

PEARL STREET PARK: A History

Revised draft by Tom Hanchett, July 1, 2018

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*Second Ward High School football practice at Pearl Street Park.
The hillside of the Cherry neighborhood is visible in the distance.
Courtesy of Kathryn Frye, Second Ward National Alumni Association.*

Executive summary:

Mecklenburg County Park and Recreation Department is making plans to reconfigure and improve Pearl Street Park. That initiative will likely include creating interpretive panels and/or an artwork relating to the Park's past, especially its early years as an African American recreation space. Park & Rec has hired Dr. Tom Hanchett, a community historian known for his work on Charlotte's urban geography and African American history, to research the Park's history as a first step in that process.

Pearl Street Park was built on six acres of land purchased from Thompson Orphanage, the deed being signed on March 31, 1943. It is not Charlotte's oldest African American park; Morgan Park in the Cherry neighborhood dates to a 1922 donation by landowner John Springs Myers. But Pearl Street Park was the first property purchased by the City of Charlotte expressly to create an African American public park.

The park's name came from its proximity to Pearl Street, a residential avenue developed in the 1910s-20s as part of the large African American neighborhood of Brooklyn. It is not known how Pearl Street got its name. Pearl Street disappeared when Brooklyn was demolished during "urban renewal" in the late 1960s.

Pearl Street Park's significance lies in its role as a center of African American community life, including its connections to Second Ward High School and the important Brooklyn neighborhood. Those aspects should be emphasized in whatever interpretive panels are placed in the Park. Subjects might include:

- *Glimpses of Brooklyn:*
 - Its business district, churches, rental housing, elite homes of leaders.
- *Building the park:*
 - Previous parks, role of Thompson Orphanage, resistance by neighbors
- *Using the park:*
 - Victory Gardens in WWII (art by nationally known Charlotte-born African American artist Charles Alston)
 - Lula Mae White as first Negro Recreation Supervisor
 - Use by Second Ward High School for athletic fields
 - Desegregation of Charlotte parks starting in 1950s
- *Changing surroundings of the park over time:*
 - Charlottetowne Mall (1959),
 - urban renewal destruction of Brooklyn (late 1960s),
 - uncapping of Sugar Creek and creation of The Metropolitan (2000s) and expansion of The Metropolitan adjacent to the park (late 2010s)

Was Pearl Street Park Charlotte's 'First African American Park'?

In my judgement as an historian, that label is not correct.

Two earlier African American public parks existed:

- Morgan Park, now known as Cherry Park, was created by a 1922 donation from landowner John Springs Myers "for the sole use as a park and playground for the colored race." It is now about 3 acres, though early descriptions mention 2 acres and 5 acres. It remains in use today.
- Fairview Park near Johnson C. Smith University existed from 1933 to 1941 on land previously used as the City waterworks. Descriptions suggest it was between 12 and 16 acres.

Was there perhaps a distinction between "Park" and "Playground"?

- Some people have speculated that Pearl Street Park may have been Charlotte's first black "park," as opposed to a "playground."

I find that those two words did not have clear definition in Charlotte usage during the 1920s – 1940s. Generally, "playground" meant a smaller recreation space with less equipment. But there was no clear dividing point. Pearl Street Park had 6 acres; Morgan Park had between 2 and 5 acres – not a huge difference.

- Morgan and Pearl Street had mostly similar facilities: swings and other playground equipment, a baseball diamond. Pearl Street Park also had a wading pool, which seems to have been the only one open to African Americans in Charlotte for several years.

How did people in the period refer to the Morgan and Pearl Street recreation areas?

- Again there was no consistency. Newspaper articles below quote local officials referring to Morgan "Park" in 1929, 1930, 1935, 1937, 1939, 1940, 1941, 1942 and 1950 – usually in articles that referred to other, smaller spaces as "playgrounds."
- Yet contradictorily, when funds were being sought in the 1930s for Fairview Park, the *Observer* said it would be "the first park established here for negroes."

In the 1940s, *Observer* articles on Pearl Street Park used similar language. A January 23, 1942 article stated, "Currently Charlotte Negroes have no municipal-sponsored recreation facility." On April 16, 1943, the newspaper described planning "of the new park, which is the only such recreational facility available for Negro use in Charlotte."

So it is easy to understand why researchers in 2005 would create a marker calling Pearl Street Park the city's "First African American Park."

Recommendation:

It would be better to identify Pearl Street Park as "The first land purchased by the City of Charlotte to create an African American public park."

In my eyes, as an historian, Pearl Street Park's significance lies in its role as a center of African American community life, including its connections to Second Ward High School and the important African American neighborhood of Brooklyn. Those aspects should be emphasized in whatever interpretive panels are placed in the park.

NEED OF NEGRO PARK CONCEDED

Flack Asks Data On Proposed Parkway Through Thompson Orphanage Property.

Need of park facilities for Charlotte's 30,000 Negroes was recognized yesterday by City Manager R. W. Flack, who declared that lack of playground space in the colored areas undoubtedly contributes to Negro juvenile delinquency and the city's overly-high rate of race murders.

Back from a look-see at the municipal park system with Parks Superintendent J. Marvin Ray, the city manager said that he was "impressed by the job that's been done on so little money," but indicated that some provision for additional Negro park facilities is desirable.

Immediately, to City Engineer Lloyd Ross, went a memo requesting preparation of data concerning proposed construction of a road through the Thompson Orphanage property off East Fourth street—a project advocated by park commissioners as the most feasible so-

lution to the need for Negro playgrounds.

In line with present plans the projected artery would be developed into a city parkway extending from East Fourth street through the orphanage lands, across Sugaw creek, and tying in with First or Stonewall streets.

TWO PROBLEMS UNSOLVED.

The park board, according to Chairman Charles H. Stone, has enough money to erect play facilities along each side of the strip for use by Negroes living in that vicinity.

Two factors, it was said, are currently blocking construction of the parkway. Right of way privileges have not yet been accorded by the orphanage directors; the city has not agreed to build the connecting link.

That both of the stumbling blocks may be removed soon was seen as a possibility, however. Working on the theory that if rights of way were available, the city would approve the plan, park officials are readying a strong plea for presentation at the Thompson Orphanage board meeting in January.

HAVE 5-ACRE PARK.

HAVE 5-ACRE PARK.

Meanwhile, of the city's 10 parks only one—the Morgan park in the Cherryville sector—is available for Negro recreation. Comprising five acres of land, the park includes a softball field, a miniature playground space with giant's stride, swings, and sand box; one volleyball court; and one deck tennis court. Total value is less than \$6,000, compared with the entire system's \$500,000 worth.

Not in use, having been condemned as unfit is the 16-acre Fairview park in the Biddleville section, valued at around \$1,000.

With nearly-adequate land space but lacking money for maintenance and development, the present park commission is making an effort to proceed with a long-range program designed to provide recreational outlets to meet the city's future needs.

Currently up for council approval is a proposal to purchase around 11 acres of land lying along Sugaw creek midway between the Dilworth and Myers Park sectors—the old polo grounds owned by Smith Medlin and offered to the commission for \$3,000—and to accept as a gift an adjoining 17 acres offered by Herman A. Moore.

Shown the site yesterday, Mr. Flack indicated that he thought the purchase a wise one, although it seems probable that development of the park will have to await more funds. The land, he pointed out is flat, underlain by drain tile, and well adapted to park conversion.

Morgan Park in Cherry already existed
on land donated in 1922

Charlotte Observer, November 8, 1941

PEARL STREET PARK: A History

Final draft by Tom Hanchett, July 1, 2018

Context of this research essay:

African Americans remember Pearl Street Park as one of Charlotte's earliest public recreation spaces for black residents. It came into being in the mid 1940s, funded and operated by the City of Charlotte's Park and Recreation Department. Thompson Orphanage sold the City the site in 1943, located along Sugar Creek on the edge of what was then an African American neighborhood known as Brooklyn/Second Ward.

In the late 1960s the surrounding African American residential area fell to the bulldozers of Urban Renewal. The subsequent construction of Interstate 277 further isolated the park. But it remained a popular spot for soccer, baseball and other athletics.

Today in 2018 the Mecklenburg County Park and Recreation Department is making plans to reconfigure and improve the park. Developer Peter Pappas is creating a mixed use high-rise development adjoining, which will bring more users to the park. A street will be built along the southern edge of the park, connecting existing Baxter Street with the Pearl Park Way bridge over Sugar Creek. A restroom building will be constructed near the Baxter Street entrance to the park. Interpretive panels and/or an artwork relating to the Park's history will be located there.

Park & Rec has hired Dr. Tom Hanchett, a community historian known for his work on Charlotte's urban geography and African American history, to research Pearl Street Park's history and draft the panels that will convey its story. This research essay is the first step in that work. The next step will be to get feedback from stakeholders. Then Park & Rec may direct Dr. Hanchett to work with a graphic artist to draft the panels.

Existing marker:

In 2005 the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Black Heritage Committee worked with Mecklenburg County Park and Recreation to place a history marker in Pearl Street Park. It includes this plaque, plus an audio unit with four short pieces read by WBTV newscaster Steve Crump describing "Segregation in Charlotte," "Pearl Street Park," "Brooklyn Neighborhood," and "Second Ward High School."



The plaque reads:

"FIRST AFRICAN-AMERICAN PARK

"The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Black Heritage Committee and the Mecklenburg County Park and Recreation Department proudly acknowledge Pearl Street Park, formerly identified the first Negro playground, as the first African-American public park in Mecklenburg County.

"We dedicate this park to memorialize the rich cultural heritage of the African-American community, its historical significance and as a reminder of the African American community formerly known as the Brooklyn community on this 25th day of February, 2005."


Crump, who is known for his work documenting African American history, recalls that the project was researched and written by Thereasea Elder, a community leader who led in creating the Black Heritage Committee, and Mike Cozza, a former WBTV newsman who was then communications director for Park & Rec.

