

Survey and Research

Report On The James and Elizabeth Purcell House (1956)



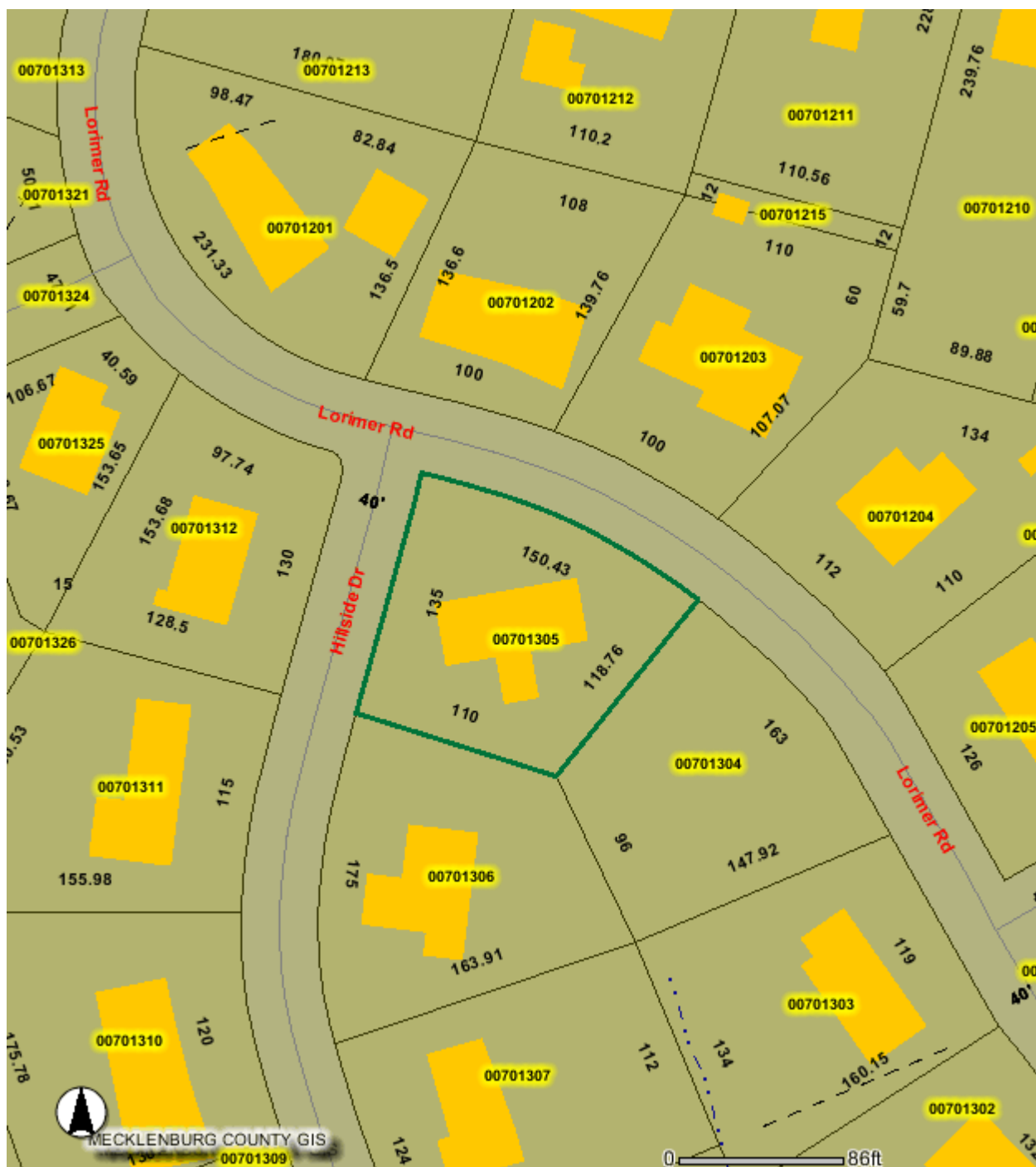
- 1. Name and location of the property:** The property known as the James and Elizabeth Purcell House is located at 206 Lorimer Road in Davidson, N.C.
- 2. Name, address, and telephone number of the current owner of the property:**
James N. Bartl and Dawn A. Blobaum
P.O. Box 1306

