

Political Fragmentation, Municipal Incorporation and Annexation in a High Growth Urban Area: The Case of Charlotte, North Carolina

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The population of the Charlotte, North Carolina metropolitan region has grown rapidly in recent decades. Charlotte was the second most rapidly growing city of over 100,000 in the nation in the 1990's. Typically, metropolitan population growth is accompanied by significant increases in the number of municipal governments and a corresponding increase in political fragmentation. However, compared to rapidly growing areas in other parts of the nation in this century and the last, relatively few new municipal governments have been created in the Charlotte region. This paper explores the impact of state annexation and incorporation policy and historical, economic and cultural legacy on the development of the municipal landscape in the Charlotte Urban Region.

Results suggest that because municipal incorporation is difficult and annexation is relatively easy in North Carolina, annexation has been a major tool for municipalities to use in expanding and controlling political fragmentation. The authors also note that the economic and cultural history of the region, most critically, the late 19th and early 20th century expansion of the textile industry in the region, may have also been important factors in reducing fragmentation in the latter part of the 20th century.

Introduction

During the 1990s Charlotte, North Carolina grew more rapidly than any other city (more than 100,000 people) in the nation except for Phoenix, Arizona. This high rate of population growth was, of course, not limited to within Charlotte's city limits, or to the last decade of the century. The entire Metropolitan Statistical Area witnessed sustained population increase over the last thirty years, almost doubling in size to an estimated 1,652,000 in 2004. Growth in the Charlotte-Gastonia-Rock Hill, MSA accelerated in the 1980s and 1990s and into the current century, with sustained annual population growth rates estimated at 2 percent or more per year (Office of State Budget and Management 2001). While such population growth often produces mu-

nicipal fragmentation (i.e. many new municipalities are created in a single or multi-county area) sustained population growth in the Charlotte urban region appears to have taken place without the creation of substantial numbers of new municipalities.

In this paper we employ Charlotte as a case study for exploring how explosive population growth and suburban sprawl impact the municipal structure of a metropolitan region. In the face of high levels of economic development, rapid and sustained population growth and the accompanying sprawl, how has the Charlotte Metropolitan Area avoided the expected proliferation of new municipalities? We explore the impact of North Carolina annexation and incorporation policy, which is

among the most liberal in the United States, on levels of fragmentation in the Charlotte urban region. Finally, we suggest that cultural and economic history matter and that pre-existing municipal pattern, in particular the spatial pattern of development associated with the growth of the textile industry in the region during the late 19th early 20th centuries, influenced the character of urban growth and fragmentation during the explosive urban development in the latter part of 20th century.

Local Government Expansion and Fragmentation, Incorporation and Annexation

There is a substantial body of literature devoted to political and/or urban fragmentation. In this study we draw on this rich literature to inform our research in three major dimensions. First, how is fragmentation measured? Second, does fragmentation matter? Third, how do annexation and incorporation policies impact fragmentation?

Measuring Fragmentation

Political fragmentation has traditionally been defined as the proliferation of local government units in one geographic area. Fragmentation is usually measured in two ways – absolute and relative (Dye and Hawkins 1971; Baker 1998). Absolute fragmentation is the total number of government units in the area and is the most common measure. Relative fragmentation is the number of government units per 1000 persons, or alternatively, the number of people per government unit. Other types of measures look at differences in finances across units or the number of taxing districts in a geographic area (Baker 1998). Dye and Hawkins (1971), using an absolute measure, found that fragmentation in metropolitan areas was a function of population—the more populous the area, the more fragmented the government structure. They also discovered that fragmentation was related to the age of the settlement and to income levels; the older the settlement and the more affluent, the more fragmented it was. Fragmentation, in their study, did not appear to increase or decrease spending for municipal services.

Oakerson (1987) and Foster (1991) criticized these traditional measures of fragmentation. According to Oakerson (1987), although the number of units of local government is used to describe fragmentation, this number is not related to the ability of a metropolitan community to act on metropolitan-wide concerns. Foster developed measures of five dimensions underlying them: central city domination, suburban unincorporation, suburban municipal fragmentation, school district decentralization, and functional overlap. The author ranked 129 large metropolitan areas according to each of these dimensions and concluded that the separate measures captured different aspects of fragmentation.

Barlow (1981) concluded that the problems of fragmentation vary among areas and are related to the number and size of municipal governments and the extent to which local governments are dependent upon property taxes for fiscal support; where there is more dependence, there are more problems. The author also suggested that the legal relationship between local and state governments affected the degree of fragmentation. Zeigler and Brunn (1980) claimed that fragmentation varied between political and cultural regions. They compared fragmentation across regions in the United States using an Index of Geopolitical Fragmentation and found the most fragmentation in the Northeast and the least in the Sunbelt.

In this paper we employ an absolute measure of fragmentation. We compare the increase in the number of municipal governments in the study area from 1970 to 2000.

Does Fragmentation Matter?