*Charlotte-Mecklenburg Black Heritage Committee
Board of Directors*


<i>Theresea Elder</i>	<i>Thurman Ross, Jr.</i>
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


Pearl Street Park Dedication Ceremony
February 25, 2005
12:00 noon





Mecklenburg County
Park and Recreation
*The Natural Place
to Be.*



*Pearl Street Marker Installation Ceremony
February 25, 2005
12 noon*

Program

<i>Master of Ceremony</i>	<i>John Mintz Former Co-Chair Charlotte Mecklenburg Black Heritage Committee</i>
<i>Invocation</i>	<i>Bishop George W.C. Walker Sr. Presiding Prelate Episcopal District</i>
<i>Welcome</i>	<i>John Mintz</i>
<i>Proclamation</i>	<i>The Honorable Norman A. Mitchell, Sr. Board of County Commissioners District 2 Representative</i>
	<i>The Honorable Patrick U. Cannon Mayor Pro Tem City of Charlotte</i>
<i>"Inception to Reality"</i>	<i>The Honorable Becky Conroy North Carolina House of Representatives Charlotte-Mecklenburg Black Heritage Advisory Board Member</i>
<i>Marker Design and Installation</i>	<i>Jeff Robinson Park Services Manager Park and Recreation</i>
<i>Remarks</i>	<i>John McClelland Central Park District 3 General Manager Park and Recreation</i>
	<i>R. Wayne Weston Director Park and Recreation</i>
<i>Special Presentation and Acknowledgements</i>	<i>Theresea Elder & Bertha L. Allen</i>
<i>Closing Remarks</i>	<i>John Mintz</i>
<i>Prayer</i>	<i>R. Wayne Weston & Theresea Elder</i>
<i>Benediction</i>	<i>Bishop George W.C. Walker, Sr.</i>

*Lunch immediately following ceremony
Music Provide by Stanley Graham*

A program for the 2005 dedication of the history plaque in Pearl Street Park, collection of the Carolina Room, Charlotte Mecklenburg Library.

Before Pearl Street Park: Some History of Charlotte Parks

The movement to create parks in America's cities gathered steam during the Progressive Era in the decades around 1900. As metropolitan areas grew bigger, denser and more polluted during the Industrial Revolution, activists began to work toward setting aside land within cities specifically for nature and recreation. In Charlotte, developer Edward Dilworth created Latta Park in the heart of his new suburb of Dilworth in 1891, a privately-owned recreation area that was open to the general public. A few years later, textile industrialist D. A Tompkins founded the Charlotte Park and Tree Commission, a non-governmental citizens group. It arranged for the creation of the city's first publicly-owned recreation facility, Independence Park in the heart of the emerging Elizabeth suburb, and in 1905 brought fledgling landscape architect John Nolen south from Harvard University to plan it.¹ Nationally, a "playground movement" was underway, sparked by Joseph Lee, author of the influential book *Play in Education*, 1915.² Lee maintained that play was essential to healthy childhood development and he advocated for cities to sprinkle playgrounds within easy reach of all families. It took a while for Charlotte, a small town of 46,338 people in 1920, to embrace the new thinking. But Charlotte Park and Recreation Commission was established as a unit of government in 1927.³

That year a field representative of the Park and Recreation Association of America, the appropriately named Dr. Willis Allen Parker, made a study of Charlotte's park system. The city had five parks: Independence Park in Elizabeth, Latta Park (now publicly owned) in Dilworth, Piedmont Park in the "Piedmont section" near Central Avenue, "the old Phifer place in North Charlotte" (Cordelia Park on North Davidson Street), and "the small Providence Road Park on Providence Road."⁴ There were also a variety of smaller lots attached to schools that were being used for playground recreation outside of school hours.

All of the five public parks were for white residents only. Back when Latta Park had opened in 1891, it initially welcomed blacks as well as whites. But segregation hardened across the South in the years around 1900. When Independence Park debuted in 1905, it barred African Americans: "no colored person shall be allowed except as nurses to white children." ("Nurses" referred to

¹ Thomas W. Hanchett, *Sorting Out the New South City: Race, Class and Urban Development in Charlotte, 1875 - 1975* (UNC Press, 1998), pp. 152 - 157.

² "Play in Education," *Play and Playground Encyclopedia*, on-line at: <https://www.pgpedia.com/p/play-education> A 1921 edition of Lee's book is on-line in its entirety: <https://archive.org/details/playineducation05leegoog>

³ For overviews of Charlotte's park history, see Hanchett, *Sorting Out the New South City*, pp. 152 - 157. "Parks and Recreation Program is Making Headway," *Charlotte Observer*, February 28, 1950. Michael Worth Ervin, "Public Order is Even More Important than the Rights of Negroes: Race and Recreation in Charlotte, North Carolina, 1927 - 1973," Masters Thesis, Department of History, UNC Charlotte, 2015. Brian Sturm, "The Evolution of Green Space: A History of Urban Landscape in Charlotte, North Carolina, 1890-1990," Honors Thesis, Department of History, UNC Charlotte, 2000, on-line at: <http://www.cmhpf.org/educationgreenspace1.htm>

⁴ "Commission to Map Ambitious Park Program," *Charlotte Observer*, July 17, 1927.

childcare workers bringing white youngsters to play in the park.)⁵ Despite the fact that African American paid taxes, they could use no public park in Charlotte.

Dr. Parker's 1927 study made recommendations for investment in both white and black parks. He called for additional facilities in Latta Park and Independence Park, both in wealthy white areas, which were then the only relatively well-equipped existing parks.⁶ He also detailed the equipment that should be added to Cordelia Park on North Davidson Street to make it a functioning recreation area for the working-class whites in the North Charlotte (now Belmont/Villa Heights/NoDa) vicinity, and he recommended similar spending in Wesley Heights, a white neighborhood just west of downtown. Two of his six recommendations urged the creation of African American parks. Black citizens comprised nearly one third of Charlotte's population, deserving of the benefits of recreation.

5. I recommend that a tract of land suitably located be obtained and developed for a children's playground, a recreation park and an athletic field for use of the colored people. I advise that leaders of the colored race be consulted with reference to same. I recommend that the children's playground be developed immediately, and that other features mentioned be taken care of as funds of the park and Recreation Commission may make possible.

6. I recommend that the playground at Baxter and Polk streets immediately opposite the colored school, which is now used as a playground by the colored children of the neighborhood, be leveled and furnished with suitable playground equipment. I recommend, also, that a back stop be erected at the southwest corner and a diamond laid out for playground ball.

It would take years for Parker's Recommendation #5 to become a reality.

⁵ Hanchett, *Sorting Out the New South City*, p. 119.

⁶ "Playgrounds, Golf Course and Pools Sought for City," *Charlotte Observer*, August 7, 1927.

Before Pearl Street Park: Morgan Park in the Cherry Neighborhood, 1920s - today

Recommendation #6 referred to Morgan Park, recently donated by John Springs Myers. The landowner, best known for developing the wealthy white suburb of Myers Park, had established Morgan School in the early 1920s, a state-of-the-art elementary school in the heart of the African America neighborhood of Cherry.⁷ In 1922 he donated a large block of property in front of the school as a public park. The initial park seems to have comprised 1.95 acres of land; in 1977 it would be expanded by one additional acre thanks to a donation by RAM Corporation.⁸

African Americans evidently raised the first dollars to improve the parkland themselves, rather than waiting for government: "The 'Jollification Night' program at the negro playground at Morgan school was attended by about 700 people," reported the *Observer* in 1929, "a large sum of money being raised through the sale of food and other articles for the purchase of swings for the playground."⁹

Park & Rec Commission leader Dr. John Hill Tucker referred to the recreation area as "Morgan park" in a speech that year: "John Myers, who was one of the city's leading citizens, left a park, Morgan park, for negroes of the city."¹⁰ Tucker touched on it again in a 1930 broadcast on Charlotte's new radio station WBT: "Morgan Park, which was given to the colored people by that splendid citizen, long since called to a just reward and rest, Mr. Jack Myers, has been graded and baseball diamond with drinking fountains have been installed."¹¹

⁷ "Morgan School: Survey and Research Report," Charlotte Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, 1992. On-line at: <http://www.cmhpf.org/S&Rs%20Alphabetical%20Order/surveys&rmorganschool.htm> The Myers family also donated the land for what became Johnson C. Smith University and also for the city's first black elementary school, Myers Street School.

⁸ J. S. Myers and wife Mary R. Myers donated the main tract in 1922 "for the sole use as a park and playground for the colored race in said City." The deed required that the City to lay coal cinders or gravel on the streets around it. See Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds, book 462, page 79. The smaller section to the east was sold by RAM Corporation to the City in 1977. Deed book 3911, page 873.

In 1997 following the merger that created Mecklenburg County Park and Recreation, the City of Charlotte deeded all of its park properties to the county. All existing city parks were included on one massive deed which listed each property, the date the City originally acquired it, and the book and page number of its deed. See Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds, book 9276, page 437, on-line at <http://meckrod.manatron.com/RealEstate/SearchDetail.aspx?bk=9276&pg=437&type=BkPg>

(Thanks to J. Michael Moore for this deed research).

⁹ "Hundreds Present for Concert by Students," *Charlotte Observer*, August 16, 1929.

¹⁰ "Parks and Playgrounds Movement in Charlotte," *Charlotte Observer*, July 27, 1929.

¹¹ "Pays Foreman Warm Tribute," *Charlotte Observer*, January 14, 1930.

