

The Excelsior Club



This report was written on Sept. 4, 1985

1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the Excelsior Club is located at 921 Beatties Ford Road in Charlotte, N.C.

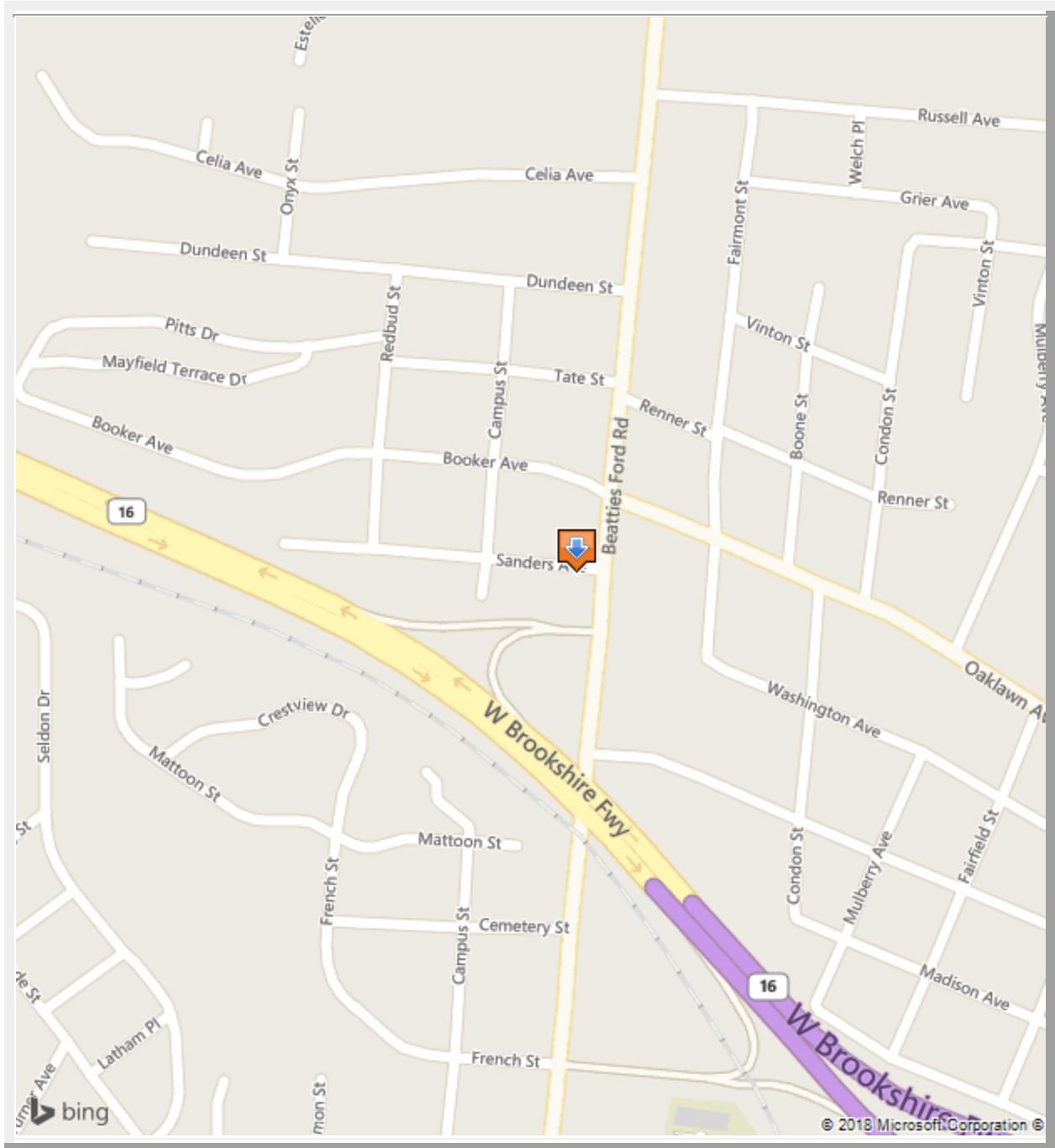
2. Name, address and telephone number of the present owner of the property:
The owner of the property is:

HKL, Inc.
603 Hawthorne Ln.
Charlotte, N.C., 28204

Telephone: (704) 334-5709

3. Representative photographs of the property: This report contains representative photographs of the property.

4. A map depicting the location of the property: This report contains a map which depicts the location of the property.



5. Current Deed Book Reference to the property: The most recent deed to this property is recorded in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 4929, Page 452. The Tax Parcel Number of the property is 069-066-21.

