The University of North Carolina at Asheville

The Reaction of the Charlotte Elite to Growth and City Planning,

1900-1930.

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"Are we in Soviet Russia or in Mecklenburg County?"—Anti-planning leader, attorney

John McRae, at a public hearing on city planning.[1]

On September 5, 1930, at the prodding of a new Progressive city manager, Radford W. Rigsby, it appeared that Charlotte city council would finally approve a zoning ordinance and a city plan. However, at a public hearing on the proposal, there was a furious reaction by people who were against city planning. Opponents "threatened the destruction of the administration and the downfall of the council-manager form of government, and openly flayed the city manager as a dictator…." Opponents presented a petition against the proposal, saying, "it prevents property owners from developing their property in accordance with their deeds, prevents the city from growing in a natural way, is an unnecessary governmental regulation," and, said attorney Colonel T.L. Kirkpatrick, "it would set back the wheels of progress here for 25 years."[2]

After a long line of furious speakers, one grey-haired old man stood alone and spoke with a shaky voice in support of the proposal. "It was Capt. J.D. Barrier, veteran of the Confederacy, drilled in the art of holding his ground. And there he stood, alone among a court house filled with opponents in whose eyes without lifting the lids, could be seen the gleam of blood."[3]   "Charlotte has suffered from the lack of regulation," said Barrier, adding, "zoning would not stop the wheels of progress but instead would turn them."[4] However, Barrier's remarks were not enough to counter the angry objections from so many of Charlotte's leaders, and city council voted to abandon the city planning proposal.

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[1] "Action Follows Protests of Noisy Crowd At Big Hearing" *The Charlotte Observer* September 6, 1930.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid.
[4] "Lone Voice In Favor of Zone Law Drowned" *The Charlotte News* September 6, 1930.

Over his lifetime, J.D. Barrier had witnessed incredible changes as Charlotte had transformed from a Civil War village to an industrial metropolis of the 20th century. He had seen the Civil War destroy the Old South, and the forces of industrialization build a New South. Just as fast as Charlotte's building were torn down and replaced by skyscrapers, so was Charlotte's old social structure torn down by the extremely rapid growth of the city. Although J.D. Barrier was in the minority at this meeting, other people throughout the country, such as John Nolen, agreed that city planning, by restoring physical order and social stability to the city, would be a help to urban progress, not a hindrance. However, the rejection of city planning in Charlotte revealed much about elite values and their vision of the meaning of progress. The elite hoped to turn Charlotte into a metropolis while, at the same time, avoiding any changes in society or in the role of government. When confronted by growing urban problems, rather than utilizing city planning, the elite believed that an idealized feeling of *public spirit* could restore unity to Charlotte. They presented an idealized image of Charlotte that allowed continued growth yet glossed over the resulting inequalities.

The issue of city planning was seriously raised in 1917, 1928, and 1930, but a core of opponents continually resisted Charlotte's adoption of it until after World War II. Most of these opponents came from the white-collar elite, a group that held decisive political power and social influence in Charlotte's conservative social structure throughout the first three decades of the twentieth century. In his book, *The Urban Ethos in the South, 1920-1930,* Blaine A. Brownell examines the commonalities that existed among urban elites throughout the South.[5] Although he does not discuss Charlotte,

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[5] Blaine A. Brownell, *The Urban Ethos in the South, 1920-1930.* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1975).

Brownell says that the elite envisioned a city where growth and social stability were able to coexist. This leaves room to examine the elite of Charlotte in this context. In Thomas Hanchett's work, *Sorting Out the New South City: Race, Class and Urban Development in Charlotte,* Hanchett concluded that as Charlotte grew from a village into an industrial metropolis, the resulting social tensions caused the city to "sort out" into separate neighborhoods along lines of class and race.[6] Hanchett identifies the broad trends and movements that led this to happen, including the role of the elite. He notes that Charlotte had rejected city planning, but does not examine in detail the reasons why. These two works greatly inform this paper, and Charlotte's local studies, histories, newspaper articles, promotional books and other materials shed light on the mindset of Charlotte's elite and their reaction to growth and city planning.

By 1930, Charlotte had become a very different place from what its oldest residents would have remembered. Every year, a sea of new faces arrived as Charlotte's population grew from about 7,000 in 1880 to 82,000 in 1930.[7] As with many other "New South" cities, post-Civil War industrialization had swept through Charlotte and built a metropolis out of what was once only a dusty courthouse village. Charlotte found itself in the bull's eye of the Piedmont's emerging industrial belt. Cotton mills and factories sprang up in the surrounding farmland, funneling their business and money into Charlotte's institutions. By 1900, Charlotte was North Carolina's largest city and had an impressive resume: it was "a center of hydroelectric power, junction of four rails and 62

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[6] Thomas Hanchett, *Sorting Out the New South City.* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998).
[7] U.S. Bureau of the Census, Sixteenth Census, "Population," 1:772.

daily passenger trains, supplier of 400 surrounding cotton mills, home of eight banks, and a retailing center with the lowest per capita taxes of any North Carolina city."[8]

Industrialization did more than raise Charlotte's status; it also changed the city's built environment and social arrangements in profound ways. From its founding in 1768 until the late 1800s, Charlotte was a typical southern village where people lived in what Thomas Hanchett calls a "salt and pepper" pattern.[9] Charlotte did not have separate areas for blacks, whites, the rich and the poor; nor did Charlotte divide residential land uses from commercial land uses. Instead, houses and businesses blended into what was an urban mix of all types of people. This integration of social groupings and land uses existed until the forces of industrialization forged a different and much bigger Charlotte.