Morgan Park appeared in newspaper stories throughout the 1930s. A 1935 *Observer* report mentioned a “baseball diamond at Morgan park” approved under funding by the federal Works Progress Administration.¹² A 1937 round-up of Park and Rec “work accomplished” included: “grading, beautification, fencing and playground equipment for Morgan park (negro).” The same story also noted “opening of negro swimming pool at Fairview park.”¹³ A 1939 story on WPA recreation activities noted a “city-wide play day” at “Independence park for white persons, and at Fairview playground for negroes.” It continued: “The negro playground units at First and Second Ward playgrounds and Morgan park will take part in the activities at Fairview playground.”¹⁴

Before Pearl Street Park: Fairview Park near Johnson C. Smith University, 1933 – 1941

The Fairview park was a heartbreaking story that showed both African American hunger for recreation spaces, and also the persistent underfunding. The project began in the early 1930s, taking advantage of the old waterworks property on Andrill Terrace down the hill behind Johnson C. Smith University. The waterworks’ pumping station and settling basin -- both built with state-of-the-art concrete construction circa 1905 -- had become surplus once the new Vest Water Treatment Plant opened up on Beatties Ford Road in 1928. An *Observer* story on the “Fairview park project for negroes” reported in 1933, “The city manager said that work will be resumed immediately on Fairview park. This work has already been approved by the city council and part of it has been finished.... A swimming pool for negroes will be built in the settling basins of the old city waterworks plant.”¹⁵ The Civil Works Administration of the New Deal (a predecessor to the WPA) paid for “six new [tennis] courts at the new Fairview park for negroes” later that year.¹⁶ Dr. Frank Porter Graham, beloved president of the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill and a tireless advocate for education and racial equity, travelled to

¹² “Request for Seats in Stadium Approved,” *Charlotte Observer*, September 8, 1935.

¹³ “Parks Commission Reviews Work in Report to City,” *Charlotte Observer*, April 29, 1937.

¹⁴ “Plan Play Day Here on Friday,” *Charlotte Observer*, August 3, 1939. Again in 1940, Morgan was listed first among African American facilities in an *Observer* start-of-summer story entitled “Everything in Readiness for Playgrounds Opening.” “Leaders at the negro play centers were also announced: Morgan Park, Olivia Torrence and William Johnson....” *Charlotte Observer*, May 26, 1940. And in 1941: “Meanwhile, of Charlotte’s ten parks, only one – Morgan Park in the Cherryville sector – is available for Negro recreation,” “Need of Negro Park Conceded,” *Charlotte Observer*, November 8, 1941. Morgan Park was again listed as encompassing five acres in 1942: “Morgan Park has softball fields, a small swing-equipped playground, volleyball court, and deck tennis court.” “Largest Recreation Program in History of City Considered,” *Charlotte Observer*, March 6, 1942. “The Negro play program at Morgan Park, Pearl Street Park, and Fairview Homes apartment center will be led by Lula Mae White and Howard Moreland.” “Summer Play Season Opens,” *Charlotte Observer*, June 6, 1946.

¹⁵ “Irwin Park to be Developed. Negro Playground Also Expected to be Improved,” *Charlotte Observer*, June 19, 1933.

¹⁶ “Park Projects are Underway,” *Charlotte Observer*, November 28, 1933.

Charlotte to address a 1934 mass meeting to raise funds for the Fairview project. It was to include a community center in the old pumping station and a huge swimming pool in the settling basin. Promised the *Observer*: “When completed, Fairview will be the first park established here for negroes, although the Charlotte Park and Recreation commission is operating several playgrounds for negroes.”¹⁷



Charlotte's official 1935 city map showed Fairview Park – a triangular tract near the center of this image, north of the Seaboard Railway line.

<https://www.mapsofthepast.com/charlotte-north-carolina-1935.html>

The pool opened in 1936 and was enthusiastically embraced by the community.¹⁸ More than 8,000 swimmers used the facility in its first two months.¹⁹ An annual beauty pageant started in 1937, along with an African American tennis tournament.²⁰ Thousands of people visited each summer throughout the rest of the 1930s.

But in 1940 the facility abruptly closed. “Neglected Fairview Park Facilities Condemned by State,” headlined a newspaper story.²¹ The fund-raising efforts had

¹⁷ “Dr. Frank Graham Speaks Here May 13,” *Charlotte Observer*, May 4, 1934. Also “Booker Lauds Negroes’ Park,” *Charlotte Observer*, May 8, 1934.

¹⁸ “Studying Site for City Pool,” *Charlotte Observer*, July 10, 1936.

¹⁹ “Parks Commission Review Work in Report to City,” *Charlotte Observer*, April 29, 1937.

²⁰ “Negroes Enter Beauty Contest,” *Charlotte Observer*, August 1, 1937. “Negro Tennis Meet Planned,” *Charlotte Observer*, August 6, 1937.

²¹ “Negro League Asks Council to Open Pool,” *Charlotte Observer*, July 11, 1940. Also “Our Negro Parks,” *Charlotte Observer*, September 14, 1941.

evidently failed amid lingering effects of the Great Depression. And government leaders had spent little or no tax money. A letter to editor in the *Charlotte Observer* described a grim reality:

Our Negro Parks.

To The Observer:
I cannot refrain from expressing to you, and to your readers, an indelible impression which I have just received in your city of Charlotte.

For the past three months I have lived in Charlotte, having come here from Richmond, Virginia. While I lived in Richmond, I had occasion to be indirectly connected with, and greatly interested in, the well-known Seventeenth Street Mission for Negroes. From time to time I heard about the fine work among the Negroes in several North Carolina cities, of which Charlotte was one. Consequently I have followed with interest the newspaper accounts of what seemed to be great progress among the Negro race, and I have been anxious to see some of the fine things being done.

One thing that I noticed that the city of Charlotte was particularly proud of was the "new" public park for Negroes. I have been looking forward to seeing this public-supported enterprise for the betterment of conditions among the colored race. Today I went with a colored friend of mine to visit Charlotte's proud promotion for its Negroes — "Fairview Park." My friend and I drove over some paved roads — in the heart of the city. Then we drove on some unpaved roads — nearer the park. But before we reached the park itself I thought that we would actually have to get out and walk the last few gulches. I saw, off to the right, a huge building on the no-longer-used fair grounds of my home town. I learned to my surprise, that that structure, with no pane in the windows, no covering on the dirt floors, and no partitions even to separate the boys from the girls, was the bath house, dressing room, and recreational hall — all combined — with not a drop of running water. I plowed through some shoulder-high weeds and grass to see the swimming pool. It seems that this, the only swimming pool for Negro boys and girls, had not had water in it for that entire summer — reason: the STATE health officials condemned this CITY pool last summer! No, the old swimmin' hole didn't have any filtration unit to purify the water, either; but it at least had a creek running in, and one running out! I noticed nearby several very substantial looking fences.

After looking more closely, I discovered that underneath all the weeds and grass there once had been some decent tennis courts. There was plenty of unused, uncultivated land all around us — plenty of room for a baseball diamond; but no diamond. My guess was that the city couldn't find anything else to do with this undesirable land and the run-down building and the out-of-date reservoir (the swimming pool), so they made a big sacrifice and let the Negroes use it — for what?! I was convinced that I was right when I found that the densely populated Negro district was several miles away, on another side of Charlotte. Is this the best Charlotte can do?

MAC KENNEDY, JR.
Charlotte.

"Our Negro Parks," *Charlotte Observer*, September 14, 1941.

When the pool closed, a group of African American leaders came before the City Council in protest. "Pleads for fair share of Park Commission's funds," a *Charlotte Observer* story headlined. "Representatives of the Charlotte Negro Citizens League ... stated [that] Negroes comprise about one third of the city's population and yet there are practically no recreational facilities afford them. Therefore the Council was asked to do what it could to bring about a more equitable distribution of funds."²²

Council appointed three of its members as a committee to look into the matter: John Wilkinson, Herbert H. Baxter, and C.S. Britt. But Fairview park never reopened. The property seems to have sat abandoned into the late 1950s. The pool was then sold off and incorporated into a building still in use by Gardner Machinery.²³ The pumphouse was demolished and Biddleville Park was created on part of the site; Johnson C. Smith University's baseball teams play there today.

²² "Negro League Asks Council to Open Pool," *Charlotte Observer*, July 11, 1940.

²³ RW. Gardner, interview with Tom Hanchett at Gardner Machinery, 700 N. Summit Avenue, May 2018.

Creating Pearl Street Park, 1940s

The promise and disappointment of Fairview Park seems to have set the stage for creation of Pearl Street Park. "Plans for the construction of a wading pool for Negro children, which may be built somewhere toward the rear of the Thompson Orphanage property," were discussed by the Park and Recreation Commission at its June 1941 meeting.²⁴ "The Thompson Orphanage owns seven or eight acres that would be developed as a Negro recreation center.... On it would be constructed the wading pool, and later a swimming pool, bath houses, and tennis courts."

728 — SUNDAY JUNE 15, 1941

Park Body Pushing Negro Play Center

Commission Members Hopeful Wading Pool May Be Built This Summer—Funds From Sunday Shows and From Baseball Game Will Aid in Project.

Confidence that the Negro recreation center planned for a tract of land at the rear of the Thompson orphanage property and facing on Pearl street in the Brooklyn section will materialize was expressed yesterday as the Charlotte park and recreation commission continued study of the tentative plans.

John R. Pender, a member of the Charlotte parks and recreation commission, is heading up the preliminary work for the commission and commission members are hopeful that the first unit of the center, a wading pool tentatively planned to be 80 by 40 feet, can be built this summer.

The entire project, it was emphasized by a member of the commission, is still only in the stage of planning. Development will depend upon the money that may be made available. It is hoped that the wading pool can be constructed with funds given the commission by Charlotte theatres from the revenue received during the first two legalized Sunday showings.

HORNETS PROMISE AID

The Charlotte baseball club, too, it was revealed, has promised to donate the proceeds from one of the baseball games played here though it will be a week-day game since the league rules forbid the contribution of funds from Sunday games, it was explained by this commissioner.

The Thompson orphanage owns a tract of seven or eight acres that would be developed as a Negro recreation center, and the commission hopes to be able to obtain this property for that purpose. On it would be constructed the wading pool and later a swimming pool, bathhouses and tennis courts. Immediately across the creek from this property is a tract that the commission would also like to obtain as the site for a baseball field, it was pointed out.

FACES NEGRO SECTION

Use of the property as a Negro recreation center would in no way interfere with the orphanage, it was pointed out, since the property is a considerable distance from the orphanage and faces upon a street on which Negroes live.