Davidson, N.C. 28036

Telephone: 704-987-8955

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 maps depicting the location of the property. The U.T.M. coordinates for the property are: 17 513903.1E/173928255.6 N



5. Current Deed Book Reference to the property: The current deed reference is book 11988, page 189. The most recent deed to the property is located in Mecklenburg

County Deed Book #11988, page 189. The tax parcel number of the property is 007-013-05.

6. A brief historical sketch of the property: This report contains a brief historical sketch of the property prepared by Dr. Dan L. Morrill.

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

8. Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets the criteria for designation set forth in N.C.G.S 160A-400.5.

a. Special significance in terms of its history, architecture and/or cultural importance: The Commission judges that the property known as the James and Elizabeth Purcell House possesses special significance in terms of the built environment of Davidson, N.C. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations:

1) The James and Elizabeth Purcell House is an essentially uncompromised example of mid-twentieth modern architecture in Davidson, N.C.

2) The James and Elizabeth Purcell House was the home of James Slicer Purcell, III, a faculty member of note at Davidson College.

3) The James and Elizabeth Purcell House was designed by the Charlotte architectural firm formed by Harold L. Cooler and Marshall McDowell, which specialized in modern style buildings.

b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling and/or association: The Commission contends that the architectural description prepared by Stewart Gray demonstrates that the James and Elizabeth Purcell House meets 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 a "historic landmark." The current appraised value of the building is \$153,200. The current appraised value of the land is \$65,000. The total appraised value is \$218,700. The property is zoned VIP (Village Infill Planning Area).

Date of Preparation of this Report: May 15, 2009

A Brief Historical Sketch Of The James and Elizabeth Purcell House

The James and Elizabeth Purcell House, designed by the Charlotte architectural partnership formed by Harold L. Cooler and Marshall McDowell, has special

significance within the context of the built environment of Davidson, N.C.¹ Constructed in 1956, the house was originally the home of James Slicer Purcell III (1912-1980) and his wife Elizabeth Wade Bradley Purcell (1920-2008).² A native of Florence, Mississippi and recipient of a Ph.D. from Duke University, James Purcell joined the faculty of Davidson College in 1947 and taught in the English Department until his retirement thirty years later and was Department Chairman for part of that period.³ Davidson College issued a statement remembering James Purcell as a "gracious and erudite man" who was "truly a gentleman and a scholar."⁴ Elizabeth Purcell established a reputation as a "gracious hostess" who "presided with warmth and good humor over many occasions when family, friends, and college guests gathered around her table, making all feel at home."⁵



Plaque On The House

The claim for special significance for the James and Elizabeth Purcell House rests primarily upon its architecture, not upon the noteworthy accomplishments of its initial owners. The great majority of the notable structures located in Davidson, N.C. are Classical or vernacular in style -- hardly surprising since the town owes its origins to the founding of Davidson College in 1835. Until 1874, when railroad service arrived, Davidson was a relatively isolated college town; and its most imposing buildings, which belonged almost exclusively to the college, established the dominant design vocabulary for the town's man-made environment. The most significant extant college structures from this era are Oak Row and Elm Row (1837), Eumenean Hall (1849), and Philanthropic Hall (1850). All exhibit the essential qualities of Classical Revivalism. This penchant for traditional design persisted into the twentieth century. In 1929, Dr. Frasier Hood, head of the Psychology Department, built a large Colonial Revival style home at 829 Concord Road. A year earlier Davidson College opened Jackson Court, a collection of Colonial Revival style cottages designed by Charlotte architect Martin E. Boyer, Jr., as meeting places for fraternities. The Davidson Colored School, a W.P.A. project, also a traditional design, opened in 1938.⁶



Philanthropic Hall, Davidson, N.C.



