

This is a draft, now being reviewed by members of the McCrorey Heights Neighborhood Association. Please share comments with Tom@HistorySouth.org



Built 1958-59 for Rev. Elo Henderson, a leader in economic development issues during Charlotte's Civil Rights era and a top official in the Presbyterian Church who made headlines across the South during the 1960s with calls for social and economic justice.

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Raised in rural Newberry County, South Carolina, one of fourteen children of an AME Zion minister, Elo Henderson knew poverty and privation first-hand. "He attended a one-room, one-teacher school which often consisted on more than 150 children," according to the obituary in his funeral program. It did little to really educate him. "At an early age he graduated from what was called fifth grade — and he could barely read or write." For most black children in South Carolina, that was all the education available. The nearest high school was twenty-five miles away and the county provided no school buses for black children. So Elo went to work, first on the family farm, then in a paying job. At age twenty, he was finally able to enroll in Harbison Institute near Columbia, South Carolina, a private highschool for black students run by the Presbyterian Church. Its Dean, Henderson later noted dryly, "regretted he did not have anything below the fifth grade in which to assign him."

Harbison Institute gave Elo his life's fire. He burned with a desire for education, a calling to the Presbyterian ministry, and a determination to help others escape the shackles of poverty. Harbison's leaders were mostly graduates of Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte (including Rev. Calvin Young, who would eventually be Henderson's neighbor in McCrorey Heights). So Elo found his way to JCSU, graduating in 1939. He stayed on to earn a Bachelor's of Divinity in 1942 which, his obituary recalled, "opened the way to a ministry that touched every aspect of life in the churches in which he worked and the community in which he lived."

The church work began at Ben Salem Presbyterian outside Charlotte, which was going through a

DRAFT by Tom Hanchett January 22, 2020

period of hard times after a tornado destroyed the church building. Rev. Henderson began fundraising for a new structure, and also helped some Ben Salem congregants launch a new church in another African American area at the edge of the city. He became founding minister of that institution, Grier Heights Presbyterian Church, 1943 - 1955. Said his funeral program obituary: "His faith in Jesus Christ and his faith in people empowered him to mobilize the Grier Heights congregation to erect its own debt-free building." He also succeeded in getting the city to create a public park and donate the historic Billingsville Rosenwald School as a community center. Willingness to tackle tough financial situations, mobilizing people to take action both on their own and in partnership with government, would be Rev. Henderson's hallmark all his life.

He left Grier Heights Presbyterian in 1955 to take a job as Field Representative — chief executive — for the Catawba Synod of the Presbyterian Church. Like many denominations, America's Presbyterians had split along racial lines during the Civil War era. The "United Presbyterian Church in the United States" not only welcomed African American churches, but created four black Synods (the denomination's governing unit) that covered the South: "Catawba" in North Carolina and Virginia where the denomination had its greatest population; "Atlantic" covering South Carolina, Georgia and Florida; "Blue Ridge" covering Tennessee and also Mississippi and Alabama; and the oddly-named "Canadian" in Texas, Oklahoma, Missouri and Louisiana.

Though all the member churches in the four synods were African American, the top leadership had always been white. Rev. Henderson became first black Synod executive in the history of the denomination. From the mid 1950s into the 1970s, he was the public face of the Catawba Synod, working to plant new churches such as Covenant Presbyterian in Kannapolis in 1958, helping local congregations renovate and expand their buildings, and working in countless other ways to expand and strengthen Presbyterian influence.

As the Civil Rights movement heated up during the 1960s he used the Synod platform to become an outspoken voice for African American advancement in Charlotte and the South. One early instance came in 1964 when an interracial group of young white and black Presbyterians attempted to repair and reopen an abandoned Presbyterian church in tiny Elm City, near Rocky Mount, NC. The Ku Klux Klan ran off the students and tried to set fire to the church. Rev. Henderson spoke for the Presbyterian denomination, vowing that the students would continue their work. "We're here to demonstrate firmly with our bodies that we believe in freedom of religion," he said in an Associated Press story published in newspapers across the U.S.

His calls for justice became more strident as the 1960s progressed. By late 1965 newspapers were identifying Rev. Henderson as Charlotte's leading "militant." That was an outlandish description of this minister in his 50s, always attired in a suit and tie, who never advocated violence. But it did convey the fact that Rev. Henderson was often Charlotte's most impatient voice for racial justice — more outspoken than NAACP leader Kelly Alexander and his brother Fredrick Douglas Alexander on City Council. When homes of four Charlotte Civil rights leaders — including the Alexander brothers and also Henderson's McCrorey Heights neighbor Dr. Reginald Hawkins — were bombed in the night in November of 1965, local white political leaders worked with Charlotte's NAACP to convene a large integrated public meeting at Ovens Auditorium to express the community's revulsion at the act. Henderson wanted more. He and five others wrote an open letter to Mayor Stan Brookshire "demanding action within two days toward ending racial discrimination in Charlotte in political, social and economic life," the Associated Press reported in a national story. When he received no response, Henderson convened his own community-wide meeting in protest, vowing that "Negroes are going to press their demands 'until the last vestige of segregation has vanished in Charlotte and Mecklenburg.'"

