

Wilmore Neighborhood Proposed Local Historic District Designation

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1. Introduction to Wilmore Neighborhood

Wilmore Neighborhood, to the southwest of downtown Charlotte, is approximately 335 acres in size with over 600 homes and several municipal and commercial buildings. To the west of the Dilworth community, Wilmore mirrors the single family bungalows and wide curvilinear streets and sidewalks that can be seen throughout Dilworth. Its buildings are a diverse collection of styles and construction methods, though the majority exhibit characteristics typical of bungalows- low overhanging rooflines, Craftsman features, and front porches that extend the width of the elevation. In addition to single family homes, Wilmore has duplexes, apartment complexes, municipal buildings and churches, and commercial and industrial buildings. The commercial and industrial corridor can be found for the most part on South Mint Street, West Summit Avenue, and South Tryon Street.

The physical boundaries of Wilmore neighborhood are defined by West Summit Ave to the north, South Tryon Street to the east, Tremont Avenue to the south and I-77 to the west (Historic District boundaries will be distinguished below from the physical boundaries). The topography is generally flat, with a slight descent in elevation to the west of the neighborhood. There are two public parks in Wilmore- Abbott Park (5.7 acres) which borders Spruce Street and I-77 to the southwest, and Wilmore Neighborhood Park (1 acre) which borders I-77 to the northwest. Neither of the parks is considered within the boundaries of the proposed Wilmore Historic District due to location and age outside the period of significance. The only known archaeological resource within Wilmore is the Rudisill gold mine, established in 1825 and located along Summit Ave, the north border of Wilmore neighborhood.

2. History of Wilmore Neighborhood

Southwest of center city Charlotte, North Carolina lies an area of 335 acres that makes up the Wilmore neighborhood. Interstate 77 and South Tryon Street bound the neighborhood to the west and east, with Summit and Tremont Avenues acting as the northern and southern borders. The area currently known as the Wilmore neighborhood was once pasture land and the pre-20th century settlement of Blandville, which occupied the corner of Summit Avenue and South Tryon Street.

The Charlotte Observer columnist Doug Smith wrote in 1979, “for the first 50 years of gold mining in the United States, North Carolina was the leading gold-producing state and Charlotte

was the [hub] of the most productive gold mining area.”ⁱ Doug Smith was pointing out that previous to the California Gold Rush in 1848, there was no greater gold producing location in the United States than Charlotte. Key among Charlotte’s gold mines stood the Rudisill Mine, with major parts located in Wilmore. Rudisill Mine in 1831 was Mecklenburg County’s largest commercial enterprise producing an annual sum of \$500,000.ⁱⁱ It was the Rudisill mine and its continuous productivity that sustained Mecklenburg County through the Depression of 1836-37 and once again during the Civil War while many other southern mines were closing. The area had become so prominent that in 1875, among the numerous outlying settlements lining Charlotte, Blandville was the only one to make it into the city directory.ⁱⁱⁱ Blandville was an African-American village located just outside the northeastern portion of the Wilmore pasture fields.

Settlements like Blandville were the home sites of freed African-Americans after the Civil War. While many African-Americans moved north in search of a better life and employment opportunities, others organized in these villages. Regardless of the strength many of these communities had in earlier years, they often lost out to the social elite of Charlotte after time. One of the first villages to be demolished was Blandville upon the purchasing of the Wilmore site in 1906. The initial demolition of Blandville was the first of many city projects over the next 60 years to displace African-Americans.

Aspiring developers moved to Charlotte in the late 19th and early 20th century hoping to capitalize on this success and rapid growth of the region. One such real estate broker, F. C. Abbott, purchased the 335 acres of pastureland above the Rudisill Mine in conjunction with the Southern Realty Company for \$74,000 on March 1st, 1906.^{iv} In honor of the previous owners George E. Wilson, Charles E. Johnson, E. Caldwell Wilson and Anna P. Moore, the Southern Realty Company and F. C. Abbott named the area “Wilmore.” In addition to this property the Southern Realty Company also developed several other neighborhoods in Charlotte like Hill Crest, Colonial Heights, and Elizabeth Heights. The Southern Realty Company and F. C. Abbott designed Wilmore as an extension of the popular Dilworth Neighborhood.^v Dilworth was Charlotte’s first streetcar suburb; it offered a mix of suburban tranquility, modern amenities and close proximity to the city. Its success in Charlotte was due to the mix of new and traditional residential elements introduced and Charlotte’s first recreational public park. Dilworth had a curvilinear street pattern with consistent lot sizes and roads extending outwards to existing city streets.

