

**PLANNING PHASE REPORT AND MULTIPLE PROPERTY
DOCUMENTATION FORM FOR THE SURVEY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN
RESOURCES IN GASTON COUNTY**

**Emily Ramsey & Lara Ramsey, Consultants
November 9, 2000**

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Introduction and Purpose Statement

In 1982, Gaston County completed "The Architectural Heritage of Gaston County, North Carolina," a project intended to serve as a comprehensive inventory of historic architectural resources in Gaston County. While this inventory has served as the basis of the Gaston County Historic Preservation Commission's educational programs, local historic landmark designations, and National Register nominations for the past two decades, it is apparent that the inventory is sorely lacking in African American resources. Furthermore, increasing development in the county has been especially damaging to formerly intact historic African American communities, particularly in the city of Gastonia. This countywide African American Resources Survey, therefore, will serve several purposes:

1. Document buildings, including both urban and rural properties, which are representative of the African American built environment in Gaston County from approximately 1880 to approximately 1960.
2. Serve as a supplement to the original 1982 county inventory, "The Architectural Heritage of Gaston County, North Carolina," prepared by Kim Withers Brengle.
3. Serve as a tool that can be used to educate county and city officials, civic groups, and the public about African American resources in Gaston County and the importance of sympathetic modernization and development in historically African American communities.

4. Serve as a guide for the Gaston County Historic Preservation Commission in nominating African American resources as individual Local Historic Landmarks, in the formation of African American Local Historic Districts, and in identifying properties eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.

Methodology and Problems of Research

For the purposes of this project, the investigation and documentation of African American Resources in Gaston County will be generally divided into urban community properties and rural properties. Although some African Americans were scattered throughout the county on farms and in small crossroads communities centered around a church or school, African Americans living in the city of Gastonia and in surrounding smaller towns of the county lived mainly in segregated communities, typically separated from white communities by such physical boundaries as railroad tracks or commercial corridors. Taking this into account, the project will begin with documentation of these concentrated urban communities and progress outward towards the more rural areas of the County.

Any survey that focuses on the built environment of a specific group presents unique challenges to the surveyors, and this project has revealed several common problems associated with researching and surveying African American sites. The most obvious problem in the early phases of research concerned the completion of a traditional windshield survey as a means of estimating the number of resources in the county. Since it is often impossible to differentiate African American housing, schools, churches, businesses and farms from white structures by physical appearance alone, more in-depth initial research (utilizing city directories, Sanborn maps, census records, local histories,

and interviews with several African American community members throughout the county) was necessary to pin-point areas that contain African American resources. Windshield surveys were then completed for each of these areas in order to ascertain the number of African American resources in each community. The discovery of African American rural properties will rely on further ongoing research of primary and secondary sources in conjunction with oral histories and interviews with local contacts, and will be included in the survey as they are uncovered.

Researching Gaston County's African American resources is also made difficult by the lack of written records kept on African Americans and by the general lack of local histories on African Americans in the county. The county's numerous local histories, and the large number of short written histories on the individual communities within the county, generally exclude African Americans, although a few do include short biographies of outstanding black citizens or a brief overview of the area's African American history (such as *Gastonia Centennial, 1877-1977: A Commemorative Book* and *Between Two Rivers* – a history of Belmont written to celebrate the city's centennial). To date, only one book has been published that documents exclusively the history of a Gaston County African American community – the recently published *Footprints on the Rough Side of the Mountain*, written by Belmont natives Oscar DePriest Hand, Sr. and Julia Neal Sykes. Therefore, oral histories and interviews (scheduled, impromptu during fieldwork, and by telephone), along with Sanborn maps and city directories (invaluable for their information on African American housing, churches, and businesses in Gastonia, but not applicable to the rest of the county) become the most important sources for this survey. The local contacts for this survey will serve as invaluable sources of information

on the area's African American communities – former and current residences provide, along with specific information on particular resources, a sense of the larger picture of how African Americans lived in Gaston County. Several contacts will also be needed to serve as guides during fieldwork, particularly in towns outside of Gastonia and in rural areas, where City Directories and other valuable printed resources are not available.

Criteria For Evaluating Resources

For this project, several criteria will determine which African American resources will be map-coded, which will be surveyed using North Carolina green (multiple structures) data sheets, and which are important enough, historically or architecturally, to merit North Carolina yellow (short individual) data sheets. Integrity of the structure (particularly the extent to which the structure has retained its original appearance), the importance of the structure in the fabric of the African American community, and representativeness of form and design will serve as the main criteria for evaluating these resources. The vast majority of the structures will be documented using multiple structures data sheets. Isolated resources, resources in urban or rural communities that are particularly pristine representative examples or historically or architecturally significant examples of African American houses, churches, and businesses, and structures significant to the entire African American community in Gaston County (such as the county's first and second black hospitals) will be documented using North Carolina yellow (short) data sheets. Resources within the county's urban communities that appear to be fifty years old or older, but which have been significantly altered or appear to be poorly preserved examples of common forms, will be map-coded.

Quality and Quantity of Resources

The number and concentration of African American resources in Gaston County follows a predictable pattern. The city of Gastonia (the county seat and the largest city in the county in both population and physical size) contains the largest number of remaining resources – approximately 400 buildings. Although the majority of these structures are simple frame houses, the area includes several significant structures, including the largest African American School in the county, the Highland High School, and St. Stephen's A. M. E. Zion Church. Belmont, to the east of Gastonia, contains approximately 200 resources, including several black-owned businesses, a teacherage that served the all-black Reid High School, and a black-owned and operated café. The county's smaller cities and towns, such as Mount Holly, Dallas, Bessemer City, Cherryville and Stanley, contain far fewer resources, an average of 20-30 buildings in each town, usually surrounding an African American church or a school building constructed to serve black students. Smaller towns like McAdenville, Cramerton and Spencer Mountain, many of which began as late nineteenth-and early-twentieth- century mill villages, are expected to yield only around 5-10 properties each.

Several rural African American churches have been identified, and it is expected that more rural resources – mostly churches and schools – will appear as research progresses. In evaluating these rural resources, the surveyors will take into consideration such factors as the age (generally fifty years or older), the condition, and the integrity of each structure (the extent to which the structure has retained its original appearance); in addition to these basic criteria, such factors as the structure's immediate surroundings (in

particular, the extent to which the original rural setting of the structure has been preserved) will decide whether a rural structure merits a yellow data sheet. An average of 10-15 files for rural resources will serve as the official estimate for this planning phase and for the Time-Product-Payment Schedule, with the understanding that the final number of rural resources surveyed may differ from this estimation, and will be determined in consultation with the Historic Preservation Office.

Architecturally, it appears that African American resources differ very little from the architecture of the majority of white communities in Gaston County. Housing is, with few exceptions, modest one-story, gable-roof, frame structures closely resembling the architecture of the dozens of mill villages dotting the county. Buildings containing black-owned and operated commercial enterprises (most often a small grocery or general store) consist mainly of small, plain brick, frame, or cinderblock one-room structures. Extant black churches in the County are overwhelmingly brick structures of varying plans, and most of the schools thus far identified are modern brick-veneered buildings, many dating from the early to mid-1950s.

The majority of these resources, as stated above, will be documented using National Register green (multiple structures) data sheets. Each file will include a completed historic structures data sheet, a brief historical and architectural background on the area covered, an inventory that includes a brief description of each resources, black and white photographs on enlarged contact sheets, a sketch of the properties, and a Sanborn map of the area where possible.

Cities and Towns

Gastonia	Lowell
Belmont	Ranlo

Mt. Holly	High Shoals
Bessemer City	McAdenville
Cherryville	Cramerton
Dallas	Spencer Mountain
Stanley	

Total Number of Resources

Altogether, the survey of Gaston County's African American resources will document (through map-coding and completion of National Register green and yellow forms) approximately 810-900 resources from the county's fourteen cities and towns in approximately 80-90 files, and approximately 10-15 files (subject to change with further research) on individual properties in the rural portions of the county.

Geographic and Natural Characteristics of Gaston County

Gaston County is situated in the western piedmont region of North Carolina, spanning an area of 357 square miles and encompassing fourteen incorporated municipalities. Established in 1846 from land previously contained by Lincoln County, Gaston County is largely a land of rolling hills, broken by the Kings Mountain chain and by Crowders Mountain in the southwest region of the county. Local historians Robert F. Cope and Manly Wade Wellman write of Gaston County as a "rolling, hilly country, tufted with forests of pine and hardwood, patched with field and meadows, and criss-crossed with streams – looked westward to the haze-crowned foothills of the Blue Ridge."¹ While twentieth-century development has overtaken many of the county's original forests and covered many of the open fields and meadows, the area retains its clay soil, which once supported corn, wheat and cotton, as well as a good portion of its gently rolling hills, surprisingly impressive mountains, and woodlands. More important

¹ Robert F. Cope and Manly Wade Wellman, *The County of Gaston: Two Centuries of a North Carolina*

than any other of Gaston County's natural geographic features is the network of rivers and fast-running shallow streams that criss-cross the county - the Catawba River, the Southfork Catawba River, Long Creek, and numerous smaller waterways contain the flowing water that powered Gaston County's first textile mills.

Historical Development and Principal Historical Context

The principal context listed in the North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office's "Handbook for Completing Historic Structures Form" that applies to this survey is, obviously, "Black Heritage." This section includes a brief history of the development of the black community in Gaston County, concentrating on the late 1800s and the first half of the twentieth century.

Settlement

In general respects, the early history of Gaston County mirrors that of most other areas of the North Carolina Piedmont. First inhabited by the Catawba Indians, who settled primarily along the western shoreline of the Catawba River, the land that would become Gaston County experienced its first significant white immigration during the latter part of the eighteenth century, when large numbers of German and Scots-Irish settlers began moving south from Pennsylvania into the North Carolina Piedmont, attracted mainly by the plentiful, inexpensive land available in the area. Once they arrived, these settlers discovered that the land in the Piedmont would be difficult to farm profitably. Gaston County settlers faced hard red clay soil, a growing season that was significantly shorter than in the eastern part of the state, poorly maintained roads, and largely unnavigable waterways. Consequently, farms that developed in the area were relatively small and, by necessity, self-sufficient.²

Region (Gaston County Historical Society: 1961), p.1.

² Kim Withers Brengle, *The Architectural Heritage of Gaston County, North Carolina* (County of Gaston, 1982), p. 3.

Antebellum-Period

The German and Scots-Irish origin of Gaston's early settlers would later become a major factor in the African American history of the county, as the South became increasingly dependent on slave labor and a plantation economy. Eli Whitney's cotton gin, designed in 1793, made cotton farming a profitable option for many areas of the South, but the land of the North Carolina Piedmont and the attitude of its inhabitants were not conducive to large scale-farming with the assistance of slave labor. The Piedmont's largely pietistic German population, Kim Withers Brengle argues, was "culturally and religiously oriented away from slaveholding."³ Thus, the area that would later become Gaston County continued the agricultural pattern of small farmsteads utilizing primarily white labor that had been established by the region's first white settlers. In 1860, Gaston County had 2,199 slaves and 360 slaveholders – ranking thirtieth among the 87 North Carolina counties in number of slaves, and holding only a third as many slaves as neighboring Mecklenburg County.⁴

Although the antebellum period saw Gaston County continuing in the agricultural direction that its residents had set a century earlier, several events laid the foundation for the County's industrialization and tremendous growth in the post-war period. Just two years after the official establishment of Gaston County in 1846, the Mountain Island Mill began operation on the Catawba River as the first textile mill in the County. In 1852, a second textile operation, the Woodlawn ("Pinhook") Mill, opened on the Southfork River near present day McAdenville. The following year, Larkin Stowe and his sons, Jasper, W.A., and Edward B., built Stowe's Factory on the Southfork River, south of the

³ Ibid, p.3-4.

⁴ Ibid. United States Historical Census Data Browser, Total Slave Population and Total Number of

Woodlawn Mill. Within a span of five years, Gaston County had moved from exclusively an agricultural region to a fledgling manufacturing center, producing primarily cotton yarn. In 1860, the Wilmington, Charlotte and Rutherford Railroad completed a rail line through the county, and Gaston County suddenly had access to agricultural and commercial centers and to distant markets.⁵

Reconstruction and Industrialization

The end of the Civil War signaled the beginning of a new era for the young county of Gaston and for many surrounding counties in the Piedmont. The newly completed railroad networks in the area were largely untouched by the war's destruction, and Gaston County was able to profit from post-war conditions. By 1874, textile mills were again being constructed in the county, and after 1880, industrial growth in the region rose exponentially. Textile mills utilizing steam power began cropping up alongside the growing network of rail lines crossing the county. Gastonia, a small depot town before the Civil War, quickly became the industrial center of Gaston County and, in 1911, also became the county seat.⁶ Gaston County, by 1900, led the state in both number of mills and number of spindles, a position it held through the 1920s. Gaston became known as "the combed yarn capital of the world."⁷

The prosperity that textiles brought to Gaston County attracted not only white farmers throughout North and South Carolina - it was also during this period that Gaston

Slaveholders, 1860 (www.fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census/).

⁵ Sally Griffin, *Gaston Remembers: Weaving a Tapestry in Time* (Gaston County Chamber of Commerce and Community Communications: Montgomery, Alabama, 1994), p.31-35.

⁶ Jim Atkins, ed., *Gastonia Centennial: 1877-1977 Commemorative Book* (Gastonia Centennial Celebration, Inc.: 1977), p.3-4.

⁷ Thomas W. Hanchett, "Charlotte's Textile Heritage: An Introduction" (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission), p.3.

County's black population experienced significant growth. The "colored" population of the county doubled between 1880 and 1900 – from 4,066 persons to 8,118 persons.⁸ Former slaves and their descendents still living in the county worked mainly on farms as tenant farmers and sharecroppers until the turn of the century. By the turn of the century, only eighty-four of the county's 540 black farmers owned their own farmsteads."⁹ However, as the cities and towns in the county swelled in population and developed diverse commercial and industrial districts, African Americans moved in to take advantage of the opportunity for jobs. All but the dirtiest, most physically demanding of the mill jobs were reserved for white workers, but blacks found jobs in cities and towns, primarily as domestic workers and laborers. They began building their own neighborhoods on the edges of city and town limits, complete with churches, meeting houses, small businesses, and schools.

Despite the constraints and suppression caused by racial discrimination and segregation, blacks in Gaston County developed rich and diverse communities during the late 1800s and the early 1900s. Gaston County's African American population followed the three themes of the black experience after 1877 outlined by historian Jeffrey J. Crow in *A History of African Americans in North Carolina*: "organization, uplift, and increasing diversity."¹⁰ They congregated in Baptist, A. M. E. Zion, and Presbyterian churches, gathered together under fraternal organizations and social clubs, formed their own community schools, and promoted black-owned and operated businesses – all of

⁸ United States Historical Census Data Browser, Negro Population, 1880 and 1900 (www.fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census/).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Jeffrey J. Crow, *A History of African Americans in North Carolina* (North Carolina Division of Archives and History, 1992), p.96-97.

which served to boost morale in the black community and promote educational, spiritual, and commercial progress.

The accomplishments of Gaston County's black communities, which promoted growth and progress in the late 1800s, would be challenged in the twentieth century with the advent of Jim Crow laws. After the 1900 passage of a constitutional amendment which effectively stripped blacks of their right to vote, white politicians in North Carolina and across the South passed a flurry of discriminatory legislation and effectively segregated African Americans in "every phase of life, from birth to death, stigmatizing them as a despised and inferior race."¹¹ Gaston County's cities and towns became increasingly segregated as a result. The Highland Neighborhood in Gastonia, which consisted only of a few small streets flanking N. York St. at the turn of the century (the Highland High School, one of the centers of the Highland community, drew a majority of its students from outside its own neighborhood), grew exponentially during the age of Jim Crow. With no other options open to them, blacks in Gastonia moved into Highland's ever-expanding rows of small frame housing in droves. By 1940, the neighborhood was the largest black community in Gaston County, and it was completely segregated.

Post-World War II

The decades following World War II were a tumultuous and exciting time for African Americans across the country, as the Civil Rights Movement began loosening the grip of segregation and discrimination in the South. In Gaston County, however, blacks saw little real change in the rigidly segregated conditions within the city of Gastonia and

surrounding areas until years later. In Gastonia, the city maintained separate schools, hospitals, and recreational facilities for whites and blacks well into the 1960s. Ashley High School, Gastonia's largest public school, was not desegregated until 1967. A number of all-black schools, including Lincoln High School in Bessemer City, John Chavis High School in Cherryville, and Highland Jr. High School in Gastonia were erected years after Brown vs. Board of Education officially ended the system of segregation in schools.¹²

Even today, the areas in Gaston County cities and small towns that were historically occupied by African Americans are still primarily black neighborhoods. Boundaries are no longer rigidly defined, as African American occupants have now spread across former physical boundaries (most often, railroad tracks) that separated white and black communities. Churches still form the center of these communities; however, once proud (if modest) houses, businesses, schools, and commercial districts are now, with few exceptions, in varying stages of alteration or deterioration. Much of this deterioration seems to be the result of outward migration of the younger generations who grew up in these communities. Increased job opportunities, new housing in comfortable suburbs, and the desire to get away from neighborhoods formed during the age of Jim Crow and legalized segregation have drawn successful baby boomer African Americans and their children out of these historically black communities. In Gastonia, the deterioration of the city's downtown district and the movement of commercial and industrial enterprises east (closer to the metro Charlotte area) have also contributed to a

¹¹ Ibid, p.117.

¹² Oscar DePriest Hand, Sr. and Julia Neal Sykes, *Footprints on the Rough Side of the Mountain* (Hand and Sykes Concepts, 1997), p.121-122. Vertical Files entitled "African American History" located in the North Carolina Collection, Gaston County Public Library, Main Branch.

widespread decline in the Highland community. Outward migration is, however, only one part of the explanation behind the deterioration of Gaston County's African American communities. This topic, which forms an important part of the larger picture of African Americans in Gaston County, will be more fully explored as the survey progresses.

Annotated Bibliography of Sources

Selected Secondary Sources

Hand, Oscar DePriest, Sr. and Sykes, Julia Neal. *Footprints on the Rough Side of the Mountain: An African American Niche in the History of a Southern Textile City*. Charlotte: Hand and Sykes Concepts, 1997.

The only known written history concentrating exclusively on African Americans in the area of Gaston County. The authors tell the history of the black community in Belmont in an informal way, but their research gives valuable information about African Americans in Gaston County and about the African American communities (including the built environment) of Belmont.

Crow, Jeffrey J., Escott, Paul D., and Hatley, Flora J. *A History of African Americans in North Carolina*. Raleigh: North Carolina Division of Archives and History, 1992.

An informative comprehensive history of African Americans across the state, particularly useful in discerning how events in the history of Gaston County's African American population compare to other areas of the state from the colonial period to the mid-twentieth century.

Atkins, Jim, editor. *Gastonia Centennial: 1877-1977 Commemorative Book*. Gastonia Centennial Celebration, Inc. 1977.

Valuable for a brief but instructive section on African Americans in Gastonia, which mainly consists of a list of "great" black citizens and their accomplishments, including many "firsts"- first black reporter for the Gastonia Gazette, first elected Justice of the Peace in Gastonia, etc.

