

THE STONE ENTRY GATES OF JOHNSON C. SMITH UNIVERSITY



This report was written on September 5, 1984

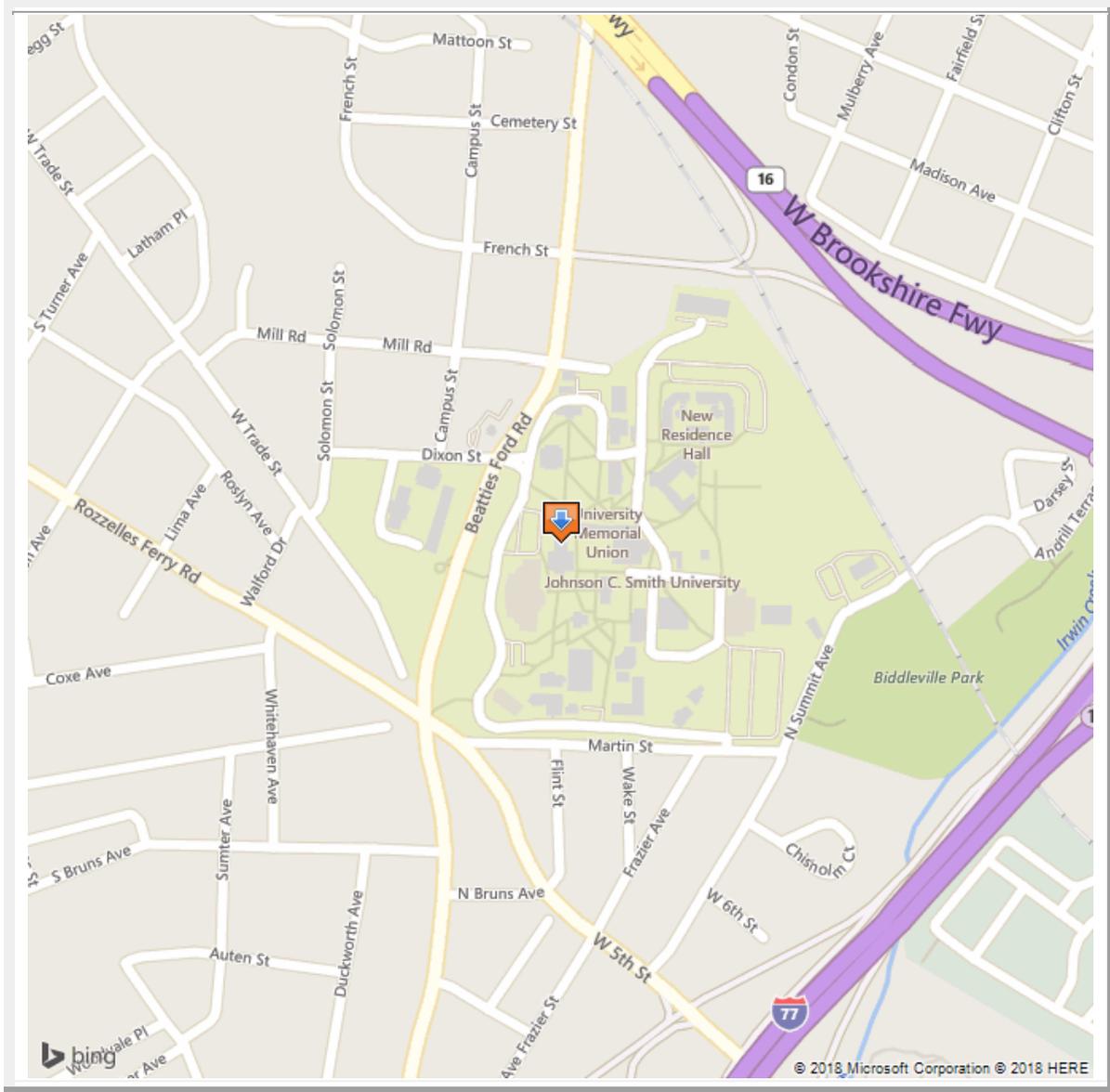
1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the Stone Entry Gates of Johnson C. Smith University is located on the campus of Johnson C. Smith University, 100 Beatties Ford Rd., Charlotte, North Carolina.

2. Name, address and telephone number of the present owner of the property:
Johnson C. Smith University
100 Beatties Ford Rd.
Charlotte, N.C. 28216

Telephone: (704) 378-1000

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: There is no individual deed to this property listed in the Deed Books of Mecklenburg County. The Tax Parcel Number of this property is 078-201-06.