From the 1960s to the present there has been a sustained debate in the urban literature on the impact of fragmentation. Scholars debated whether political and governmental fragmentation is a burden or a blessing (Baker 1998; Barlow 1981). The decline of central cities and the growth of suburban centers in the 1960s and early 1970s raised concerns about the negative impacts of fragmentation (Barlow 1981; Bollens and Schmandt 1965). In the late 1980s and 1990s scholars revisited the traditional concerns about fragmentation's impact on

government including cost, quality of urban service, diversity, and political representation (Hamilton and Wells 1990; Oates 1990). Literature during this period also addressed fragmentation's relationship to economic development and metropolitan growth (Morrill 1990; Olin 1991).

Some social scientists and economists claim that fragmentation is a way to restrain the growth of local government budgets (Morrill 1990; Oates 1990; Foster 1997). Other proponents herald fragmentation as a magnet for new firms and residents attracted to the greater choice among public service and tax packages, increased socio-economic diversity, and more responsive government which they claim fragmentation produces (Oakerson 1987; Lyons and Lowery 1989; Ostrom et al. 1989; Foster 1991). Foster (1991) noted that the positive and negative effects of growth in the number of governments may operate simultaneously and that little empirical evidence existed to show when, where, how and to whom fragmentation might matter.

Scholars critical of multiple units of government argue that the problems resulting from fragmentation hinder metropolitan growth and economic development (Barlow, 1981; Foster, 1991). Fragmentation is said to reduce coordination among services, to decrease efficiency in service provision, to increase social and fiscal inequities, to contribute to the failure of government cooperation to solve metropolitan wide problems, and to impact government structure and effectiveness (Bollens and Schmandt 1965; Morrill 1990; Foster 1991).

Barlow (1981) also grouped problems of fragmentation into three categories: inefficiency, coordination, and equity. However, he further elaborated three sources of inefficiency: duplication of services, scale economies, and spill over effects. Inefficiencies resulted from failure to realize economies of scale—many municipalities are so small that unit costs for services are high. Spillover effects were the benefits of public services that go beyond the boundaries of the municipality to benefit those who do not live in the providing jurisdiction and do not pay for those services. These spillovers are inefficient because some taxpayers pay more than they

should and some consumers do not pay for services they receive.

Curran (1963) regarded the failure of the many governments in a fragmented urban region to cooperate to solve area wide problems such as traffic congestion and air pollution as the primary metropolitan problem. Eliminating municipal boundaries would facilitate solving urban problems at the metropolitan scale. Barlow (1981) suggested that lack of coordination occurred with regard to services, planning, and city problems and many opponents of fragmentation claim that equity problems occur in connection with financing public services in a highly fragmented area. At its worst, metropolitan fragmentation can produce a situation where individuals are treated differently depending on where they live in the metropolitan area (Barlow, 1981; Baker, 1998). Barlow argued that the existence of numerous municipal boundaries fragmented the property tax base, the source of revenue for most local services, leaving tax rich and tax poor communities whose tax rates and levels of service might vary substantially.

The Impact of Incorporation and Annexation On Fragmentation

Incorporation and annexation policies of state and local governments can greatly affect the number of municipal governments in an area (Barlow 1981). Incorporation is the process by which an area becomes a legal municipality granting it the right to form a government as well as certain powers and responsibilities, most of which are related to providing public services. Annexation is the legal process by which a municipality acquires surrounding territory thereby increasing its size and extending its jurisdiction. Although these processes are ways to allow a city to adapt to growth, according to Barlow (1981) they have spawned politically fragmented cities. The procedures could work in opposing directions, however, incorporation increasing fragmentation, annexation constraining it.

A few case studies trace the history of incorporations in specific areas. Reynolds (1976) studied

the creation of municipalities in three metropolitan areas: Los Angeles County, California, Saint Louis County, Missouri, and the three counties around Detroit, Michigan. In Los Angeles County 32 new cities incorporated between 1954 and 1970. In the Detroit area, 23 new cities and villages were incorporated between 1950 and 1970. Olin (1991) found in Orange County, California that 12 of 28 municipalities had been incorporated during rapid growth in the 1950s and 1960s.

State laws governing incorporation in the United States have generally been liberal, making it relatively easy for small areas to become municipal governments. In large urbanized areas there is usually a potential for new incorporations to accommodate growth as well as pressure to incorporate to avoid annexation by another municipality (Barlow 1981).

Extending boundaries through annexation has been a favored and effective tool for cities to deal with urbanization and growth. Several studies investigated the effect of state laws on city annexation activity (Dusenbury 1980; Galloway and Landis 1986; Liner 1990; Liner and McGregor 1996; Carr and Feiock 2001;). Sengstock (1960) categorized the various state annexation laws into the following five groupings according to the primary body or method entrusted with making the final decision: (1) state legislature; (2) popular election; (3) judicial body; (4) quasi-legislative or administrative body; and (5) municipal officials. Most researchers investigating annexation laws use this classification. Galloway and Landis (1986) report that cities where final annexation decisions are made by the municipal government and judicial and quasi-legislative bodies are more likely to annex than cities where a majority vote from residents is required. Dusenbury (1980, 46) concluded "...state law largely determines how often and how much cities annex."