Cope, Robert F. and Wellman, Manly Wade. *The County of Gaston: Two Centuries of a North Carolina Region*. Gastonia, NC: Gaston County Historical Society, 1961.

A good general history of the County, helpful for background information on every aspect of Gaston County from the early 1700s to the early twentieth century. It does not, however, contain any black history, and some of the views on certain aspects of Gaston's history are dated and subjective.

Separk, Joseph. *Gastonia and Gaston County, North Carolina: Past, Present and Future*. Kingsport Press, Inc. 1936.

Basically a compilation of facts on Gaston County, very helpful for finding information on specific aspects of life in Gaston County in the early twentieth century – religion, education, industrial, etc. No information on African American community.

Brengle, Kim Withers. *The Architectural Heritage of Gaston County, North Carolina*. Gastonia, NC: County of Gaston, 1982.

Gives a good idea of what African American resources have already been investigated in the county. Few are included, and all but one are churches.

Henry, Phillip N. and Speas, Carol M. *The Heritage of Blacks in North Carolina*, Vol. 1. Raleigh: North Carolina African American Heritage Foundation, 1990.

Collection of articles, stories, family histories, and photographs, with a concise introductory history of African Americans in North Carolina.

Selected List of Primary Sources

1. United States Census Records, Gaston County, 1790-1960.
On microfilm at the North Carolina Room, Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County, Main Branch and online at www.fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census/.
2. Gastonia City Directories, 1911-1965.
Bound volumes available in the North Carolina Collection of the Gaston County Public Library, Main Branch.
3. Vertical Files entitled "African American History – Gaston County" – includes primarily newspaper articles from the Gastonia Gazette and other local papers, dating from the mid-1940s through the 1970s.
4. Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps 1895-1930, Gaston County.
North Carolina Collection of the Gaston County Public Library, Main Branch.

Contacts for Selected Areas of the County

Gastonia area:	Mildred Sadler, James Miller, Rossie Saunders, Rosetta Lightner, Arleva Rainey, Julia Price, Thelma Vance, Lindora Smith
Belmont:	Elsie Grier, Julia Sykes, Jethro Mann, Madge Rozell
Cherryville:	Camilla Young
Bessemer City:	Tweetie Stewart
Dallas:	George Jagers
Mount Holly:	Herman Gregory
Crowders Mt.:	Ruth McDowell, Cynthia Simpson, Jim Biggers
Stanley/Springfield:	William Luckey, Jane Brown Patrick, Caroll Saunders

TIME – PRODUCT – PAYMENT SCHEDULE
Survey of Gaston County's African American Resources
 Emily Ramsey and Lara Ramsey

PRODUCT	COMPLETION DATE	COST
Continue Research for Possible Rural Properties, Developmental History/Context, and Community Histories	December 9, 2000	\$600.00
Fieldwork – Gastonia Community, East Side: including photography and creating forms. Approximately 200 properties will be documented on approximately 18 – 20 green forms. 10-20 properties may merit individual yellow forms. Submit Five Sample Files for Review	January 9, 2001	\$740.00
Fieldwork – Gastonia Community, West Side; Lowell and Ranlo Communities: Approximately 215 properties will be documented on approximately 20 green forms. 10-20 properties may merit individual yellow forms. File Completion – Gastonia, East Side: including photo/slide/negative labeling & creating files.	February 9, 2001	\$740.00
Fieldwork – Belmont and Mount Holly Communities: Approximately 225 properties will be documented on approximately 22 green forms. Approximately 10-20 Belmont properties will be documented using individual yellow forms. File Completion – Gastonia, West Side; Lowell & Ranlo	March 9, 2001	\$740.00
Fieldwork – Bessemer City, Cherryville, Stanley, Dallas, High Shoals, Cramerton, Spencer Mountain, and McAdenville communities: Approximately 120 properties on approximately 15 green forms. Approximately 5-10 resources will be documented using yellow forms. File Completion – Belmont and Mount Holly	April 9, 2001	\$740.00
Fieldwork – Rural Properties: rough estimate (at end of planning phase) of about 10-15 yellow forms, subject to change as research progresses. File Completion – Bessemer City, Cherryville, Stanley, Dallas, High Shoals, Cramerton, Spencer Mountain, and McAdenville	May 9, 2001	\$740.00
Complete research for MPDF and produce first draft of MPDF; begin determining properties to be recommended for the Study List. File Completion – Rural Properties	June 9, 2001	\$1,000.00
Create final survey maps Complete Study List recommendations and make presentations to NRAC	July 9, 2001	\$500.00
Complete final draft of Multiple Property Documentation Form	August 9, 2001	\$820.00
		TOTAL
		\$6,620.00

Please note that \$1,000.00 of the total \$ 7,620.00 budget was utilized for the planning phase

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Multiple Property Documentation Form

This form is used for documenting multiple property groups relating to one or several historic contexts. See instructions in How to Complete the Multiple Property Documentation Form (National Register Bulletin 16B). Complete each item by entering the requested information. For additional space, use continuation sheets (Form 10-900-a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer to complete all items.

New Submission Amended Submission

A. Name of Multiple Property Listing

Gaston County's African American Built Environment Under Jim Crow (1900-1950)

B. Associated Historic Contexts

(Name each associated historic context, identifying theme, geographical area, and chronological period for each.)

- Rural Community Development
- Cotton Textile Industry and African Americans
- African American Urban Communities

C. Form Prepared by

name/title Emily Ramsey and Lara Ramsey

street & number 745 Georgia Trail telephone (704) 922-5198

city or town Gastonia state NC zip code 28092

D. Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this documentation form meets the National Register documentation standards and sets forth requirements for the listing of related properties consistent with the National Register criteria. This submission meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60 and the Secretary of the Interior's Standards and Guidelines for Archeology and Historic Preservation. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature and title of certifying official Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

I hereby certify that this multiple property documentation form has been approved by the National Register as a basis for evaluating related properties for listing in the National Register.

Signature of the Keeper Date

Table of Contents for Written Narrative

Provide the following information on continuation sheets. Cite the letter and the title before each section of the narrative. Assign page numbers according to the instructions for continuation sheets in How to Complete the Multiple Property Documentation Form (National Register Bulletin 16B). Fill in page numbers for each section in the space below.

Page Numbers

E. Statement of Historic Contexts (If more than one historic context is documented, present them in sequential order.)

F. Associated Property Types (Provide description, significance, and registration requirements.)

G. Geographical Data

H. Summary of Identification and Evaluation Methods (Discuss the methods used in developing the multiple property listing.)

I. Major Bibliographical References (List major written works and primary location of additional documentation: State Historic Preservation Office, other State agency, Federal agency, local government, university, or other, specifying repository.)

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 120 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section E Page 1 Gaston County's African American Built Environment Under Jim Crow
Name of Multiple Property Listing

INTRODUCTION

During the first half of the twentieth century, African Americans throughout the South labored, slept, ate, and worshipped under the watchful eye of Jim Crow. Although emancipation had given black slaves the freedom to work for a wage, to live together with their families, and to move about freely, Reconstruction promises of true political, economic and social equality for African American southerners dissolved with the Republican and Democratic compromise of 1877 and the removal of federal troops in the same year. By the turn of the century, with the blessings of the federal government outlined in the United States Supreme Court's 1899 *Plessy vs. Ferguson* decision, white southerners quickly began the formation of a system of rigid, legalized racial segregation that would remain in place until the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. African Americans in 1920 found that the options of where they could live, work, and worship were, in some ways, more strictly circumscribed under Jim Crow laws than they had been during the reign of the plantation economy.

Amidst such narrowing opportunities, African Americans during the Jim Crow era nevertheless managed to build and cultivate thriving, diverse, and closely-knit communities with black-owned-and-operated businesses, elementary and high schools, and churches. The built environment that African Americans constructed for themselves from roughly 1900 to 1950 serves as a tangible reminder of the resilience and resourcefulness of black southerners during the Jim Crow era – although physically segregated from the white population, African Americans managed to work within the confines of segregation laws to fashion better lives for themselves.

Gaston County in the Antebellum Period

Gaston County, like most of the North Carolina piedmont, remained on the periphery of the plantation economy in the antebellum period. While the eastern portion of the state, with its sandy soil and moderate climate, supported large tobacco plantations and thousands of black slaves, the piedmont region remained largely an area of smaller farms (less than 200 acres) not dependent on slave labor.¹ The 1850 United States census

¹ Sam Bowers Hilliard, *Atlas of Antebellum Southern Agriculture* (Baton Rouge: 1984), 42, hereinafter cited as Hilliard. Thomas Hanchett, "The Growth of Charlotte: A History" (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission), 3-4, hereinafter cited as Hanchett, "The Growth of Charlotte."

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section E Page 2 Gaston County's African American Built Environment Under Jim Crow
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ranks Gaston County fifty-third among the state's seventy-nine counties in total slave population. 2,112 African American slaves resided within the county's borders by the middle of the nineteenth century, a far cry from the almost 10,000 slaves working on tobacco plantations in Granville and Wake counties, the state's top-ranking counties in terms of slaveholding.² The vast majority of Gaston County's slaves labored on modest farms and worked alongside their master and his family in the fields. The largest slaveholder in the county owned only forty slaves, and in 1860, ninety percent of the county's slaveholders owned less than ten slaves.³

As with most rural counties, Gaston County was home to very few free African Americans – free blacks tended to gravitate towards urban centers, where jobs were easier to come by and there was less chance of being scrutinized and singled out by wary white citizens.⁴ Cotton, labor-intensive and difficult to grow in the North Carolina piedmont, was not a major cash crop in Gaston County – only 535 bales were ginned in 1850. Gaston County farmers grew primarily corn, along with some oats and wheat. The majority of the corn grown in the county was used not for human sustenance or for livestock feed, but for whiskey.⁵ By the end of the Civil War, more than twenty-four licensed distilleries dotted the county.

Although Gaston County operated under a decidedly agricultural-based economy throughout the antebellum period, three prosperous textile mills – the Mountain Island Mill, the Woodlawn Mill, and Stowe's Factory – operated along the Catawba and South-Fork Rivers, hinting at the changes that would sweep the county after the end of the Civil War.⁶

² *Seventh Census of the United States: Agricultural Schedule and Slave Schedule, Gaston County* (1850).

³ Robert F. Cope and Manly Wade Wellman, *The County of Gaston: Two Centuries of a North Carolina Region* (Gastonia, 1961), 76, hereinafter cited as Cope and Wellman. Hilliard, 37.

⁴ *Seventh Census of the United States*. Gaston County ranked seventy-fifth of seventy-nine counties in terms of free African American population – only 26 free blacks lived in Gaston County in 1850.

⁵ *Ibid.* Cope and Wellman, 71. 329,377 bushels of corn, 56,645 bushels of oats, and 51,762 bushels of wheat were produced in Gaston County in 1850.

⁶ Jim Atkins, ed. *Gastonia Centennial Commemorative Book: 1877-1977* (Gastonia, 1977), 46, Hereinafter cited as Atkins.

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War and Reconstruction – Gaston County's Place in Postbellum North Carolina

The Civil War left Gaston County relatively unscathed. Gaston citizens did face hard times immediately after the war; as Admiral Charles Wilkes wrote dramatically in 1865, “[there is] almost thorough starvation from the failure of last year’s crop . . . a more completely crushed country I have never seen.”⁷ However, unlike many areas of the South, Gaston County had escaped total physical destruction at the hands of the Union army; the county’s rail lines, textile mills, and public buildings remained intact, and the majority of the area’s farmers, having never been dependent on slave labor, were able to simply replant their crops and continue their farming operations. The years following the Civil War proved to be more complicated for the county’s African American population. Although a triumphant and moralistic North had defeated the South and its “Peculiar Institution,” many African Americans faced an uncertain future. For the first time, Southern blacks were faced with the freedom and responsibility of choice – choices regarding their own employment, their place of residence, their place of worship, their political associations, and social activities. Yet, as historian Jeffrey Crow argues, the slow, uncertain progress of Reconstruction left African Americans unclear about “their new position in society.”⁸ Segregated black neighborhoods did not, as Southern historians once believed, spring fully formed into existence after the Civil War – white and black Southerners alike struggled with the awkwardness of interracial contact outside of the context of slavery during the 1870s and 1880s. Blacks continued the familiar practice of entering restaurants and other places of business through the back door, but they were also seen, for the first time, in political arenas, on juries, and riding in formerly all-white railroad cars. C. Vann Woodward, in his study of Southern post-bellum segregation, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, characterized the Reconstruction period as experimental, “temporary,” “usually self-conscious,” and, in the end, “too exceptional” to last.⁹

⁷ Cope and Wellman, 92.

⁸ Jeffrey J. Crow, Paul D. Escott and Flora J. Hatley, *A History of African Americans in North Carolina* (Raleigh, 1992), 76-77, hereinafter cited as Crow, et. al.

⁹ C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: 1974), 29, hereinafter cited as Woodward. Thomas W. Hanchett, *Sorting Out the New South City: Race, Class, and Urban Development in Charlotte, 1875-1975* (Chapel Hill: 1998) 116-117, hereinafter cited as Hanchett, *Sorting Out the New South City*.

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However unclear black Southerners were about their future as free citizens, African Americans in Gaston County and across the South were generally united in their belief that the Republican party would lead the way to true freedom and equality after the Civil War. The battle between the Republican and Democratic parties for control of local and state government in North Carolina was fiercest in the piedmont region, and Gaston County proved no exception. White citizens in Gaston vehemently opposed changes in state government under Republican provisional governor W. W. Holden. Although 227 of the over 300 eligible voters in the county favored ratification of North Carolina's new constitution (which abolished slavery in the state, repealed the secession ordinance, and "provided for an election in November of state officials and legislators"), the number represented more the power of federal officials and other Reconstruction supporters over the county's "ex-Confederates" than the true feelings of Gaston County citizens, the vast majority of whom were white conservatives supporting the Democratic party. With each passing election, the margin of victory for the Republican party grew narrower, despite the earnest efforts of the county's black voters. African Americans joined the Gaston chapter of the Union League, and did their best to keep black voters from supporting Democratic candidates. Although tales of violent, determined "Negro Republicans" using intimidation tactics to force conservative African Americans to vote Republican have circulated throughout oral and written histories of Gaston County, Gaston County African Americans had more to fear from the newly formed Ku Klux Klan than from Republicans of their own race.¹⁰ Gaston County's location and intense political turmoil made it an ideal location for Klan activity. The Ku Klux Klan, formed originally as a force of violent opposition to the biracial Republican party, was centered in the piedmont of North Carolina, where Republicans were elected by the narrowest of margins and held only a weak hold on local government against an "old elite of Democratic officeholders who had been driven from power by the Republican revolution."¹¹ Gaston area Klans consisted of some of the county's leading white citizens – attorneys, merchants, and business owners – all eager to fight the Republican threat to white authority. The oath taken by new members of the Dallas chapter of the Ku Klux Klan included a statement declaring the member's opposition and rejection of the "principles of the radical party." The violent tactics of the Ku Klux Klan, which included whipping several Reconstruction

¹⁰ Cope and Wellman, 95-101. Crow, et. al. 88.

¹¹ Crow, et. al. 89.

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leaders and setting fire to their houses, were extremely effective in Gaston County, and by 1870, the brief period of Republican control was over.¹² Although Reconstruction did not officially end until 1877, Gaston County African Americans had lost any hope of having a real say in their future as free citizens long before the withdrawal of federal troops.

Separate and Unequal – The Origins of Jim Crow and the Move Towards Legalized Segregation

The last decades of the nineteenth century proved particularly disheartening for African Americans, as Reconstruction promises of equality gave way to an increasingly hostile, restrictive, and racially segregated environment. The federal government and Northern political factions, in order to foster sectional reconciliation with the newly reincorporated South, conceded point after point regarding race policy, and by the 1890s, the nation was more or less united against the idea of equality and civil rights for African Americans. The ultimate reflection of this trend was a succession of Supreme Court decisions that culminated in the landmark *Plessy v. Ferguson* case of 1896, in which the Court substantiated the Southern principle that “legislation is powerless to eradicate racial instincts,” and that “separate but equal” facilities would be sufficient to ensure adequate civil rights for black citizens.¹³ With the federal government now willing to tolerate separate facilities for whites and blacks, Southern states moved quickly to put into place a system of rigid segregation – a system which white Southerners hoped would prove to be the solution to the “problem” of free African Americans living among unwelcoming white Southerners. Jim Crow laws (written and, in many cases, unwritten) prescribing racial segregation in housing, on buses and trains, in restaurants, stores, hospitals, theaters, public restrooms and waiting rooms were adopted throughout the South in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. North Carolina passed its first Jim Crow law, requiring segregation in passenger trains, in 1899. Like dominoes, when one Southern state passed a new Jim Crow law, other states quickly followed suite.¹⁴

¹² Cope and Wellman, 101-102.

¹³ Woodward, 69-71.

¹⁴ Ibid, 85. Hanchett, *Sorting Out the New South City*, 116-121.

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It was during this turbulent time in Gaston County history that the county experienced its most rapid growth and development. Like many North Carolina counties, Gaston County followed the call of the New South pioneers to industrialize by constructing hundreds of textile mills. The transformation was astounding – by 1900, Gaston led the state in textile manufacturing, a position it would hold well into the twentieth century. The county's twenty-three mills housed 2,521 looms and 134,060 spindles and produced cotton yarn, thread, and cloth. Ten years later, these figures had doubled.¹⁵ The county grew by leaps and bounds, as evidenced by the large number of Gaston's towns that were incorporated between 1880 and 1910, many centered around one or more textile mills.¹⁶

CONTEXT ONE: RURAL COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT UNDER JIM CROW

Prior to the turn of the century textile boom, African Americans in Gaston County lived, along with most of the county's white population, in rural areas. African Americans who were lucky enough to work their own farms, or to rent a farm from a white landowner, congregated in small rural communities with idyllic names like Chestnut Ridge, Fancy Hill, Pleasant Ridge, and Neely's Grove. The majority of Gaston County's black farmers worked as sharecroppers and tenant farmers on large white-owned farms. With the coming of the textile mills in the late 1800s, African Americans began moving, along with white farmers, into Gastonia and the numerous small towns that dotted the county. However, unlike rural whites, African Americans did not move to urban centers to work in the mills. Although black men could occasionally find work hauling cotton into warehouses or as janitors, the Southern textile industry was traditionally a white industry, and would remain so in Gaston County until the 1960s. Thus, the migration of local black farmers and black farmers from as far away as South Carolina and Georgia into Gastonia and the county's surrounding small towns was a much more complex movement than the relocation of white farmers into those same

¹⁵ Thomas Hanchett, "Charlotte's Textile Heritage: An Introduction" (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission).

¹⁶ Joseph Separks, *Gastonia and Gaston County: Its Past, Present and Future* (Kingston, 1936).

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urban areas during roughly the same time. These differences, many of which stemmed from the overarching influence of Jim Crow, also made for different patterns of urban settlement and community life for transplanted white and black farmers.