The fact that the property is near the center of a section in which perhaps two-thirds of the city's Negro population live makes it all the more advantageously situated for a Negro recreational center, it was pointed out. Many more Negroes would be served conveniently at this point than they would out in the Riddleville section, the commission believes, and

LIBBY'S HUSBY PLEA FOR DEFERMENT

NEW YORK.—Ralph Holmes, husband of Libby Holman, the former Mrs. Smith Reynolds of Winston-Salem, lost his deferment appeal with his local draft board and will have to go into the army, it was learned today. Holmes, 23, and Libby, 10 years older, live at Stamford, Ct., deferment had been sought on the ground he had to support his wife, who inherited a large fortune from her late husband.

the Negroes living in this area are more thickly settled and need recreational facilities more than do those of the Johnson Smith university community.

The new commission, led by its aggressive and enthusiastic chairman, Charles H. Stone, is determined to begin as quickly as possible the putting into effect of some such plan to afford recreational facilities for the Negroes, who have been faring even worse than the white population.

WILLKIE AND KNOX WILL RECEIVE DEGREES TODAY

HANOVER, N. H., June 14.—(AP)—Wendell L. Willkie and Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox will receive honorary degrees tomorrow at Dartmouth college's 172nd commencement.

They were among 10, including Carl Sandburg and Van Wyck Brooks, authors, and Joseph B. Eastman, chairman of the Interstate Commerce commission, announced today for citations.

Willkie, listed only as "citizen," and Knox both will receive doctor of laws degrees.

More than 1,000,000 Germans are indexed at the Nazi Embassy in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Thompson Orphanage had been a big presence east of uptown Charlotte since 1887. Created by the Episcopal church, its farmland stretched along Sugar Creek from what is now East Fourth Street to Pearl Park Way. Today only its chapel survives, a red brick landmark at Kings Drive and Fourth Street, but its property once encompassed all of today's Metropolitan mixed-use development.²⁵ The Orphanage's dedication to helping disadvantaged children gave it a natural interest

²⁴ "Sunday Movie Donations May Go for Wading Pool," *Charlotte Observer*, June 8, 1941.

²⁵ "Memorial Chapel of St. Mary the Virgin," Survey and Research Report, Charlotte Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, no date, on-line at: <http://www.cmhpf.org/essays/orphanchapel.html>. "Thompson Children's Home," *NCPedia*, on-line at: <https://www.ncpedia.org/thompson-childrens-home>

in a park project. There may have been an element of restitution that inspired it to reach out beyond its usual white clientele. In 1939 six African American youngsters had died when a makeshift footbridge on Thompson land collapsed into Sugar Creek.²⁶

The acreage in question lay at the back of the Thompson property on the west side of Sugar Creek. It formed a rough rectangle, smaller at the top (north) than at the bottom. The land's eastern border paralleled the Creek but did not extend quite to its banks. To the south lay the white neighborhood of Dilworth, where a residential street named Greenwood Cliff ran on a gentle hillside above the Orphanage land. To the north was a short stub of a street called Brown Street (originally Boundary Street Extension), while at the west ran Pearl Street -- both part of the African American neighborhood of Brooklyn "in which the Commission members estimate that about two-thirds of the Negro population of the city lives."

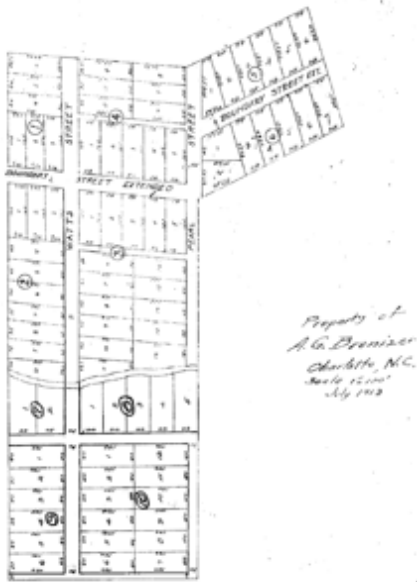
Brooklyn had come into being the 1890s as hardening racial segregation squeezed African Americans into a sharply defined neighborhood. It took its name from the Brooklyn, New York, which was annexed into New York City in that decade as Borough, a "city within a city." It was not Charlotte's only black neighborhood but it was the largest and most important. The city's "black business district" extended along Brevard Street and Second Street, including the large brick buildings of the Afro American Mutual Insurance Company, the Mecklenburg Investment Company, and the Publishing House of the AME Zion religious denomination. Community institutions included a dozen churches, North Carolina's first black public library, and the handsome 1923 Second Ward High School.²⁷ Over a thousand residences filled out the neighborhood, ranging from humble rental rows owned by absentee landlords, to substantial houses such as that built by physician and business leader J.T. Williams, who served as the top U.S. diplomat in west Africa in the years around 1900.

Pearl Street itself was laid out in 1913 by banker and real estate developer A.G. Brenizer and seems to have been built up during the 1920s. It is not known where the name "Pearl" came from. Local real estate investors likely built most or all of the houses in the area for rental to African Americans; a 1923 real estate column in the *Observer* listed two lots sold on Pearl Street to Lee Kinney, a Realtor who built many rental units throughout the city.²⁸ A Sanborn map made in 1932 for insurance purposes showed a short four-block dirt lane lined with one-story wooden cottages in the "shotgun" style, two or three rooms opening one behind the other with no hallway -- a common type of rental dwelling in African American neighborhoods in Charlotte and across the South.

²⁶ "Bodies of Six Negroes Taken from Stream," *Charlotte Observer*, July 23, 1939. Michael Worth Ervin, "Public Order is Even More Important than the Rights of Negroes: Race and Recreation in Charlotte, North Carolina, 1927 - 1973," Masters Thesis, Department of History, UNC Charlotte, 2015, p. 53.

²⁷ On Brooklyn's history see Hanchett, *Sorting Out the New South City*, pp. 127 - 134. On the history and significance of Second Ward High School, see "Historical Overview of Second Ward High School," *Charlotte Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission* website, <http://www.cmhpf.org/S&Rs%20Alphabetical%20Order/SurveyS&Rjeffers.htm>. Also <http://www.secondwardfoundation.org>

²⁸ "Wilson Pays about \$3,000 for Two Corner Parcels," *Charlotte Observer*, October 11, 1923.



Left: Pearl Street was laid out for landowner A.G. Brenizer in 1913, according to the plat map filed at the Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office, map book 230, page 223.

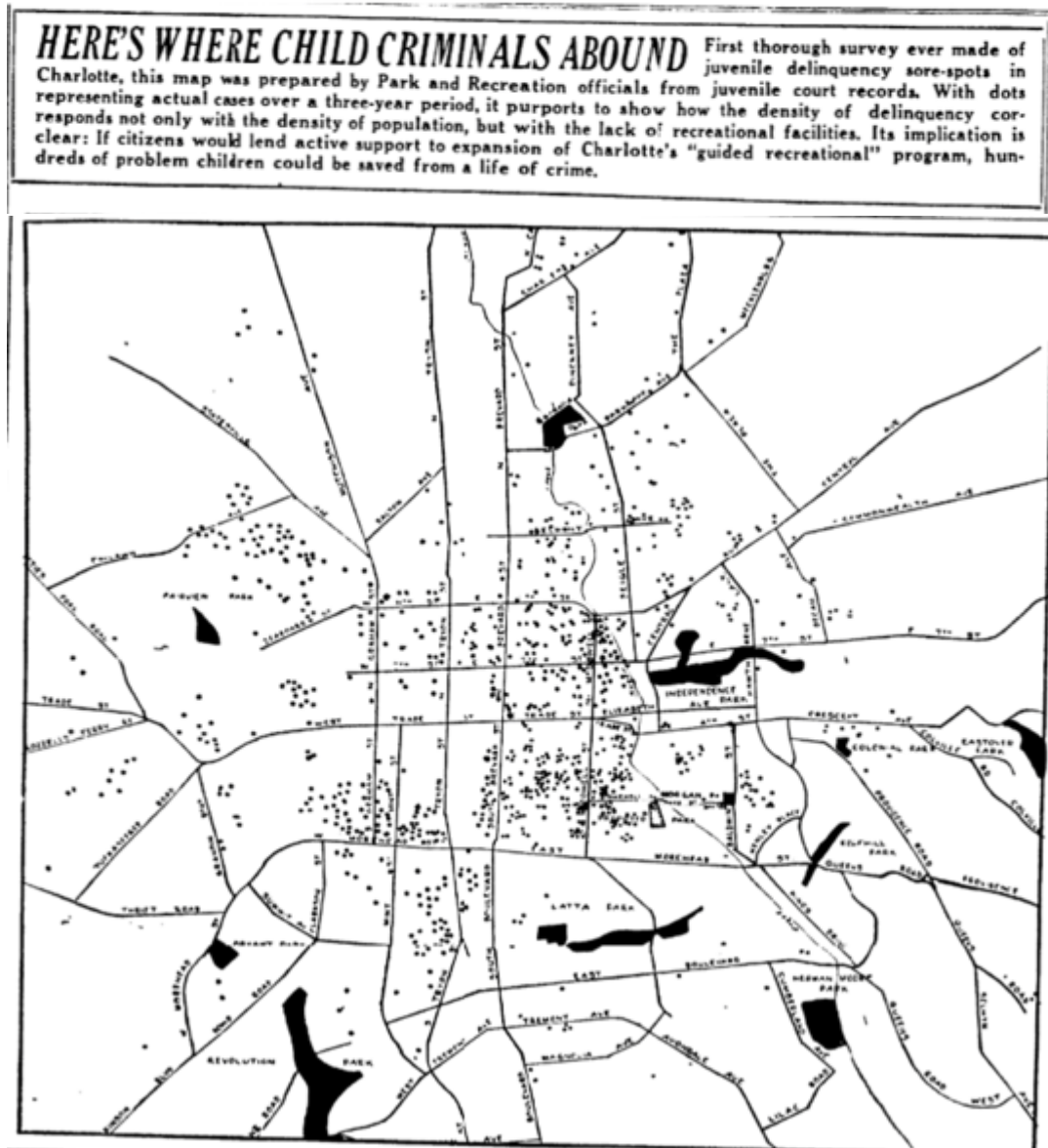
Right: Sanborn Map, 1932, in the collection of the Carolina Room of the Charlotte Mecklenburg Library. The land labelled 269SE would become Pearl Street Park.