Wilmore’s interior streets were designed to reflect the curvilinear pattern of Dilworth and major roadways like East Boulevard and Park Avenue were extended from Dilworth to connect

the two adjacent communities. Abbott used the natural topography of the area to create private lots, despite the lack of public recreational spaces. The winding streets worked alongside the traditional rectangular grid to make pockets of development inside of his larger plan. Despite the two neighborhoods' similarities, F. C. Abbott did not design Wilmore to support streetcar transit as Dilworth did due to the massive infrastructure investment required. Abbott's intention was for Wilmore to exhibit the aesthetics of a streetcar suburb and function similar to one while utilizing Dilworth's South Boulevard streetcar line and other modes of transit from the developing Piedmont Park, Wesley Heights and Craighead Park.^{vi} Abbott capitalized on the location of Wilmore immediately adjacent to Dilworth, giving the perception of modern suburban living. With its visual and physical connections to existing developments and Dilworth's streetcar line, Wilmore became a thriving neighborhood.

The success of these modern streetcar communities changed with the resulting segregation that the Home Owner's Loan Corporation (HOLC) created. The congressional agenda was intended to "aid" America's failing mortgage markets prior to World War II. The urban mapping done by the HOLC to standardize credit analysis and mortgage rates in an effort to minimize risk drastically affected Charlotte's neighborhoods, breaking them down into A, B, C or D classifications. In 1937, the Wilmore neighborhood, which was a well-maintained white suburb of one and two-family homes, received a C rating.^{vii} The rating was determined by age of residents, obsolescence and the infiltration of "undesirable" populations, especially African-Americans. A nationwide survey done at the end of the 1930s confirmed that many national banks only offered mortgages to A or B ranked areas.^{viii} It was this HOLC ranking system that started the decline of Wilmore as it slowed and eventually halted new investment or reinvestment in the area.

Wilmore suffered a slow decline into the 1950s and 60s when it underwent the most drastic changes since its initial development. With the HOLC's limitations on investment taking place in the Wilmore neighborhood and the post-World War II mindset around urban sprawl, the once prominent community had deteriorated. Like many streetcar suburbs in the post-World War II era, owners relocated and rented out their old homes to lower income families that could not afford to move away from the city. African-Americans began moving into previously all-white neighborhoods when racially-motivated deed restrictions were outlawed in the 1960s. During the same time period the federal government created the Urban Renewal Administrations Office, which offered funding to cities to encourage redevelopment under the Housing Act of 1949.

Urban redevelopment in Charlotte became a powerful tool for local politicians to clear and redevelop land however they deemed fit for better use.

The first area affected by Urban Renewal redevelopment in Charlotte was the Brooklyn project, an historic African-American community in 3rd ward uptown. Between 1960 and 1967, 1,480 structures in Brooklyn were demolished and an estimated 1,000 families were displaced.^{ix} Not a single building went up to replace those that had been torn down. Many of the families moved to previously all-white working class neighborhoods west and north of downtown, abruptly changing the dynamics of the communities. Wilmore was one of these neighborhoods that experienced such a transformation during the 1960s. As a result of the displacement of low income African-Americans due to the Brooklyn displacement, the already degrading Wilmore neighborhood lost even more of its long-term residents.

As the city of Charlotte had intended with the construction of Independence Boulevard and Interstates 85 and 277 to control growth, Interstate 77 was planned with the intentions of dissecting current “undesirable” areas of the city. Interstate 77 was planned along the outer edge of Wilmore to prevent the expansion and influence of the neighborhood. The current physical boundaries of the neighborhood are a result of the development of I-77.

The period of significance for the Wilmore neighborhood has been determined as 1920-1949, given the direct visual, physical and historic link to other Charlotte streetcar suburbs, like Dilworth neighborhood. The architectural styles of the homes and businesses in Wilmore and its historic context as a streetcar suburb have remained largely in tact despite recent demolition and redevelopment in the area.

