

SECTION IV

Black Neighborhoods

African American residential patterns: historical context

When this architectural inventory was researched, scholars were just at the start of efforts to understand Black residential patterns in Southern cities following the Civil War. They knew about Black settlements that had existed at the edges of towns during slavery times, and assumed that these had become the nuclei for the Black districts seen in the mid 20th century. Hanchett kept his eyes open for evidence of that in his research. But the earliest Black neighborhoods he found did not follow that pattern.

- Biddleville sprang up in the late nineteenth century near the new Biddle Institute (now Johnson C. Smith University) which started after the Civil War in 1867.
- Cherry apparently had the pre-Civil War “slave quarter” of the Myers Plantation as its nucleus. But plat maps showed it was laid out by the Myers family long after the War as a place where Black workers could buy lots and build homes. W.R. Myers was a Republican, adherent of the political party that elected Abraham Lincoln. Cherry seems to have been one of several actions by the Myers family – including donation of the land for Biddle Institute – aimed at giving Black people opportunities for upward mobility.

By the way, Cherry was platted in 1892 – twenty years before the adjacent upscale suburb of Myers Park. It is sometimes assumed that Cherry was built as the servants' neighborhood for Myers Park, but chronology proves otherwise.

- Washington Heights was launched in the 1910s at about the same time that the famed Black educator and proponent of economic uplift Booker T. Washington visited Charlotte. A white development company led the project, with involvement of Black leaders. It stood at the end of the West Trade Street streetcar line, not far from J.C.S.U. It seems to have been conceived as a Black middle-class streetcar suburb – the only known Black streetcar suburb documented in the U.S.

These were the three best-preserved Black neighborhoods that existed within Charlotte in the 1980s.

Other residential areas -- Brooklyn in the Second Ward, Greenville located out Statesville Avenue, and the streets near Alexander Street School in First Ward -- had been almost entirely wiped out by Urban Renewal and highway construction, and thus were not covered in this survey project.

Smaller outlying Black clusters in what had once been farmland -- such as Grier Heights east of town, the Little Hope Church community on Marsh Road, or the Lawrence Orr community off North Sharon Amity Road -- had seen extensive changes over the years and were not included in the survey.

A wide swath of Black areas in the 1980s on the west side of town -- along West Boulevard, Wilkinson Boulevard, Freedom Drive and vicinity -- had begun as white districts mostly in the 1930s – 1950s, then transitioned to Black during the 1960s – 1970s as Urban Renewal destroyed in-town neighborhoods.