If you look closely, you may be able to see that overlays have been pasted onto the Sanborn map, one covering much of Brown Street and all of Watts Alley, the other extending along Pearl Street from an unnamed alley southward to Barton Place. That suggests that houses shown on those overlays had been built since the 192_ base map had been published.

The progress of Pearl Street Park toward reality took years. White property owners on Greenwood Cliff and adjacent Harding Place mounted a protest which dragged on throughout 1942 and into 1943. “The protesting delegation feared the noise and other disturbances arising from the use of the land for park purposes might constitute a nuisance,” reported the *Observer*. Proponents countered that “Negro youths use the property anyway for disorganized play,” and they went on to assert that “juvenile and adult crime among Negroes has become a serious police and social problem, and one which officials think may be remedied in part by provision of recreational outlets.”²⁹ That statement came on the heels of a Park &

²⁹ “Negro Park in Brooklyn May Be Revived,” *Charlotte Observer*, August 14, 1942. Also “Hear Protests of Residents,” *Charlotte Observer*, February 4, 1942. And “Negro Park Again is Threatened,” *Charlotte Observer*, November 26, 1942.

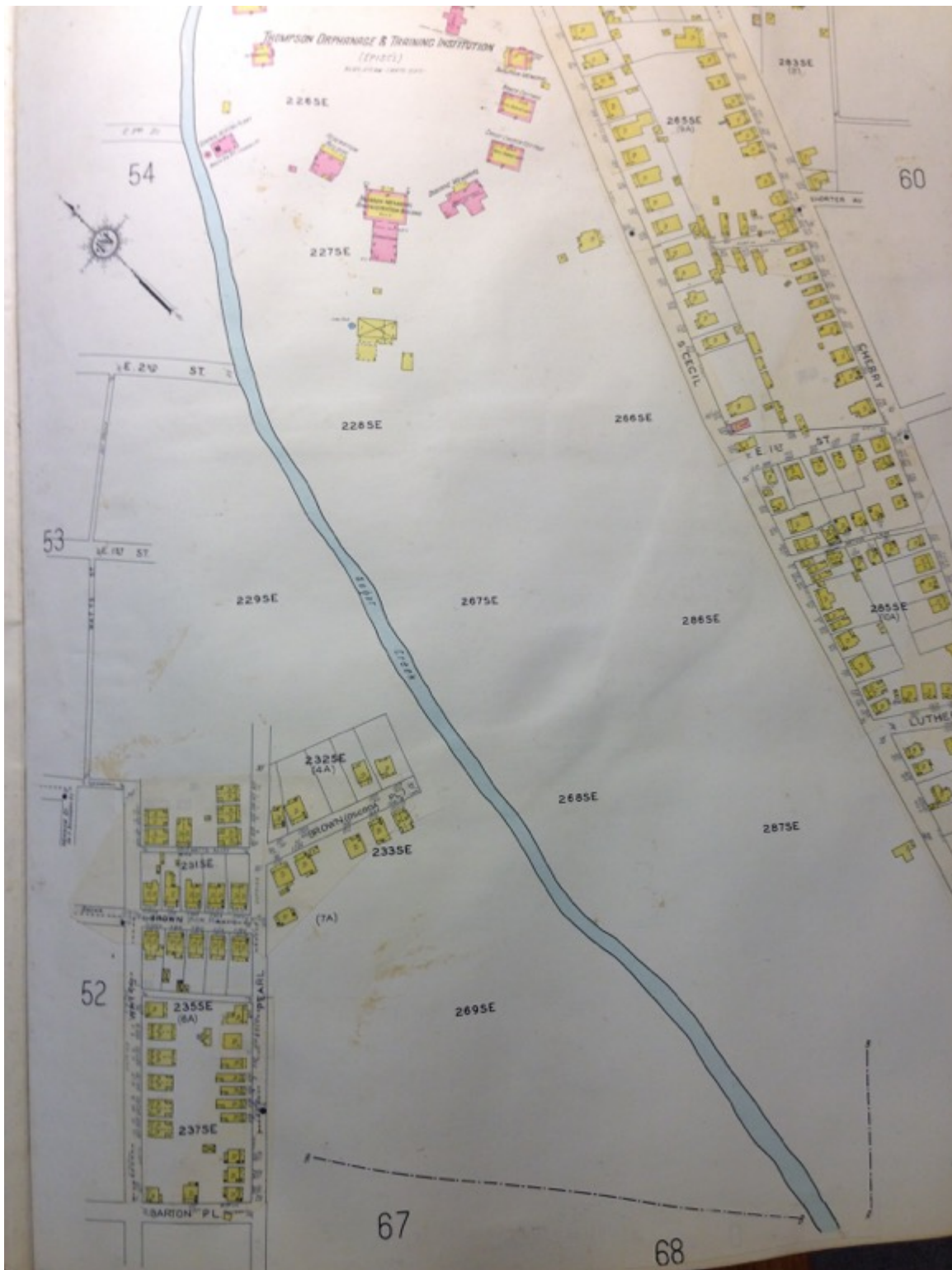
Recreation Commission study which mapped juvenile delinquency court cases; its dots fell densest in the streets of low-income rental housing near Pearl Street.³⁰



Charlotte Observer, March 8, 1942. The rough rectangle of the proposed Pearl Street can be seen to the right of the image's center: Brooklyn lies to its west; Sugar Creek angles to its east. Areas indicated in black are public parks open to whites only.

On March 31, 1943, Thompson officials led by Bishop Joseph Blount Cheshire signed the deed to sell the land to the Park and Recreation Commission for \$2500.00. It was the first time that Charlotte government purchased land specifically for an African American public park. And at six acres, it was larger than the older Morgan Park in Cherry.

³⁰ Charlotte Observer, March 8, 1942.



Sanborn Map, 1932, in the collection of the Carolina Room of the Charlotte Mecklenburg Library.

Fourth Street ran parallel to the top edge of the map, just beyond this image. The cross-shaped building at upper right is the Thompson Orphanage Chapel, today the only surviving structure from the Orphanage. On the right side of the image are the small wooden houses of Cecil Street and Cherry Street in the Cherry neighborhood. The area marked 269 SE at the bottom of the image became Pearl Street Park.

A May 1943 *Observer* story spoke glowingly of immediate plans for a wading pool, plus a new gravel street and bridge over Sugar Creek giving access to residents in Cherry. The projects, the *Observer* said cheerily, were just “the first step in a development program that includes an eventual swimming pool, bath house, recreation hut and other facilities.” Indeed, the story promised, “baseball and other playing fields, horseshoe rinks, table tennis and other equipment will be made available during the approaching summer.”³¹ In actuality it would take additional years for any improvements to happen in the park, and the neither the recreation hut, nor the bathhouse nor a true swimming pool ever became a reality.

Continued the 1943 *Observer* story: “The Negro playground, tentatively listed as Pearl Street park, is the newest of the city’s play properties and the only such facility available for Negro use.”³² This was an odd declaration. Morgan Park had been around for twenty years at that point, though with a smaller footprint.

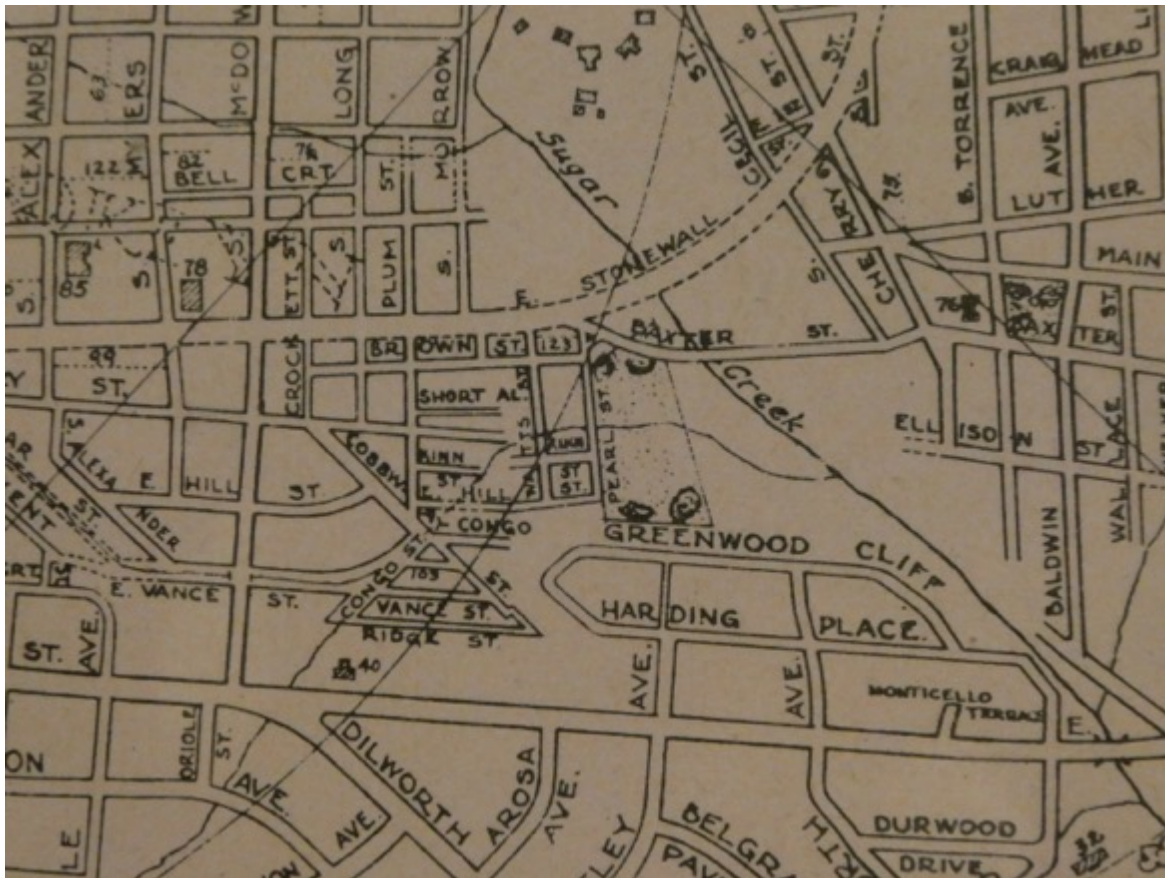
The plans for Pearl Street Park sounded impressive but its six acre expanse was tiny compared to Charlotte’s major new park of the 1940s. At the height of World War II city leaders began laying plans for Freedom Park, a 110 acre development less than a mile further down Sugar Creek that would honor World War II white veterans.³³ Freedom Park construction started on May 14, 1946, and a memorial marker to veterans was dedicated on June 2, 1948.³⁴ The name “Freedom” was deeply ironic. Both black and white Americans had fought in the war to vanquish Adolph Hitler and his Nazi vision of a white Aryan “master race.” Back home in the U.S., however, black veterans had to face the fact that American “freedom” did not fully extend to them.