Sharecropping and Tenant Farming in Gaston County

In the years immediately following the Civil War, many former slaves, unsure of where to go and unaccustomed to their newfound freedom, did not stray far from the familiar rural landscapes that they had worked unwillingly before emancipation. In Gaston County, the majority of the over 4,000 former slaves continued living the only type of existence they had ever known – working the land for white landowners.¹⁷ Coming directly from slavery, African Americans had no financial assets and no means with which to purchase or rent the land or supplies needed to farm independently. Consequently, with few other options open to them, African Americans were forced into the systems of sharecropping and tenant farming – manipulative situations which benefited the white landowner at the expense of black laborers. A sharecropper or tenant farmer, once under the financial control of white landowners and furnishing merchants (who provided an advance of needed supplies in exchange for payment at the time of harvest), could rarely break from the inevitable spiral of increasing debt.¹⁸ From modest yields of cotton, a sharecropper had to “pay a quarter to a third of the crop in rent, and most of the rest in interest on the food and supplies that had been purchased on credit.”¹⁹ Black farming families, with men, women, and children all working the fields, could toil for decades and gain nothing – as Alabama sharecropper Ned Cobb aptly observed, “the white man gettin it all back all he looking for, all he put out in the spring, gettin it all back in the fall. But what am I gettin for my labor? I aint gettin nothin.”²⁰

¹⁷ *Ninth Census of the United States, Population Schedule and Agriculture Schedule*, Gaston County (1870).

¹⁸ Crow, et. al., 92.

¹⁹ Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York, 1998), 115, hereinafter cited as Litwack.

²⁰ Theodore Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* (New York, 1974), 108.

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To many African Americans, sharecropping in particular looked and felt uncomfortably like slavery. Black farmers who could transition to tenant farming, simply renting land with cash payment instead of a portion of their crops, were seen by many as more autonomous than sharecroppers. Outside of Belmont, African American tenant farmers were clustered together in a community appropriately named "Shacktown," where blacks lived in "one-room log cabins or weatherboard shacks with the bedroom, kitchen and living room combined."²¹ Nearby Smokey Hollow was also dotted with tenant housing, most owned by the Gaston and Johnson families, wealthy white planters.²² Many wealthy white landowners constructed large numbers of similarly minimal housing across the county in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Outside of Bessemer City, the Ormond and Matthews families employed large numbers of black sharecroppers and tenant farmers. In Lowell, Sam Wilson rented a portion of his land to black tenant farmers who "grew molasses cane, cotton, corn and other crops" for him.²³

As the boll weevil swept across Southern states below North Carolina in the early 1900s, farmers from South Carolina and Georgia in particular moved north to escape the insect's devastating effects. Alfred Graves, of Cherryville, recalled that "when the boll weevils came to Georgia, whole groups of black families started coming into Cherryville in wagons, with everything they had, to get away from it." White farmers like J. C. Dellinger took advantage of the influx of labor, and many of the Georgian transplants, according to Graves, ended up on Dellinger's farm outside of Cherryville, which was "covered with tenant houses."²⁴

²¹ Oscar DePriest Hand, Sr. and Julia Neal Sykes, *Footprints on the Rough Side of the Mountain: An African American Niche in the History of a Southern Textile City* (Winston-Salem, 1997), 15, hereinafter cited as Hand, Sr. and Sykes.

²² *Ibid*, 112.

²³ William and Marjorie Goins, interview by Emily and Lara Ramsey, 7 May 2001, hereinafter cited as Goins interview. Joe Reid and Rosa Lee Armstrong, interview by Emily and Lara Ramsey, 11 March 2001, hereinafter cited as Reid and Armstrong interview.

²⁴ Alfred Graves, interview by Emily and Lara Ramsey, 30 April 2001, hereinafter cited as Graves interview.

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The Formation of African American Farming Communities in Rural Gaston County

As former slaves, many African Americans were not satisfied with their position as sharecroppers and tenants forced to abide by the rules of white landowners. They craved land of their own. Land ownership represented to the toiling tenant farmer the ultimate freedom – financial independence and personal autonomy. While in the minority, an increasing number of Gaston County African Americans were able to eventually afford their own farms, mostly modest landholdings anchored by humble log or frame dwellings. Larger black landowners such as W. R. Brooks, who owned over one hundred acres in the area between Bessemer City and Kings Mountain, remained a rarity.²⁵ Only eighty-four of the county's black male citizens (representing approximately 1% of Gaston County's black population) owned their own farms by 1900. By 1910, the percentage of black farm owners had inched upward to 2% of the county's total black population.²⁶

As the number of black farmers renting farmland for a fixed price (considered a step above tenant farming) and the number of black farm owners rose throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s, small black farming communities began to coalesce in rural Gaston County. Most often centered around a rural black church, these communities gave African Americans a sense of true independence – no longer under the watchful eye of the white landowner, free to plant and raise what they wished, the members of such communities as Chestnut Ridge, Neely's Grove, and Fancy Hill formed closely-knit all-black enclaves that are, to this day, remembered fondly by those who grew up there. Francis Setzer, whose family was among the half-dozen or so black families who settled and populated Chestnut Ridge, between Bessemer City and Kings Mountain, recalled the simple abundance of the rich farm land – “we had apple and pear trees, cows and chickens and hogs. . . No one lives in Chestnut Ridge anymore. . . none of the old houses are there anymore . . . [but] it was the most beautiful place you'd ever see, all that land and nobody there but us.”²⁷ Marjorie Goins, also a native of Chestnut Ridge, remembered the tiny farming community fondly:

²⁵ Goins interview.

²⁶ *Twelfth Census of the United States, Population Schedule*, Gaston County (1900). *Thirteenth Census of the United States, Population Schedule*, Gaston County (1910).

²⁷ Francis Setzer, interview by Emily and Lara Ramsey, 4 May 2001.

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There were only five or six families in Chestnut Ridge. It was a real small community. There were the Smiths, the Youngbloods, the Hogues, the Wards, the Costners, and us, the Stewarts. It was called Chestnut Ridge because that area was just covered, just *covered*, in chestnut trees. People used to come for miles to get chestnuts, just came and scooped them off the ground when they started falling off the trees. We farmed cotton, and we worked in the fields all day. It was so hot, the sun beating down on your head all day! . . . But we had what we needed. We had our own meat back then. We'd fatten a calf and kill it, or a pig, and share it with the families around. If a neighbor killed a calf, he would sell you a half or a quarter.²⁸

Although owning land seemed an idyllic situation to black farmers caught in the snares of sharecropping, black farm owners often had to make immense sacrifices to achieve even a modicum of economic freedom in the Jim Crow era. The path to land ownership was, for African Americans, crowded with obstacles. Ambitious black farmers not only had to work harder and longer in an effort to secure payment, they also had to navigate the complex web of contract labor and vagrancy laws that, coupled with unwritten rules of custom, worked to minimize black farmers' attempts to "escape the cycle of indebtedness. . . designed to ensure a permanent and tractable black labor force."²⁹ When Daniel Stewart moved his family to a 200- acre farmstead outside of the Vantine Community in Bessemer City in the early 1940s, he was determined to pay for the land and house as quickly as possible. Not surprisingly, the white owner of the farm, a prominent Bessemer City citizen and owner of the local drugstore, pressed Stewart to "take his time on the payments." Francis Setzer, Daniel and Gennie Stewart's daughter, now lives on the farm that her family worked to purchase outright. Her father, Setzer remembers, had always wanted a big farm. "We paid for this house and land by picking cotton – ours and everybody else's. I say we because we all worked out in the fields. . . . Mr. Morris would tell my father that he didn't have to pay it off so soon, he didn't have

²⁸ Goins interview.

²⁹ Litwack, 138-140.

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to pay that much each month, but my father wanted to have the place paid off as soon as possible, so nobody could take it from him.”³⁰

Black farmers in the process of purchasing land often had to supplement their crop earnings by taking jobs with railroad companies, lumber mills, or by working as common laborers, taking odd construction and maintenance jobs in nearby towns. W. R. Brooks worked as a bondsman during the construction of the Southern railway outside of Bessemer City. His son, Oscar Goins, took work with the Southern Railroad. “Blacks couldn’t work in the cotton mills,” William Goins, a black farmer, recalled, “but a lot of the men worked in the sawmills. . . . A good many of the men would farm in the spring and summer up until harvest, and in the winter they worked in the sawmills. Some of the men were carpenters there; builders would bring in blueprints and they would dress them out -- tell how much lumber they needed to build whatever they wanted built.”³¹

Farmer’s wives contributed much to the household’s income. Many worked as domestics for white families, scrubbing floors and washing clothes for prominent families and common mill workers alike. Children picked strawberries and blackberries to sell in town, along with “crack cotton” (cotton inside unopened or partially opened bolls, left on the plant after the harvest) that could be sold to the closest textile mill.

Religion and the Development of African American Churches in Gaston’s Rural Communities

Emancipation, while failing to deliver political, economic, or social equality, gave African Americans the freedom to worship in their own churches, far from the segregated sanctuaries and pro-slavery rhetoric of predominantly white Southern Christian churches. African Americans, who had cultivated a deep religious faith in secret slave churches before and during the Civil War, were overjoyed with the freedom to worship in the open among their peers. As one African American woman explained, after having been forced for years to listen to the sermons of racist white ministers, “now we desiar [sic]. . . to

³⁰ Setzer interview. Charlotte Crawford, Hilda Gunst, Enid Kiefer, and Elizabeth Thornburg. *Centennial 1893-1993: Bessemer City, North Carolina – A Compilation of Facts and Fancy as They Have Affected Our Town Over the Past 100 Years* (Charlotte, 1993). Hereinafter cited as Crawford et al, *Centennial*.

³¹ Goins Interview.

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worship God according to the dictates of our consciences.”³² The concentration of sharecroppers into clusters of tenant housing, coupled with the development of rural communities populated by black renters and landowners, allowed otherwise isolated African American farmers to build churches in which to worship independently of whites. Rural churches often formed the religious, social, and educational center of black communities, and the church buildings themselves served as community meeting houses and architectural centerpieces - the pride of the people who had built them.

The majority of African American congregations that emerged in the last half of the nineteenth century in Gaston County were, as in the rest of North Carolina, predominantly African Methodist Episcopal, A.M.E. Zion, or Baptist churches. Most began as informal gatherings under brush arbors or in community members' houses. The Neely Grove community, located between Cramerton and Gastonia, supported both the Neely Grove A.M.E. Zion Church and Center Baptist Church. Center Baptist, originally a simple, white wood-frame structure that was replaced by a brick building in the 1950s, was first organized in 1879. These churches served not only the Neely Grove area, but the nearby Baltimore community on the outskirts of the Cramerton mill village as well.³³ Tenant farmers, living and working on white-owned land, were often unable to afford the land and construction costs of a church building. Still, many tenant farming communities had their own churches, thanks in large part to their white employers. Oak Grove A.M.E. Zion Church and Zion Hill Baptist Church were constructed with help from white landowner J. C. Dellinger, on land he donated to his tenant farmers for that purpose.³⁴ Such donations were not strictly charitable outpourings by sympathetic white farmers. Religion was a stabilizing influence, and church-going tenants were generally thought to be hard working and dependable. By giving his tenants and sharecroppers space for their own congregations, Dellinger and other white landowners were creating, in their own minds, a more reliable workforce. Such arrangements were beneficial to tenant farmers

³² Crow, et. al., 82-83.

³³ Pearl Grier, interview by Emily and Lara Ramsey, 9 May 2001. An unpublished “History of Center Baptist Church” (Gaston County). Woody Connette, Tom Hatley, and Roger Manley, “Cramerton, North Carolina: A Piedmont Mill Village” (M. A. thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1974), 67, hereinafter cited as Connette et. al, “Cramerton.”

³⁴ Graves Interview.

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and white landowners. As Alfred Graves wryly commented, "that's why those churches are so far off the road – they [the Dellingers] didn't want to give them good land near the road, so they put them far back and let them dig a little road to the church."³⁵

Cemeteries were also an integral part of the development of the rural church. Unlike the majority of black church congregations within Gaston County's town and city limits where land was expensive and heavily taxed, most rural churches were able to bury their members in church graveyards.³⁶ Burial grounds make up some of the oldest and most well-preserved African American resources in the county – while many of the area's rural church buildings were replaced in the 1950s and 1960s by more modern structures, their cemeteries have survived.

As congregations grew and benefited from the economic prosperity of the post-World War II period, many began replacing their modest, one-room frame church buildings with larger, more sophisticated brick structures. Henry's Chapel A. M. E. Zion Church, established in 1874 at Mary Henry Spring and located south of Belmont, is a representative example of the evolution of Gaston's rural African American churches. For the first four years, Henry's Chapel Church members met under a modest brush arbor. In 1881, the congregation purchased the one and one-fourth acres of land that housed the brush arbor, but members were unable to afford the cost of a church building until the early 1890s. The simple frame building served the congregation until 1953. Eager for a structure that would more adequately reflect the progress of church members and the congregation as a whole, members financed the construction of a new brick building.³⁷ The burial ground at Henry's Chapel, with simple stone gravemarkers dating to as early as the late 1800s, remains the only tangible reminder of Henry's Chapel's humble beginnings.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Most of the churches in the Highland Neighborhood in Gastonia buried their members in the North Oakland Cemetery. Burge Memorial Methodist Church and Mt. Sinai Missionary Baptist Church in Mt. Holly's Freedom Neighborhood shared a small plot on the corner of South Hawthorne Street and West Catawba Avenue, across from the city's public cemetery. St. Benedict's Cemetery in Belmont accommodated black Catholic who attended Belmont Abbey.

³⁷ Hand, Sr. and Sykes, 55-57.

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Education in Gaston County's Rural Communities

Of all of the new opportunities open to blacks in the post-bellum period, the opportunity for an education was perhaps the most powerful instrument for change within the black community and the most threatening aspect of black freedom to Southern whites. Northern missionaries and representatives of the Freedman's Bureau who arrived after Emancipation to set up schools and begin the education of freed slaves were astounded by the enthusiasm and the sheer masses of eager students that greeted them across the South. One teacher recalled walking into his schoolhouse in North Carolina and being confronted by "three hundred people assembled for a lesson."³⁸ The overwhelming desire for an education crossed all generational boundaries, as evidenced by the experience of one North Carolina teacher, employed by the Freedman's Bureau, who encountered "*representatives of four generations* in a direct line . . . a child of six years, her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother." Parents sacrificed the sorely needed labor that their children could provide in order to ensure that they begin their educations in the hastily organized one-room schoolhouses. Adults attended night schools after laboring in cotton fields from sunup to sundown, so eager were they to attain the education they had been denied as slaves.³⁹

The enthusiasm African Americans showed for learning was not dampened by the failure of Reconstruction. Still, black schools were often the barest of environments -- one-room, unpainted frame structures with split log benches, shuttered, glass-less windows, and a pot-bellied stove for heat in the winter. Supplies were crude, if available at all. Most black students during the post-bellum period, according to historian Leon F. Litwack, learned to read "using the Bible and the *Farmer's Almanac*."⁴⁰

Rural black students had additional disadvantages that often hampered their ability to receive an education. Since every member of the farming family was considered an integral part of the farm's workforce, most rural black students attended school only when the weather was bad, and during the short period between harvest and

³⁸ Crow, et. al., 81.

³⁹ Ibid, 81-82.

⁴⁰ Litwack, 64.

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planting seasons. Altogether, most rural pupils attended school only an average of two to three months out of the year.

In Gaston County, the rural African American's desire for learning continued in spite of these disadvantages. 1870 Census records showed only twenty four of the county's 4,172 African Americans attending school. By 1890, more than one-quarter of the Gaston's black citizens were students.⁴¹ Some rural black communities, such as the farming community outside of Lucia near the Lincoln County Border, constructed one-room schoolhouses for the area's children. Miles Luckey, an African American farmer in the Lucia community, bought a small parcel of land in 1901 and began plans for a schoolhouse for the area's black children.⁴² The Luckey School - a "one-room, white framed structure" with "windows that could be opened for cooling in the summertime" and a pot-bellied stove for heating in the winter - opened in 1907 and closely resembled the thousands of schools that served black students across the South. Even some tenant farmers were able to attend a nearby school - a one-room schoolhouse was constructed on the Dellinger farm outside of Cherryville in the 1910s.

The Impact of the Rosenwald Fund on Black Rural Education

Conceived by black educator Booker T. Washington and financed by Julius Rosenwald, noted philanthropist and president of Sears, Roebuck and Company, the Rosenwald Fund changed the face of black education throughout the South during the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s. Although African Americans had always put a high value on education, the need for a basic education became even more crucial as states across the South, including North Carolina, passed legislation requiring that all citizens pass a literacy test before being allowed to vote. This legislation, which moved to effectively disenfranchise the state's black and rural white populations, also provided the impetus for a renewed push towards public education for blacks. In the early twentieth century, education literally equaled political power.⁴³ The Rosenwald Fund worked to meet the

⁴¹ *Eighth Census of the United States, Education and Population Schedules*, Gaston County (1870). *Tenth Census of the United States, Education and Population Schedules*, Gaston County (1890).

⁴² Gaston County Register of Deeds, Book 51. Joyce J. Handsel, *Echoes and Shadows of Two Centuries (1950-1950): A Collection of Interesting Tidbits Relating to the History of Stanley, North Carolina* (Stanley, 1999), 308.

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overwhelming educational needs of rural black communities by provided matching grants for use in the construction of new school buildings. The Fund, which replaced dilapidated one-room schoolhouses with large, multi-room buildings constructed according to modern, standardized architectural plans, had a particularly strong impact in North Carolina. More Rosenwald Schools were constructed in North Carolina than in any other state.⁴⁴

Gaston County's black communities moved quickly to take advantage of Rosenwald funding. Fourteen of the sixteen Rosenwald Schools erected in the 1920s in Gaston County were completed between 1921 and 1925. The buildings ranged in size from the rural one-classroom McLean, Southpoint, and Zion schools to the impressive twelve-classroom Reid High School in Belmont, which utilized the largest Rosenwald plan.⁴⁵ The new Rosenwald schools must have seemed like castles to the hundreds of rural black children who had previously worked in the dark, cramped environment of the one-room shack school. Rosenwald schools were painstakingly planned and printed on stock blueprints, thus enabling "any rural community to build a top-flight facility, without architects' fees."⁴⁶ The schools were designed to maximize light and ventilation while providing spacious classrooms and, in the larger schools, an open auditorium space – an unheard of luxury in white or black rural communities. Rosenwald Schools, often set in close proximity to the local church building, served as community centers, and were used for church get-togethers, school plays and other local social activities.

⁴³ Thomas W. Hanchett, "The Rosenwald Schools in Mecklenburg County: A History" (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, 1987), 3., Hereinafter cited as Hanchett, "Rosenwald Schools in Mecklenburg County." Francis P. Alexander, "Survey and Research Report on the Billingsville School" (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, 1994), 5.

⁴⁴ Thomas W. Hanchett, "The Rosenwald Schools and Black Education in North Carolina," North Carolina Historical Review, October 1988, 387, hereinafter cited as Hanchett, "The Rosenwald Schools and Black Education."