6. A brief historical sketch of the property: This report contains a brief historical sketch of the property prepared by Dr. William H. Huffman.

7. A brief architectural description of the property: This report contains a brief architectural description of the property prepared by Mr. Thomas W. Hanchett, architectural historian.

8. Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets the criteria set forth in N.C.G.S. 160A-399.4:

a. Special significance in terms of its history, architecture, and/or cultural importance: The Commission judges that the property known as the Excelsior Club does possess special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations: 1) the original owner, "Jimmie" McKee (1913-1985), was a leading black philanthropist, political activist, and businessman in Charlotte; 2) the Excelsior Club has enjoyed the reputation as being among: the most influential social institutions in the black community of Charlotte; and 3) the Excelsior Club attained architectural appointments in 1952 which make it perhaps the finest example of the Art Moderne style in Mecklenburg County.

b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling, and/or association: The Commission contends that the architectural description included in this report demonstrates that the property known as the Excelsior Club meets this criterion.

9. Ad Valorem Tax Appraisal: The Commission is aware that designation would allow the owner to apply for an automatic deferral of 50% of the Ad Valorem taxes on all or any portion of the property which becomes "historic property." The current appraised value of the .189 acres of land is \$9,080. The current appraised value of the structure is \$99,620. The total appraised-value is \$108,700. The property is zoned B1.

Date of Preparation of this Report: September 4, 1985

Prepared by: Dr. Dan L. Morrill
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Properties Commission

1225 S. Caldwell St. Box D
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Historical Overview

*by Dr. William H. Huffman
August, 1985*

The Excelsior Grub, located on Beatties Ford Road about one-half mile north of the main entrance to Johnson C. Smith University, was for many years the leading private black social club in the Southeast, and one of the largest of its kind on the East Coast. In addition to its importance as the only social club for black professionals in the area, it also became a political focal point of the city and county for both black and white candidates for office, and a meeting place for boosters of Johnson C. Smith University. Started in 1944 in a house built in the 1910s, the club took on its present appearance in the early 1950s.

The story of the founding and the success of the Excelsior Club is that of its original owner, James Robert "Jimmie" McKee (1913-1985). Born in South Carolina but raised in the village of Biddleville, McKee dropped out of school at the age of fourteen to go to work so that his athlete older brother could finish school following the death of their father. About 1934, when he was twenty-one, he managed to get a job as mail clerk with Horton Motor Lines, and over the next ten years rose to head mail clerk supervising six employees. In order to help support his two brothers and four sisters, he also served at parties and tended bar at the city's country clubs, and about 1939 began to entertain the idea of the need for such a club for the black community, which had nothing comparable. Over the next few years he gathered information from friends who worked in other private clubs and researched the organization schemes of the existing white ones. It was also in 1939 that he was married to the former Minnie Jackson of Charlotte, to whom he remained dedicated all his life. Mrs. McKee received her B. A. from a teacher's college in Winston-Salem and an M.A. in Elementary Education from Columbia University in New York, and taught at the Double Oaks School in Charlotte for a number of years. ¹

In 1944 Jimmie McKee was able to make his dream a reality when a suitable property became available: a seven-room, two story house on Beatties Ford Road, which he

bought at public sale for \$3510 in July.² The house was originally built about the late Teens or early Twenties by Laura Davidson, a domestic, who sold it in 1929 to I. D. L. Torrence, a real estate agent, and it subsequently remained a rental property until Jimmie McKee bought it fifteen years later.³ It had been a part of Washington Heights, a suburban development for middle-class blacks, which was put together by banker-developer W. S. Alexander through his Freehold Realty Co. (1912-1920).⁴