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

7. A brief architectural description of the property: This report contains a brief architectural description of the property prepared by Lisa A. Stamper.

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 Stone Entry Gates of Johnson C. Smith University does possess special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations: 1) the stone entry gates symbolize the revitalization of an important black institution of higher education through the generous gift of funds by Mrs. Johnson C. Smith in 1921-22; and 2) the stone entry gates, designed by New York architect A. G. Lamont, occupy a strategically important site, at the intersection of Beatties Ford Rd. and W. Fifth St., and are a unique element in the built environment of Charlotte-Mecklenburg.

b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling, and/or association: The Commission contends that the attached architectural description by Miss Lisa A. Stamper demonstrates that the Stone Entry Gates of Johnson C. Smith University meet 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 Stone Entry Gates possess no individual Ad Valorem Tax Assessment. However, the entire 44.24 acre campus has an appraised value of \$575,120 for the land and \$11,607,330 for the improvements, or a total appraised value of \$12,182,450.

Date of Preparation of this Report: September 5, 1984

Prepared by: Dr. Dan L. Morrill, Director
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Properties Commission
1225 S. Caldwell St.
Charlotte, N.C. 28203

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Historical Overview

Dr. William H. Huffman

The stone gates guarding the old entrances to Johnson C. Smith University are fitting monuments to mark both the revitalization of that institution through the benefaction of Mrs. Johnson C. Smith and the changing of its name to honor the memory of her husband. Built in 1923 as part of a rigorous construction program funded by Mrs. Smith, the gates stand as a symbol of the commitment to the school to be one of the best black colleges in the country by Mrs. Smith, the Presbyterian church, and local leaders.

Johnson C. Smith University was started in 1867 by the Committee of Freedmen of the Presbyterian Church, USA as a school to train young black men to become teachers and preachers in the South. Through the gifts of Mrs. Mary D. Biddle of Philadelphia, the school was able to move to eight acres of land donated by William R. Myers, and in 1869, Biddle Memorial Institute opened just north of the city. It was named in honor of Mrs. Biddle's husband, Major Henry J. Biddle, who had fallen in the recent war. Under the direction of Dr. Stephen Mattoon, (1815-1886), who began his tenure in 1870, Biddle was solidly established as one of the leading black colleges in the nation, and it also became an influential part of the City of Charlotte. The school has not only provided the education for many black professionals, but the institutions administrators and staff have played a significant role in the community and the community of Biddleville, which became connected to the city center by streetcar in 1903, grew up around it.¹

Despite a disastrous fire in 1878, the school prospered. In 1912, a fine new library building was dedicated which was built from a grant by Andrew Carnegie, the philanthropist.² Another fire of 1921 which destroyed the theologies dormitory, kitchen and dining room put the continued existence of Biddle (chartered by the state as a university in 1876) very much in doubt because of the great amount of money needed to rebuild.³ Through the Presbyterian Board of Missions, Mrs. Mary Jane Smith of Pittsburgh, PA, learned of the schools plight, and during the academic year 1921-1922 pledged about \$200,000 to build a new theological dormitory, a science building, a teacher's cottage, a dining hall, and a memorial gate to honor the memory of her late husband, Johnson C. Smith. Because of her gift, the Board of Missions of the Presbyterian Church changed the name of the institution to Johnson C. Smith University in 1922, a change which was legalized by an amendment to its state charter by the legislature on March 1, 1923.⁴In all, Mrs. Smith's gifts eventually totaled about \$700,000, which built another dormitory and teacher's cottage, a new heating plant, a printing shop, and a church, as well as added to the endowment.⁵

At ceremonies on the campus on October 27, 1922, which were attended by local civic and religious leaders as well as Mrs. Smith and Presbyterian officials, the dormitory, teacher's cottage (Berry Cottage, after Mrs. Smith's parents) and refectory (dining hall) were dedicated. As part of the proceedings, the cornerstone for the new stone science hall was laid.⁶ By the following year, the science building and the stone gateway were completed, and on October 25, 1923, a second dedication was held on the campus led by JCSU President B. L. McCrory, at which Harry Harding, Charlotte Schools Superintendent, Dr. James Dudley, President of the Agricultural and Technical College of Greensboro, and others spoke. The high point of the ceremonies came when Mrs. Smith was presented with an oil painting of the arched entry gate that had been painted by the professor of French at the University.⁷

All of the buildings and the gate arch on the campus built with Mrs. Smith's funds (except for the church) were designed by the superintendent of architecture for the Presbyterian Board of Missions, A. G. Lamont. Lamont's office was on Fifth Avenue in New York, and the Missions Board kept him busy designing many buildings for black colleges in the South which were funded by donors such as Mrs. Smith, although some designs were repeated in various locations. All of the structures were also built by the same Charlotte contractor, the Southeastern Construction Company. Southeastern built similar buildings for the Board of Missions from Lamont designs in Hot Springs, NC, Keysville, GA, and Cordele, GA, in 1924 as well.⁸

There is no question that Mrs. Smith, the Presbyterian Board of Missions, and local leaders were proud of the revitalization of the school made possible by the generous Smith gifts and that the arched gateway to the renewed campus was an appropriate landmark to symbolize its rejuvenation and the commitment of those involved to make the school a strong and viable one.