Despite this physical integration of people, Southern towns and cities had always observed sharp social distinctions between wealthy and poor whites, and especially between blacks and whites. After the Populist challenge of the 1890s, the lines between these social classes hardened all over the South as the elite put down the lower classes' insurrection.[10] At about the same time in Charlotte, with the beginning of rapid growth and an influx of newcomers to the city, the elite were especially anxious to separate themselves. This new consciousness carried over into the built environment of Charlotte. Separation did not happen all at once, and the interests of factory owners, upper-class whites, and business concerns were all served by this type of separation, thus, in small increments, it began to occur.

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[8] Jack Claiborne, *The Charlotte Observer: Its Time and Place, 1869-1986.* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 142.
[9] Hanchett 7.
[10] David Goldfield, *Cotton Fields and Skyscrapers: Southern City and Region 1607-1980.* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 112.

Socially, the salt-and-pepper living pattern came to an end, replaced by separate white-collar neighborhoods, blue-collar neighborhoods, and black neighborhoods. The quality of life in these separate areas began to reflect the class standing of its residents. In 1889, industrialists in North Charlotte built several mill villages for factory workers. These neighborhoods were the first developments in Charlotte built exclusively for one land use—residential—and one class—blue-collar. This trend soon repeated itself in other areas of Charlotte. Blacks developed their own business district, called Brooklyn, and clustered in their own neighborhoods, and Charlotte's upper-class whites moved out of the city and flocked to a setting that promised more peace and stability--the suburbs.[11]

White collar suburbs like Dillworth, Piedmont Park, and Myers Park began to spring up on the south and east sides of Charlotte during the 1900s. In Myers Park, Charlotte's largest and most prestigious suburb, planner John Nolen was hired by realtor George Stephens to create a model neighborhood for Charlotte's elite. John Nolen was an innovator in neighborhood planning, and during his career he would become a leader in the city planning movement. In his 1911 design for Myers Park, the major innnovation was the curving streets that were laid out to naturally follow the hills and valleys of the land. The purpose of the street plan went beyond aesthetic effect; it effectively made Myers Park one large cul-de-sac that ensured residents' privacy.[12] The mansions and quiet shaded streets of Myers Park gave it a park-like atmosphere, which sharply contrasted the bustle of the city. Yet, for Charlotte's leading businessmen, that bustle was

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[11] Hanchett 105, 130.
[12] Hanchett 174.

only a short streetcar ride away. As a sales brochure boasted, Myers Park allowed its residents "out of the dust and out of the heat; a country home on a city street."[13]

As the wealthy of Charlotte moved to the southern and eastern suburbs, many of Charlotte's institutions also left downtown for addresses in southeast Charlotte. Several churches and two hospitals moved to Dilworth in the south and Elizabeth in the east during the 1910s.   Charlotte's main hospital remained downtown until it also moved to Dillworth in 1940.[14] Parks were located exclusively in the wealthy suburbs of Charlotte. In Myers Park, J.S. Myers donated land "for the perpetual use as a public park for white people." [15] During the 1920s, the location of Charlotte's first grocery stores "read like a roster of the city's most affluent southern and eastern suburban addresses", and Charlotte's first high school was built in Elizabeth.[16] The building of high schools in North Charlotte to serve the children of factory workers and in Brooklyn to serve the black population made clear the separation of social groups that had taken place in Charlotte.[17] For upper class Charlotteans, it had become possible to go to school, get health care, shop, work, and worship without seeing anyone outside of their own social group.

The residents of Charlotte's affluent suburbs were mostly among what historian Blaine A. Brownell termed the "commercial-civic elite." Rising in stature throughout the South during the 1920s, the commercial-civic elite was the "middle ranking economic

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[13] Myers Park Sales Brochure, 1921, Myers Park Vertical File, Robinson-Spangler Carolina Room, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Library, Charlotte, NC.
[14] The Medical Society of South Carolina. "A Brief History of the Carolina's Health Care System" Internet on-line www.medsocietysc.com/history.cfm?history=2 (12 September, 2003)
[15] "Myers Donates Land for Park" *The Charlotte News* January 16, 1919, Myers Park Vertical File, Robinson-Spangler Carolina Room, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Library, Charlotte, NC.
[16] Hanchett 202.
[17] Ibid.

interest groups," including journalists, real estate men, professionals, larger merchants and bankers.[18] Industrial giants, such as James B. Duke, often lived among the commercial-civic elite, but historians have categorized them differently.[19] For while the sprawling interests of railroad, shipping, and factory owners usually extended beyond the city, the interests of the commercial-civic elite were ultimately localized to the city. Their prosperity was tied to the wealth of their city. Thus, the commercial-civic elite was deeply active in government and civic organizations like the chamber of commerce, using them to reinforce their own values. In Charlotte, the conservative social views and pro-business mindset of the commercial-civic elite shaped the direction of city government, controlled the media, and directed urban growth during the years of Charlotte's greatest expansion.

Of those members of the commercial-civic elite who are mentioned in this paper, all lived in planned white-collar neighborhoods in South or East Charlotte. Realtor T.T. Allison lived in Piedmont Plaza in East Charlotte. Realtors F.C. Abbott, George Stephens, and E.C. Griffith lived in Myers Park. Clarence "Booster" Keuster and attorneys Paul Whitlock and T.L. Kirkpatrick lived in Dillworth.[20] These men were some of the most influential figures in Charlotte affairs, and many of them were leaders in the opposition to planning. Only George Stephens actively supported planning. That they all came from white-collar neighborhoods demonstrates the degree to which power in Charlotte was contained within a small geographical area of the city.