Once the new club had a home, plans proceeded apace to get it into business. In the same month as the purchase of the property, Jimmie McKee, Oscar Jackson (McKee's father-in-law), John Black, Ruben McKissick and Edward B. Pharr became the original incorporators of the Excelsior Club.⁵ The name was suggested by Jimmie's attorney, who had always advised him to "exceed all others" in his endeavors, and the subsequent history of the club bore out its appropriateness.⁶ By September, 1944, all the necessary paperwork and remodeling were completed, and the club opened with a small bar and seating capacity for seventy-five.⁷

From the beginning, the club was exclusive: candidates for membership were carefully screened after being recommended by a member. It was also very successful. Over the next few years, the membership grew from the original twenty five to many times that number, and came to include a large proportion of Charlotte - Mecklenburg's black professionals: doctors, lawyers, educators, ministers, businessmen and others. "The club's growth has come because from the very beginning I've tried to give the best service I could, not only to the members of the club, but to the community as well," Jimmie McKee explained in a 1977 interview.⁸ At times, some of the best talent available entertained at the Excelsior, including the legendary Nat "King" Cole. The club also became the home for a number of bridge, social and civic clubs (both men's and women's) as well as for fraternity and sorority meetings.⁹ One of the most notable of these organizations was the "100 Club," which was organized in 1965 by Jimmie McKee, Dr. Emery L. Rann, a lifelong friend of Jimmie's, and others to help raise funds for Johnson C. Smith University. Not only did they reach their initial goal of \$12,500, by 1967 they had given the University \$50,000 as their part of the school's centennial fund-raising drive.¹⁰

About 1952, the original two-story house was incorporated into the much larger building that one sees today as part of a major expansion of the facility. It was the most extensive of several renovations undertaken to modernize the building. McKee himself subcontracted all the work, and the design appears to have been his own.¹¹

An unintended, but eventually very important, feature of the club was its significance for local and statewide politics. Since its members included so many leading citizens of the black community, it was a natural political meeting place. Starting in 1946,

when the Democratic candidate for county sheriff made a campaign stop at the club and went on to win the election, a succession of white and later, black, political candidates have made it a point to try and pick up support from black voters by campaigning at the Excelsior.¹² In 1957, Jimmie McKee and three other members of the board of directors of the club organized political support to get a black elected to the Charlotte City Council.¹³ For his efforts on behalf of local politics, in 1975 McKee was awarded a plaque in a ceremony at the club which read in part, "To Jimmy McKee. Thanks for the many years of dedicated, untiring support of the Mecklenburg County Democratic Party. 10/30/75. D. Kelly, Chairman."¹⁴ For the occasion he also received the congratulations of U. S. Senator Robert Morgan (D-N.C.) and N. C. Attorney General Rufus Edmisten.¹⁵

The social and political importance of the Excelsior Club, however, do not complete the measure of Jimmie McKee. His was, in fact, an impressive success story in the best tradition of the American dream: a youth who dropped out of school to help support his brothers and sisters, who worked hard and put together a unique institution that was based on his own vision and succeeded by the force of his own personality. But above all, he cared about others. This is the quality that underlies much of what he did, but his philanthropy, good will, and boosterism extended beyond the better known activities of the club, and he put much of himself back into the community where he had achieved his success.

His philanthropic contributions included sponsoring membership for any boy who wanted to join the YMCA's boy's club in the 1940s; the purchase of a building on Oaklawn Avenue in the early '60s which was then turned into a nursery and kindergarten; numerous contributions to charitable organizations; and many transactions that were done quietly behind the scenes.¹⁶ For promoting racial cooperation and opportunities for blacks, one could cite, in addition to the political activity mentioned above, Jimmie's bringing a golf tournament to Charlotte that was held at the Meadowbrook Golf Course in 1948, which resulted in blacks being able to use the course at all times.¹⁷ That same year, he had talks with Francis Fitzgerald, the president of a new radio station, WGIV, about broadcasting live from the Excelsior Club and having "Genial Gene" Potts as MC to entertain black listeners. Thus was launched a nearly thirty-year career for the highly popular "Genial Gene" with the station, and his success paved the way for for other black radio talent in the city.¹⁸ For these and other achievements, Jimmie McKee was elected to receive the *Charlotte Post*'s Sepia Man of the Year award in 1957.¹⁹

In November, 1984, a Fortieth Anniversary celebration was held at the club to honor its founder. It was both a happy and sad occasion, for many of his friends were able to offer their congratulations and an anniversary booklet had been published, but Jimmie McKee had contracted cancer and was retiring from ownership of the Excelsior. That

same month he sold the club to two Charlotte businessmen, Ken Koontz and Phil Hachett, who intend to carry on the traditional role the Excelsior Club has played in the community for over forty years.²⁰ It is a fitting personal testimonial to a truly significant part of Charlotte's history.