NOTES

¹ Arthur A. George, *100 Years, 1867-1967: Salient Factors in the Growth and Development of Johnson C. Smith University* (Charlotte: Johnson C. Smith University, 1968).

² *Charlotte Evening Chronicle*, May 30, 1912, p. 1.

³ George, pp. 30-34.

⁴ *Fifty-eighth Annual Report of the Board of Missions for Freedmen of the Presbyterian Church*, Pittsburgh, PA, May, 1923, p. 40; *Fifty-fourth Annual*

Catalogue, Johnson C. Smith University, 1921-22, p. 3 et passim; *Fifty-fifth Annual Catalogue*, Johnson C. Smith University, 1922-23, p. 9.

⁵ Inez Parker and Helen Callison, *The Biddle-Johnson C. Smith University Story* (Charlotte: Observer Craftsman Co., 1975), pp. 19-21.

⁶ *Charlotte Observer*, Oct. 27, 1922, p. 4; *Charlotte News*, Oct. 28, 1922, p. 7.

⁷ *Charlotte News* Oct. 26, 1923, p. 12.

⁸ City of Charlotte Building Permits No. 3540, 3836, 5345, 5366, 5368, and 8454; Southeastern Construction Company files, 1924.

Architectural Description

Lisa A. Stamper

The arched stone gate near the five-point intersection of Biddleville, Charlotte's first black suburb, marks the name change of Biddle University to Johnson C. Smith University. It also serves a more utilitarian function by designating the old entrance to the institution, and has done so since 1923. According to Dr. William Huffman, Mrs. Mary Jane Smith donated a total of \$700,000 in memory of her husband, to struggling Biddle University. This money was used not only to build the stone gate, but also several buildings on the campus, with funds left over to add to the endowment. The stone gate was designed by A. G. Lamont, superintendent of architecture for the Presbyterian Board of Missions, and the contractor was the Southeastern Construction Company of Charlotte.

The stone gateway is composed of a horseshoe shaped arch over a driveway, and two flanking pillars. Sidewalks begin between each pillar and the arch, and a driveway begins underneath the arch. This rusticated gateway is made primarily of granite. The stones are cut into irregular size pieces which, except for the voussoirs, are all basically rectangular in shape. Although not apparent at first glance, the voussoirs are not all of the same length. They too are irregularly cut, with the smaller ones being near the top.

The string course of the stone gate arch is of concrete. In this case, it is not a continuous horizontal band, but allows the stone to be molded to form a polished looking, stepped outline. This outline consists of a straight, horizontal line at the very top; a step down from that are elongated S-curves which complement the round

arched opening; yet another step down are short straight string courses permitting the squaring off of the sides of the structure so that they appear to be piers rather than part of an arch.

To emphasize the "piers" formed at the sides of the arch, wide pilasters with concrete string courses are located on both sides of the stone gate. The height of these pilasters does not extend above the spring line of the arch. Another concrete string course appears to run behind the pilasters at approximately the same height as the pillars. This helps to make the pillars look more like part of the total gateway. The pillars are square and also capped with concrete string courses. A simple iron gate inside the arched opening prevents usage of the driveway.

On the side of the stone gate which faces Beatties Ford Road, a rectangular polished stone is set underneath the topmost string course. It is not surprising that this stone is engraved with the name of the university. However, there is a period placed after "Johnson", and a comma placed after the initial "C."

Two large trees flank the stone gateway, and several others randomly follow the driveway and sidewalks. It is difficult to determine when and/or if they were planted there, but it is obvious that many of the trees and shrubs in this area have been there for quite a while. The 1929 Sanborn map shows that the semi-circular driveway was present six years after the stone gate was built. Today the main entrance is located at the opposite end of this drive.

The stone gate has been a strong symbol of the university's achievements since the early 1920's. The gateway is in good condition, and students still pass through it often. This landmark deserves recognition as a monument to Charlotte's support of Johnson C. Smith University.