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[18] Brownell 48.
[19] Brownell 54.
[20] "Charlotte, North Carolina City and Suburan Directory" Volume 26, 1926. Robinson-Spangler Carolina Room, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Library, Charlotte, NC.

Although the business-minded commercial-civic elite of Charlotte were men of the New South, they clung to the the rigid morality and conservative religious beliefs of the Old South. Brownell confirmed that the Southern elite agreed, "the city should become bigger and better—but in many essential respects it should not change."[21] In Charlotte, the intensely conservative social structure was loath to deviate from its traditional Southern mores. Indeed, Charlotteans often bragged of having the "largest church-going population in the world for a city of its size."[22] The fundamentalist Christians were supported by city council, which Harold A. Stone, an urban government researcher from the Public Administration Service, described as "a fortress for the churchmen."[23] The elite attempted to legislate against what they saw as the vices of the lower class—drinking, fighting and generally loose morality. Since the 1880s, mostly white-class prohibitionists had attempted to outlaw the sale of liquor in Charlotte, before finally passing a law in 1904.[24] Subsequently, the growth of a vibrant bootlegging industry probably served to strengthen the conservative's unfavorable opinion of the poor. Stone wondered whether a "extremely high homicide rate" actually existed in Charlotte, or if it was a product of the "moral hypochondria" that existed within the citizenry.[25] Regardless, Stone found that Charlotte's "well understood class distinctions" played an important role in the city's economic, social, and political life.[26]

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[21] Brownell 125.

[22] "Charlotte, North Carolina: Diversified Industrial and Commercial Center" Charlotte Chamber of Commerce, 1927. Robinson-Spangler Carolina Room, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Library, Charlotte, NC.

[23] Howard A. Stone, Don K. Price, and Kathyrn H. Stone, *City Manager Government in Charlotte, North Carolina.* (Chicago: Public Administration Service, 1939), 3.

[24] Hanchett 216. Charlotte remained dry until 1947.

[25] Stone 3.

[26] Stone 3.

The media in Charlotte was a major conduit of elite opinion. Both of Charlotte's biggest newspapers, *The Charlotte Observer* and *The Charlotte News,* were very sympathetic to elite interests. *The Charlotte Observer,* owned by industrialist D.A. Thompkins, ran editorials downplaying the class divide, claiming that "employers' and workers' goals are one and the same", and "high wages do not mean prosperity for the worker."[27] When, in 1921, *The Charlotte Observer* changed the title of its personal news column from "Personal and Social" to "Society," it signified that an upper stratum of society in Charlotte had indeed developed.[28] Inferring a social circle limited to a certain type of people, the term "Society" was an adept description of the elite in Charlotte. As the economic gap between the classes widened, so did the social distance that "Society" maintained, geographically insulated in suburbs like Myers Park.

Local government was another tool used by the elite in order to protect the status quo and the values of Charlotte's conservative social structure. In keeping with the "strict individualism which has at all times characterized the city," the elite philosophy of city government was minimalism, keeping taxes and social spending as low as possible.[29] If government had any role, it was in helping the economy. City government was outfitted to encourage business growth, and, following nationally Progressive trends, guide urban development using business principles. However, in the urban South, observed David Goldfield, Progressive reforms in government were not joined by Progressive societal reforms.[30] Social spending and governmental initiatives on behalf of

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[27] *The Charlotte Observer* August 24, 1923.
[28] Jack Claiborne, *The Charlotte Observer: Its Time and Place, 1869-1986.* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 142.
[29] Stone 1.
[30] Goldfield 101.

the poor were rare. In Charlotte, many public amenities, like parks and libraries, were dependant on private charity.[31] Before a bond referendum was passed in 1917, Charlotte ranked last among North Carolina cities in the value of school property per child of school age.[32] Both of the new forms of government that Charlotte adopted would continue the city's fiscally conservative tradition.

In 1917, the elite of Charlotte pushed the city to adopt a commission form of government that promised Progressive methods of government, removing city government from "the throes of a political machine."[33] Charlotteans like T.L. Kirkpatrick, an attorney and president of the chamber of commerce who led the campaign for the commission government, felt that the old aldermanic system, where an alderman was elected from each ward of the city, was corrupt and wasted too much money.[34] However, while the aldermanic system had ensured that poor wards were represented in government, the new commission government allowed all officials to come from one area of the city.[35] Furthermore, voting restrictions had disenfranchised large sections of the population. Throughout the South, the elite used poll taxes, literacy tests, and open intimidation to keep blacks and poor whites from voting. The result was that, across the South and in Charlotte, the commercial-civic elite was disproportionately influential in local politics, "comprising the vast majority of elected officials."[36] Of the twelve Charlotte commissioners that were elected from 1917-1929, only one (a preacher) was

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[31] Stone 3.
[32] *The Charlotte Observer* April 24, 1917.
[33] *The Charlotte Observer* May 5, 1917.
[34] Claiborne 45.
[35] Edgar Thompson, *Agricultural Mecklenburg and Industrial Charlotte.* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1926), 302.
[36] Brownell 54.

not a member of the commercial-civic elite.[37] The same pattern was observed in

Greensboro, North Carolina, where between 1880 and 1910, upper white class whites

increased their share of aldermanic seats from 49.4 percent to 85.1 percent of the total.[38]

As one contemporary observer noted, "The business elements of Charlotte are happy with

the city government. How other elements feel is impossible to ascertain."[39]

