maps – a key to understanding the age and the architectural look of an area.
- Single-family dwellings in the fashionable new architectural styles, especially Bungalow and Colonial Revival, dominated the streetscape. Often the busiest avenues held the biggest houses; people in that day liked showing off their wealth.
- Every streetcar-era neighborhood mixed in rental duplexes and four-unit quadraplexes, plus occasional small multi-unit apartment houses. Not until the arrival of zoning in Charlotte in 1947 would single-family-only areas become a norm.
- Beginning in the 1890s, developers wrote restrictive covenants into the deeds to the new houselots which set minimum construction costs. Starting in 1901, they added covenants that barred Black people. That led to a great increase in racial and economic segregation, which Tom Hanchett explored in his book *Sorting Out the New South City: Race, Class and Urban Development in Charlotte, 1875-1975*, second edition (UNC Press, 2020). Even though the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 1948 that racial restrictions were unenforceable, the ripple effects continue to impact our society into the present day.

direction 170 feet to the point of beginning; being Lots 6 and 7 in an easterly suburb of the City of Charlotte known as "Chatham Estates", as shown by plat thereof recorded in Book 230, pages 206 and 207, of the Office of the Register of Deeds for Mecklenburg County; together with the right to the use in common with adjacent property owners of the 15 foot alleyway and wide turning space therein in the rear of the property hereby conveyed. The foregoing property is conveyed subject to the following covenants, conditions and restrictions which shall be covenants running with the land; (1) The property shall be used for residential purposes only and shall be occupied and owned by people of the white race only. (2) No residence erected on the property shall be nearer the street on which it fronts than 30 feet, or nearer any side street than 15 feet, or nearer the side property line of any lot adjoining the lot or lots on which it is built than 10 feet. (3) Outbuildings shall not be nearer the front of any lot than 75 feet, nor nearer any side street than thirty (30) feet. (4) No sign boards of any description shall be displayed on the property with the exception of signs "For Rent" or "For Sale", which signs shall not exceed 2 x 3 feet in size. (5) Any residence erected on said property shall cost not less than \$3,500.00 (6) Any residence built

Deed for a 1920s house on The Plaza in the Chatham Estate subdivision, now part of the Plaza Midwood neighborhood. Can you find a) mention of the plat map? b) racial deed restriction? c) minimum house cost restriction?