Liner (1990) found that cities in states allowing municipally determined annexations had the highest rates of annexation and those with judicially determined had the lowest. Liner and McGregor (1996) found that both municipal government structure and annexation statutes were significantly related to annexation activity. In a study of annex-

ations in the 50 states between 1990 and 1999, Carr and Feiock (2001) found that state laws designed to constrain annexations actually increased their number. Two explanations for these results were, first, that smaller annexations encountered less resistance than larger ones and, second, that municipal officials annexed smaller parcels to avoid restrictions that would be invoked if some threshold size of population or land area were surpassed. In other words, there were more but smaller annexations.

Incorporation and Annexation in North Carolina

In North Carolina, the legal relationship between incorporation and annexation favors annexation. Incorporation is more restricted; annexation is much easier.

Incorporation

In North Carolina the state constitution specifies that a city can be incorporated in only one way – by an act of the General Assembly (Lawrence 1996). Such an act establishes the initial borders of the city and enacts its charter. The single constitutional restriction on the General Assembly's power of incorporation is on its ability to incorporate new cities in close proximity to existing ones. If a community seeking incorporation lies within a certain distance of another city and that city is of a minimum size, then a three-fifths vote of both houses is necessary for incorporation. Otherwise a simple majority vote is sufficient. This provision reflects a state policy favoring annexation by existing cities of urban areas near their borders over incorporation of new cities. When the General Assembly incorporates an area, it may first require the approval of the area's residents. The decision of whether or not to require residents' approval, however, rests with the General Assembly; local voters have no constitutional right to vote on incorporation (Lawrence 1996). Only the General Assembly may abolish a legally established city. It does so by repealing the city's charter.

Annexation

North Carolina's annexation laws are a central part of the state's policies for providing government services in urban areas, policies that favor the expansion of existing cities over other ways of providing those services, such as incorporating new municipalities or creating special districts. Only cities are authorized to provide the full range of basic urban services (Lawrence 1996). While the state constitution restricts the General Assembly's ability to incorporate new cities close to existing ones, the state's annexation statutes help implement a public policy strongly favoring annexation by existing cities. North Carolina was the leading state in the United States in reported annexed population during the years 1990-1995 (Hemmings Information Services 1997).

State statutes provide four methods by which cities may annex: (1) by legislative act; (2) voluntary annexation of areas contiguous to the city; (3) voluntary annexation of areas not contiguous to the city but nearby; and (4) annexation at the city's initiative of contiguous areas that are developed for urban purposes (Lawrence 1996). With few exceptions, all of the state's 527 cities may use these methods. In general, a city may annex any territory qualifying under the various procedures as long as that territory is not part of another, active city. County boundaries do not bar annexation; approximately thirty cities lie within two or more counties, having grown across county lines through annexation.

Most annexations in North Carolina are voluntary. Most of these, however, are relatively small, often involving only one or a few property owners. The city initiated procedure, involuntary as far as annexed citizens are concerned, accounts for the largest number of persons and the largest amount of property annexed. Cities can annex using this procedure by using development standards and service requirements.

The statute allowing annexation of areas developed for urban purposes was enacted in North Carolina in 1959. Cities are permitted to annex an area if the area is developed in an urban manner and if the city plans to provide services to the area

on the same basis as it provides services within the existing city. The North Carolina procedure was recommended by the Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (ACIR) as a model for all states (Wicker 1980). This law granted local governments the authority to annex areas, which qualified under these standards through municipal ordinance and without the consent of area residents. Statutory standards were intended to ensure that annexations occurred only when areas were sufficiently urban and contiguous to the municipality.

To be subject to annexation, an area must meet general standards and be developed for urban purposes as defined in the statute. The annexing city must be able to provide major services to the annexed area on the same basis as it provides them to the existing city. When a city annexes an area, in the absence of a statute providing for private service providers, the city becomes entitled to be the primary provider of municipal services in the annexation area.

Since 1959, North Carolina has also granted municipalities the power to exercise zoning and subdivision regulation authority outside their boundaries. Municipalities of 10,000 or more in population have this extra-territorial jurisdiction up to two miles beyond their boundaries; municipalities of 25,000 or more have this authority up to three miles beyond the municipal boundaries. These powers may only be exercised, however, where the county government is not doing so (Ducker 1996). Extraterritorial jurisdiction enables cities to plan and manage growth on their fringes before areas qualify for annexation.

Data and Methods

Data used in this analysis were drawn primarily from the website of the North Carolina Office of State Budget, Planning, and Management. The data depicting incorporations and annexations were provided by the State Demographer, Bill Tillman and the Office of State Budget, Planning and Management. Incorporation dates were taken directly from the various web sites of the municipalities in the study area.