⁴⁵ Ibid, 433. The complete listing of Rosenwald Schools in Gaston County and the number of classrooms are as follows: Beaver Dam (2); Belmont, Reid High School (12); Bessemer City (8); Crowders Creek (2); Dallas (4); Jackson Knob (3); Lowell (3); Lucia (2); Mauney (2); McLean (1); Mildren Welman (at Lincoln Academy) (6); Mt. Holly (3); Mountain Chapel (1); Ranlo (2); Sinai (2); South Point (1); and Zion (1).

⁴⁶ Ibid.

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Many of Gaston County's Rosenwald Schools served black children until the desegregation of public schools, prescribed by the Supreme Court in its 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* ruling, began in earnest during the 1960s. Uncomfortable with the idea of white students attending formerly all-black schools, the county constructed new schools in the 1950s and 1960s in anticipation of desegregation. In turn, many of the county's Rosenwald schools, once the pride of their communities, were demolished. The smaller, one-and-two-room Rosenwald buildings dotting the county's rural landscape were often abandoned and, eventually, forgotten. Three of Gaston's rural Rosenwald schools (the Zion, Southpoint, and Lucia schools) have been demolished; the status of the others is not known.

Lincoln Academy and the Advent of Private Education for African Americans in Gaston County

A major exception to the system of small, locally attended black schools was Lincoln Academy, Gaston County's first private educational institution founded exclusively for African American children. Now legendary in the minds of the county's African American population, Lincoln Academy effectively raised the standard for black education in Gaston County and in many surrounding counties. Founded by First Congregational missionary Emily C. Prudden in 1888 and originally conceived as a training academy for Negro girls, Lincoln Academy was set in the shadow of Crowders Mountain, its only neighbor the nearby All Healing Springs (later Linwood College).⁴⁷ In this bucolic setting, Prudden and her fellow missionaries constructed a three-story building, which served as classroom, dormitory, teacherage, kitchen and dining hall. Despite the fact that prospective students were required to pay a monthly four-dollar tuition, quite a sum for African American families at the time, the Academy thrived, attracting students from throughout the North Carolina piedmont. The first graduating class included male and female students from nearby Kings Mountain, Shelby, and Charlotte. Lincoln Academy became one of the first black institutions in the county to install electric lights, and running water was brought down from a spring on the side of the mountain by a complex system of pipes constructed by the Academy's male boarders. The Academy was accredited by the Southern Association of Secondary Schools in 1923,

⁴⁷ "Lincoln Academy Began Classes 67 Years Ago," *The Gaston Gazette*, September 8, 1954.

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and reached its zenith in the 1920s and 1930s under an all black administration and faculty led by the Reverend Walter E. Ricks.⁴⁸ With the funds collected from enrolled students and numerous private donations, the Academy constructed a brick boys dormitory, a brick dining hall, a Rosenwald elementary school, a vocational building, a teacher's cottage, a canteen, and a swimming pool, forming an expansive and impressive school campus. Students who could not afford the monthly tuition were allowed to work their way through by putting in hours of landscaping, kitchen duty, and general maintenance chores.

Unlike many of Gaston County's early black educational facilities, which were located in already established communities that could support and maintain the operations of the school, Lincoln Academy began as an isolated campus and eventually became the center of a small but tightly-knit community. Gradually, as hundreds of African American children began to attend the Academy (some boarding, many commuting to the school from the Vantine community in Bessemer City and scattered African American rural communities like Chestnut Ridge and Ebenezer in order to complete their high school educations) a handful of African American families moved closer to the campus in order to take advantage of job opportunities generated by the Academy. C. V. Alexander built a house and small grocery store within walking distance of the campus in the early 1900s, and was able to make a living almost solely from the profits generated by his grocery. Alexander also worked on the Academy's campus, helping with the large construction projects underway throughout the 1920s and 1930s.⁴⁹

Lincoln Academy, like the vast majority of Gaston County's early twentieth-century black schools, fell prey to the desegregation of the Gaston County school system in the 1950s and 1960s. The Academy closed its doors in 1955, and students were transferred to the newly constructed Lincoln High School in Bessemer City. The unoccupied rural campus rapidly deteriorated – vandals defaced the abandoned buildings, breaking windows and scrawling graffiti on the walls. The campus was ravaged by fire on more than one occasion. Today, only remnants of foundations remain of what was once the area's largest black educational facility.

⁴⁸ Ibid. *Lincoln Academy Reunion 2000*, compiled for the 2000 reunion of alumni and provided for the authors by Mrs. Tweety Stewart of Bessemer City.

⁴⁹ Ruth McDowell, interview by Emily and Lara Ramsey, March 2001.

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**CONTEXT TWO: THE COTTON TEXTILE INDUSTRY AND
AFRICAN AMERICANS IN GASTON COUNTY**

Textile manufacturing, more than any other industry, transformed the South from a region of farmers laboring under a rural, agrarian economy to a region of burgeoning urban centers swarming with industrial workers, laden with investment capital, and supported by the hum and bustle of looms and spindles turning cotton into spools of thread and bolts of cloth. In the years following the Civil War, forward-thinking Southern entrepreneurs proclaimed the need for a "New South," a South that depended not on one-crop agriculture and an agrarian economy, but on industrialization and the development of urban centers. By embracing new steam power technology and utilizing the South's ever-expanding web of railroad lines, local investors built sprawling brick textile mills across the rural landscape, and provided the impetus for the development of small towns and large urban centers, both of which would transform the rural countryside of the antebellum period into the "New South." The exponential growth of the textile industry astounded even company owners, particularly in North Carolina - between 1885 and 1915, the number of mills in the state skyrocketed from 60 to 318, with a productive capacity of nearly four million spindles and over 67 million looms.⁵⁰

Gaston County: The Development of the "Combed Yarn Capital of the World"

If, as historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall proclaimed, "textile mills built the New South," then Gaston County was the New South's crowning glory.⁵¹ Like many other North Carolina communities, Gaston County had experimented with textile production as early as the antebellum period, with modest and temporary success. The area's first cotton manufacturing mill, the Mountain Island Mill, opened in 1848 with 3,000 spindles and 150 looms. Two other water-powered mills, the Woodlawn ("Pinhook") Mill and the Stowe Mill, both situated along the South Fork River, soon followed, making Gaston

⁵⁰ Brent D. Glass, *The Textile Industry in North Carolina, A History* (Raleigh: 1992), 31-35, hereinafter cited as Glass.

⁵¹ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, James Leloudis, Robert Korstad, Mary Murphy, Lu Ann Jones, and Christopher B. Daly, *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill: 1987), xi, hereinafter cited as Hall et al., *Like a Family*.

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County the fourth ranking county in the state in number of textile mills prior to the Civil War.⁵² This early distinction would pale in comparison to Gaston County's phenomenal industrial success in the post-war period. As railroad lines were laid across the county in the 1870s and 1880s, merchants and other prosperous local businessmen, eager to heed the call of New South pioneers like D. A. Tompkins to "Bring the Mills to the Cotton," enthusiastically formed cotton manufacturing companies and erected textile mills.⁵³ In 1874, A. P. Rhyne organized the Mount Holly Cotton Mills, followed by the Wilson and Moore Cotton Mill (later Spencer Mountain Mill), incorporated by R. Y. McAden in the same year. In 1881, McAden erected the Spring Shoals Manufacturing Company, and incorporated the town of McAdenville as the home of his mill and his mill workers. These three mills would be among the last in Gaston County to rely on a nearby water source for power. The Gastonia Manufacturing Company opened as Gaston County's first steam-powered mill in 1887, located in the newly incorporated town of Gastonia – from then on, Gaston County's textile entrepreneurs located their mills near the vital lines of the railroad instead of on isolated spots along the water.⁵⁴

The introduction of steam power gave local textile leaders the opportunity to build mills wherever they pleased, and many chose the rapidly growing town of Gastonia. Because of the flurry of textile mill activity, Gastonia was transformed "from a small depot town of 236 in 1880 to a thriving industrial center boasting eleven mills and a population of 5,759 in 1910."⁵⁵ Gastonia textile manufacturers set themselves apart from the myriad of textile mills in the Piedmont by switching from the production of course, carded yarn (predominant throughout the South) to combed yarn, a higher quality yarn that was produced by older, established mills in New England and Great Britain. Pioneering the process in Gastonia was textile mill owner George W. Ragan. Although Ragan first began experimenting with combed yarn as early as 1893 at the Trenton Cotton Mills, it was not until 1900, with the establishment of the Arlington Cotton Mills,

⁵² Robert Allison Ragan, *The Pioneer Cotton Mills of Gaston County (N. C.), "The First Thirty" (1848-1904) and Gaston County Textile Pioneers* (unpublished collection of articles, documents, and brief sketches, 1968-1969), hereinafter cited as Ragan, *Pioneer Cotton Mills*.

⁵³ Hanchett, "The Growth of Charlotte," 9.

⁵⁴ Ragan, *Pioneer Cotton Mills*, 4. Glass, 14.

⁵⁵ Kim Withers Bringle, *The Architectural Heritage of Gaston County, North Carolina* (Gastonia, 1982), 15.

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that combed yarn production in Gaston County began in earnest.⁵⁶ Gastonia's future as the "combed yarn capital of the world" was set when the Loray Mill, by far the largest single mill building in North Carolina and reportedly the largest textile mill under one roof in the South, began operations one mile west of the city in 1902.⁵⁷

The Textile Labor Force and the Exclusion of African Americans in Textiles

The search for workers to fill the increasing number of textile mills spread over the entire piedmont of the Carolinas and into the mountain regions - the local labor force had been quickly absorbed in the first years of the textile boom, and Gaston County mill owners were anxious to increase production and expand their operations.⁵⁸ Textile mill owners recruited hundreds of men, women and children from the countryside, guaranteeing employment and housing to practically anyone who could learn the tasks required. The one notable exception to the inclusive hiring practices of textile mills was the African American worker. Although the antebellum mills in Gaston County had utilized some slave labor, the Southern cotton textile industry of the postwar era was strictly a white industry. The reasoning behind this exclusion of African Americans (which did not occur in other North Carolina industries, most notably the tobacco industry) involved beliefs on the limitations of African Americans workers held by textile mill owners, and the deeply ingrained racism of white workers. Despite the testimony of several textile manufacturers to the contrary, many mill owners refused to employ black laborers because of the widely held belief "in the inability of blacks to operate machinery or to participate in production work."⁵⁹ The few textile mill owners who attempted to employ African Americans for jobs inside the mill encountered fierce opposition from white workers, who flatly refused to work in an atmosphere that implied racial equality by allowing African Americans to perform the same jobs as whites.⁶⁰ Consequently,

⁵⁶ Ibid. Ragan, *Pioneer Cotton Mills*, 2.

⁵⁷ Ragan, *Pioneer Cotton Mills (Loray Mills Sketch)*, 2.

⁵⁸ Hall, et. al. *Like a Family*, 36-37.

⁵⁹ Glass, 19.

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black workers looking for work in Southern textile mills “found employment only in custodial or heavy manual jobs that might be found in the mill warehouse or pickroom, but never in operating machinery and never alongside white workers.”⁶¹

The African American's Place in Gaston County's Textile Economy

By the early 1900s, Gaston County contained more textile mills than any other county in North Carolina. While the sheer number of textile mills increased the number of textile jobs available to African Americans, the textile industry did not directly support Gaston's black working community in the way that it supported the large numbers of whites working inside the mills and living within company mill villages. African Americans who did find low-paying jobs in the textile industry, sweeping floors, unloading bales of cotton, and keeping up the mill yard, often worked in a variety of other jobs to supplement their meager incomes. The county's lumber mills, machine shops, Laundromats, cotton warehouses, mercantiles, and railways provided steady employment for many African Americans men, and thousands of black workers traveled throughout the county, taking odd jobs. During planting and harvest season, African Americans took seasonal jobs as planters and pickers on the large farms outside Gaston County's small towns. “Jobs,” Dallas resident Reginald Cloud remembered, “were hard to come by here. . . . Black men would make money during harvest by working for white farmers. Tommy Lee Rhyne paid thirty-four cents a day plus dinner during the harvest. Some guys cut cordwood and sold it. People did what they had to do to get by.”⁶²

African American women profited more from the burgeoning textile mills than their fathers, brothers, husbands and sons. Gaston County's textile mill villages provided a fertile ground for a variety of domestic jobs – one of the few areas where black women could find work. White women in the area's mill villages worked long shifts as spinners, carders, and weavers alongside male family members, and many mill families were glad to pay a minimal sum every week for laundry and house-cleaning services. Many African American women also served as nannies to working-class white children too young to work in the mills. Almost every man and woman interviewed for this survey

⁶⁰ John A. Salmond, *Gastonia 1929: The Story of the Loray Mill Strike* (Chapel Hill: 1995), 5.

⁶¹ Glass, 19.

⁶² Cloud interview.

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recalled their mothers and grandmothers going out every day to do laundry for white families. Joe Reid, a life-long resident of the Wright's Chapel community in Lowell, recalled a time when his mother, who washed for a number white families in town, made more money a week than his father, who worked for six dollars a week at the local mill.⁶³

Wealthy textile entrepreneurs often employed black women for full-time jobs as maids and household servants. In Belmont, the Stowe family employed a number of black women from Smokey Hollow and other nearby black communities for work in the Stowe mansion. Janie Stowe worked for S. P. Stowe until 1960, and lived with the family for a brief period after her employer's death – "I stayed there all day, cleaning and doing odd jobs. . . they had a big room for the colored people and we used the same bathroom. It was nice," she recalled. "There were three stories to the house, with thirty rooms."⁶⁴

Such intimate contact with textile mill owners was rare, and the majority of African Americans who were directly employed by the county's dozens of textile mills were not provided with company housing. White mill workers who did not want black men and women working alongside of them were even more adamantly against living in close proximity to African Americans. Even African Americans who worked for the American Mill Number Two in Bessemer City, the only mill in the county that employed black men for inside jobs before integration, lived outside of the mill village in the already established Vantine community on the outskirts of the town.⁶⁵

Despite white workers and mill owners' aversion to the idea of company housing for African Americans, a number of mills in Gaston County provided a limited number of houses for their African American workers. These African American enclaves varied greatly, depending on the textile mill owner, but all were small (usually one or two short

⁶³ Reid and Armstrong interview.

⁶⁴ Hand, Sr. and Sykes, 112-114.

⁶⁵ Salmond, 51-52. In his discussion of Ella Mae Wiggins, who lived in Bessemer City and worked at the American Mill there, Salmond mentions the progressive hiring policies of that particular mill and states that nearly half of the workers in the mill were African American. Despite this, African Americans interviewed for this survey from the Bessemer City area insisted that blacks were, on the whole, not employed by the mills, and few houses that would have been occupied by African American mill workers have survived in the Vantine area. In his text, Salmond refers to the Vantine community as "Stumptown," a name used by whites to refer to Vantine.

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streets) and separated, to some degree, from their white working-class neighbors. Two African American mill communities, the Baltimore community in Cramerton and the High Springs community within Gastonia's Loray Mill complex, provide contrasting examples of the way in which textile mill owners handled the complex issue of housing African Americans within their mill villages.

The town of Cramerton, originally a self-contained mill village conceived, constructed, and controlled by textile entrepreneur Stuart Cramer, formed a unique environment within Gaston County. More than any other mill village in the county, the mill village at the Cramerton Mill (originally known as the Mayes Mill) represented the height of paternalism within the textile industry during the early twentieth century. Stuart Cramer carefully designed the mill town within a bucolic setting on the side of a small mountain, surroundings that "perpetuated a piece of the Southern myth . . . in an industrial town."⁶⁶ The town was physically constructed to reinforce traditional Southern paternalistic hierarchies, where distance and elevation "reinforced . . . perceived distances in status." Cramer's mansion, an imposing three-story stone and shingle structure with a huge stone swimming pool (an unheard of luxury at the time of its construction), stood at the top of Cramer Mountain, overlooking the town and the winding South Fork River. The mill stood directly below, nestled into the side of the mountain, and the mill village stretched out to the west. The houses themselves acquired varying degrees of importance, dependent upon their proximity to the mill itself.⁶⁷

African Americans who worked in Cramerton were placed according to this strict paternalistic model. As inferiors, black workers in Cramerton were placed far from the mill and at a distance from the white worker housing. Originally, Cramer constructed a small row of houses on Eighth Avenue for his black workers, "close to the mill office but further from the mill" than the lowest white workers.⁶⁸ This small black enclave, called Brooklyn, served the mill until the 1920s, when Cramer began plans to expand the white mill housing. To avoid any close contact between his black and white workers, and to guarantee that the problem would not present itself again if further expansion was required, Cramer relocated his black workers to the newly constructed Baltimore area. Baltimore, consisting of two small streets lined with four-room hipped

⁶⁶ Connette, et al., "Cramerton," 22-23.

⁶⁷ Williams, 27. Ibid.

⁶⁸ Connette, et. al., "Cramerton," 22.

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roof housing, was completely separated from Cramerton's white housing, "hidden on the slopes of the mountain some distance from the whites, but on the property." The South Fork River formed a concrete physical barrier between whites and blacks in Cramerton. This solution, though radical, suited the town's black and white workers. Baltimore's residents were more closely tied to the nearby African American rural community at Neely's Grove (where they attended church and various social functions) than to Cramerton, and, after completing eighth grade at the Baltimore Schoolhouse (constructed for the community by Stuart Cramer), Baltimore children attended the Reid High School in Belmont.⁶⁹

Although African Americans did not work in the Cramer Mill, the work of the African American men, women and children housed in the Baltimore community remained an integral part of the town. The majority of black men in Cramerton held jobs tied not to the mill, but to Cramer's dairy farm, orchards, and immense vegetable gardens. One resident of Baltimore recalled:

I gathered the vegetables, for the Cramers, and I had to walk
from the first section all the way up to the top of the mountain. . . .
I'd walk up that mountain twice a day carrying vegetables. . .
I'd get the vegetables carried up there and they'd say they wanted
some blackberries. . .⁷⁰

Black women in Cramerton, like most black women across the South during the first half of the twentieth century, were limited to domestic work. "Our wives," a former Baltimore resident affirmed, "would work out on the hills for people. They would get people's clothes, carry them back and forth for them and wash them. They washed for just about the largest part of the town." For the white residents of Cramerton, black domestic workers were a measure of status and strengthened the idea of traditional race relations – one visitor to Cramerton, touring the village in the 1920s, was "particularly impressed by the fact that on the rose-embowered porches of some of the four room cottages, Negro nurse-maids were observed tending their infant charges."⁷¹ African

⁶⁹ Grier interview.

⁷⁰ Connette, et al, "Cramerton," 67.

⁷¹ Ibid, 23 & 67.

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Americans working for Cramer between 1910 and 1946, when the mill was sold to Burlington Industries, though small in number and segregated into the distant Baltimore neighborhood, formed an integral part of the textile magnate's vision of an industrial utopia.