In 1929, the elite of Charlotte pressed for another change in government, this time

to the city-manager form. Realtor E.C. Griffith, a leader in the movement, emphasized

that hiring a manager to run the city's affairs would be beneficial by replacing dirty

politics with business efficiency.[40] Of twenty-one districts, the only four that voted

against the proposal were working class. Myers Park voted in favor of the city-manager

of government by an 8 to 1 ratio.[41] The mayor and four councilman that were elected in

1929 were all members of the commercial civic elite.[42] In Edgar Thompson's study of

Charlotte, he cautioned that while city leaders excelled at efficiently running the city,

"they have developed little social efficiency," meaning taking care of the average

inhabitant of the city.[43] Thompson said while the government had "devoted their

energies" towards the already well-off, it had "done little to abolish the slums."[44] Thus,

governmental reform was used to reinforce the conservative social structure and the

disparity of wealth.[45]

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[37] Stone 49.
[38] Samuel M. Kipp III, "Old Notables and Newcomers: The Economic and Political Elite of Greensboro, North Carolina, 1880-1920." *Journal of Southern History* 43, no. 3 (August 1977), 392.
[39] Thompson 308.
[40] Stone 5.
[41] Stone 6.
[42] Stone 41.
[43] Thompson 302.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Goldfield 101.

With the cooperation of city government, business interests in Charlotte had reason to be optimistic about business opportunites, and the city was growing rapidly. The most important goal of the elite leadership of Charlotte was continuing this growth, because growth made many people rich. Realtor F.C. Abbott summarized this in his motto—"population makes values."[46] In other words, the rate of city population growth was proportional to rising property values, and thus greater wealth. As Abbott watched Charlotte rise from a small town to an industrial city of the 1920s, he saw the expanding population push up property values in the center of Charlotte. One lot rose from $12,000 to $625,000 during this time.[47] Many Charlotteans profited twice from growth—once from the improving business opportunities, and then from rising property values. Abbott noted that the most fortunate property owners were "those who owned real estate in the center of town and had to do little to improve it, just watch as property values went up."[48]

Only slightly less fortunate were men like Abbott and his partner in real estate, George Stephens, who profited from the suburban craze that accompanied growth. Throughout America's development, land speculation has been an essential element of the economy. Americans looked upon suburban development as a continuation of the frontier tradition. Developers were admired for taking untamed land and turning it into "places fit for the habitation of man".[49] Real estate agents saw in their work a measure of civic importance. At the end of his career, F.C. Abbott looked back with pride at his accomplishments:

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[46] Abbott, F.C. "Fifty Years in Charlotte Real Estate", 1947. Robinson-Spangler Carolina Room, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Library, Charlotte, NC, 17.
[47] Abbott 19.
[48] Abbott 32.
[49] Brownell 69.

> My realty companies, by years of developing outlying farms into well built-up sections of the city, have added several millions of dollars to the taxable value of the city, and the income from same will, therefore, aid in the support of our schools and other civic necessities for long years after I am forgotten.[50]

Stephens and Abbott were representative of the commercial-civic elite in Charlotte, in that their personal wealth was closely linked to the prosperity of Charlotte. They saw their business ventures as good for Charlotte as well as themselves. Likewise, the city was a symbol of their own aspirations and successes. Just as they competed with other men, their city competed with other cities over industrial and commercial power. The rate of the city's growth was a judgement on its spirit and character, and citizens endowed the city with a special identity.[51] Often, this idealization of the city led members of the elite to blind themselves to the harsh realities of urban poverty and disunity.

One method through which a city defined its identity, observes Blaine Brownell, was through its rivalry with other cities.[52] The census was one of the most important scorecards in Charlotte's civic competition with rival cities in North Carolina, including Raleigh, Greensboro and Winston-Salem. The census revealed the winners and losers in terms of population, the most visible statistic of growth. Eager to help Charlotte win, Clarence Keuster of the chamber of commerce adopted this slogan in 1926; "100,000 by 1930 if we all pull together."[53] But when a 1926 mid-decade census report showed that Charlotte's growth had slowed, *The Charlotte Observer* took great pains to demonstrate

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[50] Abbott 31.
[51] Brownell 68.
[52] Brownell 81.
[53] Charlotte Chamber of Commerce "Greetings to Our Members" 1926. Chamber of Commerce Publications and Brochures Vertical File, Robinson-Spangler Carolina Room, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Library, Charlotte, NC.

that the report was only based on an estimation, not actual data. The editorial stated "anyone who has witnessed the expansion of Charlotte over the last years is aware of how much the city has grown."[54] Although the commercial-civic elite was the leading proponent of Charlotte's growth, the entire spectrum of society felt a sense of civic patriotism. Even *The Charlotte Herald*, a pro-labor newspaper, declared "nothing is in the way of Charlotte taking the lead right now and holding the title to the state's largest city."[55]

During the early decades of the 20th century, the sense of competition led to attempts to influence the perception of the city. Bad images, such as reports of stagnant growth, rampant poverty, or class conflict, could hinder Charlotte's progress. On the other hand, establishing a positive urban image in the minds of others could lead to new opportunities. Cultivating an image of a dynamic, growing city, leading businessmen realized, would take a concerted organized effort. The Greater Charlotte Club was their first attempt. Formed in 1905, they adopted the slogan "Watch Charlotte Grow." The Greater Charlotte Club was conceived as a booster organization, dedicated to spreading the word about Charlotte as a phenomenal city. They even supported a marching band that traveled to parades as far as the Midwest, handing out fliers about Charlotte.[56]

Eventually, business leaders wanted to go beyond simple booster activity. They should, said one businessman, move toward further integration of the business community in Charlotte: towards "the management of its commercial organization" by

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[54] "The Census Report" *The Charlotte Observer* April 9, 1926.
[55] "Charlotte's Opportunity" *The Charlotte Herald* February 22, 1924.
[56] Jack Claiborne, *Crown of the Queen City: The Charlotte Chamber of Commerce.* (Charlotte, North Carolina: KPC Publishing, 1999), 32.

the "big men of Charlotte business."[57] Thus, in 1915, the Charlotte Chamber of

Commerce was formed, attracting more members than had the Greater Charlotte Club.