The Study Area

The study area is composed of Mecklenburg County, in which the central city of Charlotte is located, and its five adjacent North Carolina counties (Figure 1). With the exception of Iredell, all of these counties were (together with York County, South Carolina) in the Charlotte-Gastonia-Rock Hill, NC-SC, Metropolitan Statistical Area according to the 1999 OMB definition. The total population of the study area in 2000 was 1,326,999 (Office of State Budget and Management 2001)¹.

As shown in Table 1, five of these six counties experienced substantial population growth during the last 30 years of the 20th century. Only Gaston County had a growth rate that averaged less than one percent per year during this period. Much of the growth in this metropolitan area from 1970-2000 was related to the rapid expansion of the central city economy. The population of Charlotte, the major growth engine of the region, expanded by more than 124 percent during this time. Population growth in the counties adjacent to Mecklenburg ranged from a low of 28 percent to a high of 126 percent. Of course, some of this growth occurred in relatively rural areas such as the counties of Lincoln, Iredell and Union; hence their percentage increase, while impressive (Union grew by 126 percent) was of a relatively small population base in 1970.

Like most late automobile-era North American cities, Charlotte's growth sprawled outward from the original core. From 1960 through the 1980s, this growth was initially absorbed by development in open spaces immediately surrounding the city. More recently growth pushed outward into the surrounding counties, especially those in the path of the two primary growth sectors (Figure 2). Until the 1990s, Charlotte's primary growth sector was southward into Union County. During the last decade, a secondary sector pushed northward towards the small towns in northern Mecklenburg and on into the counties of Iredell and Cabarrus. This northern expansion was facilitated by major public sector, financial stimuli including a university, hospital, library, major highway construction, and creation of water and sewer treatment facilities. While

this stimulated the initial northward expansion, the natural amenities of artificial lakes on Mecklenburg County's western boundary has played a significant role in the more recent growth. By the 1990s the small towns directly in the path of both growth axes began to absorb much of the entire urban region's growth. However, even as the new century dawned, the City of Charlotte still made up almost 41 percent of the region's total population and accounted for over half of its total population growth during the last three decades of the 20th century.

Several factors make this region an intriguing case to study. First, there is the rapid and extensive population growth. As Charlotte's growth spilled outward into the surrounding countryside, it threatened what was, until the 1980s, a small town and rural setting. Many of the small towns were mill towns in an earlier economic era. They were the centers of the textile industry that dominated the region's economy until the 1970s. Second, as the United States' textile industry continued its inextricable march offshore, the small textile towns surrounding Charlotte lost most of their previous industrial base and became bedroom communities to the economic expansion and dominance of Charlotte. A transportation network focused on Charlotte, but built to service the dispersed textile industry, permitted these towns to develop as suburban centers to Charlotte's economic core. Finally, and important for this research, is the role that incorporation and annexation have played in this rapid growth and expansion. As demonstrated in the following sections, incorporation seems to play a limited role. Annexation, however, is a major element of the growth picture.

In the 1990s Charlotte's total population grew by more than 144,000, from approximately 396,000 to 541,000. Over 53 percent of that growth came through annexation. The growth has continued since then in similar fashion. In a July 2001 annexation, the city added more than 22,300 residents and grew to more than 260 square miles. Following an annexation in 2002, the city had jurisdiction over development decisions in a 382 square mile area². That made Charlotte geographically larger than New York

Table 1. Population Growth in the Study Area, 1970-2000

| LOCATION | NUMBER MUNICIPAL | POP Apr-70 | POP Apr-80 | POP Apr-90 | POP Apr-00 | Chng 70-00 | Chng 90-00 |
|-------------------|---------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| North Carolina | | 5,084,411 | 5,880,095 | 6,632,448 | 8,049,313 | 58.3% | 21.4% |
| MSA | 44 | 737,293 | 848,079 | 1,012,649 | 1,326,999 | 80.0% | 31.0% |
| Cabarrus Cnty | 4 | 74,629 | 85,895 | 98,935 | 131,063 | 75.6% | 32.5% |
| Gaston Cnty | 14 | 148,415 | 162,568 | 174,769 | 190,365 | 28.3% | 8.9% |
| Iredell Cnty | 5 | 72,197 | 82,538 | 93,205 | 122,660 | 69.9% | 31.6% |
| Lincoln Cnty | 1 | 32,682 | 42,372 | 50,319 | 63,780 | 95.2% | 26.8% |
| Mecklenburg Cnty | 7 | 354,656 | 404,270 | 511,211 | 695,454 | 96.1% | 36.0% |
| Union Cnty | 13 | 54,714 | 70,436 | 84,210 | 123,677 | 126.0% | 46.9% |
| City of Charlotte | | 241,420 | 326,330 | 395,934 | 540,829 | 124.0% | 36.6% |

Source: Adapted from Office of State Budget and Management, 2001.

NUMBER MUNICIPAL = Number of Municipalities in county or area.

POP = Population

Chng = Percent change in population over time period.

City and all but eight of North Carolina's 100 counties (Dodd 2001).