³¹ “Plan to Build Negro Wading Pool Drafted,” *Charlotte Observer*, May 29, 1943. Charlotte had constructed its first swimming pool for whites in 1938 at Revolution Park. It cost the City \$47,500. It would not build a pool for African Americans til 1951, in the Double Oaks are on Statesville Avenue. Michael Worth Ervin, “Public Order is Even More Important than the Rights of Negroes:’ Race and Recreation in Charlotte, North Carolina, 1927 – 1973,” Masters Thesis, Department of History, UNC Charlotte, 2015, pp. 40, 43, 65.

³² “Plan to Build Negro Wading Pool Drafted,” *Charlotte Observer*, May 29, 1943.

³³ “Facility Honoring Heroes to Be Named Freedom Park,” *Charlotte Observer*, April 4, 1945. “Park Campaign Aided by Elks,” *Charlotte Observer*, May 27, 1945.

³⁴ “Freedom Park Job Launched by Group,” *Charlotte Observer*, May 14, 1946. Aerial photo of the park under construction: “Freedom Park,” *Charlotte Observer*, July 19, 1947. “Kuester Memorial Dedication Slated,” *Charlotte Observer*, June 2, 1948.



1948 Charlotte map, detail. Note Pearl Street Park near the center of the image.

Second Ward High School is indicated by "85" near top left of map.

Morgan School is indicated by "76" near top right of map. Note the small park filling the block to its right.

Baxter Street, extended westward from Cherry in the 1940s, crossed a then-new bridge over Sugar Creek.

City of Charlotte map, 1948, in the collection of the Carolina Room, Charlotte Mecklenburg Library.

Pearl Street Park in use

Even before Thompson Orphanage officially signed the deed to the land along Pearl Street, city officials designated it as the site of the city's black Victory Garden for 1943.³⁵ The Victory Gardens movement came as more and more of America's agricultural output went into the war effort during World War II.³⁶ The federal government urged patriotic citizens to plant small gardens and raise food for themselves. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt even cultivated one at the White House. Posters and advertisements carried the message, including a series of cartoons by Charlotte-born artist Charles Alston which ran in African American newspapers nationwide.³⁷ In Charlotte, reported the *Observer*, "The Negro garden program will be under the advisory direction of Lula Mae White, supervisor of Negro recreation" with the park department.³⁸



Charlotte Observer, February 21, 1943.



State Archives of North Carolina

<http://digital.ncdcr.gov/cdm/ref/collection/p16062coll10/id/141>

³⁵ "Negro Victory Gardeners Given Use of Park Land," *Charlotte Observer*, February 21, 1943.

³⁶ "Victory Garden," *Wikipedia* website, on-line at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Victory_garden

³⁷ "Charles Alston," *Wikipedia* website, on-line at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Alston Erin Blakemore, "This African American Artist's Cartoons Helped Win World War II," *Smithsonian Magazine*, February 2017. On-line at <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/african-american-artists-cartoons-helped-win-world-war-ii-180962279/> To find Alston's war-era cartoons in the collection of the National Archives, see for instance <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/535632>

³⁸ "Negro Victory Gardeners Given Use of Park Land," *Charlotte Observer*, February 21, 1943.



Newspaper cartoons promoted Victory Gardens. African American artist Charles Alston drew these cartoons which ran in black newspapers nationwide.

Born in Charlotte in 1907, Charles Henry Alston moved to New York City and became an important figure in the Harlem Renaissance. He interacted often with Charlotte's most famous artist, Romare Bearden, a cousin by marriage. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Alston)

Images from the National Archives. <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/535632>
<https://catalog.archives.gov/id/535638> See also <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/african-american-artists-cartoons-helped-win-world-war-ii-180962279/>

Lula Mae White was a key African American figure in the parks movement in Charlotte. She graduated from Charlotte's first black high school, Second Ward High in the Brooklyn neighborhood, in its initial graduating class of 1924.³⁹ After earning a BA degree at what is now Winston Salem State University, she taught public school briefly in Pineville before finding her career in the recreation movement. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) -- created in 1935 as part of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal to put people to work during the Great Depression -- was making grants to cities so they could employ recreation specialists. The City of Charlotte hired Lula Mae White as "supervisor of Negro Recreation activities" in the city parks.

A 1942 *Observer* story gave a sense of her early career trajectory, "Lula Mae White, head of the Negro Defense Recreation Office and former supervisor of Negro Recreation activities in the WPA recreation program ... [will] serve as director for the indoor play program... and as supervisor of the Negro summer playground activity. With six years experience in recreational leadership, she will assist also in the training of personnel to administer the Negro playground program."⁴⁰

Among her early activities, Lula Mae White led in forming Charlotte's first black Girl Scout troop in 1937.⁴¹ When Morris Field (later Charlotte Douglas International Airport) opened as an air base in 1941, Lula Mae White coordinated recreation there, including "a dance and community sing" with a visit from "a delegation of girls from the Negro YMCA."⁴² Her tireless work continued at least into the 1950s. When she died in 1987, the *Charlotte Observer* looked back over her life in a feature story, noting: "She was the first black Playground Director for the Charlotte Parks and Recreation Department."⁴³



Photo from funeral program, courtesy of Simpson-Gillespie Church

³⁹ "First Commencement of Second Ward High Held," *Charlotte Observer*, May 19, 1924.

⁴⁰ *Charlotte Observer*, September 29, 1942.

⁴¹ "Troops Formed by Girl Scouts," *Charlotte Observer*, December 12, 1937.

⁴² "Enlisted Men's Ball on Friday," *Charlotte Observer*, September 4, 1941.

⁴³ "Lula Mae Brown Loved Young People," *Charlotte Observer*, July 29, 1987.

Lula Mae Brown 'Loved Young People'

By LUCHINA FISHER
Staff Writer

When it came to church and community Lula Mae White Brown had a hand in them.

"She wanted to attend all the church meetings, 'til she was about not able to go. But she still wanted to go," said Letha Shipp, a fellow church member who knew her for 42 years.

Mrs. Brown, 80, died Saturday, July 25, 1987. The Charlotte native was a member of the first graduating class of the old Second Ward High School in 1924.

In 1928 she graduated from Winston-Salem State Teachers College but taught only briefly in Pineville. Her real love was work in her church and community.

A member of Simpson-Gillespie United Methodist Church for more than 30 years, Mrs.

Brown served as Sunday school treasurer, led the ladies Bible class and served as president for United Methodist Women.

In the late '70s the church organized the first hot lunch program in the city and Mrs. Brown was secretary and treasurer.

"She was very concerned about the welfare of the community," said the Rev. John Epps, minister at Simpson-Gillespie church.

She was a registrar for the Lincoln Heights voting precinct.

But Mrs. Brown was particularly concerned about young people in the community. "She really loved young people," niece Mable Reeder said. "She always wanted to see them better themselves."

For the past 30 years, Mrs. Brown supervised an annual talent show for young people to compete nationally and win scholarships.

Around 1962 she founded the Charlotte chapter of Alpha Chi sorority "to promote

better women and give our young people some thing to do," Mrs. Reeder said.

Mrs. Brown was the first playground director for the Charlotte Parks and Recreation Department. She helped further the education for many young people by giving them work in playgrounds, Reeder said.

During World War II, she organized a group of people to travel to Fort Bragg and entertain the soldiers.

She never had children of her own, though she had two stepchildren. "I guess maybe she didn't have time to have kids. She was so busy," Reeder said. "She really liked doing things."

Survivors include her nephew, William Gillespie of Ossining, N.Y.; nieces, Mrs. Elizabeth Banks of Philadelphia, Mrs. Mable Reeder, Mrs. Nannie Allen.

Funeral is 11 a.m. today at St. Mark's United Methodist Church. Burial will be in York Memorial Park. Grier Funeral Home is in charge.



Brown

Charlotte Observer, July 29, 1987.

By the mid 1940s, African American residents were making active use of Pearl Street Park. In July 1943 it held the finals of a city-wide horseshoe tournament.⁴⁴ In 1945 it was the site of a city-wide celebration of the legacy of parks advocate Joseph Lee, starting with a flag-raising ceremony and including a luncheon of chocolate milk, sandwiches and doughnuts.⁴⁵

To Observe Play Day

Program Will Begin At 10 This Morning

Elaborate plans have been formed for observance locally today of Joseph Lee play day under leadership of the Charlotte Park and Recreation commission. Originally the celebration was scheduled for last Friday, but postponement until today was found necessary because of rainy weather. The late Joseph Lee was widely known as the founder of the modern playground system.

Independence Park has been selected as the center at which white children will participate in the special program, with registration beginning at 10 o'clock this morning and the round of events starting at 10:30. At 10:45 a flag-raising ceremony will begin. At noon, chocolate milk, sandwiches, and doughnuts are to be sold in order to make luncheon available and avoid interruption of the program for the day.

For 4:30 o'clock this afternoon a boxing match has been arranged and many other events are planned. At 5:15 a watermelon party, the last phase of the program, is to begin.

A similar celebration, with the same hours prevailing, is planned for Negro children today, these events to be at the Pearl street unit of the municipal park and playground system.

Except for the Independence Park and the Pearl street center, all the units in the system will be closed today, said Mrs. Mary Brackman Sills, supervisor of recreation for the Charlotte Park and Recreation commission.