NOTES

¹ *Charlotte Post* February 23, 1957, p.1; *Charlotte Observer*. Nov.17, 1984, p.1; *Ibid.*, 1977 (Copy in following citation); Anniversary Booklet, Excelsior Club, Nov. 16, 1984.

² Mecklenburg County Deed Book 1121, p.539, 25 July 1944.

³ *Ibid.*, Book 312, p. 340, 30 June 1913; Book 751, p. 181, 18 Sept. 1929; Charlotte City Directories. 1913-1945.

⁴ Mecklenburg County Record of Corporations, Book 3, p.468; *Ibid.*, Book: 6, p. 345.

⁵ Certificate of Incorporation # 49667, July, 1944, on file at Excelsior Club.

⁶ *Charlotte Observer*. 1977, copy in Anniversary Booklet.

⁷ Anniversary Booklet, cited above.

⁸ See note 6.

⁹ Anniversary Booklet; interview With Ken Koontz, Charlotte, NC, 25 July 1985.

¹⁰ Anniversary Booklet; letters of organization on file at the Excelsior Club.

¹¹ Interview with Minnie McKee, Charlotte, NC, 24 July 1985.

¹² See note 6; *Charlotte Observer*. Nov.17, 1984, p. 1; *Ibid.*, July 26, 1985, p. 1C.

¹³ Letter dated 24 April 1957 from J. Arthur Twitty, Dr. J. M. Villains, "Genial Gene" Potts, and Jimmie McKee, reproduced in Anniversary Booklet.

¹⁴ Photograph on file at Excelsior Club.

¹⁵ *Charlotte Post*.1975, article reproduced in Anniversary Booklet.

¹⁶ See note 1.

¹⁷ *Charlotte Post*. February 23,1957, p.1; Anniversary Booklet.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*; *Charlotte Observer*. August 4, 1985, p. IF.

¹⁹ *Charlotte Post*, February 23,1957, p. 1.

²⁰ Mecklenburg County Deed Book 4929, p. 452, 9 November 1984.

Architectural Description

by Thomas W. Hanchett

The Excelsior Club began its existence in 1944 in a two-story wood-frame Four Square type house built in the teens or twenties. About 1952 the structure was heavily remodeled under the direction of owner James R. McKee in the Art Moderne style. Today it is perhaps the finest example of this rare style of architecture in Mecklenburg County.

The Club building dates back to the first years of Washington Heights, developed as a middle- and upper-income black streetcar suburb beginning in 1913. As in most Charlotte suburbs of the day, the main avenues along the trolley lines were reserved for the finest houses, while humbler bungalows lined the side streets. Beatties Ford Road formed the major street of Washington Heights, and the house erected at #921 was among the larger in the neighborhood. Like the R.C. Biberstein House recently nominated for historic designation on analogous Elizabeth Avenue in the Elizabeth neighborhood, #921 was a two-story example of the Four Square style. It had a high hip roof with a front dormer, weatherboarded exterior walls, and a broad one-story front porch that wrapped around the sides of the structure.

When Beatties Ford -- like most of the city's major suburban thoroughfares -- began to turn commercial in the 1940s, James R. McKee bought #921 for his new social club

and as soon as possible remodeled it in a fitting manner. Long-time associates and the tradesmen who worked on the job have all told historian William Huffman that McKee created the design himself. He visited clubs in other parts of the country, and returned with a vision of a clean, up-to-date design in the style that architectural historians now call the Art Moderne.

The Art Moderne style is the clean-cut cousin of the more ornamental Art Deco style popular from the late 1920s into the 1940s and 1950s. Art Moderne is characterized by flat roofs, horizontal trim, smooth surfaces, and use of such modernistic materials as glass block and aluminum. McKee's Excelsior Club is a fully-realized example of this mode, such a thorough remodeling that even the practiced eye can see little evidence of the original house.

McKee had the hip roof replaced with a flat parapet roof. A two-story concrete block addition to the rear -- including a small one-story stage -- greatly increased the club's capacity. The porch was extended and enclosed, and fitted with frameless glass-block windows. The two-story main block of the building received matching glass-block front windows, and aluminum-sash side and rear windows. All exterior walls were sheathed with a uniform coat of white stucco. At the corners of the porch roof and main roof, the parapet steps up for decorative emphasis, and is trimmed with horizontal black raised bands. The overall effect is no longer that of a house with an enclosed porch, but rather of a modernistic ziggurat with a small square second story centered on a larger square first story. The Art Moderne effect was heightened shortly after the main remodeling by the addition of an elegant canopied entrance. An elaborate formed canopy of aluminum -- complete with port-hole like openings in the sides -- shelters arrivals as they walk from Beatties Ford Road up the concrete steps and through the glass-and-aluminum double doors.

The inside of the Excelsior Club is homier than its exterior might suggest. Walls throughout are finished in wood-grained paneling -- the 1952 solid-wood variety in most cases. Floors are carpeted and ceilings finished in acoustical tile. Photographs in the collection of owner Ken Koontz indicate that even when wear-and-tear over the years has necessitated replacement of 1950s materials, the new work has essentially replicated the old.

One enters through the front doors into a small lobby that incorporates the stairhall of the original house. To the left, on the enclosed porch, are a coat-check room, a storage room, and the owner's office. At the rear of the lobby is the winding stairway to the second floor. It originally retained the old wooden balustrade and simple newel, but now features a "wrought" iron balustrade. At the base of the stair is a massive tropical-fish tank on a stone base, the focus of the lobby in recent years. There is evidence offered by the sinking floor in the vicinity that its weight is causing

structural problems in the building. To the right of the lobby is the long barroom. It has a leather-upholstered bar with recent bar-stools. The impressive bar back consists of a mirrored wall above cabinets handsomely stippled with paint to resemble exotic wood. In the days before liquor-by-the-drink, the cabinets provided a place where patrons could lock their personal stock of bottled beverages -- a common feature of bars at white country clubs. Today the cabinet doors are gone and the area has been refitted with glass shelving and indirect lighting to display the club's liquor selection. Next to the bar in the enclosed porch area is the pantry and kitchen with its massive gas stove. Here, too, is the remains of a buzzer system that allowed the owner to be notified of phone calls, or of visiting law enforcement officials interested in the club's two slot-machines, remembers current owner Koontz.

At the rear of the lobby is the main dining and entertainment room. It retains all its early dark wood paneling. In an archway at the rear is the cramped stage which is said to have held such notables as Sam Cooke and Nat "King" Cole.

At the top of the stairs on the second floor are the men's and women's restrooms, a medium-sized conference room that was probably the master bedroom of the original house, and one other tiny meeting area. If one moves back through this last room, one comes to the sizable upstairs dining room. This area has been recently refinished in black wood-grained paneling. In the northeast corner of the room is a serving niche that includes the opening for a dumbwaiter that once brought food up directly from the kitchen.

As in most clubs and restaurants, furniture and light fixtures at the Excelsior Club have changed periodically over the years. This makes worthy of notice the fact that several notable pieces of Art Moderne furniture survive in the upstairs rooms. There are three over-sized arm-chairs and a matching sofa that feature rounded arms, streamlined backs, and slick blue and yellow leather-like upholstery.

Since retirement of founder James McKee, the new owners have added a fire exit in the main dining room, remodeled the women's restroom, and expanded and updated the men's restroom. They express a strong desire to keep the Excelsior Club as it has always been. Today the building is an impressive period piece, rivaled as a Charlotte Art Moderne landmark only by the 1939 Woolworth Store downtown on North Tryon Street. In both its well-thought-out crisply modern exterior and in its warm and unpretentious interior, the Excelsior Club is an important symbol of the cultural aspirations of Charlotte's middle- and upper-income blacks in the post World War II era.