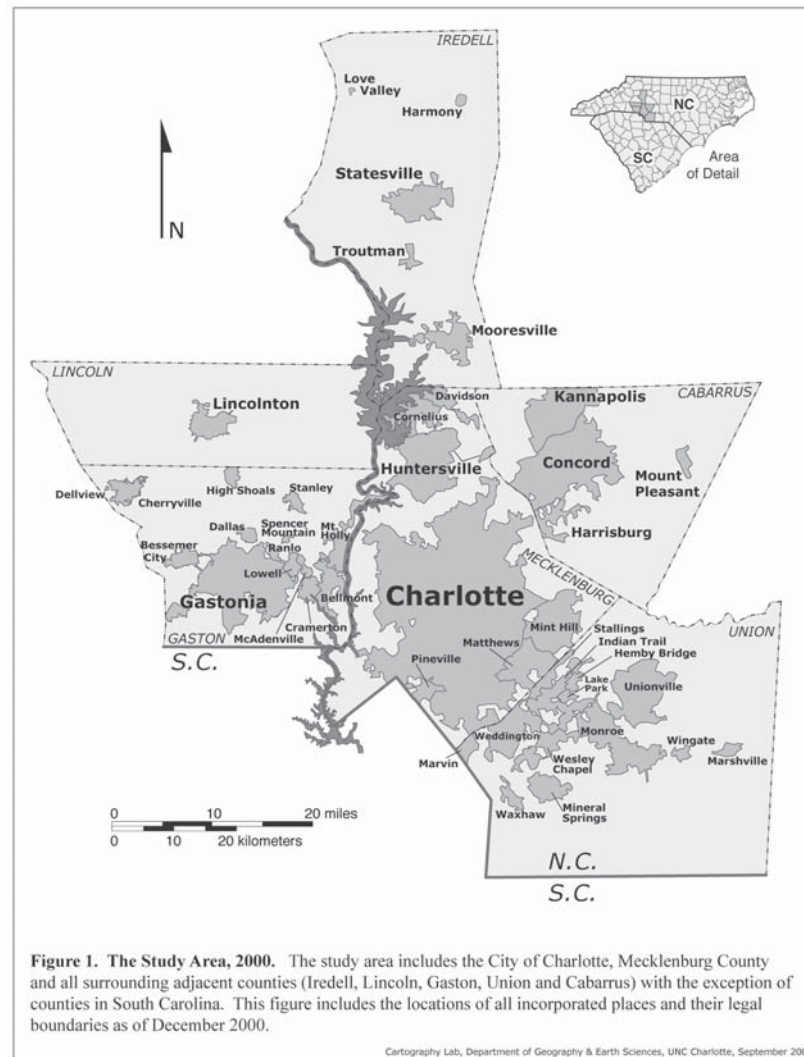
Results—The Pattern of Incorporations In the Study Area

In terms of the number of formally constituted governments, the Charlotte urban region is markedly different from many of its counterparts across the United States. With only 50 local governments (6 counties and 44 municipalities) in 2000, Charlotte is at the opposite end of the fragmentation scale from Chicago (260 municipalities in Illinois alone), New York (153 in New York) or St. Louis (170 in Missouri) (US Bureau of the Census 2002).

In the midst of the rapid growth and expansion of the built up area of Charlotte and its surrounding urban centers, relatively few new governments have been created within the urban region. Of the 44 municipalities in Mecklenburg and the five adjacent North Carolina counties in 2000, all but 15 were incorporated before 1930. In fact, 22 were incorporated during the height of North Carolina's industrial expansion between 1870 and 1930. Like its northern industrial counterparts, Charlotte was also bordered by municipalities incorporating around it during the peak of the industrial expansion in the region and most of the municipal pattern of the Charlotte urban region was in

place before its recent rapid population growth began. One way to see this is to compare Figures 1 and 3. Figure 3 provides a visual image of municipalities in 1970 at the very beginning of our study period. Virtually all of the places listed in Figure 1 existed in 1970. These places simply exploded outward from their 1970 cores to municipal limits outlined in Figure 1. Most of the energy for that explosion came in the form of annexation. The major exception to this generalization was Charlotte's southern growth sector expanding outward into Union County. Here new municipalities were created.