The chamber of commerce soon became the most important organization in Charlotte.

Said one Charlotte booster, in a chamber of commerce promotional book:

> The Chamber of Commerce is the center of civic, social, and commercial
> activities, and an efficient and tireless servant of the community as a whole.
> While it is a city organization, its greater services are in promotion of county
> welfare and agricultural interests.[58]

Thus, in Charlotte and other Southern cities, the chamber of commerce was conceived as

not only a promoter of business, but as an advocate for the community in general. Its

powerful membership, composed mostly of the commercial-civic elite, was well placed

in government offices and other influential positions, including the media. Certainly,

then, the chamber of commerce was well placed to both direct Charlotte's course and

shape its image.

Clarence O. "Booster" Keuster did more than anyone to promote a dynamic

image of Charlotte. As a founding member of the chamber of commerce and its president

from 1921-1948, Keuster was not a wealthy businessman, nor did he have the business

savvy of his colleagues, but he was a natural salesman and a "dynamo" at civic

promotion.[59] His zeal for Charlotte was legendary; his personality the essence of what

was meant when it was bragged, "Charlotte's citizens *believe in their city*."[60] Keuster

travelled the country, speaking to other chambers of commerce and spreading the word

about Charlotte.

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[57] Ibid.
[58] Harris 21.
[59] Claiborne *The Charlotte Observer* 170.
[60] Charlotte Chamber of Commerce "Charlotte, North Carolina, Diversified Industrial and Commercial Center" Robinson-Spangler Carolina Room, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Library, Charlotte, NC.

Boosterism of this kind was characterized by an unending optimism, a tendency to see everything in a positive light. For example, W.H. Harris' book, subtitled "Charlotte: Cock of the Walk Among North Carolina Towns," praised Charlotte with an almost religious fervor. Every aspect of Charlotte was ideal, including the weather ("no severe winds, yet sufficient circulation to purify the air and prevent stagnation"), the water supply ("twenty billion gallons of mountain lake water on tap"), and the labor supply ("composed of that sturdy, law-abiding, liberty-loving Anglo-Saxon stock").[61] At a time when the immigrant population was often criticized, Charlotte's "All-American population", with less than one percent of the population foreign-born, was an attractive lure for industrialists who disliked employing immigrants and blacks.[62] Furthermore, the South lacked the entrenched labor unions of the North, offering "an opportunity for a new philosophy of management."[63] In such a promotional spirit, those unflattering aspects of Charlotte not conducive to selling the city were left out.[64] Different publications talked of an "Anglo-Saxon," "All-American population," but never mentioned the third of Charlotte's population that was black.[65] Certainly, black and poor white areas of the city were overlooked by the statement that Charlotte had "no tenements and no slums."[66]

To the elite, then, the integrity of Charlotte's character was based on measures of growth. Thus, through this lens, the elite had created an idealized image of a united, harmonious Charlotte safe in the care of business leadership. The extent to which the elite subscribed to this illusion was demonstrated by their naïve strategy for urban

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[61] Harris 28-30.
[62] Chamber of Commerce "Diversified Industrial and Commercial Center"
[63] Harris 7.
[64] Harris 9.
[65] Stone 2.
[66] Chamber of Commerce "Diversified Industrial and Commercial Center"

harmony. According to Brownell, urban elite throughout the South hoped that the urban

masses could be united through a call for *civic togetherness*. They envisioned a

collective allegiance to the city, achieved largely through the use of rhetoric and

individual effort, where everyone worked together for the common good. Brownell

observed that this was an urban vision "not unworthy of an idealist or utopian

philosopher." That city leaders could construct "a 'closely knit community' through the

widespread commitment to its own realization" was quite an optimistic assessment of

urban possibilities.[67]

In Charlotte, Clarence Keuster gave this urban vision a name: *public spirit*. In a

letter to members of the chamber of commerce, Keuster said, "What is Public Spirit?

That force or influence which prompts or inspires man with a real live earnest desire to

do something for the good of the community in which he lives."[68] Keuster hoped that

public spirit would spread, and, like religion, inspire people to connect their personal

well-being to something bigger than themselves: again, to make all of "Charlotte's

citizens *believe in their city*."[69] Charlotte businessmen believed that, by bringing in new

business to Charlotte, promoting the city, and building suburbs like F.C. Abbott did, they

were improving Charlotte and performing the utmost acts of *public spirit*. They hoped

that individual acts of *public spirit* would restore urban harmony, without having to resort

to government intervention or city planning. Widespread belief in the city, then, was both

the key to successful urban growth and the glue that would unify urban society.