3. Statement of Significance

From an historical context, Wilmore neighborhood is significant to the history of Charlotte due to its association as an early to mid century streetcar suburb. In addition to its close proximity to the Dilworth neighborhood and the Southend streetcar line, Wilmore provides a physical record of a pre-WWII Charlotte suburb. Its setting and function as an outlying center city neighborhood has remained largely intact. Single and double family homes still dominate the neighborhood and the commercial element still exists along the South Mint Street corridor.

From an architectural context, the residential buildings in Wilmore have retained many of their original features, despite small changes to siding, windows and doors. The original footprints of the homes have been maintained, although additions can be seen on the rear and side elevations of some of the buildings. Nonetheless, the character of the homes as single and double

family bungalows, cottages and Foursquares is evident from street view. The lot size of the buildings within the proposed Historic District is perhaps the most telling feature of the pre-WWII streetcar suburb. The ¼ acre lots have all been preserved and very few buildings have taken over more than their original lot coverage. The visual association of Wilmore as a streetcar suburb is evident in building architecture and function, footprint, lot size and street pattern.

4. Period of Significance

1920- 1949

The period of significance for the proposed Wilmore Historic District has been determined as 1920-1949, the time period in which Wilmore was a streetcar suburb for middle class families. The buildings that fall within the period of significance are considered contributing features. The exceptions are (1) buildings constructed within that time period that have experienced substantial and irreversible alterations, additions or modifications and (2) buildings constructed outside that time period that are extraordinary examples of style or construction or may be likely to yield information to the prehistory or history of Wilmore.

5. Description of Contributing and Non-Contributing Features

Contributing buildings within the proposed Wilmore Historic District are those that meet the following guidelines:

- a. Buildings within the period of significance, 1920-1949.
- b. Buildings that maintain their original features, such as roofline, windows, doors, porches, siding, etc.
- c. Buildings that maintain their original footprint.
- d. Buildings that maintain their original setting and historic function (residential, municipal, commercial or industrial).
- e. Buildings that have undergone alterations, additions or modifications that-
 - i. Do not significantly alter the character, function or design intent of the building.
 - ii. Are not visible from the street, such as alterations, additions or modifications to the rear or side elevations of the building.
- f. Buildings outside the period of significance that are-
 - i. Extraordinary examples of style or construction method.

- ii. Likely to yield information significant to the prehistory or history of Wilmore.

Non-contributing buildings within the proposed Wilmore Historic District are those that do not meet the guidelines outlined above. In addition, buildings that have one or more of the following properties are considered non-contributing features:

- a. Buildings that have been recently constructed.
- b. Buildings or significant features of a building that have been demolished.
- c. Buildings that have undergone alterations, additions or modifications that irreversibly alter the character, function or design intent of the building.

Percentage of Contributing and Non-Contributing Features

- Total buildings in proposed Wilmore Historic District- 529 buildings
- Total buildings contributing in proposed Wilmore Historic District- 414 buildings
- Total buildings non-contributing in proposed Wilmore Historic District- 115 buildings
- Percentage of buildings contributing in proposed Wilmore Historic District- 78% of buildings
- Percentage of buildings non-contributing in proposed Wilmore Historic District- 22 % of buildings
- Percentage of vacant lots in proposed Wilmore Historic District- 8% of lots

6. Boundary Map

(Please see attached the attached Boundary Maps)

Boundary Description

The proposed Wilmore Historic District is bounded to the north by the southwest side of Summit Avenue, beginning at the southwest corner of Merriman Avenue and Summit Avenue. The boundary then extends southeast across Summit Avenue, excluding South Church Street and Kee Court, to include the rear lots of Southwood Avenue and West Park Avenue. The Historic District is then bounded to the east by the lots that border the South Tryon Street properties on the west side of South Tryon Street, including those on West Park Avenue, West Kingston Avenue, West Boulevard, and Woodcrest Avenue/Wilmore Drive. Both sides of South Tryon Street have been excluded from the boundaries given the high number of vacant lots and non-contributing

properties along the Tryon Street corridor. The new development off Worthington Avenue is excluded from the boundaries, with the exception of those buildings that border Wickford Place to the north and Woodcrest Avenue to the south. The Historic District is bounded to the south by both sides of Woodcrest Avenue/Wilmore Drive and the 1300 block of Spruce Street (with the exception of Abbott Park, which is not included in the boundaries). The Historic District is bounded to the west by Merriman Avenue and continues west along both sides of Merriman Avenue up to Summit Avenue.