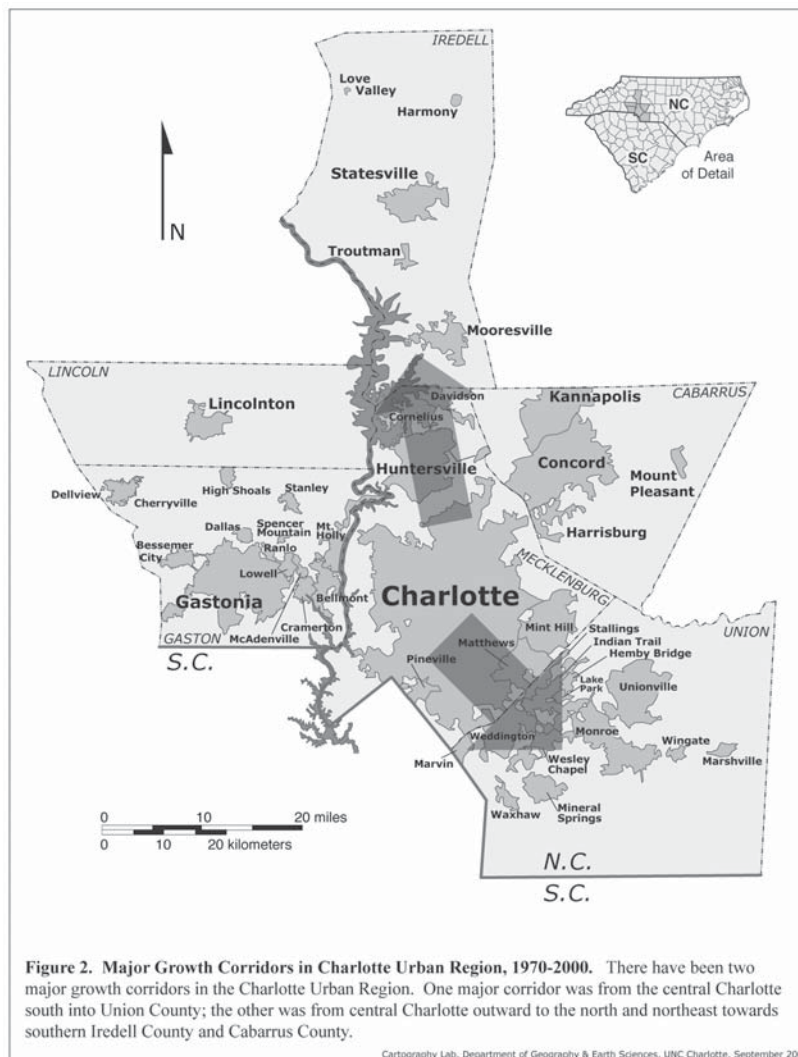
What happened in the study area during the explosive growth of the last three decades of the 20th century? Evidence suggests that incorporation has been employed as a defense against the expansion of the Charlotte central city and a tier of older (19th century) municipalities to the south of the central city (See the municipalities of Matthews, Mint Hill and Indian Trail in Figure 2). Of the 12 municipalities created since 1970 all were in the path of Charlotte's high growth sectors; in fact 10 were in the direct path of the southern high growth sector moving outward from Charlotte into western and northern Union County (See Figure 2 and Table 2). All 6 of the incorporations in the study area during the 1990s were in the high growth southern sector. As a comparison there were 35 incorpora-



tions in the entire state during the 1990s (Morgan and Tillman, 1999).

How does the study area compare to the national pattern of incorporation? Nationally, the number of incorporations remained at about the same annual rate between 1980 and 1995. Table 2 shows the trend in the number of incorporated places nationwide and in the study area during the period of this study. Nationally, the number of municipalities increased from 18,048 in 1967 to 19,429 in 2002, the date of the most recent Census of Governments. This was a 7.7 percent increase

(US Census Bureau 1967, 2002). During the same period, the number of municipalities in the study area increased from 32 to 46, a 44 percent increase. Clearly the number of new incorporations in the study area exceeded the pace of incorporations in the nation as a whole. Ten new municipalities were incorporated between 1980 and 2002 in the study area; four between 1997 and 2000; two between 2000 and 2002. Eight of the ten new incorporations were in Union County, one of the major growth corridors for the Charlotte metropolitan area.