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[67] Brownell 153.
[68] Chamber of Commerce "Yearbook: The Greater Charlotte Club" 1912. Chamber of Commerce
Publications and Brochures Vertical File, Robinson-Spangler Carolina Room, Charlotte-Mecklenburg
Public Library, Charlotte, NC.
[69] Chamber of Commerce "Diversified Industrial and Commercial Center"

Not all classes of Charlotte agreed with the elite that individual acts could unify

the city. Indeed, class conflict was bubbling under the surface. North Charlotte, with its

factories and blue-collar population, was the center of labor activity in the city.[70] Tinged

by socialist ideas, labor unions were gaining strength and often went on strike to leverage

the power of industrialists. In a media dominated by pro-business newspapers like *The

Charlotte Observer, The Charlotte Herald* was a lonely pro-labor voice published from

1913 until 1925. On the very same day that the *Observer* cautioned that "high wages do

not mean prosperity for the worker," the *Herald,* using less conciliatory tones, refuted the

sufficiency of the current wage, when between 1913 and 1921, the percentage of income

needed for rent rose from 20% to 40%.[71] Further, the editorial lambasted the fact that

textile mills owned the houses of the workers. Thus, if fired, workers could also be

evicted from their homes. The editorial asked for support from those "who think of the

citizens of this state as citizens, not confining their thoughts to Myers Park and like

residential sections…," insinuating that some might see workers as a lower class of

citizen.[72] That such a concern was articulated underscored the sharp divide in Charlotte's

class structure. The classes were physically separated by distinct neighborhoods,

economic interests constantly divided them, and continued growth promised to draw both

more factory workers and lucrative investments into Charlotte, increasing class disparity

and the possibility of more conflict.   Clearly, the elite and the urban masses viewed

Charlotte's situation differently. The elite's harmonious idealization of the city clashed

with the reality experienced by the working class. While many of the elite depended

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[70] See, for example, *The Charlotte Herald* August 24, 1923.
[71] "What We Need Now" *The Charlotte Herald* August 24, 1923
[72] ibid.

solely on the unifying power of individual acts of *public spirit*, a movement for collective action through city planning was developing.

That American cities were threatened by urban growth and class disparity was an opinion of an increasing number of people. What was needed, according to Franklin D. Roosevelt, was a "struggle for the liberty of the community rather than the liberty of the individual."[73] The *Charlotte Herald* voiced the awakening of a new understanding of social responsibility:

> With the city's growth there is another thing growing with it, and that is the responsibilities a large city always comes with…. Negro areas need to be paved, cleaned, wooden houses torn down and decent ones built. No white sections of the city will be safe from fire and disease as long as Negro sections remain as they are at present.[74]

The core of this message was that all parts of the city were inextricably connected, and suffering in one place eventually affects everyone. Thus, a city's "responsibility" to its citizens increased in proportion to its growth. City planning, as a means of controlling growth and creating well-designed living environments, emerged as a way for communities to fulfill this social responsibility. As city planner John Nolen said, "we should no longer be content with mere increase in population and wealth. We should insist upon asking, 'How do the people live, where do they work, what do they play?'"[75]

Although John Nolen had designed Myers Park, Charlotte's finest white-collar suburb, he was first a city planner who envisioned planning cities in which people of all classes could live in comfort; "in fact, a convenient, healthful and beautiful city."[76]

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[73] Hancock 226. F.D. Roosevelt, *Troy Record*. March 15, 1912.
[74] "What We Need Now" *The Charlotte Herald* August 24, 1923.
[75] Hancock 189.
[76] John Nolen, *Replanning Small Cities* (New York: B.W. Heubsch, 1912), 5.

Everywhere Nolen went, his goal was to convince skeptical city leaders of the economic advantages of city planning. He told them that improving conditions throughout the city would lower crime rates, eliminate disease, increase productivity, and improve education. In short, leaders could be "getting more out of a city by putting more into it."[77] Nolen not only extolled the economic advantages of city planning, he also pointed out the cost in human suffering caused by unplanned growth and industrialization in American cities: "Cities pay heavily for a mean and unbusinesslike policy in many ways that cannot be exactly described or put into dollars and cents, but which businessmen and city officials understand very well."[78] City planning, in order to succeed, needed to be implemented by the urban elite. Nolen hoped that businessmen and city officials would be infected by a "new civic spirit," one willing to take concrete action on behalf of the community.[79] However, when Nolen and others brought this "new civic spirit" to Charlotte, it would conflict with the more individualistic *public spirit* preferred by many of the Charlotte elite.

Planning's advocates believed that early 20th century Charlotte, "with her congested streets and her lack of breathing and play spaces," had suffered from the "congestion and confusion" of unplanned growth.[80] In 1913, one of John Nolen's students, Alfred F. Muller, wrote a preliminary city planning study for Charlotte, the purpose of which was also to sell city planning to Charlotteans. Muller wondered how Charlotte could "expect to handle … a future population of 80,000 or 100,000, when in

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[77] Hancock 235.
[78] Hancock 244.
[79] Nolen 5.
[80] Alfred F. Muller, "City Plan For Charlotte" November 1913. (Box 23, Nolen Papers, Rare and Manuscript Collections, Carl A. Krock Library, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY)., 2.