The Loray Mill Complex contrasted sharply with Cramerton's paternalistic model, and its African American workers encountered controversy that Baltimore's residents could not have imagined. Indeed, the Loray Mill's construction just one mile west of Gastonia in the early 1900s brought a new type of mill to Gaston County – unlike many of the county's mills, which featured a sprawling complex of buildings, added on as needed, the Loray Mill operated under one towering brick structure.⁷² The company's adjoining mill village matched the monumentality of the mill building, with hundreds of modest houses stretching in neat rows to the east and south of the mill. On the southern edge of the mill village, spaced somewhat apart from the last rows of white housing, J.F. Love and George Gray had allotted for the construction of three small streets of company housing for Loray's African American workers. The area, known as High Springs, was a closely knit community, even boasting its own church congregation, High Springs Baptist Church – the only African American mill congregation in Gaston County. Unlike the short-lived Brooklyn community in Cramerton, High Springs remained at the intersection of Seventh Avenue, Dalton, and Weldon streets even as the mill's white housing pushed farther south.

In 1929, the mill's black employees, all in janitorial, mill yard, and warehouse positions, were swept up in the turmoil of the infamous Loray Mill Strike. A central issue for the Communist Party members who had come to Gastonia to organize a union in the Loray Mill – then the largest textile mill in North Carolina – was the racism that permeated the hiring practices within the textile industry. Historian John Salmund, in his study of the strike, asserts that it was the issue of race that ultimately cost the Party its union in Gastonia – workers who could agree with every other aspect of the National

⁷² Ragan. *Pioneers of the Textile Industry*, (Loray Mill sketch), 2-3. The Loray Mills was conceived by local textile pioneers J.F. Love and George A. Gray – the company's name was a combination of the names Love and Gray. Although the company was overseen by local mill men (primarily Love and Gray), the mill was financed primarily by northern capital, a fact that would be prominently noted during the infamous Loray Mill Strike of 1929. The mill retained its single building plan even through a monumental expansion project during the early 1920s – workers excavated under the existing building to provide more space. Eventually a large addition was added to the west of the building, but it blended seamlessly with the existing structure.

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Textile Worker's Union philosophy, and many of those who were initially in favor of the strike, turned on the issue of racial equality in the mills. Roy Stroud, who served in the early phases of the strike as the chairman of the strike committee, "was violently prejudiced 'against the Negroes,' and boasted of having killed one in South Carolina." Not surprisingly, as the NTWU's position on race became a highly publicized point, Stroud, along with many of the strike's initial supporters, went to the "other side."⁷³

Despite the cold reception, Communist organizers Fred Beal and Vera Buch continued to press the strikers to allow Loray's African American workers (who comprised less than one percent of the mill's workforce) to join the union. Strikers grudgingly agreed, under Beal's persistence, to extend an invitation to join the union "not only to 'Negroes who are now employed in textile plants as porters, sweepers, elevator hands and in similar jobs,' but to "all Negroes. . . including domestic servants, cooks and launderers."⁷⁴ The results were disappointing, but not surprising, given the fact that African American workers were justifiably suspicious of white strikers who had, in the years before the strike, vehemently and sometimes violently opposed the idea of African Americans working alongside them in the mill. The clergy at High Springs Baptist Church, and in African American churches across Gastonia, warned black mill workers against joining the strike, or even associating with striking union members, and the black community in High Springs obeyed. The atmosphere at the Loray Mill in 1929 was so charged with racial tension, the few black workers who may have supported the strike were too frightened to address the white strikers and publicly declare their support.

In the end, the strike had little effect, positive or negative, on the county's African American textile workers. Residents of High Springs had distanced themselves from the strike, and, when the Loray Mill reopened in September of 1929, "under the protection of 150 National Guardsmen and scores of armed deputies," African American employees went back to work as custodians, and in the warehouses and mill yard. The Loray Mill, sold to the Firestone Rubber Company in 1935, did not begin offering inside jobs to African Americans until the 1960s.⁷⁵

⁷³ Salmond, 49, 64-69.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 65.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 184-186.

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**CONTEXT THREE: AFRICAN AMERICAN URBAN COMMUNITY
DEVELOPMENT UNDER JIM CROW**

Although a majority of African Americans in Gaston County continued to live and work in rural areas throughout the first half of the twentieth century, an increasing number of black farmers and agrarian laborers began finding work and residence within the county's urban areas -- by 1910, Gaston County had more incorporated towns than any other county in North Carolina, and by 1930 roughly a quarter of the county's residents lived inside these towns.⁷⁶ Several factors contributed to this gradual migration from farm to city. During the late 1800s, the development of fertilizers like Peruvian guano gave more farmers the chance to grow cotton as a major cash crop -- however, as the number of bales ginned in the Piedmont skyrocketed in the 1870s and 1880s, the price of cotton began steadily falling. By the mid-1890s, the bottom had dropped out of the cotton market -- a pound of cotton sold for five cents, "half the price a farmer needed simply to break even."⁷⁷ In the early twentieth century, the boll weevil, capable of reducing entire fields of cotton plants to a sea of empty shells within a matter of weeks, swept through the South with devastating effects. Farmers and planters, in an effort to escape what had become the curse of cotton, reduced their cotton acreage, and many gave up the crop altogether. Without the labor-intensive crop, the demand for masses of black farm laborers diminished as well. Seasonal workers and established tenants alike found themselves, by the turn of the century, looking for work outside the agricultural sphere.⁷⁸ Having taken advantage of the tremendous growth of the textile industry, Gaston County's burgeoning towns were a logical place for displaced rural workers to turn. White farmers flooded into the mills and surrounding mill villages, and African Americans workers filled the diverse array of domestic, manual labor, service and construction jobs generated by the economic success of the all-white textile mills.

⁷⁶ Cope and Wellman, 153. *Fourteenth Census of the United States, Population Schedule*, Gaston County (1930).

⁷⁷ Sherry Joines and Dr. Dan L. Morrill, *Historic Rural Resources in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina* (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, 1997), 6. Dowd, et. al., *Like A Family*.

⁷⁸ Litwack, 175-179.

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Although practically every town in Gaston County was growing and thriving during the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and although much of this growth can be attributed, directly or indirectly, to the textile industry, Gaston County's urban areas were as diverse as they were numerous. For the purposes of this study, however, the county's urban settlements will be divided into three distinct categories – small towns like Belmont, Dallas, and Lowell that grew up prior to or independently of the turn-of-the-century textile boom; textile mill towns such as Cramerton and McAdenville, which came into being as a direct result of the textile industry and were developed as large, self-contained mill villages; and Gaston County's only true city, the county seat of Gastonia.

Textile mill towns offered few promising opportunities for African Americans migrating from country to town in the hopes of taking advantage of increased job prospects. Unlike the crowds of poor white farmers who flocked to textile mills to escape the wildly fluctuating uncertainty of the agrarian economy, African Americans could not depend on the textile mills and adjacent mill villages for stable employment and housing. Instead, African Americans in Gaston County looked to established urban areas with more diverse and open economic opportunities.

The Merging of Rural and Urban Life in the Twentieth Century

The era between the turn of the century and the beginning of World War II was characterized, within the Southern African American population, by the “persistent and overriding theme of movement.”⁷⁹ Discouraged by the lack of progress and poor prospects that had plagued them in the rural South, many black Southerners made the decision to move North, and many of those remaining in the Southern states moved from the country into rapidly developing urban areas. These two movements, from South to North and from country to city, resulted in a dramatic shift in settlement patterns across the country. In 1917, ninety percent of black Americans lived in the South and nearly seventy-five percent of these black Southerners lived in rural areas. By 1957, the African American population had become primarily urban and Northern. Seventy-five percent of black Americans lived in urban areas, and fifty-five percent lived in the North. Although

⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 481-482.

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the Great Migration from South to North was felt much more acutely in the Deep South, North Carolina's population statistics reflect the changing demographics among African Americans. The percentage of African Americans living in North Carolina dropped for the first time in 1880, and continued to steadily erode throughout the first half of the twentieth century. African Americans remaining in the state began a movement of their own, out of the farms and into the city. The number of black farmers in North Carolina peaked in 1910, and then began declining – between 1930 and 1940, the percentage of black males employed in agriculture dropped from roughly fifty-six percent to roughly forty-one percent.⁸⁰

Although Gaston County's African Americans followed statewide trends in their movement from farm to town, the migration was not as clear-cut as statistics portray. Urban life did not replace rural life for African Americans in Gaston County. African Americans who looked to Gaston County's small towns for work and educational opportunities in the early twentieth century did not often make the immediate move off of the farm. The African American rural population in Gaston County peaked in 1930, ten years after the state as a whole, but many of these rural residents were as tied, economically and socially, to a nearby town as they were to the land.⁸¹ Conversely, African Americans living in the county's numerous segregated urban communities retained deeply ingrained rural traditions and continued working the land, keeping kitchen gardens and a few livestock on modest plots.

The line between urban and rural living was blurred for most African Americans in Gaston County well into the twentieth century. Celebrated African American artist John Biggers, a native of the Highland community on the northern edge of Gastonia, remembered the stomping, shuffling noise of juke joints in the Square (Highland's busy commercial district) that drifted up the hill to his family's four-room cottage on West Davidson Avenue, and the whistle of the "Bob" train that ran north to Lenoir or south to Chester, South Carolina, but his childhood years in Highland were also filled with memories of kitchen gardens full of fresh vegetables that would be canned and pickled

⁸⁰ Litwick, 482. Crow, et. al., 119-121.

⁸¹ *Thirteenth Census of the United States, Population Schedule*, Gaston County (1920). *Fourteenth Census of the United States, Population Schedule*, Gaston County (1930). *Fifteenth Census of the United States, Population Schedule*, Gaston County (1940).

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for the winter and fishing in the creek that ran through the neighborhood.⁸² Families in the Rankin Heights community of Belmont also grew or raised most of their own food – Oscar Depriest Hand, Sr., local historian and a native of the area, recalled that “fruits and vegetables were canned for the winter, cows gave us milk and butter, chickens gave us eggs as well as meat, and hogs were raised for meat. John Dock, Jesse Reid and Jim Hanks circulated the community in November and December to assist with hog killings.”⁸³ Charles Costner, who would eventually become the most successful black contractor in Gastonia, was still living in the tiny rural community of Chestnut Ridge (between Bessemer City and Kings Mountain in the western part of the county) when he began his contracting business. During the 1920s, Costner constructed several houses in the fledgling Vantine community, an African American enclave on the outskirts of Bessemer City, while still operating his farm in Chestnut Ridge. Costner later abandoned farming and moved his family to Gastonia’s Highland Community in the late 1920s, where he worked as a full-time contractor and funeral director.⁸⁴

Segregation and the Development of African American Enclaves in Gaston County’s Urban Areas

Those African Americans who made the definitive move from farm to town were confronted with more rigid segregation than they had encountered in rural areas, where physical distance between whites and blacks was accomplished without legislation or specific, clearly articulated rules. As C. Vann Woodward illustrated in *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, within Southern cities, where incidents of contact between black and white were unavoidable, segregation was accomplished more systematically through a combination of state-wide legislation, city ordinances, and “local regulations and rules enforced without the formality of laws.”⁸⁵ Seeking to control every possible situation that

⁸² *John Biggers’ Journeys (a romance)*, prod. Barbara Forst, dir. Sherri Fisher Staples, 45 min., Chloe Productions Inc., 1996, videocassette.

⁸³ *Ibid*, 19-20.

⁸⁴ Charles Costner, Jr., interview by Emily and Lara Ramsey, 2 May 2001, hereinafter cited as Costner interview. Goins Interview.

⁸⁵ Woodward, 98-99.

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might involve interracial contact, Southern states passed laws requiring segregation in street cars, train cars, waiting rooms, hospitals, parks, public restrooms, and countless other points of contact. Life in Southern towns throughout the first half of the twentieth century was, to a great degree, controlled by the “increasing profusion of the little signs: ‘White Only’ or ‘Colored.’”⁸⁶ Gaston County was no exception. Oscar Hand Depriest, Sr. and Julia Sykes, Belmont natives, recalled that the signs “were everywhere – in public places, water fountains, waiting rooms, restrooms. Everywhere! Perhaps every black child made an attempt to sneak to a water fountain labeled ‘White’ and take a sip to see if it really was different – like being white!”⁸⁷

Although racial separation within small town business districts, commercial and industrial areas was the most visible kind of segregation, the establishment of separate residential areas for African Americans remained the central issue for white separatists. After legally sanctioned methods – the “Baltimore” method, designating all-black and all-white blocks; the “Richmond” method (utilized by the North Carolina city of Winston-Salem), forbidding any person to live on a block with “those with whom said person is forbidden to intermarry;” and the “New Orleans” method, which required a person to procure the consent of a majority of an area’s residents before moving in – were struck down by the Supreme Court in 1917, residential segregation was accomplished indirectly through economic separation and private contracts drawn up by white landlords. It is not known whether Gaston County utilized a specific method to segregate residential areas within the county’s towns and cities. Such drastic measures were most likely not necessary since within such small urban areas there were relatively small numbers of African Americans. Gastonia, Gaston County’s largest urban area, had reached a total population of only about 13,000 by 1920 – more than the population of the county’s remaining small towns combined, but still a paltry number in comparison to large Southern cities like New Orleans, Richmond and Baltimore.⁸⁸ Moreover, land ownership within the county’s small towns was almost completely controlled by white landowners. Free African Americans, however small their numbers, had been a part of practically every town in Gaston County since incorporation, since only the town of Dallas was

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Hand, Sr. and Sykes, 88.

⁸⁸ *Thirteen Census of the United States of America, Population Statistics*, Gaston County (1920).

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officially incorporated before the end of the Civil War. Once an area had been settled by African Americans, even if the "settlement" consisted of only one or two families, that area was unofficially designated as the African American community for the town – land there was sold or rented only to African Americans, at least during the first half of the twentieth century. The Reid Community – called "Boogertown" by local whites – in north Belmont was exceptional as an area where a high percentage of African Americans owned their own homes, but the location of their residences was strategically controlled by white community leaders like J. Bart Hall, the owner of the Belmont Building and Loan, and powerful textile families like the Stowes and Lineburgers, who personally employed many of Boogertown's African American homeowners.⁸⁹

Although segregation restricted their settlement choices, many African Americans in Gaston County did not feel resentment for residential segregation in the same way that they felt resentment for other forms of segregation. Separation from whites in their living situations allowed African Americans the freedom to form closely-knit communities of their own, communities that provided a haven from the hostility and discomfort that came with contact with whites in town. Alfred Graves, who came to the Freedom Neighborhood in Cherryville during the 1940s to teach at the John Chavis Rosenwald school, recalled the sense of connectedness that permeated this small residential neighborhood:

When I came to Cherryville from Reidsville, North Carolina in 1949, I didn't have money for a place of my own. The families in Freedom were real generous, and I boarded with different families until my wife and I got married. Then we went to stay with her mother. . . . Everyone knew everyone else. . . . I remember when the Floyd Byer's Café [in the center of Freedom] was a big hangout place for blacks around here. He had a jukebox in there, and every Friday and Saturday night the kids would come and dance. There was always a big crowd outside, but we never had any trouble with any of them, even when we lived right across the street from the café.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Jethro Mann, interview by Emily Ramsey, 20 February 2001, hereinafter cited as Mann interview.

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Segregated communities within Gaston County's urban areas, although no less difficult than life in rural communities or on tenant farms, provided a diverse and multi-faceted environment for African Americans during the twentieth century. Residents of the Freedom communities in Cherryville and Mt. Holly, the Vantine Community in Bessemer City, the Reid and Rankin Heights communities in Belmont, and particularly within the Highland Neighborhood in Gastonia enjoyed the convenience of urban living, with its local black-owned and operated businesses, schools, fraternal and social organizations, while maintaining many of the practices and cherished traditions associated with a rural existence.

Religion and Education In Small Town African American Neighborhoods

Like their rural neighbors, African Americans in small town neighborhoods built their communities around a deeply rooted Christian faith and a strong belief in the values of a good education. Gaston County's African Americans followed the direction of North Carolina's leading black figures, such as the Reverend James W. Hood. Hood, an ordained bishop of the A. M. E. Zion Church and long-time chairman of the board of trustees of Livingston College in nearby Salisbury, espoused the essential combination of religious and moral instruction with a solid secular education. Although the African American's "first great need" was education, Hood insisted that the church, which had "opened the way for the development of the race in a material and intellectual sense," formed the foundation for moral and literary training. Education without religion, Hood declared, would produce "educated rascals instead of useful citizens."⁹¹ Consequently, many of Gaston County's small town African American communities were often more dedicated to establishing a church, which could also serve during the week as a school house, "than to building homes for themselves."⁹² These first churches were often crude, one-room structures – Mt. Pleasant Missionary Baptist Church in Belmont was first housed in a tiny building, erected in 1903, that could allegedly hold only ten worshippers at a time – and communities developed around these important, though modest,

⁹⁰ Alfred Graves, interview by Emily and Lara Ramsey, 30 April 2001, hereinafter cited as Graves interview.

⁹¹ Crow, et. al., 104-105.

⁹² Hand, Sr. and Sykes, 55.

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edifices.⁹³ The small African American community on the eastern edge of the town of Lowell first consisted of little more than a scattered grouping of rental housing anchored by Wright's Chapel A.M.E. Zion Church and a neighboring two-room schoolhouse. As farmers moved off the land and into the Vantine community in Bessemer City, rural congregations like Kelly's Chapel A. M. E. Zion Church, the oldest African American Church in Bessemer City, followed their members and became urban churches – John A. Smith, one of Bessemer City's founding fathers, deeded a small lot on the corner of Carolina Avenue to the congregation in 1892.⁹⁴ Love's Chapel Presbyterian Church, in Belmont, followed a similar pattern – the church began in 1870 outside the town limits, but moved in the early 1910s to the prosperous Reid Neighborhood.⁹⁵

During the first half of the twentieth century, these once humble church congregations evolved into the financial and social, as well as moral, forces within their respective communities. Many churches from the Jim Crow era that still stand within these communities date from the 1910s and 1920s, a time when urban congregations pushed for construction of sanctuaries that they hoped would reflect congregational growth, financial success and the faithful devotion of church members. Wright's Chapel A. M. E. Zion Church in Lowell, when faced with the challenge of rebuilding after a fire destroyed their original sanctuary in the early 1910s, constructed what would become one of the finest examples of Gothic Revival architecture in the county. The process, however, was a rocky one, and the congregation's desire for an architecturally impressive structure almost cost the church its new building. The cost of construction for the church building was set by Spencer Lumber Company of Gastonia at \$2,000, and when the church congregation failed to make the weekly payments on the building, Spencer Lumber Company stopped work on the building, which was lacking a roof and completely unfinished on the inside, and reclaimed it. Fortunately, the Company sold the building to Joe Hudson, a local white banker, who donated the building and deeded the parcel of land to the church trustees. The building was finally finished in the 1920s by a contractor from Clover, South Carolina, and remains as one of the most impressive African American resources in the county.⁹⁶

⁹³ Ibid, 66-69.

⁹⁴ Reid and Armstrong Interview. Goins Interview. Crawford, et. al., *Centennial*, 24.

⁹⁵ Hand, Sr. and Sykes, 58.

