

[charlotteobserver.com](https://www.charlotteobserver.com)

Walking Charlotte's oldest Black neighborhood

Michael J. Solender

6–7 minutes

The United House of Prayer for All People in Charlotte's Historic West End is one of more than a dozen such churches in the Queen City, and likely the most eye-catching.

The United House of Prayer for All People in Charlotte's Historic West End is one of more than a dozen such churches in the Queen City, and likely the most eye-catching. Courtesy of Tom Hanchett, HistorySouth.org

For local historian Michael Turner Webb, the connections found in [Charlotte's Historic West End](#) are personal. The history graduate from [Johnson C. Smith University](#) (JCSU), a storied historically Black college and university (HBCU) with origins extending back more than 150 years, has a special affinity for this Black neighborhood and loves to share its backstory whenever he gets the opportunity.

“My father and his siblings attended Johnson C. Smith and some of them also worked at the university,” Webb said. “My grandparents came here from South Carolina when the area was known as Biddleville. This was a thriving Black community that grew up and thrived around the university after the Civil War.”

The university was originally established in 1867 by a group of presbyterians from Philadelphia as the Freedmen's College of North Carolina, which was later renamed Biddle Institute. "The Presbyterians looked to the newly freedmen as prime prospects for education and training as both 'preachers and teachers,'" Webb said. "Biddleville grew to become a hub for the Black middle class in Charlotte."

Occasionally, Webb teams up with another community historian, Dr. Tom Hanchett, to lead walking tours of the neighborhood. Here seven official historic landmarks provide the background and context to the stories behind a community Hanchett refers to as the historic heart of African American Charlotte.

"This is an increasingly vibrant neighborhood with strong historic roots," Hanchett, a former staff historian at the [Levine Museum of the New South](#) and first historian-in-residence for the Charlotte Mecklenburg Library, said. "As home to Johnson C. Smith University, people of learning have always clustered around here with many leaders both directly affiliated with the university and more generally in Charlotte."

Hanchett developed the [Historic West End walking tour](#), along with several other self-guided tours during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic as a way for Charlotteans to get outside and enjoy unique neighborhood histories.

"When I came to Charlotte in 1981," Hanchett said, "my job was working for the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission to write histories of older neighborhoods. Biddleville was one of them." Hanchett explained that when the pandemic hit, lots of entertainment options weren't possible. Walking, however,

was an easy way to get outside and explore the city while paying tribute to its history.

Tour highlights include the [historic stone gate](#) leading into Johnson C. Smith University. The gate was constructed in 1923 — the year Biddle Institute was renamed JCSU. As a historic landmark, the gate is a symbol of the revitalization of this significant Black institution of higher education. The primary funding source was a gift by Mrs. Johnson C. Smith in 1921-22. Tour-goers also enjoy contemporary handsome brick styling of many JCSU buildings including the signature bell tower — a landmark easily recognized throughout the campus.

Nearby is the well-preserved home of [George E. Davis](#), the first Black professor at Biddle Institute. Davis taught mathematics, science and sociology during his 35-year tenure. He became dean of the faculty in 1905 and retired from JCSU in 1920. Davis became a Rosenwald agent, administering money for the Rosenwald Fund to build so-called [Rosenwald Schools](#) for Black children throughout the segregated South.

Tour-goers are drawn to the colorful architecture and presence of the United House of Prayer for All People. “Charles Manuel ‘Sweet Daddy’ Grace from Cape Verde launched the United House of Prayer in New England,” Hanchett explains in his guide. “But it first really caught on in Charlotte. A summer-long revival in 1926 attracted as many 20,000 participants nightly. Today there are some 130 Houses of Prayer nationwide, with over a dozen in the Charlotte area.”

Other stops feature [Mosaic Village](#), a contemporary mixed-use residential development that serves as home to many JCSU

students, the home of [Dorothy Counts Scoggins](#), a tireless civil rights advocate who, in 1957, was one a handful of Black children to integrate Charlotte's white schools, and [Mama Gees](#), a family owned West African restaurant serving Ghanaian specialties such as Oxtail and Jollof rice.

“It’s important people recognize there is a legacy here [of Black uplift],” Webb said. He remains hopeful that newcomers to the area will appreciate the historical community building initiatives undertaken by past generations. “It’s a neighborhood with a proud past and bright future.”

Michael J. Solender is a Charlotte, N.C.-based journalist. His work has been featured at The New York Times, Smithsonian Magazine, Metropolis Magazine, Salvation South, Southern Living, Charlotte magazine, NASCAR Illustrated, American City Business Journals, Business North Carolina, The Jewish Daily Forward, and others. Read more from him at <https://michaeljwrites.com>