Boundary Justification

The proposed Wilmore Historic District is bounded to the north by the southwest side of Summit Avenue. Summit Avenue acts as a secondary entrance road into the neighborhood by way of Merriman Avenue, Wilmore Drive, South Mint Street, and Southwood Avenue. The southwest side of the street contains several contributing and non-contributing commercial and industrial buildings. The northeast side of Summit Avenue contains commercial and industrial buildings that do not contribute to Wilmore and have no physical or visual connection to the neighborhood. The northeast side of Summit Avenue has therefore been excluded from the proposed boundaries.

Wilmore Historic District is bounded to the east by lots that border the South Tryon Street properties on the west side of South Tryon Street, including those on West Park Avenue, West Kingston Avenue, West Boulevard, and Woodcrest Avenue/Wilmore Drive. Both sides of South Tryon Street have been excluded from the eastern boundaries of the proposed Historic District, given that majority of the lots are vacant or contain non-contributing buildings.

Wilmore is bounded to the south by both sides of Woodcrest Avenue/Wilmore Drive as well as the 1300 block of Spruce Street. As mentioned previously, Abbott Park has not been included in the boundaries due to its age outside the period of significance and its location relative to the rest of the proposed Historic District. Wilmore is bounded to the west by both sides of Merriman Avenue up to Summit Avenue.

Streets that have been excluded from the proposed historic district boundaries are Spruce Street and Dunkirk Drive to the west of the neighborhood. The houses on both streets were constructed outside the period of significance, mostly in the early to mid 1950's, and have little architectural connection to the rest of the neighborhood. Abbott Park and Wilmore Neighborhood Park have likewise been excluded due to their age outside the period of significance and their relative location to Spruce Street and Dunkirk Drive. In addition, Worthington Avenue and the

buildings on both sides of the street have been excluded from the proposed boundaries because they are all newly constructed. The exceptions on Worthington Avenue are (1) those buildings that border Wickford Place and (2) those buildings that border Woodcrest Avenue. The east and west sides of South Tryon Street have been excluded from the boundaries because of its minimal visual and physical connection with the Wilmore neighborhood, as well as the large number of vacant lots and non-contributing buildings. Church Street and Kee Court, accessible only from Summit Ave, have been excluded because the buildings are all recently constructed.

The boundaries of the proposed Wilmore Historic District are roughly 300 acres in size, as compared to the 335 acres of land that define the physical boundaries of Wilmore.

7. Inventory of Properties in the Proposed Wilmore Historic District

(Please see attached Building Inventory)

- Photographs for the building inventory are courtesy of Leah Burch, Nathan Minett and Mecklenburg County Real Estate Lookup System, POLARIS.
<http://meckcama.co.mecklenburg.nc.us/relookup/>
- Building dates are courtesy of Mecklenburg County County Real Estate Lookup System, POLARIS.

ⁱ Tompkins, Daniel. "History of Mecklenburg County and the City of Charlotte from 1740 to 1903: Vol. 1" Observer Printing House; Charlotte, 1904

ⁱⁱ Brown, Dr. Henry and Mary Hoffman, "Gold Mining of the Rudisill Lode and The Development of Charlotte, N.C." pg. 22.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hanchett, Thomas. "Sorting out the New South: race, class and urban development in Charlotte, 1875-1975." The University of North Carolina Press, 1998 pg. 42

^{iv} Deed, State of North Carolina Mecklenburg County. Book 202, pages 563-570, March 1st 1906.

^v Abbott, F.C. "Fifty Years in Charlotte Real Estate" Charlotte: 1947, pg. 25.

^{vi} Hanchett, Thomas. "Charlotte and It's Neighborhoods: The Growth of a New South City, 1850-1930." Urban Institute of UNC Charlotte: Charlotte, 10.

^{vii} Hanchett, Thomas. "Sorting out the New South: race, class and urban development in Charlotte, 1875-1975." The University of North Carolina Press, 1998 pg. 230

^{viii} Hanchett, Thomas. "Sorting out the New South: race, class and urban development in Charlotte, 1875-1975." The University of North Carolina Press, 1998 pg. 231

^{ix} Hanchett, Thomas. "Sorting out the New South: race, class and urban development in Charlotte, 1875-1975." The University of North Carolina Press, 1998 pg. 250