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Although most of the churches constructed during this period were not plagued with the problems faced by the Wright's Chapel community, most church buildings were built in a similar manner. The vast majority of churches constructed during the 1910s and 1920s in African American neighborhoods were Gothic revival buildings with a distinctive towered façade – generally, two towers flanking a central, gable-roofed block. This church plan, popular throughout North Carolina's African American communities, appears in the Reid Community's Love's Chapel Presbyterian Church (1916). Two particularly impressive examples of the style – St. Stephen's A. M. E. Zion Church and St. Paul's Baptist Church - remain in Gastonia's Highland neighborhood. All of these early twentieth century churches feature brick veneer, which was generally considered a superior building material. As architectural historian Catherine Bishir writes, "the replacement of 'ephemeral' wood buildings and 'unsightly wooden shanties' with masonry structures" was widely considered a reflection a community's progress.⁹⁷ The early twentieth century wave of prosperity that allowed African American congregations in urban areas to build architecturally distinguished brick structures did not extend to Gaston County's rural communities. Not until after World War II would rural congregations begin to build new church buildings; consequently, many of the county's rural African Americans churches date from the 1950s and 1960s. The development of Gaston County's small town African American schools followed a pattern similar to the community churches. During the 1920s, many of the small "shack" schools – one and two-room frame buildings that had served African American communities since Reconstruction -- were replaced with larger, more functional and better-built buildings. This flurry of school construction across Gaston County was a direct result of the grants provided by the Rosenwald Fund. The impact of the Rosenwald Fund was felt more intently within Gaston County's African American urban communities than in the county's truly rural communities, which the Fund had originally been set up to serve. Within a four-year period, between 1921 and 1925, Rosenwald Schools were constructed in practically every town in Gaston County, ranging in size from one to twelve classrooms: the Vantine community constructed Stewart Elementary, an eight room Rosenwald school with a typical "H" plan that was also used

⁹⁶ Reid and Armstrong Interview.

⁹⁷ Catherine W. Bishir, Charlotte V. Brown, Carl R. Lounsbury and Ernest H. Wood III, *Architects and Builders in North Carolina: A History of the Practice of Building* (Chapel Hill, 1990),137.

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for the Mildred Wellmon Rosenwald School at nearby Lincoln Academy; the small African American community in the town of Dallas boasted a four-room Rosenwald school, which locals christened the Jingles School, after principal Fisher Jingles; Lowell's Wright's Chapel community replaced their two-room school with a three-classroom Rosenwald school adjacent to their newly constructed church building; and both the Reid Neighborhood and the Rankin Heights community in Belmont constructed Rosenwald school buildings.⁹⁸ Despite the proliferation of new school buildings, obtaining a high school education was still difficult for African Americans, and in this respect, many small town communities were no better off than their rural counterparts. Before the middle of the twentieth century, only three schools in Gaston County offered classes through the twelfth grade – Highland High School in Gastonia, Lincoln Academy, and the Reid High School in Belmont. African American students walked, and later were bussed, to these three schools from rural and small town communities throughout the county.

Belmont, which boasted the largest Rosenwald School in the county and one of three high schools open to Gaston County African Americans, serves as a representative example of the development of educational opportunities within small town African American neighborhoods. The first African American school in Belmont, organized by the fledgling Reid and Rankin Heights communities in 1889, gathered an impressive seventy-five young pupils under one teacher, George Leeper, in the small frame building that served as O'Conner's Grove Methodist Church. The Reverend Leeper, a graduate of Biddle University (later Johnson C. Smith University) in Charlotte and pastor of the Third Street Presbyterian Church in Gastonia (known as Leeper's Chapel), was "young. . . well-trained, and ambitious," all qualities which helped him to become a leading advocate for African American education within Gaston County.⁹⁹ Leeper epitomized the deep connection between religion and education within African American communities as advocated by Bishop James W. Hood. In addition to his pastoral duties and his classes at the fledgling Belmont School, Leeper began, in 1887, to teach children

⁹⁸ Hanchett, "The Rosenwald Schools and Black Education", 433. Reid and Armstrong interview. Reginald Cloud, interview by Emily and Lara Ramsey, 8 April 2001, hereinafter cited as Cloud interview.

⁹⁹ George Miller, ed. *A Magical Romance for Any Season: Highland High School, Gastonia North Carolina, 1887-1966, A Brief History with Pictures and Notations* (unpublished manuscript, private collection of George Miller, 1992), 6, hereinafter cited as Miller, ed., *A Magical Romance*.

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in the Highland community, using the upstairs rooms of his own house for classrooms. There, he served as “principal and teacher, along with his wife, Josephine Leeper.” This school, the first black school in Gastonia, would later become Highland High School.¹⁰⁰ The first Belmont school for African Americans held class for only three months out of the year, to accommodate children from farming families who could not attend school during planting and harvesting seasons. Most of the students walked an average of three to five miles each day to school. The curriculum was simple and informal – lacking many of the supplies needed for desk work, the children competed in spelling bees and speaking contests and were graded on their recitation of addition, subtraction and multiplication tables. Students were promoted when they finished the textbook assigned to their grade. Reverend Leeper served as teacher for the Belmont school until 1893, and pupils moved to a new one-room frame schoolhouse in 1897 (soon afterwards expanded to three rooms), but little else changed for Belmont students until after the turn of the century.¹⁰¹ In 1914, Charles Jefferson Bernard Reid was appointed as the Belmont school’s first official principal. Reid, who bicycled every day from his home in the Wright’s Chapel community in Lowell to the Belmont school before finally moving to the Reid neighborhood in the 1920s, began an aggressive campaign for improvements for the school building and for the curriculum.¹⁰² With the help of County Supervisor Mildred Wellmon, Reid obtained a Rosenwald grant, and in 1923, the pupils left the three-room schoolhouse on McAdenville Road for a state-of-the-art five classroom building in the heart of the Reid Neighborhood. The school, which served grades one through ten, was expanded in 1927 to twelve classrooms, making it the largest Rosenwald School in the county. With more space, the Belmont School became the Reid High School, graduating its first high school students in 1932 and gaining accreditation the next year. The Reid High School taught students not only from the Rankin Heights and Reid Neighborhoods, but also from Lowell, Cramerton, McAdenville, South Gastonia, Neely’s Grove and other farming communities along Union Road all the way to the South Carolina border.¹⁰³ The Reid High School, along with the tiny one-classroom

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Hand, Sr. and Sykes, 75-76.

¹⁰² Reid and Armstrong interview.

¹⁰³ Hand, Sr. and Sykes, 78-80.

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Rosenwald School in the South Point/Rankin Height's community, called "Negro School #6," served Belmont's African American communities until 1966, when Gaston County began integrating schools. That same year, the Reid High School was demolished, and black students were transferred to nearby white elementary and high schools.

Practically all of Gaston County's small town all-black schools met the same fate as Reid High School – black schools were demolished, and black students were transferred to previously all-white school or to newly constructed integrated schools. Two exceptions are the John Chavis School in Cherryville and the Stewart School in Bessemer City. John Chavis, originally a Rosenwald building, burned in February of 1964, just two years before integration. The building was quickly rebuilt and was ready for students in the fall of the same year.¹⁰⁴ That school building was later used as an integrated elementary school, and is presently the John Chavis Middle School. Stewart Elementary School, an eight-classroom Rosenwald school, was purchased by the St. James Grand Lodge, the local African American Masonic organization, and presently serves as the Masonic headquarters for St. James. Although the school building has been significantly altered, it is the only known remaining Rosenwald School in Gaston County.¹⁰⁵

Commercial Development in African American Small Town Communities

The growth and development of small town churches and schools during the first half of the twentieth century reflected the overall success of the African American communities that supported them. A large number of residences within these communities, ranging from rows of identical rental housing (two and three-room shotgun houses, four-room pyramidal cottages, and Craftsman-inspired front-gable structures) to modest owner-occupied one and one-and-a-half story bungalows, date from the period between World War I and World War II. Unlike many African American urban communities, class did not separate the small town neighborhoods in Gaston County - working-class and middle-class African Americans, already segregated because of the

¹⁰⁴ Graves interview. "John Chavis School Has Made Remarkable Strides," *Gastonia Gazette*, October 17, 1950.

¹⁰⁵ Crawford, et. al., *Centennial*, 136.

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color of their skin, seemed unwilling to divide their community further.¹⁰⁶ Affluent white landowners who had owned the land that eventually gave way to the county's burgeoning small towns often constructed rows of rental housing and became landlords to working-class African Americans. South Main Street in the small town of Lowell was transformed during the 1920s, when Joe Hudson, a white landowner and local businessman, erected a long stretch of identical front-gabled rental housing along the street. Hudson rented the houses to black families, who christened the grouping "Hudson Row."¹⁰⁷ Carlisle Simmons, who ran the Dixie Lumber Company in Cherryville, built a cluster of rental front-gabled houses on Mulberry Road and Dellinger Road in the Freedom Neighborhood during the 1930s. Local resident Alfred Graves remembers "about twenty frame houses" that Simmons "rented out to blacks. "A couple of the black people in Freedom" Graves recalled, "worked for Dixie Lumber, and they built a lot of the houses around here, including Simmons's houses."¹⁰⁸ By using black labor, cheaper during the lean years of the Great Depression, and supplying all the building materials himself, Simmons must have made a handsome profit from the houses. Many of the most affluent African Americans within these small town neighborhoods were local businessmen. Barbershops, small groceries, general stores, cafes and juke joints formed modest commercial areas in even the smallest towns, and brought vitality and needed commerce to African American neighborhoods. Black-owned-and-operated businesses formed the heart of many communities, and black business owners were often the leading members of social and religious as well as commercial life within their towns. Along with the status that being a local businessman carried, most African Americans who owned or operated their own businesses could also afford to own their own homes, from modest bungalows like the one built by John Humphrey, who operated the only store in Dallas's African American community until the 1950s, to more impressive, architecturally styled homes, like the one built by John

¹⁰⁶ Gastonia's Highland Neighborhood forms the only exception to this rule. Middle-class African American homeowners occupied the older residential section, on the southern side of the neighborhood flanking N. York Street, while the rows of rental housing generally cropped up to the north of Davidson Street, along N. York Street. The western section of Highland, west of Boyce Street, developed later than the eastern side, and thus is not as strictly divided along class lines.

¹⁰⁷ Reid and Armstrong interview.

¹⁰⁸ Graves interview.

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Simirel in the Reid Neighborhood.¹⁰⁹ Simirel, who worked for the Bank of Belmont in addition to owning his own café and barbershop, erected a large, two-story traditional brick structure on the corner of Reid Street and Cedar Street in the late 1920s.¹¹⁰ The house, the largest African American residence in Belmont and one of the largest in Gaston County, also served as an informal boarding house for African Americans new to the area. Jethro Mann, a builder and contractor who came to Belmont in 1936, remembers staying at the Simirel house while working for master mason and contractor Sam Moore.¹¹¹

Commercial districts ranged from a few general groceries on a main street to thriving complexes of businesses. The Vantine community supported only a few local groceries. William Goins recalled his grandfather's grocery store - "If you wanted something special, that he didn't have, you could place your order and it would come with the next delivery. . . . Mr. John Walker had a service station. He sold gas and kerosene, flour, eggs, pencils, and these flimsy little tablets to write on. He had a lot of different stuff."¹¹² In contrast, the Reid community in Belmont boasted dozens of small community enterprises. The "Greasy Corner," including John Simirel's café and barbershop and G. W. Howe's feed store, catered to "tobacco-chewing farmers, railroad workers, and laborers."¹¹³ A small commercial block on Reid Street was home to Mass Leeper's barbershop, Sudie's beauty shop, and Bill Foxx's café, the local weekend hangout. J. R. Reid's grocery on Cedar Street served Reid High School students during lunch and after school; John, Hiwatha, and Charles Isles owned a dry cleaning business; George Armstrong ran a concession stand on Sacco Street; Johnny Green ran the Green Lantern Club; Andrew Gordon owned a blacksmith and general maintenance shop; and the Erwin Brothers - Jeff, Ralph, Kello, and Theodore - owned a body shop and garage. Many of the community's entrepreneurs operated businesses from their homes - George Hanks "delivered ice on a mule-drawn wagon;" Jim Warren repaired cane-bottomed

¹⁰⁹ Cloud interview.

¹¹⁰ Hand, Sr. and Sykes, 29.

¹¹¹ Mann interview.

¹¹² Goins interview.

¹¹³ Hand, Sr. and Sykes, 29.

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chairs; James Craig, who worked in Charlotte for a white drive-in movie theater, brought old film reels to his home in the Reid Neighborhood and showed movies in his backyard every weekend.¹¹⁴ His daughter, Anna Craig Young, remembers selling popcorn and drinks for a nickel a piece to black audiences who had traveled from across the county to see the movies.¹¹⁵

Gastonia: African Americans in Gaston County's City

Despite the wealth and diversity of labor, religious groups, commercial enterprises, and social organizations that made up small town life for Gaston County's African Americans during the Jim Crow era, the center of African American life in Gaston County remained, as it was for whites within the county, the city of Gastonia. Although Gastonia had been little more than a stop along the Atlanta and Charlotte Airline Railroad and the Carolina and Northwestern Railroad in the 1870s, by the turn of the century, Gastonia Station's strategic location at the crossing of these two railroads had transformed the sleepy crossroads into a bustling town. "Gastonia," the *Gastonia Gazette* proclaimed in the 1890s, "is becoming a city with a rapidity that makes one dizzy. . . telephones are here, electric lights are in sight, and water works, graded schools, electric cars. . . we hope, are coming along next."¹¹⁶ By 1910, Gastonia boasted a population of over 5,700, two hotels, a biweekly newspaper, *The Gastonia Gazette*, a Y. M. C. A., and a large financial house, The First National Bank. The year before, the city had been named the new county seat of Gaston County. The county's first streetcars ran along the newly laid Piedmont and Northern Railroad tracks through the center of the city, and the Loray Mill, purportedly the largest textile mill under one roof in the South, loomed high over the west side of the city.¹¹⁷ With railroad lines running east to the nearby trading center of Charlotte, north to Lincolnton, and south into South Carolina, Gastonia became a magnet for dozens of New South entrepreneurs eager to make their fortunes in textiles. Textile mills and mill villages rose up on all sides of the town, attracting hundreds of white workers from the countryside. Between 1887 and 1930,

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 29-31.

¹¹⁵ Anna Craig Young, interview by Emily and Lara Ramsey, February 2000.

¹¹⁶ Cope and Wellman (quoting *Gastonia Gazette* article from February 21, 1955), 137.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 107-109, 130.

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roughly fifty-six cotton textile manufacturing companies were incorporated within Gastonia. The majority of these companies began operation between 1915 and 1930, and the impact of these enterprises transformed the city of Gastonia during first half of the twentieth century.

African Americans were an integral part of Gastonia from its incorporation in 1877. That same year, Prince Holland, a former slave from the town of Dallas, opened a blacksmith shop, "the second business in the city and the first that was not connected with the railroad."¹¹⁸ Although African Americans first settled outside the city limits in the Mt. Pleasant community around Mt. Pleasant A. M. E. Zion Church, a small black enclave on the north side of downtown Gastonia, which local whites called "Happy Hill," gained popularity with African American newcomers during the late 1800s.¹¹⁹ Happy Hill began as a small group of African American residences and black-owned and operated businesses along the short stretch of North York Street, and along Walnut and Page Avenue. Bordered on the south and east sides by the Piedmont and Northern Railway and the Atlanta and Charlotte Airline Railroad (now Southern Railroad), and steps away from Gastonia's bustling Main Street, the neighborhood grew along with the city at a moderate pace until the early twentieth century. The area initially attracted middle-class African Americans, business owners, and a new class of highly educated black men and women, including Talmadge C. Tillman, who served as principal of the city's first black school and who was instrumental in developing a high school curriculum for Gastonia's black students; Reverend J. N. Rollins, the pastor of Third Street Presbyterian Church, who built a home on East Walnut Avenue; and Dr. Herbert J. Erwin, Gastonia's first black physician, who also resided on East Walnut Avenue.¹²⁰ The first church established in the small African American community was the First Baptist Church (now St. Paul's Baptist Church); in 1885, the congregation purchased a quarter-acre plot on North Oakland Street, near the intersection of East Walnut Avenue,

¹¹⁸ "Minority Enterprise Development Week: A Historical Perspective" (African American Vertical File, Gaston County Public Library), hereinafter cited as "Minority Enterprise Development Week."

¹¹⁹ Interview with G. T. Smith, interviewer unknown (Gaston County Public Library, Local History Room), 1. Smith claims to have produced a map of Gaston County based on his memory dating back to 1895. In this interview, he describes some of the landmarks of early Gastonia. He mentions "Happy Hill, a section where colored people lived," as being located north of Long Avenue.

¹²⁰ Miller, ed. *A Magical Romance*, 6-7. "The Earliest Negro Physician and Colored Hospital in Gastonia" (Gaston County Public Library, African-American Vertical File), 1.

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for \$25.00 and erected a modest church building on the site.¹²¹ St. Stephen's A. M. E. Zion Church soon followed, building its church on North Marietta Street in the late 1800s.¹²² By 1921, the Gastonia City Directory listed eight "Colored" churches within the city limits, and all but one were located in the Highland neighborhood.¹²³ Although churches obviously formed an integral part of the Happy Hill neighborhood, perhaps the most significant development revolved around the growth of the neighborhood school, originally known as the Leeper School in honor of its founder and first teacher, the Reverend George Leeper. Begun in 1889 as a private parochial school (the school was subsidized by the Presbytery and originally held classes in the Third Street Presbyterian Church), the school was appropriated by the newly created Gastonia School District in 1901. The city constructed a four-room brick building on North York Street between East Walnut Avenue and Granite Avenue. The school remained without an official name until 1907, when county officials insisted that the neighborhood name the school for the school district's official reports. According to one report, the community held a contest to name the school. The African Americans in Happy Hill finally decided to name the school "Highland Elementary." Since North York Street, the main thoroughfare through the neighborhood, "was truly a hill from Walnut Avenue to Lincoln Avenue [now Nat Barber Avenue], . . . the name HIGHLAND seemed fitting."¹²⁴ The school building, renovated and enlarged several times during the 1910s and 1920s, became the educational institution for a growing number of students from Gastonia and surrounding rural areas, and a focal point for the Happy Hill community. The school, which had evolved into a rambling two-story stuccoed brick structure, was by far the most impressive building in the neighborhood and the pride of the burgeoning community. The identity of the Happy Hill community became so intertwined with the Highland School that community members and many of Gastonia's white population began calling the community "Highland." Eventually, the name Happy

¹²¹ Atkins, *Gastonia Centennial*, 33.

¹²² "St. Stephen's History Goes Back to 1860," *Gastonia Gazette* article, undated (African American Vertical File, Gaston County Public Library).

¹²³ Hill's *Gastonia City Directory* (Richmond, 1921-1922).

¹²⁴ Miller, ed. *A Magical Romance*, 6-10.

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Hills was abandoned altogether, and Gastonia's largest African American neighborhood became known as the Highland community.¹²⁵

Highland in the twentieth century differed greatly from Happy Hill in the late nineteenth century. Between 1900 and 1930, the dynamic of the Highland community began to change from a largely middle-class neighborhood confined to a relatively small area around North York and North Marietta streets to a diverse community of rental and owner-occupied housing, with a large African American commercial district. As Gastonia's population soared and as businesses riding the wave of the textile boom flourished across the city, African Americans flocked to Highland to take advantage of the economic prosperity and increased employment opportunities. Although African Americans were still largely limited to traditionally "black" jobs in fields like construction and domestic service, and although African Americans were expressly prohibited from employment in the city's multiplying textile mills, it was the proliferation of these mills, with their rows of mill houses, increasing number of working wives and mothers, and related industries, which helped to create a seemingly endless supply of jobs for African American men and women.