He did not shy away from criticizing his beloved Presbyterian Church. "Henderson is still applauded

and praised because of his leadership in the human rights struggle for all people ... one of the chief architects of “A Design to Liberate the Oppressed,” ... [also] known as The Catawba Manifesto,” a national Presbyterian historian wrote many years later. “It was a radical proposal whose specific goal was to provide economic liberation for black people in the Catawba Synod.” Henderson drew up a detailed blueprint in 1970 for what would today be called “reparations,” a \$21 million program of low-interest loans and grants. It was not adopted, but Henderson’s pressure over the years resulted in better treatment of African Americans, from equalization of clergy wages, to renewed funding for JCSU’s theological training program.

Rev. Henderson also kept up the pressure on Charlotte government. City Council minutes record his impassioned speeches in the late 1960s and early 1970s on behalf of his Black Solidarity Committee on issues including policing, education, hiring of African Americans, and the “urban renewal” demolition of black neighborhoods. On police matters, for instance, he called on the City to:

- “set up a machinery to upgrade black policemen from their present rank.... We believe there should be black sergeants, black lieutenants, black majors and black assistants and, if necessary, a black chief of police.”
- “authorize the implementation of Civilian Review Board that will have full power to act on all cases” of alleged police brutality.

To encourage both government and private enterprise to hire African Americans, he set up a Charlotte Frontiers Association, which became an affiliate of the national Opportunities Industrialization Center. OIC was created by a black Philadelphia minister to combine hands-on job training for African Americans with focused entreaties to employers to actually hire. Federal employment law now forbids companies from discriminating — but until someone brought pressure, companies seldom sought out non-white job candidates. Henderson’s efforts won the hiring of Charlotte’s first black bus drivers, opened employment at giant Southern Bell to blacks above the rank of janitor, and trained hundreds of other workers.

On education issues, Henderson put his own family directly into the fray. On behalf of his daughter Sulla, he signed on as one of the dozen plaintiffs in *Swann v Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools*. Decided by the Supreme Court in 1971, the landmark lawsuit became the national precedent for court-ordered busing for racial balance. He also battled to block the closure of black schools — something that white school officials routinely did during desegregation. Henderson worked alongside fiery young AME Zion pastor Rev. George Leake (later a Bishop) to protest a plan to close Second Ward High School and six other historically black schools. “In theory the school board’s plan complied with Judge McMillan’s orders to provide for partial integration of the student body and the complete integration of faculty, by the fall of 1970. In reality, their plan was nothing short of a spiteful rejection of the black community’s traditions,” historian Lauren Tess Bundy has written. The plan also called for black children to bear most of the brunt of busing, with African American youngsters bused to white schools.

Leake and Henderson organized mass meetings and marches that included both white and black citizens plus a boycott of downtown merchants. The outpouring of emotion failed to save the schools: indeed 14 black schools closed by 1970. But the wider Charlotte community began to understand the unfairness of busing as initially planned. A new plan emerged by the mid 1970s that required students from every neighborhood, white and black, rich and poor, to get on buses.

Even in his later years after retirement from the Presbyterian administration in 1980, he continued working for better opportunities for Charlotte’s least well-to-do. Sharon Manor Homes, a handsome cluster of apartments for low-income renters that opened in the mid 1980s in a middle-class section of east Charlotte, features an entry sign that reads “A Vision of Rev. Elo Henderson.”

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Rev. Henderson's wife Doris Stephens Henderson (- 12.12.1977) attended Fee Memorial Institute, a Presbyterian high school in Kentucky, before coming to North Carolina Central University in Durham for her Bachelors and Masters degrees. She taught for twenty-three years in Charlotte-Mecklenburg public schools. All the while she worked actively alongside her husband in the Presbyterian Church, both in Charlotte and at the Synod level, including serving as an Elder, as Clerk of Session and as a member of the Synod's Board of Trustees.

Doris and Elo Henderson raised a daughter, Sula (4.16.1947 - 4.10.2015), who grew from her early teens to adulthood in this house. As a high school student she became a plaintiff in the national landmark Supreme Court case *Swann v Mecklenburg*. She studied at the elite Julliard School of Music in New York City, earned a degree at Johnson C. Smith University and married William Page. In addition to a career in banking with Wachovia and its predecessors, Sula Henderson-Page was an active member of first United Presbyterian Church in uptown Charlotte where she founded the United In Jazz concert series during the 2000s - 2010s.



