



**The Patterson Grocery Store (c. 1925)
2515 Booker Avenue
Charlotte, N.C.**

The Patterson Grocery Store in the Washington Heights Neighborhood is one of the few surviving buildings of its type in Charlotte. African Americans owned and operated grocery stores throughout the black residential enclaves of the city in the first half of the twentieth century. Most were destroyed after legal racial segregation was dismantled in the 1960's.

Black entrepreneurs had limited opportunities to own businesses in the Jim Crow South. They could be lawyers, dentists, and doctors. They could establish insurance agencies and sell real estate. They could operate barber shops, hair salons, and funeral homes. They could be peddlers or artisans, such as bricklayers, plasterers, and carpenters.

Grocery stores, like the Patterson Grocery, were also a mainstay of black entrepreneurship in racially segregated Charlotte. A book published in 1915 highlighted Charlotte's black businessmen. It listed twenty-four proprietors of black-owned grocery stores. In February 1930, more than one hundred "negro merchants" gathered at a banquet to protest what they regarded as unfair competition from chain stores. Many of the attendees were grocers. "Local grocery stores," writes historian Lisa Tolbert, "were the most common small business run by black merchants."

Grocery stores in black neighborhoods were special places for their patrons. Black grocers were convivial people, and they had to cater to the distinctive eating habits of African Americans. Customers could walk into these establishments to purchase all kinds of foodstuffs. They could also have groceries delivered to their homes, usually by bicycle. Fatback. Ham hocks. Pigs' feet, sometimes pickled. Pork ribs. Black-eyed peas. Collard greens. Turnip Greens. Lard. Corn Meal. Sweet potatoes. Grits. These and other selections supported the casual, personalized approach to cooking that characterized the African American kitchen. Black folks frequented places like the Patterson Grocery store to buy these items and to socialize with one another.



This 1907 Photograph Shows Thad Tate With His Family. Tate Was An African American Barber In Charlotte. It Was Customary For Black Barbers To Cut White Men's Hair Under Segregation. Tate Street In Washington Heights Is Named For Him.

The popularity of establishments like the Patterson Grocery Store went beyond the culinary. African Americans felt affirmed and valued there. They knew the grocer. They knew the members of his family. African Americans could relax in the store, talk jovially to one another. There were usually no whites around. During the hot days of summer, it was customary for men and boys to buy a bag of peanuts and a soda drink, sit in cane-bottomed or other kinds of chairs in front of the store, and call out to pedestrians.

Going to a grocery store outside the neighborhood could be a very different experience for African Americans. One man remembers the advice he received from his mother when he journeyed out of the neighborhood.

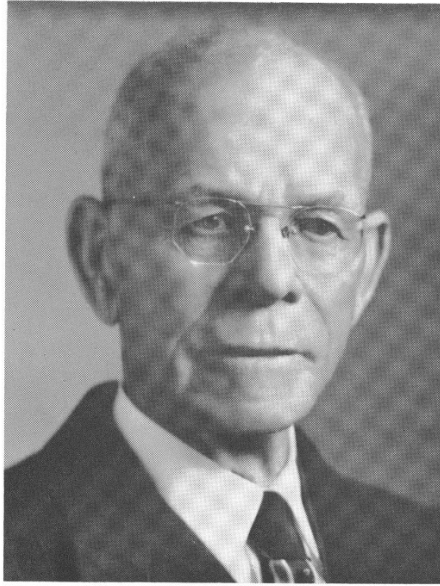
"Son, now you going up to the store and get this or that for me, now if you pass any white people on your way, you get off the sidewalk. Give them the sidewalk. You know, you move over. Don't challenge white people."

Washington Heights was Charlotte's first streetcar suburb developed exclusively for African Americans. It was part of a process that historian Tom Hanchett calls the "sorting out" of the city. As recently as the 1880s, Charlotte had been a "salt-and-pepper" place, meaning that blacks and whites co-mingled in all aspects of life, including where they resided. That arrangement began to change in the 1890s. Elite whites used race as a "wedge issue" to persuade blue collar whites and white farmers to resist appeals to cooperate with African Americans in fighting for economic and social reforms.



Sign Enforcing Segregated Seating On North Carolina Public Transit

John D. Belamy, a Democrat candidate for Congress, spoke to mill workers in Charlotte on September 27, 1898. He insisted that the outcome of the upcoming election on the disenfranchisement of blacks would determine whether the affairs of North Carolina would “be controlled by the vicious, or whether they will be put in the hands of the intelligent people of the State - the white people.” Racial separation and “White Supremacy” became the order of the day. This led to the creation of neighborhoods that were composed solely of one race or the other. Deed covenants were placed on property to make sure that African Americans did not reside in areas reserved for whites, like Myers Park, Dilworth, Wesley Heights, and Villa Heights, plus many more.



DR. GEORGE EDWARD DAVIS
First Negro Teacher

Dr. George E. Davis Was The First African American Faculty Member At Biddle Institute, Now Johnson C. Smith University. He Was Also The North Carolina Agent For The Julius Rosenwald Fund. Davis Street In Washington Heights Is Named For Him.