To house the numbers of working-class African American families moving into the Highland community, Walt Davis, Boyd Warren, and several other white landlords constructed rows of rental housing north of the already established owner-occupied streets between West Page Avenue and West Davidson Avenue.¹²⁶ This chronological development of Highland created three distinct areas: the lower commercial district, known as Union Square or simply, "the Square;" the Hill (for which Highland was named), farther north along North York Street, which combined commercial and residential buildings, and "Texas," the stretch of North York Street beginning at the intersection of West Davidson and ending at North Caldwell Street.¹²⁷ Charles Costner, Jr., whose family moved to the Highland neighborhood in 1928, recalled the time that his family spent in Highland, living on Page Avenue:

It was a big deal to live on Page Avenue. That's where all the businesses were Most of the people who lived there

¹²⁵ Ibid, p. 10.

¹²⁶ Costner interview. Cloud interview.

¹²⁷ Costner interview.

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owned their own homes. It was sort of the older, more respectable part of the community. The rest of North York Street and the other streets up near Texas weren't paved until the 1940s. We called the upper part of North York Street, up to Caldwell Street, we called it Texas – it was rough, like the wild west. People used to say, when you go down there, you better carry your gun, 'cause you were going to Texas! . . . Union Square was what we called the lower section – that's where all the businesses were, and the Credit Union. It was a busy area back then. If you were ever looking for someone . . . you'd usually find them there. There were cafes, barber shops, we had a post office, groceries, restaurants. . . . That was Walnut and Page streets, mainly. The police used to block the paved streets off on Saturdays so that the black kids would have a place to skate on.¹²⁸

While working-class African Americans took jobs as janitors, cotton haulers, and drivers outside the city's cotton mills, as carpenters and laborers at the nearby Spencer Lumber Company and City Lumber, and as domestics for the thousands of white mill families living in mill villages across the city, African American business-owners thrived within the Highland community. In 1915, several African American entrepreneurs, including future city councilman and City Treasurer Nathaniel Barber and James C. Biggers, brother of artist John Biggers, along with Howard Glenn from the North Carolina Orthopedic Hospital, formed the Excelsior Credit Union, with the purpose of providing loans to "any colored citizen of good moral character residing within the corporate limits of Gastonia, N. C."¹²⁹ The Credit Union established an office within the Union Square Building complex on North York Street, and instantly became a major supporter of African Americans seeking to open businesses within Highland.¹³⁰ Men and

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Credit Union Organization Certificate, Excelsior Credit Union papers, Gaston County Museum of Art and History.

¹³⁰ Hill's Gastonia City Directory (Richmond, 1918).

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women in the community opened small establishments all along the Square during the first half of the twentieth century: William Lyle was the area's first pharmacist; Charlotte Smith Means Lowrey manufactured her own line of beauty products; George Marshall, Andrew Lee Garvin, and J. B. Adams, along with many others, owned and operated barber shops; Geneva Davis, Mae Adams Thomas and Larnell Gallimore Biggers were cosmetologists who owned and operated their own beauty shops; and Charles Costner, Sherman Thomas Enloe, Burton Douglas Miller, and Thomas King owned and operated funeral homes. The most successful black businessmen in Gastonia diversified their assets into several different enterprises, and these men formed the pinnacle of the economic hierarchy among Gaston County's African Americans. Charles Froneberger, listed in city directories as a bondsman, owned a beauty shop and a barber shop, a dry cleaning business, and a laundromat. Leslie "Les" Lightner, perhaps the most successful businessman in Highland, owned an impressive number of enterprises, including grocery stores, a service station, a dry cleaning plant, a sandwich shop, the community's first taxi service, and, most unusually, the community baseball team.¹³¹

Highland, by the beginning of World War II, was almost a city unto itself. In addition to the large number of businesses selling products and services in the Square, the neighborhood was home to the Gaston County Negro Hospital, the only black hospital in the county, Highland High School, the largest African American school in the county, and the largest and most influential church congregations in the county. The city of Gastonia dwarfed surrounding towns, and the pull of jobs and social opportunities proved irresistible to those living outside of the city. African Americans from towns in Gaston County and from places as far away as York and Chester, South Carolina, routinely hopped the C & NW Line (which African Americans called the "Bob" Train) for day trips to Gastonia. Reginald Cloud of Dallas remembered many of the black men in Dallas taking jobs in the city. "They would hop the train in the morning, work in Gastonia, and hop the train home in the afternoon."¹³² Highland's cafes, restaurants, and soda shops served many patrons who had come on the train to Gastonia to socialize and chat with other out-of-towners, and many black church congregations included members who did not live in Gastonia. Cloud's mother and father belonged to the United House of Prayer for All People, and in the years before a congregation was established in Dallas,

¹³¹ "Minority Enterprise Development Week."

¹³² Cloud interview.

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the family walked “all the way to Highland to the United House of Prayer there. We would follow the railroad track up on Sunday afternoon and walk back late that night.”¹³³

The Highland neighborhood continued to flourish through the end of the reign of Jim Crow, but several events heralded the demise of what was once a large and closely knit African American community. In 1955, the Highland High School building at 535 North York Street, which had once boasted an enrollment of over 1,200 students, half of which pursued higher education after graduation, closed its doors. In order to meet the demands of the Civil Rights Bill of 1954, and in an attempt to thwart integration, the Gastonia School Board had overseen the construction of a new \$640,000 campus that would replace the North York Street complex. Although the new Highland Junior – Senior High School offered spacious classrooms and a host of modern amenities, it was located north of the Highland neighborhood, “far from the center of the Black population” that it was meant to serve.¹³⁴

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s gave African Americans employment opportunities they had never had before. In Gaston County, the integration of the textile industry in the mid-1960s gave African Americans the opportunity to exchange low-paying, physically demanding jobs in the mill yards and warehouses for higher-paying jobs inside the mills. For the first time, African Americans were able to take full advantage of America’s post-war prosperity, and many members of the county’s African American communities moved out of segregated neighborhoods to pursue the suburban dream that the county’s white population had been enjoying since the late 1940s. The little frame houses that had seemed luxurious to former slaves and sharecroppers were seen as inadequate and outdated to many post-war African Americans. A 1945 dissertation entitled “The Negro in Gaston County, North Carolina,” denounced the housing situation for African Americans throughout the county as “deplorable.”¹³⁵ The author, Mina L. Beatty, stated that many of the houses in Highland “do not have toilet facilities and often five to six families get their water for drinking and household use from one centrally located spigot. . . . street paving and street lighting is also neglected in these areas.” Beatty placed much of the blame on “the deliberate

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Miller, ed. *A Magical Romance*, 16.

¹³⁵ Mina L. Beatty, *The Negro in Gaston County, North Carolina* (unpublished dissertation, Gaston County Public Library Local History Room), 10.

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negligence of white landlords, who bleed the renters [in African American communities] for every possible penny of profit," while allowing "practically no output for improvement or repairs."¹³⁶ Surprisingly, these indictments did not result in the destruction of the "substandard" housing in Gaston County's African American neighborhoods, as was the case throughout the South during the 1950s and 1960s, when urban redevelopment plans wiped out block after block of African American homes and businesses. In Winston Salem, thousands of acres of African American housing, businesses, churches, and community houses were marked as blighted areas, razed, and replaced with modern apartments, houses and shopping centers.¹³⁷ While the physical nature of the Highland neighborhood remained much as it had been under Jim Crow (the only large change involving the construction of the four-lane stretch of N. C. Highway 321 in the mid-1950s, which physically bisected the community between North York Street and North Boyce Street), the community became increasingly less diverse in terms of class. Middle-class African Americans, freed from the constraints of segregation, moved out of the Highland Neighborhood, while those who could not afford to buy their own homes were forced to stay in the rental housing in Highland.

Although Highland escaped destruction during the early urban renewal push of the 1960s, the neighborhood was targeted in the last decade of the twentieth century as the location for the county's civic expansion plan. In the mid-1990s, the entire Highland commercial district, from the south block face of East Walnut and Granite avenues south to the border of the neighborhood at Airline Avenue, was demolished to make way for the new Gaston County Courthouse, Jail, and Offices of Health and Human Services.¹³⁸ Few physical traces remain of the once vibrant group of black-owned and operated businesses along Page and Walnut Avenue and along the southern end of North York Street, which had made the Highland neighborhood such a unique and inspiring landscape for African Americans throughout Gaston County. As African Americans in Gastonia have continued to achieve economic and cultural successes that would have seemed impossible in the Jim Crow era, and as former members of the Highland

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Langdon E. Oppermann, *1993 Architectural and Planning Report: Winston Salem's African American Resources* (North Carolina Division of Archives and History: Raleigh, 1993), 17.

¹³⁸ *Gaston County Courthouse Dedication*, (Gaston County Courthouse Dedication Committee, 1998).

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community spread across the city, the county, and the country, Highland has ceased to be the center of African American life in Gaston County. In 1999, the community's largest congregation, St. Stephen's A. M. E. Zion Church, moved from its 1928 brick Gothic Revival building on North Marietta Street to the former First Baptist Church building on West Franklin Avenue, a towering brick Spanish Revival style building that was previously home to the county's largest and most affluent white Baptist congregation.¹³⁹

CONCLUSION

From the turn of the twentieth century to the mid-1950s, African Americans in North Carolina and throughout the South struggled against the rigid segregation of Jim Crow. With the United States Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, Southern states were able to legally enforce the separation of black and white citizens, and the idea put forth in the decision concerning "separate but equal" facilities was easily brushed aside. In Gaston County, the disadvantages African Americans faced through segregation were compounded by the policy of the county's cotton textile industry of hiring only white labor for all but the most menial jobs. Despite these constraints, the county's black population managed to build close-knit, relatively independent communities. Many of these communities (such as Highland in Gastonia and Reid in Belmont) were vital centers filled with black-owned businesses, schools, and churches. Before the promise of jobs created through Gaston County's new textile economy lured black farmers and farm laborers to Gastonia and other small towns, many African Americans (along with the rest of the county's population) lived in rural areas. Like many other counties in North Carolina, Gaston did have its share of black tenant farmers and sharecroppers, many of whom formed their own communities within the tenant housing provided by their employers. The system of tenant farming left many black farmers chained to their landlords through a never-ending cycle of debt, and those who were able to break this cycle usually moved up to renting farm land or even owning a small farm of their own. Rural farming communities, such as Chestnut Ridge and Neely's Grove, consisted of small groupings of those families who either owned or rented the land they worked. Most communities had their own churches, and, with the aid of the

¹³⁹ "A Partnership Preserves the Faith," *The Charlotte Observer*, August 7, 1999.

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Rosenwald Fund, their own schools. Although the textile boom of the early 1900s did lure many black families away from rural, these families retained close ties to their rural communities.

The growth of the cotton textile industry in Gaston County offered countless job opportunities for many white farmers and laborers in the surrounding countryside; however, this invitation to work was not extended to African Americans. Nevertheless, growing populations within the county's textile centers -- especially in the county seat of Gastonia -- did allow many African Americans to take advantage of employment opportunities that came out of these burgeoning towns. Housing was generally not provided within mill villages for those few African Americans who worked in menial jobs for the mills; the High Springs section of the Loray mill village and the Baltimore community in Cramerton were two important exceptions to that rule.

Within Gaston County's growing towns, black communities began to form and expand in the early twentieth century. Most of these communities consisted of just a few streets with a church, general store and small school. Although these smaller communities did have a modicum of independence from the town to which they were connected, none were as developed or self-reliant as the Highland community on the northern edge of Gastonia. Highland, by far the largest black community in the county, contained a thriving business district, the county's only black hospital, Highland High School, and many of Gaston's finest Gothic Revival churches. For many black residents of Gaston County, the Highland community served to show how much could be accomplished by African Americans, despite the difficulties of Jim Crow.

Legalized segregation and limited opportunities afforded to African Americans from the cotton textile industry served to mold the development of black communities in Gaston County from roughly 1900 to 1950. The Craftsman bungalows housing members of Gastonia's black middle-class, the rows of rental housing along North York Street in Highland, the mill houses tucked against Cramer Mountain far from the mill village, and the Gothic Revival church that serves as the centerpiece for the small black community within Lowell -- all these buildings were constructed within these contexts. Uncovering the full history of these buildings and communities was an extremely difficult task -- with few written records concerning African Americans in Gaston County, and city directories only for Gastonia, the majority of the information on small town communities and rural resources came from numerous interviews with older residents, as well as from church histories and other unpublished documents (which were few). During the course of conducting fieldwork for the survey, it was quite disheartening to discover just how many

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resources have been demolished, neglected, or altered -- the loss of the Highland business district, for example, completely changed the neighborhood, and Stewart Elementary School, the only Rosenwald school remaining in the county, has been significantly altered. The resources that remain tell the story of African Americans in Gaston County under Jim Crow.

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PROPERTY TYPES

While African Americans in Gaston County's rural areas, mill villages, small towns and county seat of Gastonia managed to build closely-knit, relatively independent communities within the constraints of Jim Crow during the first half of the twentieth century, the buildings they constructed within these segregated communities followed the conservative architectural trends and established building types set by white communities in the county. The following discussion of building types included within this survey is divided into four categories. The first three categories are listed in descending order by number of buildings: Residential, Commercial, Institutional. The fourth category, Historic Districts, deals with collections of individual buildings which possess a particular significance as a group. Each category will include a general description of the building type, a listing of the different buildings included within each building type, a brief statement of the significance of each building type, and the registration requirements for potentially eligible properties within each category.

TYPE 1: RESIDENTIAL

Description

The vast majority of the properties included within this survey are examples of residences lived in by African Americans during the period 1900 to 1950. The types of residences which housed African Americans during the Jim Crow era were largely dependent on the economic status of the occupant, but almost all residences within African American communities were one or one-and-a-half-story frame dwellings. Although duplexes were a popular form for African American and working-class white rental housing, this building type was seldom found in Gaston County's African American communities, where practically all of the residences were built as single-family structures. Original building materials included wood framing, wood siding, double-hung, four-over-four or six-over-six windows, and brick foundation piers. However, given the fact that most of these residences have been remodeled or updated with modern materials, very few of the county's African American houses retain all of these original features.

For this survey, residential units are divided into three categories: owner-occupied housing, rental housing, and mill village housing. Housing types in both rural and urban

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African American communities that date from the first half of the century show that certain house designs were used almost exclusively for rental housing, and others for owner-occupied housing. Mill villages in Gaston County typically show little difference between houses for African American workers and white workers – proximity to white housing seems to have been the distinguishing factor for African American mill housing.

A. Owner-Occupied Housing

The owner-occupied residences in African American communities across Gaston County are primarily one and one-and-a-half-story bungalows, although a few traditional forms, such as the I-house and Colonial Revival styles, make up some of the most impressive examples of middle-class African American housing. Another type of house, the hall-and-parlor plan, although more modest than the I-house, is now rare in these communities. The form, used for owner-occupied housing and in early rental housing, was largely replaced in the early twentieth century by the increasingly popular Craftsman style bungalow. Here, the term “Craftsman bungalow” denotes a more sophisticated building type than the smaller “Craftsman-inspired” structures widely used for rental housing. The early-twentieth century bungalow was a house type intended for those individuals “who earned enough to own their own homes but who needed to husband their resources.” The plans that appeared in countless magazines, design books, and catalogs (most notably Chicago’s Sears, Roebuck and Co.) were varied and easily adapted to fit particular tastes. For these reasons, the bungalow became the house design of choice for Gaston County’s more affluent African Americans in the 1910s and 1920s. Although the Craftsman bungalow did not lend itself to use as rental housing, which was generally much smaller than the average owner-occupied bungalow and lacked the combination of details (full front porch, decorative brackets, exposed rafter tails, substantial porch posts, etc.) which characterized the true Craftsman house, Craftsman-inspired rental housing, which often included one or two general characteristics of the style, became very common in Gaston County’s African American neighborhoods in the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ Elizabeth Collins Cromley and Carter L. Hudgins, Ed. *Gender, Class, and Shelter: Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture, V.* (Knoxville: 1995), p. 180.

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1. Hall-and-Parlor

The hall-and-parlor is a widely accepted national house type, appearing in the North Carolina piedmont as a one-story, side-gable, single-pile structure throughout the nineteenth century and into the early years of the twentieth century. This form is thus one of the oldest house types within African American neighborhoods that formed in the late 1800s. The hall-and-parlor, a one-story version of the I-house plan, is typically a side-gabled structure, one room deep and three bays wide, with a shed or gabled porch, and six-over-six windows. Good examples of the hall-and-parlor plan house remain in Cherryville's Freedom Neighborhood, along the west face of South Mountain Street's 600 and 700 blocks (GS1042). These homes operated as farms on the edge of the community, and most likely form the oldest residential block in Freedom.

2. I- House

Although usually considered a rural house type, the traditional I-house form was the choice for several home owners within the Highland neighborhood and within Mt. Holly's Freedom Neighborhood, and the two-story, hall-and-parlor or center passage plan stands out among the horizontal lines of the neighborhood's bungalows and the low rows of one-story rental housing. Unlike the bungalow, I-houses within African American communities tend date from the late 1800s or from the turn-of-the-century, and many may have been built as farmhouses or rural structures before the widespread development of segregated neighborhoods. Typically, this house type is a one-room-deep (later versions are often two-rooms-deep), side-gabled structure, three bays wide, with a porch that extends the length of the façade, often wrapping around one side of the building. Windows are typically a six-over-six configuration. A National Register eligible example of the I-house is the Harvey Pryor House (GS984) at 306 North Pryor Street in the west side of Highland, currently listed on the National Register Study List.

3. Craftsman Bungalow

First promoted in the late 1890s and early 1900s as a distinctly Californian architectural style by brothers Charles Sumner Greene and Henry Mather Greene, the Craftsman style, with its low, horizontal lines, large porches, and distinctive detailing, was promoted extensively in magazines that varied from *The*

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Architectural Record to *Ladies Home Journal*. This national publicity, along with the profusion of pattern books and complete construction packages, including pre-cut lumber along with a complete set of buildings plans and specification, made the Craftsman bungalow “the most popular and fashionable smaller house in the country.”¹⁴¹ In Gaston County, the bungalow was the most popular choice for African Americans who could afford to build their own homes. Plans were relatively inexpensive, easy to come by and easy to construct, and the large, horizontal floor plan distinguished the house from the small, compact rental housing that had overtaken most African American neighborhoods in the early twentieth century. The roofline of owner-occupied bungalows also helped to distinguish them from renters— home owners gravitated towards side-gabled or cross-gables bungalows, in contrast to the rows of front-gable Craftsman style rental housing. Many of the county’s few remaining owner-occupied rural properties are also Craftsman bungalows. In addition to their low profile, many of these owner-occupied bungalows include the distinctive detailing that characterized the style – exposed rafter tails, decorative beams and knee brackets, low, overhanging porches supported by wide brick piers topped with squared columns, and three or four-over-one window configurations. The three National Register eligible examples of the Craftsman bungalow (all of which are now on the National Register Study List) - the C. J. B. Reid House (GS1066) in Belmont’s Reid Neighborhood, the Erwin Saunders House (GS1028) in Gastonia’s Highland Neighborhood, and the Dr. Herbert J. Erwin House (GS964), also in Highland – are among the best examples of this type in the county, .