ILLNESS FATAL TO A. L. CHAPMAN

Resident Of Lynwood Avenue Succumbs; Services to Be Conducted This Afternoon.

Alvin L. Chapman, 43, died at his home at 200 Lynwood avenue yesterday afternoon. Funeral services will be held this afternoon at 3:30 o'clock at Crouch Funeral home. Rev. J. D. Moose will officiate, and interment will be in Pleasant Grove cemetery near Shelby.

Surviving Mr. Chapman are his mother, Mrs. Mattie Chapman; two brothers, John M. Chapman of Charlotte and Joe Chapman of Baltimore; two sisters, Mrs. Claire Right of Shelby and Mrs. Bessie Gillis of Charlotte. Mr. Chapman was a member of Thomasboro Baptist church.

Charlotte Observer, July 31, 1945.

⁴⁴ "Negro Tourney Nears Finals," *Charlotte Observer*, July 12, 1943.

⁴⁵ "Program Will Begin at 10 This Morning," *Charlotte Observer*, July 31, 1945.

“Pearl Street Park was like a big family gathering every day,” remembers Frank Manago, who grew up in the Brooklyn neighborhood on Morrow Street a block north of the park during the 1950s.⁴⁶

“There were swings. There were bleachers on the basketball court ... [and a baseball diamond] fenced in for the fans, so they wouldn’t get hit by the balls. And there was a water fountain.”

Manago also recalls “a cookout -- a grill, a physical grill made out of bricks and steel. First come first serve, whoever got there first was able to use it. And that was very happy.”

“Also we had a swimming pool there, a wading pool, it was two feet deep or something like that. It wasn’t much. But at least you could cool off in the summertime.”

“Park & Rec had summer activities every summer.”

“In the wintertime there was a hill near Pearl Street Park where you usually would make sleds for the snow and slide down the hill. Because it was a pretty steep hill. We’d use cardboard, the stuff out of boxes, corrugated cardboard. And that was a sled. You just hold onto it, like that. By the time you got down the hill it was all wet and stuff and you had to find another one somewhere.”

“Living in Brooklyn was special. Everybody knew each other, from going to school together or church, social functions, and Pearl Street Park. That was the gathering place, our place for recreation activity.”



Manago attended Second Ward High School, graduating in 1966 and going on to a career as an environmental scientist with the federal government. He remembers that Second Ward High School used Pearl Street Park as its athletic field, an eight-block walk from the school. The football team and baseball team played there and the marching band practiced there as well. Indeed a 1966 aerial photo

⁴⁶ Frank Manago, interview with Tom Hanchett, May 8, 2018.

showed the football grid lines at the south edge of the park, overlapping the baseball field.

Remembers Manago: “We did not have a [athletic] field at Second Ward High. So we got permission from Park and Rec to have practice at Pearl Street Park, football practice and baseball practice. And the baseball team played their games at Pearl Street Park.”

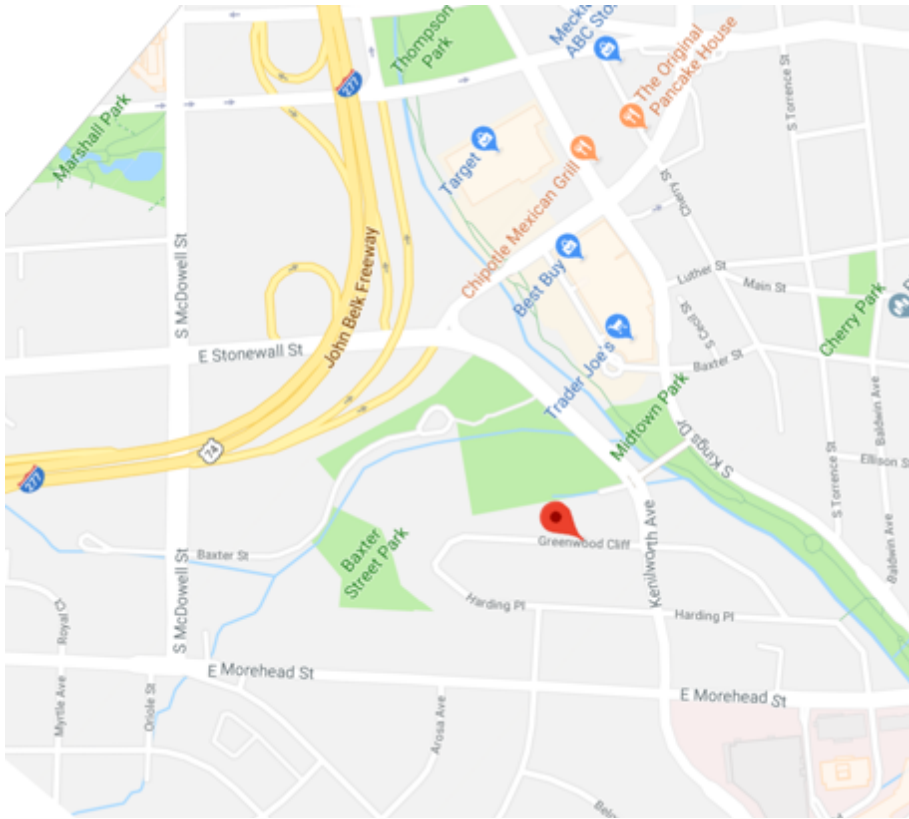
“The football team would walk from Second Ward to Pearl Street Park. All the people would come out and greet the players. The neighborhood would have cups of water for them because it was in the summertime, it was hot, so they had some relief.”

“It was like a community.”

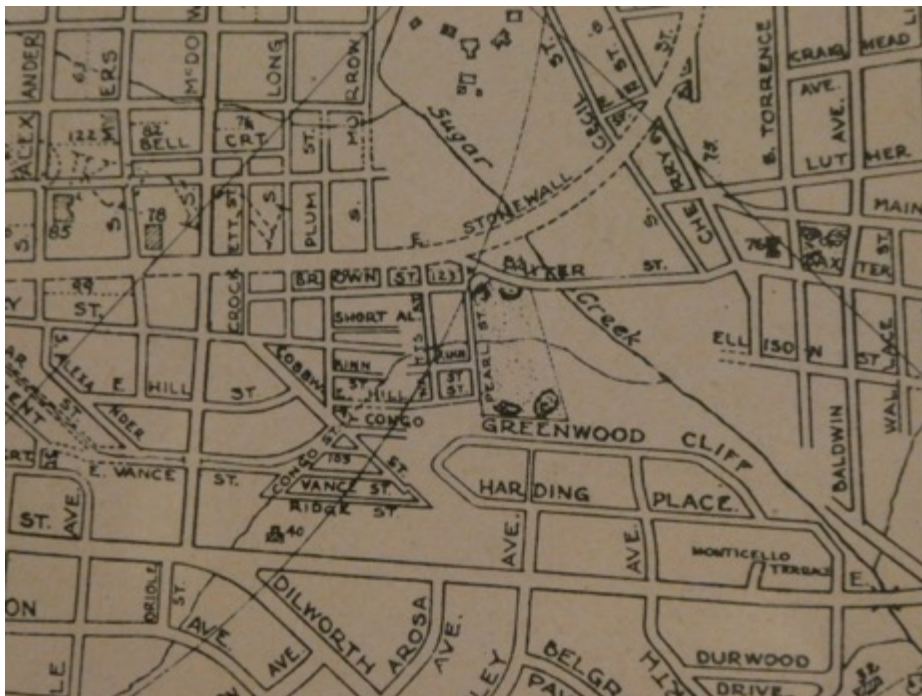


Pearl Street Park and environs, 1966, courtesy of Charlotte Mecklenburg Park and Recreation. White indicates 2018 property lines.

Note football grid and baseball diamond at left, adjacent to the homes of Pearl Street. Charlottetown Mall is at right; Charlottetown Mall Post Office at lower center. Kennilworth Avenue runs vertically through the right-center of the photo.



2018 Charlotte map detail, Google. Comparison of this map with the 1948 map below shows how dramatically street patterns have changed. Morehead Street, McDowell Street, Greenwood Cliff and Harding Place are among the few streets to appear on both maps.



Pearl Street Park in a Changing City, 1950s – 1990s

Racial desegregation:

Charlotte parks desegregated in the late 1950s-1960s in the wake of the U.S. Supreme Court's 1954 landmark decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. It held that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal." The Supreme Court specifically extended that precedent to parks on November 7, 1955 when it affirmed a lower court decision in case *Dawson v. Mayor and City Council of Baltimore*.⁴⁷ "Public Park Segregation Illegal," headlined the *Charlotte Observer's* front page the next day.

Public Park Segregation Illegal

Legal Tests Seen In N. C.

High Court Gives Ruling

All Tax-Supported Places Of Recreation Are Affected

Court-Martial Held Illegal For Ex-GIs

Russia Hints At New Plan For Germany

THEY HEARD THE NEWS — Here in Charlotte's Park Street during storm Monday when news of the Supreme Court ruling was received by Ernest Sifford, and Commissioner E. P. Shelby. Standing are Commissioner L. M. McEwen, Park Dept. Marion Davis.

Charlotte officials did not greet the decision with enthusiasm, but by the end of the decade the park department began moving to end racial segregation. The turning point came in December 1956 when Mecklenburg judge Susie Sharp ruled on a lawsuit by African Americans to desegregate the Bonnie Brae golf course at Revolution Park.⁴⁸ That park's land contained a "reverter clause" which stated that if the park accepted African Americans, the land would revert to its previous owner.

⁴⁷ "Public Park Segregation Illegal," *Charlotte Observer*, November 8, 1955. The Supreme Court affirmed a lower court decision in case *Dawson v. Mayor and City Council of Baltimore*, November 7, 1955. See Charles A. Reynard, "Legislation Affecting Segregation," *Louisiana Law Review* (December 1956), page 103. On-line at <https://digitalcommons.law.lsu.edu/lalrev/vol17/iss1/23>.