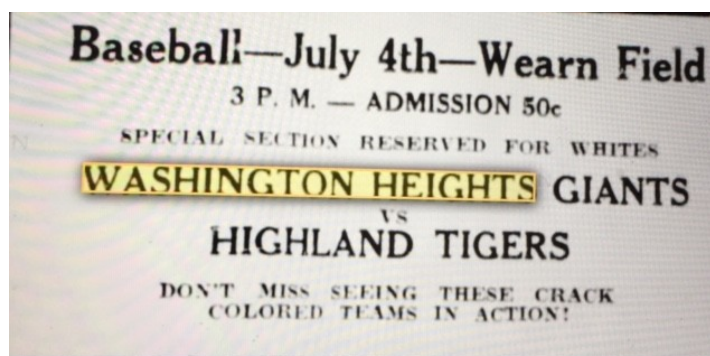
White real estate developer W. C. Alexander purchased farmland on Beatties Ford Road in 1912 and began laying out streets for Washington Heights. Washington Heights, the realtors claimed, would be a “Delightful Home Place for the Colored Race.” The neighborhood was named for Booker T. Washington, the influential African American educator at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Streets in Washington Heights were named for prominent African Americans of Charlotte. Davis Street for Dr. George E. Davis, the first African American professor at Biddle Institute. Tate Street for influential barber Thad L. Tate. A streetcar line terminated near the intersection of Beatties Ford Road and Booker Avenue. People in the neighborhood still call it “The End.” The line provided direct service to the center city.

The *Charlotte Evening Chronicle* touted Washington Heights as an example of the benefits of racial segregation. “Believing that the growth of the city will eventually encroach on the territory now populated by the colored race,” said

the newspaper, “the developers believe that the segregation idea will prove very popular.” One hundred and fifty lots in Washington Heights were sold at auction in one day in June 1913.

A cluster of commercial buildings appeared at the end of the Washington Heights trolley line. Riders returning from downtown Charlotte would often stop to do some shopping at the stores on Beatties Ford Road before walking to their homes in Washington Heights. As the neighborhood grew, more and more residents lived several blocks from Beatties Ford Road. They wanted a grocery store closer to where they lived. This need gave rise to the Patterson Grocery Store.

Washington Heights was a lively, vibrant place in the 1920s and 1930s. Residents were devoted to advocating for improvements to the neighborhood. In April 1926, Clarence O. Kuester, head of the Charlotte Chamber of Commerce, was invited to speak in Washington Heights about the “essentials of community building.” In 1933, representatives of four civic organization presented the outgoing mayor with a bouquet of flowers in appreciation for his support for upgrading recreational facilities in Washington Heights. The neighborhood had a team that played in Charlotte’s “negro baseball league.” Attendance at games in Washington Heights in July 1933 was 1,904. In October 1931, the Washington Heights Giants played the Greenville. S.C. Spinners for the “negro diamond title of the two Carolinas.” The City of Charlotte opened the West Charlotte Negro High School on Beatties Ford Road in Washington Heights in 1938.



Wearn Field was the largest baseball park in Charlotte. Note that a section was reserved for Whites. Such was the way of life during racial segregation.



Washington Heights Bungalow Being Restored



Washington Heights Bungalow

James M. Patterson purchased a lot on Booker Avenue in July 1921. He constructed a large residence on the rear of the lot and a brick store building on the front portion. The grocery store was open for business by 1925. Patterson operated the grocery store until the mid-1930s, when he moved to Cleveland County, North Carolina. The store was rented, stood vacant, and was sold to a new owner in 1940. Walker Logan purchased the property in June 1945. The building had several uses under Logan’s ownership until the early 1960s. It was a grocery store, a general merchandise outlet, even a restaurant. City Directories reveal that the building continued to house grocery stores until the mid-1990s. The longest-lasting was Booker Lil Superette, from 1976 until 1991. Residents of Washington Heights called it “Little Booker.”

One might ask why historic preservationists should be interested in the preservation of the Patterson Grocery Store. Clearly, the real estate market, which focuses almost exclusively upon “highest and best use,” looks upon the building as an impediment to development. Almost every realtor would say: “Tear it down.” The Patterson Grocery Store is not a refined piece of architecture. But it is a significant historic artifact. It is a rare survivor of an era when individuals operated small grocery stores that served small, localized markets. Even more importantly, it is the only extant building of its type in Washington Heights and in the entire Beatties Ford Road corridor. Finally, the Patterson Grocery Store illustrates how legal racial segregation affected the nature of the built environment of Charlotte in the 1920s.

Until recently, the future of the Patterson Grocery Store was in doubt. That is no longer true. Preserve Mecklenburg will purchase the building in June 2020 and will place a preservation easement on the Patterson Grocery Store to assure its preservation in perpetuity. Much credit goes to the owner of the property. He rejected higher offers for the Patterson Grocery Store, because he hoped the building could be saved.



Dr. Dan L. Morrill
June 19, 2020