B. Rental Housing

The vast majority of the African American houses in Gaston County were rental properties built by landlords and developers. Contractors who constructed the rows of rental housing in Highland and all of the small towns around Gastonia used standard and familiar buildings plans. In general the rental housing built for African Americans across the county can be grouped into three major types: shotgun houses, pyramidal cottages, and Craftsman-style front-gable and hipped-roof houses.

¹⁴¹ Virginia and Lee McAlester, *A Field Guide to American Houses* (New York, 1997), 452-455.

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1. Shotgun Houses

The shotgun house, typically a front-gabled structure one bay wide, with a shed-roof front porch, whose rooms are set one behind the other, is a traditional southern urban house form, used predominantly in African American neighborhoods from around 1880 through the early decades of the twentieth century. The origin of the form is debated: some scholars contend that the shotgun house may have originated in Africa and been transferred to the West Indies, Haiti, and eventually New Orleans and the southern United States by African slaves carried over in the slave trade, while others insist that the shotgun is the traditional hall-and-parlor form turned on its end to fit into narrow urban lots.¹⁴² Whatever its origin, the shotgun house was once a predominant form within African American neighborhoods – two-room and three-room deep shotguns outnumber almost every other house type in early twentieth century Sanborn Maps of these communities. However, many of these closely spaced rows of shotguns that once dominated African American neighborhoods in Gaston County have been demolished. The Highland neighborhood still contains the largest number of shotgun houses, generally frame structures which originally featured six-over-six or four-over-four windows, shed-roofed porches spanning the narrow façade, and offset front entryways, and several two-room examples are included in the National Register eligible Highland hospital district (listed on the National Register Study List), on North Falls Street (GS908).

2. Pyramidal Cottages

The pyramidal cottage is one of the most distinctive examples of rental housing in Gaston County, and was among the most popular form for mass construction during the 1920s and 1930s. The house, with its nearly square plan (four rooms around a central axis) and pyramidal roofline, were easily and inexpensively constructed, and consequently they began to replace earlier forms like the hall-and-parlor and shotgun house. The typical pyramidal cottage found in Gaston County was a frame dwelling with wooden clapboards, a centrally placed entryway flanked by two windows (six-over-six or four-over-four configuration) and covered by a shed or gabled porch. The most distinctive

¹⁴² Ibid, 90.

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feature of the earlier pyramidal cottages was the house type's central fireplace, which could service small hearths in every room of the house. The John Biggers House (GS975) in Highland (listed on the National Register Study List and eligible for individual nomination) retains this feature. Numerous excellent examples of the pyramidal cottage remain in practically all of Gaston County's African American neighborhoods.

3. Craftsman-Style Houses

This type encompasses a variety of similar houses that appear in Gaston County's African American neighborhoods between the 1920s and 1930s, and in some instances into the 1940s. While the rooflines and porches of these houses vary – from front-gable/front-gable porch and front gable/shed porch combinations to hipped roof examples very similar to pyramidal cottages, but featuring an integrated porch - they are all included in one category because of their typical Craftsman detailing. Although only the best examples combine all of these features, including exposed rafter tails, decorative beams or knee brackets under gables, low pitched roof, wide brick porch column bases, and squared porch columns, most of the Craftsman style houses surveyed (except in the most altered examples), retained at least one distinctive Craftsman detail. The most popular Craftsman house in Gaston County's African American communities was the front-gable form – earlier examples often included a front-gable porch with exposed rafter tails, while later examples featured a simple shed porch. As with the pyramidal cottage, numerous examples of this house type remain throughout the county.

Significance

The residential buildings constructed for African Americans in the Jim Crow period are significant because they reflect the changing settlement patterns of Gaston County's African Americans, the urbanization of the county's population as a whole, and the varying economic status of African Americans in Gaston County's black neighborhoods. The physical and stylistic differences between owner-occupied housing and rental houses served to differentiate classes within all-black communities, while the owner-occupied houses became standards to which all African American community members could aspire. Although these houses are not outstanding for their architecture, they reflect, more than any other building type, the lifestyles of their occupants during the first half of the twentieth century.

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Registration

Because the emphasis of this survey concentrates on the association between the built environment and the development of Gaston County's African American communities during the period c. 1900 - c. 1950, the primary consideration for determining eligibility to the National Register for all of the resources surveyed will be the property's historical association with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of African American history in Gaston County (Criterion A). Questions such as integrity of design, materials, workmanship, setting and association remain important for the consideration of residential buildings built by or for African American families within Gaston County for the National Register of Historic Places.

Most residential resources that will be eligible for the National Register will be so as part of a National Register Historic District. A small number of residences will be individually eligible for the Register as particularly well-preserved examples of a housing type, and, in most cases (such as the John Biggers House in Highland), for their historical association with a significant person. For houses eligible as well-preserved examples of a housing type, integrity of design, materials, and workmanship will particularly important in determining individual eligibility. For residences associated with an historically significant person, significant integrity must be retained to convey the historic appearance of the resource during its period of significance.

TYPE 2: COMMERCIAL

Description

Very few commercial buildings historically associated with African Americans still stand in Gaston County. The destruction of the Highland community's large commercial district in the 1990s eliminated the majority of the county's pre-1950 black-owned-and-operated businesses, and many of the modest commercial districts in Gaston County's small town African American communities were replaced with housing as the communities became strictly residential areas. The examples that have survived fall into three categories: the one-room grocery, the two-story commercial/residential combination, and the multi-unit commercial block.

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1. One-Room Grocery

A popular form in rural and urban settings throughout Gaston County, the one-room grocery was often erected to serve the general needs of a specific area of a community. Generally, the proprietors of these structures sold a wide variety of products, including foodstuffs, school supplies, farming supplies, household items, and tobacco; some were used on the weekends as juke joints for local teenagers. These buildings are plain rectangular frame structures, usually with a front-gable or flat roof, and windows flanking a central entrance on the façade. Often, the entrance is protected by a shed roof, supported by metal or wooden poles which go straight to the ground. Occasionally, a plank porch fronts the building. Examples of this building type include the C. V. Alexander Store (GS 1064) in Crowder's Mountain, the J.R. Reid Store (GS1010) in Belmont's Reid Community, and Floyd Byer's Café (GS1045) in Cherryville's Freedom community.

2. Commercial/Residential Combination

These structures served the urban community of Highland, and were most likely the predominant commercial building in the Union Square area of Highland. The building combines public and private space, with the business on the ground floor and a living space above. These are simple, rectangular structures made of brick (often stuccoed), with a flat roof. The ground floor storefront features large windows and an offset door, and an exterior wooden staircase on the side elevation to give access to the second floor. The Hillside Barbershop (GS894) on North York Street and Odom's Appliance Store (GS906) on Nat Barber Avenue, both in the Highland Neighborhood, are the best remaining examples of this building type.

3. Multi-unit Commercial Block

The multi-unit commercial block became a popular commercial building type for the larger commercial districts in the Highland Neighborhood and Belmont's Reid Neighborhood, and were generally constructed in the 1930s and 1940s. Only two examples of this building type survive today, one in Reid and one in Highland. The building is generally a one-story, flat-roofed, rectangular brick structure, with the long elevation facing the street. Both of the remaining examples have been stuccoed. Simple storefronts -- two windows flanking a single door -- punctuate the common

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façade. The best remaining example of this building type is the commercial block on the east face of the 700 block of North York Street (GS895) in Highland.

Significance

The commercial buildings erected in Gaston County's African American communities between c. 1900 – c. 1950 are significant because they exemplify the economic success that many African Americans were able to achieve despite the constraints of Jim Crow laws, and because they reflect the increasing autonomy of African American communities. The diverse array of African American businesses within these neighborhoods enabled black consumers to support black business owners and strengthen the economic power of their communities, instead of relying on white businesses outside of their neighborhoods.

Registration Requirements

To qualify for listing on the National Register of Historic Places, a commercial building included in the survey must have been constructed between the years 1900 to 1950. The building must retain sufficient architectural features to identify its original function. Factors such as integrity of design, materials, workmanship, setting and association will be of particular importance, since most of these primarily urban structures may be included within a National Register district.

TYPE 3: INSTITUTIONAL

Description

There are three types of institutional buildings included in Gaston County's African American built environment under Jim Crow – religious, educational, and civic. As the centerpieces of their communities, these buildings – churches, schools, community houses, hospitals, etc. – are often the most architecturally impressive buildings within African American neighborhoods. Churches in particular were erected with great care and attention to detail, and practically all of the African American churches constructed in the Jim Crow era adhered to a common architectural style. The county's black schools, erected largely through the economic support of the Rosenwald Fund, were also similar in design and construction. Although civic structures – Masonic lodges, community houses, and other buildings – were once an integral part of African American

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communities, the only remaining civic structures associated with African Americans dating from the Jim Crow era are the county's two black hospital buildings.

A. Religious

Churches, more than any other building type within Gaston County's African American neighborhoods, represented the aspirations of the members of these communities. The church formed the spiritual and social center of their communities while serving as a reflection of their members' devotion to God. Consequently, African American communities devoted a good deal of their time and money to replacing simple frame churches from the Reconstruction era with larger, more impressive structures, structures befitting their growing economic and social independence. In the construction of church buildings, African Americans remained conservative and traditional in their choice of architectural styles, and almost all of the African American church buildings included in this survey are brick Gothic Revival churches. The majority of these Gothic Revival buildings feature a distinctive double-tower façade, a form particularly popular among African American communities across the state. Two National Register eligible examples of this double-tower form are the former St. Stephen's A. M. E. Zion Church (GS961) on North Marietta Street and St. Paul's Baptist Church (GS966) on North Oakland Street, both in the Highland Neighborhood. Perhaps the best example of Gothic Revival architecture included in this survey, which features a single offset tower and double gabled façade, is Wright's Chapel A. M. E. Zion Church (GS1001) in the town of Lowell. All three of these churches are currently on the National Register Study List.

B. Educational

Although the majority of school buildings constructed for Gaston County's African Americans in the Jim Crow era were built with grants from the Rosenwald Fund, and were thus very similar in style and materials, the three black schools that remain from the first half of the twentieth century vary greatly in their location, their history, and their building styles. The one remaining Rosenwald School in the county, the Stewart School (GS1037) in Bessemer City, has been altered to such a degree that the distinctive features that characterize

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Rosenwald Schools – the large banks of windows, the H-plan of the eight-classroom school, the white weatherboard siding – are no longer present. The two remaining schools, however, are excellent, if atypical, examples of schoolhouse design, and both are National Register eligible examples. The Highland School building, on North York Street in the Highland Neighborhood, was built in 1936 as a WPA project, and originally served as an extension of the original Highland High School (GS947), housing elementary classrooms. The building is a large two-story, stuccoed-brick rectangular structure, with a flat roof, little detailing, and a windowless façade. A brick gymnasium was added to the rear of the building in 1939. The second school is the only schoolhouse constructed by a mill owner for his African American employees, in addition to being the most pristine African American school building in Gaston County. The Baltimore school in Cramerton (GS1049) was built in the 1920s by Stuart Cramer for his African American workers in the Baltimore community. The small frame schoolhouse, a gabled structure with a sloping rear ell and integrated corner porch, has remained virtually unchanged since its construction, and is currently on the National Register Study List, eligible for individual nomination.

C. Civic

The only civic buildings in Gaston County's African American communities that have survived to the present are the First Gastonia Colored Hospital (GS954) and the Gaston County Negro Hospital (GS963), located almost side by side in the Highland Neighborhood. The buildings themselves are simple long, rectangular, side-gabled brick buildings – the Gaston County Negro Hospital, constructed in the 1937 to replace the 1919 Gastonia Colored Hospital, is now used as a retirement home. The more modest Gastonia Colored Hospital is now a private residence. Both properties are on the National Register Study List.

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Significance

Institutional buildings played an important role in Gaston County's African American communities, and remain significant as the pinnacle of African American architecture within the county. Impressive churches, school buildings, and civic structures gave African Americans a sense of community pride, and reflected the economic success of developing black communities during the Jim Crow era.

Registration Requirements

In order to qualify for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, an institutional building included in this survey must have been constructed during the Jim Crow era, c. 1900-c. 1950. Unlike many of the residential and commercial buildings in this survey, many of these institutional buildings will be individually eligible due to their architectural significance; because institutional buildings are typically located in the hearts of their communities, many may also be included within a National Register district. Thus, to individually qualify, an institutional building should be largely intact and an excellent example of its form or style (particularly the Gothic Revival church buildings). Integrity of design, materials, and workmanship is particularly important for individual and district consideration, and resources connected to a potential district should retain integrity of location, setting, feeling, and association. Because institutional buildings are relatively rare, particularly in comparison to the number of residential buildings, modest alterations that do not fundamentally alter the historic appearance of the building should not prevent an institutional building from being eligible for the National Register.

TYPE 4: HISTORIC DISTRICTS

Description

The above building types come together to form cohesive units in historic districts. The districts identified in this survey generally fall into three categories, based on the building types which they encompass – residential districts, mill village districts, and mixed-use districts. Residential districts generally include a group of dwellings within a community that are exceptionally pristine examples of a specific house type, most often constructed as a group for use as rental housing. Mill village districts, although also purely residential in many cases, are unique in their association with a specific textile mill or company. In addition, African American mill village districts are distinctive type because of their isolation from a true community

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setting with commercial and institutional buildings as well as residences. Mixed-use districts generally include at least one important civic or institutional building (in most cases, churches) anchoring a surrounding group of residences. Five areas have been identified through this survey as being eligible for the National Register Historic District nomination, and are now on the National Register Study List: the Shady Avenue/Granite Avenue historic district (GS979, GS981, GS982, GS985); the Hospitals historic district (GS963, GS954, GS908, GS920, GS921); the Southeast Highland historic district (GS961, GS964, GS966, GS937, GS938, GS940, GS941, GS942, GS1028); the High Springs historic district (GS1002, GS1004, GS1003, GS1005, GS1006) and the Baltimore historic district (GS1048, GS1049, GS1050, and GS1051).

A. Residential Districts

The majority of buildings within any African American community in Gaston County during the Jim Crow era were residential structures. Although these communities included all income levels (since African Americans were restricted, regardless of class, to segregated neighborhoods), African American urban housing, particularly the Highland neighborhood in Gastonia, were roughly divided into two areas – owner-occupied and rental housing. Owner-occupied housing, which often form the oldest areas of a community, are often mingled with commercial, institutional and civic buildings. Strictly residential districts are more often found as pockets of well-preserved rental housing, most often constructed as a group by a particular developer and often nearly identical in their plan and detailing. Several of these areas still remain in many of Gaston County's African American neighborhoods, the most notable of which is the Shady Avenue/Granite Avenue district. Constructed as in the mid-1930s as a new section of working-class housing for blacks, the U-shaped district is comprised almost entirely of one-story, double-pile front-gabled frame structures covered with white painted weatherboard siding and fronted by shed front porches.

B. Mill Villages

African American housing in Gaston County's mill villages is relatively rare, since very few textile jobs were open to African Americans until the late 1950s and early 1960s; the small number of jobs that were available to African

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American did not often offer steady employment. Most often, African American mill housing, if it existed in a complex, would occupy only one or two small streets on the edge of the community, such as in the Rex Mill in Ranlo. However, two textile mills, the Loray Mill in Gastonia and Cramer Mills in Cramerton, offered fairly sizable areas of housing for their African American employers. These pockets of mill dwellings are unique not only for their association with an industry known for its discriminatory hiring practices, but also because of their isolation from true black communities. High Springs, the African American section of the Loray Mill Village, had its own church building, but residents had to go east to Highland for most other social and commercial activities. Similarly, though Stuart Cramer provided his African American employees with a small school in Baltimore, residents traveled to the Neely Grove community to attend church services and socialize. Considering the small number of these distinct districts, it is surprising that each mill dealt very differently with the problem of employing and housing African Americans in textiles. The housing used for African Americans is generally the same as the mill's white homes – one and one-and-a-half story hall-and-parlor dwellings with shed porches, weatherboard siding, and six-over-six windows in High Springs, and one-story pyramidal cottages and steeply hipped frame house with integrated corner porches and cross gables with a distinctive diamond patterned detail in the Baltimore community. The placement of the houses was the most important factor for mill owners – African American mill housing in High Springs was on the outer edge of the mill village, originally with a buffer of open space between the last white housing and the first black housing. Stuart Cramer took the idea of racial segregation even further, building the Baltimore neighborhood ~~across~~ around the South Fork River from the all-white mill village, on an isolated parcel on the side of Cramer Mountain. The High Springs area and the Baltimore community area are both on the Study List for the National Register as eligible historic districts.

C. Mixed-Use Districts

Mixed-use districts are groups of buildings within Gaston County's African American communities that include at least two building types; most often they consist of one or more commercial, institutional, or civic buildings, which served the community as a whole, surrounded by residences. Because of the inclusion of a variety of building types, multi-use districts most often give the

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most complete view of African American community life during the Jim Crow era. The two mixed-use districts identified in this survey are the Southeast Highland district and the Hospitals district, also in Highland. Southeast Highland is anchored by three individually eligible properties: Saint Stephen's A.M.E. Zion Church (arguably the most influential church in Highland); Saint Paul's Baptist Church; and the home of Gaston County's first practicing African American physician, Dr. Herbert J. Erwin. Along with the Oakland Cemetery, Gastonia's only city-owned African American cemetery, and the variety of house types in the area (which includes owner-occupied and rental housing), this district includes almost all of the building types present in this community. The Hospital district is centered around the former Gaston County Colored Hospital and the former Gaston County Negro Hospital, both on the National Register Study List, eligible for individual nomination. This area includes both rental housing (primarily pyramidal cottages and two-room shotgun houses) and black-owned and occupied bungalows, forming a group of houses representative of the diverse economic nature of Highland in the early twentieth century.

Significance

Districts, more than any other property type, allow for a more complete understanding of African American community as a whole. While single structures can only convey information about one building, and single aspect of community life, the diverse array of properties encompassed by the boundaries of a mixed-use historic district allow for comparisons and give a sense of the context in which these buildings existed originally and how they survive today. In the case of most residential and mill village districts, where the buildings themselves are most often very similar, it is even more essential to view the group of buildings as a whole, since each individual structure is significant only when considered as part of the larger resource.

Registration

In order to qualify for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, properties to be included as contributing buildings within a historic district must have been constructed during the Jim Crow era, c.1900 - c. 1950. Contributing structures must

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make up the majority of the resources within the district, and these properties should retain the ability to convey the feeling and association of the period of significance. In addition, the contributing resources within the district must retain sufficient architectural features to identify their original function and place within the community. Factors such as integrity of design, materials, workmanship, setting and association will be of particular importance, since National Register historic districts must convey a sense of historic and/or architectural cohesiveness.

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