1913 she fails to properly provide for 40,000?"[81] He lamented the lack of access poor

people had to parks and public facilities.[82] One member of the elite who agreed with this

conclusion and supported city planning was realtor George Stephens. Stephens had

befriended John Nolen and asked him to design Myers Park. Nolen's enthusiasm and

vision rubbed off on Stephens, who began to push Charlotte to work on a city plan.[83] In

1915, Charlotte's newly formed chamber of commerce sponsored the development of a

city plan, agreed to split the cost of the plan with city council, and hired John Nolen.[84]

However, by the time Nolen had finished his initial survey and asked for more funding to

complete the project, the zeal for planning in Charlotte was gone.[85] The city council and

the chamber of commerce reverted to their fiscally conservative ways, and Nolen's

request was rejected without anyone taking notice. Soon George Stephens would be gone

as well, moving to Asheville in 1922.[86]

When Charlotte rejected this first attempt at city planning in 1917, the national

planning movement was still in its early stages. Charlotte would have been

uncharacteristically progressive to have adopted it so early. However, Charlotte

continued to shun planning long after other smaller cities had come around. By 1930,

twelve North Carolina cities had adopted city planning. Chambers of commerce were

instrumental in the planning movement of seven of the twelve cities.[87] Generally, in

North Carolina and throughout the South, chambers of commerce favored city planning

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[81] Muller 2.
[82] Muller 9.
[83] Hanchett 218.
[84] Claiborne *Crown of the Queen City* 41.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Hanchett 220.
[87] Huggins 77.

for economic reasons rather than for ideals of social responsibility.[88] The money saved

by planning city streets and services had succeeding in winning over many of planning's

skeptics.[89] Furthermore, according to Koleen Huggins, "to chambers of commerce ... a

city plan symbolized a progressive community spirit which had advertising value." [90] By

promising a stable physical environment in which to live and do business, city planning

appealed to city leaders as a means of boosterism. Still, this was not enough to persuade

Charlotte's chamber of commerce. As would happen again, the elite found that their

traditional values of individualism and small government clashed with the goals of city

planning. Even as planning began to look more inevitable for the future of Charlotte,

many of the elite leaned more heavily on the past.

In 1928, citizens in the Dillworth neighborhood of Charlotte began to push for

zoning, one of the major tools of city planning. The "rucus" started when businesses like

gas stations began to invade this residential neighborhood.[91] The movement spread to

include various groups like the Charlotte Real Estate Board and the Charlotte Women's

Club.[92] With the establishment of an unofficial city planning and zoning commission, the

adoption of zoning had begun to seem an inevitable and desirable development.

Proponents, including the influential *Charlotte Observer,* pointed out "that it would

stabilize the community, improve the city, protect all land values, protect the safety,

health and welfare of the city and that it had worked out successfully in scores of cities

throughout the United States."[93] However, the city commissioners decided to go against

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[88] Goldfield 101.
[89] Huggins 50. When Greensboro adopted planning, the mayor was skeptical of planning until planning advocates demonstrated how much money was saved.
[90] Huggins 87.
[91]"Zoning Meet At Noon" *The Charlotte Observer* September 14, 1928.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Ibid.

"public enthusiasm" for the zoning ordinance. At a public hearing, the dissent of a "score" of citizens was enough to dissuade them, citing an injury to property owners and the cost of implementing a zoning plan.[94] So, while wealthy property owners were looked out for, the preferences of a large part of Charlotte were ignored.

One year later, in September 1929, the planning debate was reopened, this time by Charlotte's new Progressive city-manager, Radford W. Rigsby. He hoped to appeal to the white-collar population by saying that planning would protect property, plan for future traffic and growth, lower government spending and stabilize taxes.[95] This time, city council was definitely in support of planning. However, this push for city planning ended in the fiery public hearing on September 5, 1930, where, save one Confederate veteran, everyone present opposed city planning and threatened to overturn the government. What caused such a turn against planning between 1928 and 1930?

Rigsby's proposal had several factors working against it. First, realtors were against regulations on property development, and the difficult economic times of the Depression increased their opposition.[96] At the hearing, F.C. Abbott, a leading opponent of planning, said, "The zoning ordinance will be a serious damage to all property owners."[97] E.C. Griffith, a realtor who had been on the unofficial planning commission in 1928, was a leader in the anti-planning movement in 1930.[98] Realtor T.T. Allison vowed that, if the zoning ordinance were passed, his company would seek "a restraining order against its operation."[99] Also, many people were against Rigsby's planning

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[94] "City Fathers Turn Backs on Zoning Plans" *The Charlotte Observer* September 15, 1928.
[95] "Rigsby Urges Zoning City To Meet Future Needs" *The Charlotte Observer* September 13, 1929.
[96] "Action Follows Protests of Noisy Crowd at Big Hearing" *The Charlotte Observer* September 6, 1930.
[97] "Lone Voice In Favor of Zone Law Drowned" *The Charlotte News* September 6, 1930.
[98] Stone 6, 40.
[99] *The Charlotte Observer* September 6, 1930.

proposal because he was an outsider to Charlotte, and the conservative social structure was used to being in charge of themselves. Colonel T.L. Kirkpatrick believed that something was wrong "if we cannot run the town without going to New York and importing somebody to tell us what to do."[100] John McRae said he was "not in favor of going outside of Charlotte to get a man to run this government."[101] These and other leaders of the anti-planning movement collected a petition signed by 2,511 people.[102]

Despite the ferocity of these opponents, they were not necessarily in the majority in Charlotte. After the hearing that derailed planning, an editorial in *The Charlotte Observer* wondered, "Where were the remaining Charlotte people who have professed advocacy of the zoning proposition?"[103] Indeed, this section of the populace was silenced in the face of the lawyers, realtors and property owners who felt that rejecting planning was "the most morally, legally, financially, and industrially important" matter that Charlotte faced.[104] This was a decisive defeat for planning, and the issue would not be raised again until the 1940s. "Whether a mistake has been made," considered the *Observer*, "remains for time to prove."[105]