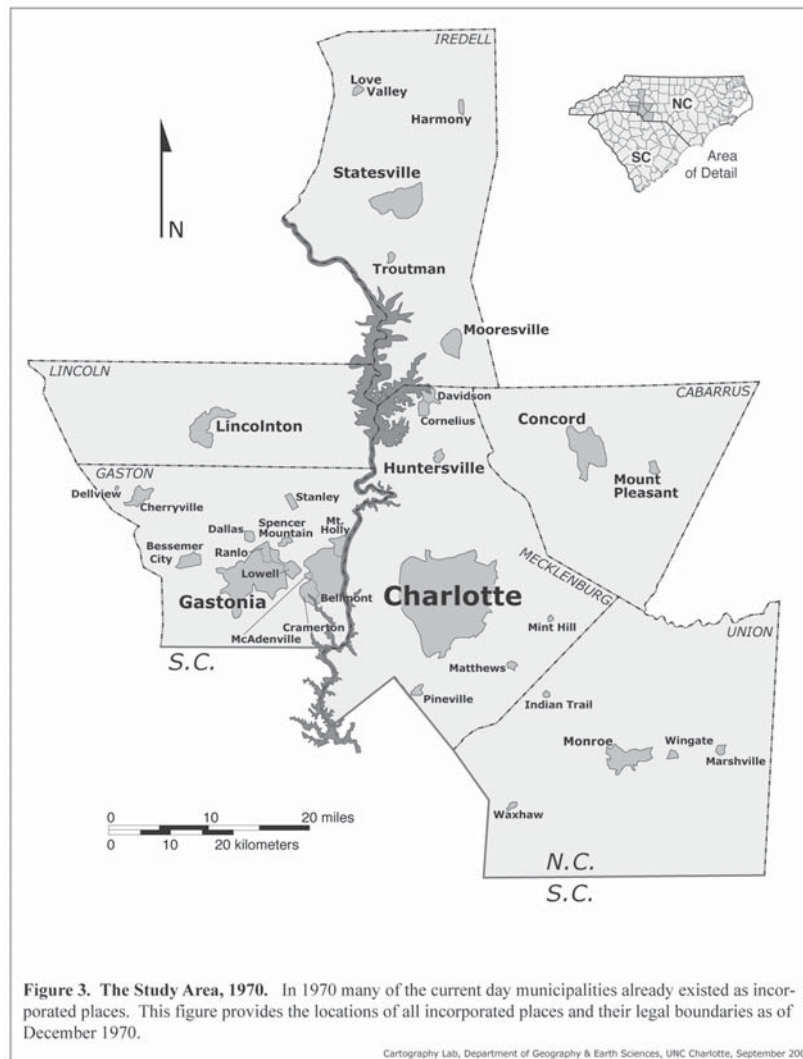


Based on these data we offer three interpretations. First, while incorporation has not caused extensive fragmentation of the government structure in the study area, creation of new municipal governments increased markedly during the 1990s. Second, every new municipality created in the study area during the 1990s was in one county, Union, which is in Charlotte's southern, high growth corridor. Finally, the newly incorporated places in the study area during the 1990s seem to have been created as a defensive mechanism. Most offered no public services, had no permanent employees and

had total annual town budgets of less than \$50,000. Their tax rates ranged from \$0.02 to \$0.04 per \$100 of assessed valuation.

Results—The Pattern of Annexations In the Study Area.

The municipalities in the study area have annexed extensively during the last twenty years. In the 1980s, five municipalities in the study area were among the top 20 annexing municipalities statewide (by both population and area annexed). In the 1990s, eight of the study area municipalities were among



the state's top twenty in terms of size of area or population annexed (See Table 3; Morgan and Tillman 1999). Some of the increases in municipal population and area are dramatic. For example, Huntersville went from a population of 3,023 in 1990 to 24,960 in 2000. Indian Trail grew from 1,942 people in 1990 to 11,905 in 2000. Huntersville is in the north growth corridor; Indian Trail in the southeast (Office of State Budget and Management 2001). Many municipalities in North Carolina annexed considerably more population than was annexed by all municipalities in other entire states in

the US. The total population residing in areas annexed by Charlotte during the period 1990-1995 was greater than the sum of all population annexed in 17 of the 29 US states that reported municipal annexations during this period (Hemming Information Services 1997, 36-37).

Conclusions and Implications

Why does Charlotte differ so markedly from examples of fragmentation found elsewhere in the United States? Why has there not been more incorporation in this rapidly growing urban region? The

Table 2. Number of Municipalities Nationwide and Study Area, 1967-2002

| Nationwide | | | | | | | | |
|-------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Year | 1967 | 1972 | 1977 | 1982 | 1987 | 1992 | 1997 | 2002 |
| Number | 18,048 | 18,517 | 18,862 | 19,076 | 19,200 | 19,279 | 19,372 | 19,429 |
| Study Area | | | | | | | | |
| Year | 1967 | 1972 | 1977 | 1982 | 1987 | 1992 | 1997 | 2002 |
| Number | 32 | 33 | 36 | 36 | 38 | 38 | 40 | 46 |

Source: Adapted from US Bureau of the Census, Census of Governments, 1967 to 2002.

answer to these questions comes in two parts: the role of North Carolina's urban-friendly incorporation and annexation statutes and the influence of a previous cultural and economic heritage.

Understanding how North Carolina's urban expansion pattern has emerged rests on a set of constitutional provisions and state statutes governing how cities may incorporate and how they can deal with population growth and suburbanization through annexation. The information and analysis in this paper demonstrates the impact of these legal arrangements on the level of fragmentation. If cities adopt a regular policy, as Charlotte has, of reviewing for possible annexation developing areas around the fringe, growth outside the city is soon absorbed into the city.

The cultural and economic landscape in which the Charlotte urban region is now expanding also contributes to the current lack of fragmentation. Stuart (1972) labeled this landscape "dispersed urbanization." This concept describes the pattern of small towns and cities, which grew up during the expansion of the textile industry during the last 20 years of the 19th century and the first 30 years of the 20th century. Each small town in the region competed with others to attract, and even finance on their own initiative, textile mills. In less than 50 years most of the textile industry migrated from New England to the Piedmont region of the South and Charlotte became a major center of this new industry. In 1930, more than 300 cotton mills and more than half of all the looms in the South were within 100 miles of downtown Charlotte (Tomkins 1989). The result was a landscape dotted by small towns, many with only one mill, and a few others with dozens of mills, for example Charlotte, Gastonia, and Kannapolis.³ These mills dominated

the economy, and the life of the community often focused on activities that centered on the mill. And as the textile economy expanded so did the number of incorporated places. Thus, much like its northern urban counterparts, Charlotte's explosion of incorporation accompanied industrialization; only it occurred before the turn of the 20th century, more than a century before the recent urban expansion.