⁴⁸ Jess Usher, "'The Golfers': African American Golfers in the North Carolina Piedmont and the Struggle for Access," *North Carolina Historical Review* (April 2010), pp. 158 – 193. Michael Worth Ervin, "'Public Order is Even More Important than the Rights of Negroes': Race and Recreation in Charlotte, North Carolina, 1927 – 1973," Masters Thesis, Department of History, UNC Charlotte, 2015, Chapter 3.

Sharp's ruling stated unequivocally that the Park and Recreation Commission was "permanently enjoined from denying Negroes the right to play on the course." It became part of a series of rulings across the United States that invalidated racial reverter clauses. On January 9, 1957, seventeen-year-old golfer James Otis Williams teed up at Revolution Park.⁴⁹

Barriers began to fall at all city parks thereafter, but it was a slow process. In 1960, the same summer that Sit-Ins desegregated downtown lunch counters, African American student Civil Rights activists boldly came to swim in the still-all-white Revolution Park Pool.⁵⁰ As late as 1965, Park and Rec listed separate "Negro" activities in its annual reports.⁵¹

Charlottetown Mall and related development:

Thompson Orphanage departed for a more suburban site in the mid 1950s (it remains in operation in the 2010s, not as an orphanage but as a social service provider: Thompson Children and Family Services). It leased much of its land for construction of a major shopping center called Charlottetown Mall.

Created by nationally renowned developer James Rouse, Charlottetown opened in 1959 as the first enclosed mall in the South and only the fourth in the entire United States.⁵² The project covered part of Sugar Creek in a concrete culvert, hiding it from view for a generation.

The mall sparked adjacent development. Kenilworth Avenue was extended through the land between the Pearl Street Park and Sugar Creek. It became a busy thoroughfare that funneled commuters from southeast Charlotte into the center city – and cut Pearl Street Park off from Sugar Creek. In 1963 a developer constructed a large one-story building on Kenilworth adjacent to the park for use as a branch Post Office (when the Post Office no longer needed the property, it became a popular

⁴⁹ "Bonnie Brae First: Negro Golfer Fires Hot 37," *Charlotte Observer*, January 10, 1957. The Park Department initiated steps toward desegregation in 1955 and 1956, allowing African American groups to take part in particular events in Freedom Park. "Negro Children Have Fun as Festival Performers," *Charlotte Observer*, May 20, 1955. "The first colored players to be entered in ... the City-Wide tennis tournament at Freedom Park" played in 1956: "Rain Dampens Play at City Net Tourney," *Charlotte Observer*, July 5, 1956.

⁵⁰ "Revolution Park Swimming Pool is Desegregated," *Charlotte Observer*, July 28, 1960. I am indebted to historian J. Michael Moore for this reference. Desegregation battles at the Revolution Park pool continued well into the 1960s: Michael Worth Ervin, "Public Order is Even More Important than the Rights of Negroes: Race and Recreation in Charlotte, North Carolina, 1927 – 1973," Masters Thesis, Department of History, UNC Charlotte, 2015.

⁵¹ "Charlotte Park and Recreation Commission Annual Report September 1, 1964 to September 1, 1965." Compare with the 1967 report, which did not list racially separate activities. Both are in the collection of the Carolina Room, Charlotte Mecklenburg Library.

⁵² Hanchett, *Sorting Out the New South City*, p. 242.

restaurant called Midtown Sundries before being demolished in the 2000s).⁵³ To the south of Pearl Street Park, at the corner of Kenilworth Avenue and Greenwood Cliff, two multi-story office buildings went up in around 1970, one occupied for many years by the Charlotte Regional Realtors Association.⁵⁴

Demolition of Brooklyn:

About the same time, the City of Charlotte demolished the Brooklyn neighborhood using grants from the federal Urban Renewal program. The demolition took out many streets such as Pearl Street that had been built as rental housing and often suffered from poor maintenance by their absentee landlords. But the clearance also destroyed Charlotte's main black business district as well as homes owned by many African American leaders. Over 1000 households were displaced.⁵⁵ 208 black businesses closed, most never to re-open. More than a dozen churches departed. Second Ward High School fell to the wrecking ball; a North Carolina state historic marker placed in the early 1980s honors its site.

The former Brooklyn lands were turned over to government and business uses. Today the area includes the Government Center, Aquatic Center, Walton Plaza, First Baptist Church, hotel and office buildings on McDowell Street, much of the southern and eastern segments of Interstate 277, as well as office buildings on Baxter Street off South McDowell Street. The only residential development in the vast tract came in 1977 when Charlotte Housing Authority built an apartment tower for low-income senior citizens called Charlottetown Terrace at 1000 Baxter Street overlooking Pearl Street Park.⁵⁶

⁵³ "Mall to Get Post Office," *Charlotte Observer*, August 15, 1962. The building became a restaurant called Midtown Sundries in its last years before being demolished in the 2000s.

⁵⁴ An insurance concern, Lumberman's Mutual Casualty Company, developed the structures at 1201 Greenwood Cliff and 1229 Greenwood Cliff. Kemper Insurance was the initial main tenant at 1229. "Two New Office Buildings are Planned for Charlotte," *Charlotte Observer*, December 7, 1969.

⁵⁵ All numbers are from "Statistical Summary Urban Renewal Areas," 1968, on the *DigitalCollections.UNCC.edu* website, <http://digitalcollections.uncc.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/p15483coll2/id/912/rec/514>

⁵⁶ "Elderly Gain More Housing," *Charlotte Observer*, October 8, 1978. "Charlottetown Terrace," *Charlotte Housing Authority: Find Housing* website, on-line at: <http://www.cha-nc.org/property/21-charlottetown-terrace>



A portion of "Charlotte Urban Renewal Areas" map, 1972. Look closely at the right edge of "No. 4" to see the boundary of Pearl Street Park above a rounded notch that contains Greenwood Cliff.

Courtesy of DigitalCollections.UNCC.edu

See also:

<http://digitalcollections.uncc.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15483coll2/id/941/rec/814>

Frank Manago still recalls the pain of losing the neighborhood he had grown up in:

"We left Brooklyn in August 1968. We were one of the last ones to leave. We owned our own house. We knew, if you are going to tear the neighborhood down, there's no way they are going to put up a brand new school and new houses for us. We knew that. But there really wasn't nothing we could do."

"It was depressing. Because it broke the neighborhood up. Everybody moved. We lost contact with a lot of people after they broke Brooklyn up. Eventually, we got in touch with some people by going to funerals and stuff like that, and got the addresses and made contact that way. But it was devastating. It was devastating."⁵⁷

With its neighborhood gone, Pearl Street Park ceased to function as a neighborhood gathering place. It became a destination for field-game players, especially in the fast-growing sport of soccer. But African Americans in Charlotte never forgot their love of Pearl Street Park.

⁵⁷ Frank Manago, interview with Tom Hanchett, May 8, 2018.

Pearl Street Park in the 2000s - 2010s

During the mid 2000s, developer Peter Pappas and Mecklenburg County worked together to demolish the abandoned Charlottetown Mall. They uncapped Little Sugar Creek and turned it into the city's best-loved greenway park, opening in 2012.⁵⁸ Pappas created a large new mixed-use development called The Metropolitan -- office and residential towers, restaurants, brand-name retail including Trader Joes and Best Buy -- on most of the mall site. At the south edge of the project, Mecklenburg County and the City of Charlotte collaborated to construct a new bridge and a street linking Kings Drive with Kenilworth Avenue. It was named Pearl Park Way, honoring Pearl Street Park.

In the park itself, a new marker appeared in 2005, placed by the Charlotte Mecklenburg Black Heritage Committee. It proudly called attention to the park's African American history.

The Heritage Committee, led by pioneering public health nurse Thereasea Elder and former School Board chair Arthur Griffin, among others, also pushed local officials to preserve the Second Ward Gymnasium. It was the one piece of Second Ward High School that had escaped demolition in 1968 -- and one of just four buildings that survived from the Brooklyn neighborhood. Renovated by the Park and Recreation Commission, it is set to open in 2018 as a community center affiliated with Aquatic Center. Panels in the building will call attention to history of the school and the Brooklyn neighborhood.

The success of The Metropolitan during its first decade inspired Pappas launch a second phase. He crossed Kenilworth and purchased land adjoining Pearl Street Park, working out a land-swap that reconfigured the park's boundary. The next phase of The Metropolitan, now under construction, will be a "high-density mixed-use development" overlooking the park.⁵⁹ It promises to put the recreation space back into use as a daily gathering place for residents, shoppers and office workers who will be able to walk there.

As Mecklenburg Park and Recreation reconfigures Pearl Street Park, it plans to add new elements to honor the park's past. Visitors will learn stories of Pearl Street Park's heritage and its important place in the African American history of Charlotte.

⁵⁸ "Little Sugar Creek Greenway," *Wikipedia*, on-line at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little_Sugar_Creek_Greenway

⁵⁹ "More Construction Coming: Midtown Site Sells for Millions in Planned Redevelopment," *Charlotte Observer*, September 12, 2017, on-line at <http://www.charlotteobserver.com/news/business/biz-columns-blogs/development/article172833261.html> Also "When Will Pappas Properties Begin Developing Its Midtown Site?" *Charlotte Business Journal*, December 28, 2017, on-line at <https://www.bizjournals.com/charlotte/news/2017/12/28/when-will-pappas-properties-begin-developing-its.html>



*Pearl Street Park and environs, courtesy of Charlotte Mecklenburg Park and Recreation.
White indicates 2018 property lines.*

*Above, 1957, showing the small dwellings of Brooklyn at left, larger Dilworth houses below, and
Thompson Orphanage fields at right.*

Below, 1997, Charlottetown Terrace apartment tower at left, Charlottetown Mall at right.



*Pearl Street Park and environs, courtesy of Charlotte Mecklenburg Park and Recreation.
White indicates 2018 property lines.*

2017 showing the newly un-capped Little Sugar Creek and The Metropolitan mixed-use development at right.



Additional Second Ward High photos from Second Ward National Alumni Association courtesy of Kathryn Frye:



Additional Second Ward High photos from Carolina Room, Charlotte Mecklenburg Library:

