

## The Flats

### How an Interstate Highway Split an African American Community

Gaston County, North Carolina was established and existed primarily due to its network of textile mills. The land was not conducive to large scale agriculture and the primary cash crop was corn, which supplied the county's [numerous distilleries](#). The town of Lowell was established in 1879 as a planned community with a vast majority white population.

On the western outskirts of Lowell, a small African American community was established that included a scattered grouping of rental housing anchored by Wright's Chapel A.M.E. Zion Church. The church was originally constructed in 1908. After a fire destroyed their original sanctuary in the early 1910s, the community went through a long, difficult effort to rebuild the church.



*Wright's Chapel A.M.E. Congregation in 1945 with named members (Obtained from City of Lowell)*

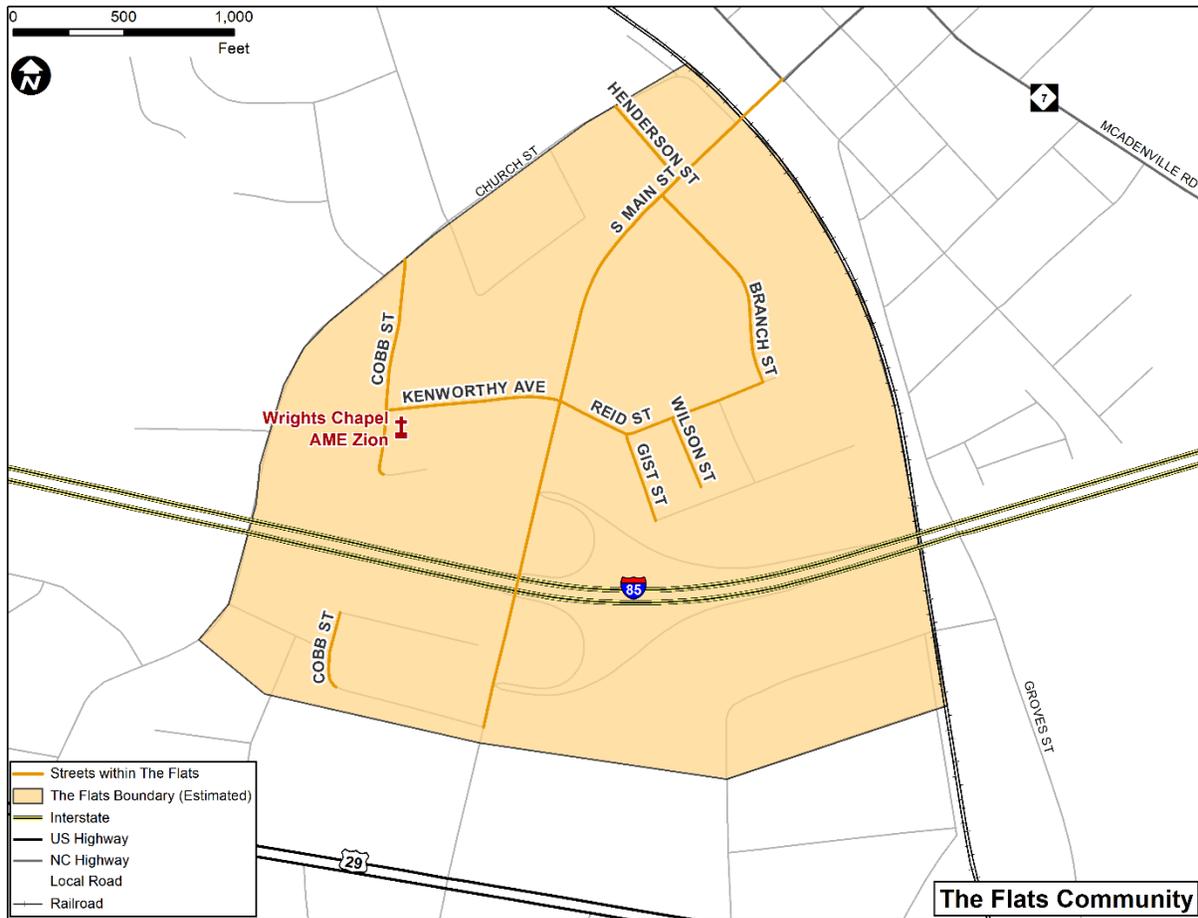
According to the North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office's 2000 survey of [African American resources in Gaston County](#), "the process, however, was a rocky one, and the congregation's desire for an architecturally impressive structure almost cost the church its new building. The cost of 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." The current structure is noted as one of the finest examples of Gothic Revival architecture in the county. The Church is eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places as a Gaston County historic resource (GS0383).



*Wright's Chapel AME Zion Church in 2017 (Obtained from NCDOT I-5917 Historic Structures Survey Report)*

Over time, the African American community in Lowell came to be recognized as "The Flats, or Wright's Chapel" and was home to "hundreds of black families, a black-owned store, and a school for young black children." The boundaries of "The Flats" were South Main Street, Henderson Street, Branch Street, Kenworthy Street, Cobb Street, Reid Street, Gist Street and Odum Drive.



*Map of The Flats with I-85 bisecting the community*

Lowell's Wright's Chapel community replaced their two-room school with a three classroom school adjacent to their newly constructed church building as a direct result of grants provided by the Rosenwald Fund.

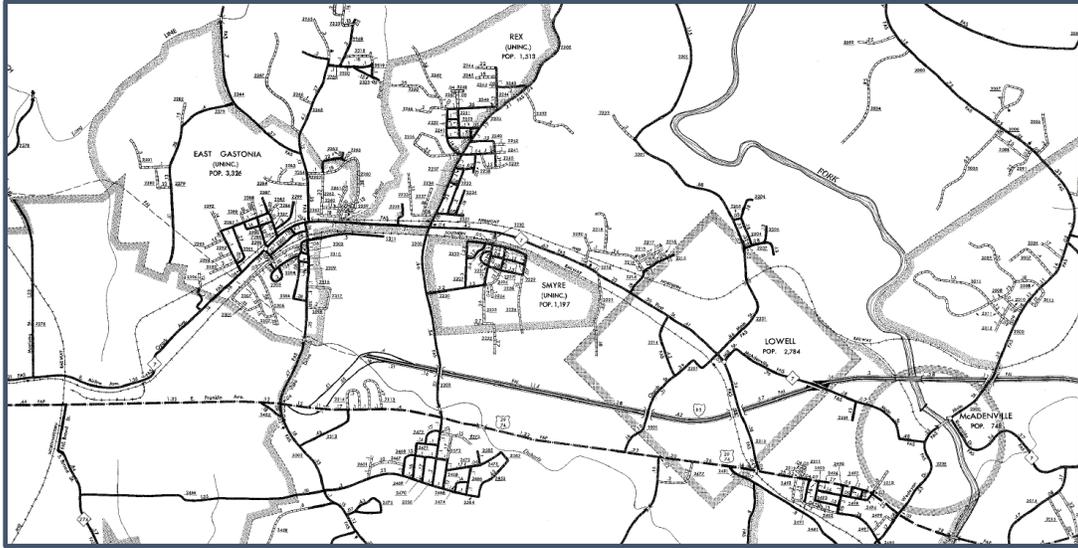
The growth and development of small-town churches and schools during the first half of the twentieth century reflected the overall success of the African American communities that supported them. A large number of residences within these communities, ranging from rows of identical rental housing (two 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 color of their skin, seemed unwilling to divide their community further. 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." Families with the last names of Adams, Armstrong, Barrow, Beard, Benson, Brown, Butler, Cathey, Crawford, Currence, Davie, Dixon, Enloe, Fair, Foxx, Gardin, Garrison, Gillespie, Gingles, Glenn, Gist, Goode, Givens, Hall, Howard, Johnson, Johnsons, Keaton, Key, McKnight, Miller, Odum, Patterson, Paysuer, Pressley, Reid, Robbins, Roseboro, Seigle, Slade, Spencer, Steele, Stowe, Walker, Wilson, Williams, Williamson, Woods, and Worley lived in the area for many years.



*South Main Street in the 1950 (Obtained from City of Lowell 2021)*

When I-85 was constructed, based on NCDOT County roadmaps from 1962, it splintered "The Flats." While interstate construction has inevitable impacts, it is notable that the impact on The Flats was more severe than surrounding communities, even though Lowell was larger than many of them.



*NCDOT 1961 Gaston County Road Map (Obtained from NCDOT)*

The Flats had direct effects from the construction. I-85 was built just 500 feet south of Wright's Chapel A.M.E. Zion Church. Cobb Street was split by I-85 and Odum Drive was terminated. While South Main Street was not terminated, an access to I-85 was not initially provided, limiting any potential benefits of the facility to the community. Wright's Chapel as no longer readily accessible by foot to residents south of the new facility. The results of the construction can be seen below.



*1956: S Main St and Groves St area before I-85 construction (Obtained from NCDOT Historical Aerial Imagery Index)*



*1968: S Main St and Groves St area after I-85 construction (Obtained from NCDOT Historical Aerial Imagery Index)*

While it is not possible to definitively correlate the construction of the Interstate to the decline of the African American community in Lowell, the decline is apparent from US Census data, as shown below.

Demographics of White and African American Populations of Lowell			
Year	Population	Percent White	Percent African American
1950	2312	87.3%	12.3%
1960	2784	88.1%	11.8%
1970	3122	89.0%	10.8%
1980	2917	90.8%	8.5%
1990	2704	91.8%	8.3%
2000	2662	91.4%	6.5%
2010	3526	85.9%	8.7%
2018*	3612	74.6%	15.9%

Data downloaded from historic US Census records, except \* US Census Bureau, American Community Survey 5-year Estimates (2014-2018).

As shown above, the 1950 population of Lowell was 12 percent African American (note, African American is used in this application rather than the term used in historic census data). By 1980, Lowell's population was just over 8 percent African American, and by 2000, the number had declined to 6.5 percent. Census data from 2019 indicated that 19.6 percent of the current population of Lowell was below the poverty line, more than 1.5 times the rate of the Charlotte-Concord-Gastonia, NC-SC Metro area (11.5 percent).

The construction of I-85 was not the only impact to the community. In 1969, Gaston County sought to re-instate literacy tests for African American voters. The case reached the U.S. Supreme Court, which held on June, 2, 1969 that, the "Appellant's contentions that reregistration in 1962 was conducted fairly and impartially and that significant strides have been made in equalizing and integrating its school system do not refute the fact that, for many years, the County deprived its black citizens of the educational opportunities it granted its white citizens, and that "impartial" administration of the literacy test today would perpetuate those inequities in another form. Pp. 395 U. S. 296-297."

#### Recent Efforts to Commemorate The Flats

In 1982, Wright's Chapel was featured prominently in the "History of African Methodist Episcopal Zion Churches in the Lincolnton District of the Western North Carolina Conference." Lowell City Councilman Thomas Gillespie, who grew up in The Flats was one of the leaders in 2019 of an effort to commemorate the community with an historic marker. The effort was successful and in 2020 the marker was constructed near Joe Hudson Park along Main Street; and can be easily seen by anyone driving into Lowell from the south.



*Mayor Pro-Tem Thomas Gillespie and City Planning Director Scott Attaway hold a historical marker sign erected to commemorate "The Flats" community (Gaston Gazette 2019).*

### Mitigation for Prior Impacts

The N.C. Board of Transportation updated its Complete Streets policy in 2019. The policy, revised after nearly two years of analysis, public engagement, and collaboration with the Department's many transportation partners, will help NCDOT better deliver Complete Streets across the state. The benefits of this approach include:

- Making it easier for all travelers to get where they need to go
- Encouraging the use of alternative forms of transportation
- Building more sustainable road networks
- Increasing connectivity between neighborhoods, streets and transit systems
- Improving safety for pedestrians, cyclists, and motorists.

To comply with NCDOT's policy, the I-5719 Project will add or replace bicycle and pedestrian accommodations to all of the road structures that will be replaced. These improvements will enable those without motor vehicles to safely cross the barrier that I-85 presents. There are several business development parks, with more proposed, to the north along the I-85 corridor in the I-5719 Project area. Many residents, particularly in Gastonia and Belmont live to the south of I-85. Increasing access to future development and higher earning jobs may also benefit personal economies in the region.