This pattern of population distribution where small towns and economic centers were dominant was in place as the economy of the region began to shift during the last quarter of the 20th century. As employment shifted away from industry towards the service sector, North Carolina's two major urban centers — Charlotte and Raleigh — led a shift into new urban, economic and cultural pathways. The spatial explosion of Charlotte, however, was largely absorbed within the existing local government framework. The municipalities that had been created a century before simply shifted from industrial centers to bedroom communities, albeit ones that were not contiguous to Charlotte. By the time the urban explosion occurred, the statutes favoring annexation over incorporation were in place. Although some areas were able to incorporate in defense of being annexed, few new towns were created and the existing towns, for the most part, simply annexed to absorb the rapidly increasing urban population.

What of the Future?

Interestingly enough, were it not for the one county to Charlotte's south, there would have been virtually no increase in the level of fragmentation during the period we examined. Currently, anecdotal evidence suggests that the existing cities may be positioning themselves to absorb most of the future growth as well. A series of annexation spheres

Table 3. Selected Municipalities in the Study Area: As Ranked by Total Population and Area Annexed

| 1980 – 1989 | | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------|------------|------------------------|------------|
| Municipality | Population Annexed | State Rank | Area Annexed (sq. mi.) | State Rank |
| Charlotte | 45,303 | 2 | 35.79 sq. mi. | 1 |
| Matthews | 13,556 | 8 | 10.76 sq. mi. | 9 |
| Concord | 11,449 | 9 | 13.76 sq. mi. | 7 |
| Gastonia | 7,021 | 15 | 9.26 sq. mi. | 12 |
| Belmont | 4,937 | 20 | 3.41 sq. mi. | * |
| Total | 82,266 | | 72.98 | |
| 1990 – 1999 | | | | |
| Municipality | Population Annexed | State Rank | Area Annexed (sq. mi.) | State Rank |
| Charlotte | 81,245 | 1 | 66.25 sq. mi. | 1 |
| Huntersville | 19,357 | 7 | 27.14 sq. mi. | 5 |
| Concord | 17,847 | 9 | 30.14 sq. mi. | 3 |
| Indian Trail | 7,899 | 14 | 12.08 sq. mi. | 16 |
| Cornelius | 7,399 | 15 | 4.66 sq. mi. | * |
| Gastonia | 5,995 | 17 | 14.54 sq. mi. | 14 |
| Kannapolis | 5,097 | * | 14.82 sq. mi. | 13 |
| Monroe | 4,454 | * | 10.67 sq. mi. | 18 |
| Total | 149,293 | | 180.3 | |
| *Ranked below top twenty | | | | |

Source: Adapted from Office of State Budget and Management, 2001.

of influence agreements have been negotiated in Mecklenburg and between towns in Union and Mecklenburg that would essentially divide up the areas of future population expansion well into the next decade. Apparently, once these towns have been created they are loath to see new competition for future expansion.

Local conditions and politics across the region vary, however, and the pattern seen in Mecklenburg and some of the other counties may not hold. Consider annexation practices in this one metropolitan area. For decades, Charlotte, the largest city in this metropolitan area, has, as a matter of policy, regularly evaluated areas for annexation. Few, if any, other cities in the region have done so. Then there are possible changes in policies and practices of incorporation. The recent incorporations in Union, the county to the south of Mecklenburg, appear to

have been defensive; the residents that fought to incorporate new municipalities did so to ward off annexation. Furthermore, given statewide policy restricting incorporation, residents in newly minted municipalities must have found a sympathetic ear in the General Assembly to sponsor special legislation.

As growth continues to spill into the rural areas surrounding municipalities in the urban region, the pressure to incorporate may grow in other areas and there may be other sympathetic legislators. If recent events in the counties surrounding Mecklenburg are any clue, more defensive incorporations will be attempted (McClury 2005).

Footnotes

¹ Although York County, South Carolina was within the Charlotte-Gastonia-Rock Hill Metropolitan Statistical Area in 2001 and borders on Mecklenburg County, it was not included in the study. State laws governing incorporation and annexation in York County differ from those in North Carolina. Other applicable laws, such as those governing local taxation, also differ.

² Of course this is nowhere near the fabled exploits of Houston which annexed 200 square miles during the 1950s and 1960s, or Oklahoma City, which annexed its way from 50 square miles in 1950 to a city covering 620 square miles in 1962 (Barlow, 1981).

³ Kannapolis, North Carolina was incorporated in 1984. Prior to this, it was the largest unincorporated urban area in the United States. It had been a mill community owned by Canon Mills and the owners provided housing, utilities, and streets. When the mill was sold the company ceased provision of these services.

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