Architecture

Ranch style house, one-story in red brick, with an unusual orientation on its lot. The front of the house faces east, rather than toward the street — the only such example in McCrorey Heights. The main block of the house has a low gable roof. At the rear, a cross gable extends to form an east wing. The small shed-roofed front porch, with “wrought iron” columns and railings, nestles at the intersection of the main block and the wing. Windows are metal units with unusual horizontal panes,

DRAFT by Tom Hanchett January 22, 2020

another indication of the owner's willingness to embrace modern and unconventional thinking.

In 1968 the original owner Rev. Elo Henderson took out a permit to construct a detached garage, a gable-roofed brick structure at the rear of the lot, and also to modify the back porch on the house.

Building permit

[Washington-1716-permit](#)

Date issued: August 5, 1958

Owner: G.C. Holman [?]

Contractor:

Estimated cost:

Other permit info: Wiring, likely for original construction of house

Building permit(s): [Washington-1716-permit-b](#)

Date issued: April 30, 1971

Owner: Rev. Elo Henderson

Contractor: Gullede and Holmes

Estimated cost: \$1,500

Other permit info: garage and porch

First appeared in city directory

1960 - Rev. Elo L. Henderson & Doris S.

He: Field Rep, Cataurba [Catawba?] Center

She: Teacher, Billingsville School

1981 city directory - still listed

Economic development activist Elo Henderson was a leader in pushing businesses to hire African Americans as formal barriers began to fall during the 1960s.

obituary

[Henderson_Elo_Rev](#)

[Henderson_Doris_Stephens](#)

[Page, Sula](#)

Resources

"200 Negroes Blast School 'Tokenism:' City Power Structure. Chamber Assailed, Too," *Charlotte Observer*, June 20, 1966.

"Blacks in the United Presbyterian Church in the USA, 1807 - 1982," page 28. On-line at:
<http://www.dpcus.org/Blacks%20in%20the%20United%20Presbyterian%20Church%20in%20the%20>

DRAFT by Tom Hanchett January 22, 2020

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Bundy, Lauren Tess. "A Community Worth Fighting For: African American Educational Activism in Charlotte, North Carolina, 1961-1974." MA thesis, North Carolina State University, 2008. Pages 5, 77, 81.

"Charlotte Rights Meeting is Held," *Burlington Times*, December 11, 1965. On-line at: <https://www.newspapers.com/image/52991757/>

"Elo Henderson," 1954 photograph on the *Presbyterian Historical Society* website. On-line at: [https://digital.history.pcusa.org/islandora/search?type=dismax&f\[0\]=mods_subject_name_phs_ms%3AHenderson%2C%5C%20Elo%2C%5C%201909%5C-](https://digital.history.pcusa.org/islandora/search?type=dismax&f[0]=mods_subject_name_phs_ms%3AHenderson%2C%5C%20Elo%2C%5C%201909%5C-)

"Harbison Agricultural College" — more here -. On-line at: <http://library.sc.edu/digital/collections/harbisonabout.html>

Henderson obit in *Presbyterian News* On-line at: https://archive.org/stream/presbyteriannews1990pres/presbyteriannews1990pres_djvu.txt

"History" page in the website of Covenant Presbyterian Church, Kannapolis. On-line at www.covenantpresbyterian-kannapolis.org/history

"Homecoming Set Sunday at Bethany," *Robesonian*, October 14, 1971.

"Our History," *Ben Salem Presbyterian Church* website. On-line at: <http://www.bensalempcusa.org/about-us>

"Serving God," *Grier Heights Presbyterian Church* website. On-line at: [https://digital.history.pcusa.org/islandora/search?type=dismax&f\[0\]=mods_subject_name_phs_ms%3AHenderson%2C%5C%20Elo%2C%5C%201909%5C-](https://digital.history.pcusa.org/islandora/search?type=dismax&f[0]=mods_subject_name_phs_ms%3AHenderson%2C%5C%20Elo%2C%5C%201909%5C-)

"Statement of Rev. Elo Henderson" Charlotte City Clerk Minutes 1969. On-line at: <http://charlottenc.gov/CityClerk/Minutes/November%2024,%201969.pdf>

Swann lawsuit and Presbyterians. Also "Design" p. 128. On-line at: <http://www.chicagopresbytery.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/All-Black-Governing-Bodies.pdf>

Henderson, Doris Stephens, funeral program in the _____

Henderson, Rev. Elo, funeral program in the History Room, First United Presbyterian Church, Charlotte.

Page, Sula, funeral program in the History Room, First United Presbyterian Church, Charlotte.