Throughout these debates over city planning, it is clear that neither side based their argument on purely ideological grounds. When the people of Dillworth pushed for planning, they did not have John Nolen's vision of whole cities in mind; rather, they wanted to protect their property. Likewise, some planning opponents were influenced by the Depression and Rigsby's outsider status. However, it can be said that, on the whole,

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[100] *The Charlotte Observer* September 6, 1930.
[101] *The Charlotte News* September 6, 1930.
[102] Ibid.
[103] "Zoning War Ended" *The Charlotte Observer* September 7, 1930.
[104] Ibid.
[105] Ibid.

the decision to reject city planning reflected certain values of the elite. First, the elite believed that property rights were sacred; they were skeptical, as one planning opponent said, of "anybody telling him what to do with his own business."[106] Secondly, the elite were wary of politics. They wanted government to be fiscally conservative, and to restrain from intervening in society and the economy. City planning violated both of these values by regulating land use, using public funds, and imposing governmental control on individuals. To the elite, the power of a government with city planning was comparable to the tyranny of England's "King George III" during the colonial period, and they protested against having a new "domestic … yoke placed around their necks."[107]

The elite also opposed planning because they feared it would stop Charlotte's *progress*. The meaning of progress depends upon the context; in different situations, progress can signify motion towards different destinations. Certainly, the elite definition of progress was much different from that of John Nolen's. Therefore, it is important to ask: what was the elite's idea of progress, and what did the destination look like?

To the elite, progress meant modeling Charlotte on the principles of the business world, where growth and profit took top priority. Their ideal future for Charlotte was one where growth continued uninhibited by taxes or labor unions, where industrial enterprise flocked, and the lower classes worked in the factories and stayed out of sight. As city boosters, they conceived of the city as a corporate entity of which they were all partners and salesmen, each engaged in "selling" the city to increase its growth and their own personal wealth. Under elite leadership, city government would remain devoted to the business model, keeping down the cost of public services and synchronizing government

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[106] "Action Follows Protest Of Noisy Crowd At Big Hearing" *The Charlotte News* September 6, 1930.
[107] "Lone Voice in Favor of Zone Law Drowned" *The Charlotte Observer* September 6, 1930.

with business. In short, the elite idea of progress focused on maximizing the economic benefits of growth, ignoring questions of the resulting social impact.[108]

This interpretation of progress was informed by a dose of classic American individualism, of which Charlotte certainly had its share. Individualism created a competitive atmosphere—"the spirit of every man for himself while the grabbing is good"—that guided Charlotte's economic, political and social development.[109]   It allowed the elite to look after their own interests, seek quick profits in real estate or land speculation, yet avoid responsibility for public issues like the city's inequality, the lack of health care, or the absence of parks. Thus, individualism in Charlotte was a reason that city planning was urgently needed, and also a reason that city planning was rejected. City planning made enemies by threatening a way of doing business that had made many men rich. After experiencing Charlotte and many other American cities, John Nolen concluded that "strong, selfish, unchecked individualism still has sway in our cities, and many of the evils which better city planning may help to correct are due to this cause."[110]

So, individualism in Charlotte was strong enough to defeat several different city planning proposals. One reason it was so strong was that, within Charlotte's conservative social structure, traditional elite values like individualism were well preserved. Residing in affluent suburbs like Myers Park and Dillworth, the elite benefited from already planned neighborhoods that were insulated from urban disarray. They rarely came face-to-face with the problems that fed John Nolen's planning crusade, and with elite

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[108] Goldfield 151.
[109] Hancock 55.
[110] Hancock 242.

domination of media and government, social issues were rarely heard over cries for economic growth.

It was in this environment that the elite were able to create an idealization of the city that served their interests, where their leadership served every Charlotte citizen. It was this one-sided view of reality that allowed them to believe in a solution to urban disunity, a call for *public spirit,* that was little more than a civic pep rally. As a solution to the problem of class conflict, *public spirit* counted on private rather than public initiative, and it emphasized individual effort over any kind of collective solution requiring increased governmental intervention or spending. Thus, *public spirit* was an accurate representation of the elite's individualistic mindset. Most importantly, encouraging *public spirit* allowed for economic growth, but did not require a change in the status quo of Charlotte; rather, the elite were able to continue their leadership of the city, the business model of government, and uncontrolled urban growth.[111] Thus, when confronted by Charlotte's poverty and unrest, the elite were able to resolve their dilemma—that their vision of progress was incompatible with real solutions to inequality—by invoking *public spirit.* While it did nothing to solve the actual problems in Charlotte, the real purpose of *public spirit* was to assure the elite that their vision of progress could continue undiluted.

To Civil War veteran J.D. Barrier, it probably seemed as if, over his lifetime, Charlotte had been torn down and raised anew by forces beyond his or anyone else's control. The simplicity and order of a small town had been replaced by a complicated industrial metropolis, with all the problems therein. When Barrier said, "zoning would

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[111] Brownell 154.

not stop the wheels of progress but instead would turn them," his meaning of progress took on a sense of regaining what had been lost—the sense of a united Charlotte. As historian Lewis Mumford said, "differentiation is fatal to social life if not the city, as a shell and a symbol, help to restore unity."[112] Since Charlotte had begun its extraordinary growth, the city had certainly experienced "differentiation" within its class structure, its government, and its interpretation of progress. However, if the city was to become a unifying symbol for all of Charlotte's citizens, it would require more than just talk, it would require action. Unfortunately, Charlotte did not have a leadership willing to grow and change alongside its city.

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[112] Lewis Mumford, "The Ideal Form of the Modern City" in *The Lewis Mumford Reader,* edited by Donald Miller. (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 165.

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