Hood House



**Example of Jackson Court
Cottage**



Davidson Colored School

The late 1800s and early 1900s saw the appearance in Davidson of a substantial number of large frame houses primarily used to board students and mostly to serve them meals, since there was no cafeteria at Davidson College until 1946. Essentially vernacular in style, these domiciles possessed architectural elements from a variety of design motifs popular in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including Queen Anne, Eastlake, and Four Square. Striking extant examples of this type of dwelling are the Holt-Henderson-Copeland House and the Martin-Henderson House.⁷



Holt-Henderson-Copeland House.

305 North Main Street



Martin-Henderson House.

310 Concord Road

Davidson had a dearth of modern style houses until the 1950s. That situation changed when Davidson College surveyed a tract of land it had bought south of the campus and

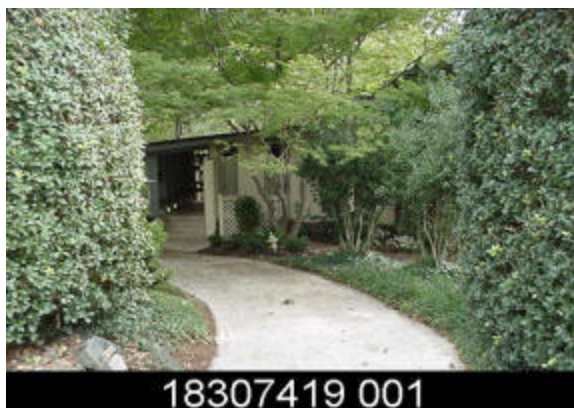
began laying out streets and selling lots to members of the faculty. James and Elizabeth Purcell acquired their home site at the corner of Lorimer Road and Hillside Drive in January 1956.⁸ According to his wife, Purcell had become enamored with contemporary architecture while teaching in Florida.⁹ Purcell had been a visiting professor at Florida Southern College in Lakeland Florida, a campus filled with modernist buildings. One can infer that it was there that he had acquired a liking for what his wife called "flat roof" buildings.¹⁰



Building at Florida Southern College

James and Elizabeth Purcell hired Charlotte architects Harold L. Cooler and Marshall McDowell to prepare plans for their new home in Davidson with Cooler taking the lead. Graduating from Clemson College, now Clemson University, in 1943, Cooler, a South Carolina native, came to Charlotte and eventually partnered with McDowell and became a proponent and practitioner of modern design. Among the notable extant

homes he designed in Charlotte are the William Little House at 2301 Red Fox Trail and the Holbrook House at 4141 Arbor Way.¹¹



Holbrook House, Charlotte, N.C.



Little House, Charlotte, N.C.

There are other Modernist style homes in the immediate vicinity of the James and Elizabeth Purcell House, most notably the residences at 102 Hillside Dr. and 103 Hillside Dr. However, in terms of its overall setting on a corner lot and its flat roof design, the Purcell House, excluding the modified interior, is a purer example of modernism. Also, one should not dismiss the role the Purcell House played in the professional career of its original owner. Davidson College has a long tradition of encouraging students to visit in the homes of their professors. Consequently, Purcell, who specialized in teaching Southern Literature, welcomed "would-be-writers out of the cold, hearing them read works that even they knew to be puerile fumbings, finding something -- if only a phrase -- to praise, and sending them out again just a little bit warmer and a lot better for having been there and for having known him."¹²



102 Hillside Dr.



103 Hillside Dr.

ndnotes:

1. Jason Nichols, "Survey and Research Report on the James and Elizabeth B Purcell House (1956)"
<http://landmarkscommission.org/surveysrpurcellhouse.htm>. Hereinafter cited as Nichols.
2. *Charlotte Observer*, June 16, 1980; November 23, 2008.
3. *Charlotte Observer*, June 16, 1980.
4. "James Slicer Purcell, Jr. (1912-1980). A manuscript held in the Davidson College Archives. Hereinafter cited as Testimonial. Purcell's death certificate lists his name as "James Slicer Purcell, III." See Mecklenburg County Death Certificate No. 1980001641.
5. *Charlotte Observer*, November 23, 2008.
6. Jennifer Payne, "The Evolution of the Built Environment of Davidson, N.C."
<http://landmarkscommission.org/surveydavidsonpayne.htm>. Hereinafter cited as Payne.
7. Payne.
8. Mecklenburg County Deed Book 1831, Page 501.
9. Nichols.
10. *Charlotte Observer*, June 16, 1980.
11. Nichols. <http://landmarkscommission.org/surveys&rlittle.htm>.
12. Testimonial.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION



The Purcell House faces north on a sloping corner lot in a residential neighborhood of single-family houses and curvilinear streets. The house is roughly centered on a .4 acre lot. The front yard features a few small trees and affords a largely unobstructed view of the house from the street. Large mature trees border the rear and west sides of the house. Neighboring houses include several Contemporary Style houses, but are predominately post-World War II brick Ranch Style Houses. The Purcell House fits clearly into the flat-roof subtype of the Contemporary Style as defined in Virginia and Lee McAlester's *A Field Guide to American Houses*. The flat-roof design of the Purcell House distinguishes it from most, if not all, of the other houses in Davidson.



The Purcell House is a one-story, frame, flat-roofed house with a daylight basement. As is typical for the Contemporary Style, the house lacks any traditional decorative details. Instead the facade features simple geometric forms; the combined rectangles that make up the doors and windows, and the bold thick line of the soffit that runs far beyond the principal section of the building. Another prominent feature of the facade is the wide, rough-saw redwood siding. The use of natural materials and the integration of the house with its site, as is demonstrated with the Purcell House, distinguish the Contemporary Style from the earlier International Style.



The facade of the Purcell House features a deep overhang. The front entrance is roughly centered on the facade. It is recessed and is bordered to the west by a partial-height two-wythe-thick brick wall that projects slightly past the facade. The original single-light door was recently replaced with a new door of a similar design. The door is bordered with a direct-glazed transom and a direct-glazed sidelight to the east. The brick wall is topped with a single direct-glazed light. The east wall of the recessed porch is covered with redwood siding. The porch floor is concrete, with a brick border and steps. The porch ceiling and the deep soffit are sheathed with plywood panels.



To the west of the recessed porch, the facade is mostly blank. It is pierced by a tall window opening set close to the projecting brick wall. The window is composed of two narrow sash stacked one above the other. The top sash operates as a casement, while the lower sash is fixed.





To the east of the recessed entrance the facade is pierced by two windows. Originally these window openings were roughly square. Recently the openings were enlarged with tall casement sash that extend below the original window openings. This modification appears to be the only significant change to the exterior of the house, and is the only instance where the original windows have been replaced. To the east of the recessed entrance the daylight basement is exposed. The frame walls of the main story overhang by approximately ten inches the masonry walls of the basement level. The basement walls are masonry block veneered with brick laid in a running bond. On the facade the masonry wall is pierced by a single window with an angled brick sill.



The house's flat roof extends uninterrupted beyond the west elevation to form a full-width engaged porch. The porch roof is supported by three box posts that contain metal pipe columns. The adjustable metal columns rest on low concrete piers set in the concrete porch floor. The concrete floor features a rough exposed aggregate finish, and is divided into square sections by dimensioned lumbers set in the concrete. Three boxed beams run from the principal section of the house to the posts. The ceiling is plywood like that found on the soffits.



The west elevation is sheltered by the engaged porch and features a bank of windows composed of nine sash stacked three high and three wide. The sash on the top row operate as awnings. The middle row is fixed, and the bottom row sash operate as hoppers that swing in. The windows are located near the facade. The west elevation is also pierced by a single-light door set near the

middle of the elevation. The same redwood siding found on the facade is used on the west elevation, and covers all of the exterior frame walls.

The design of the side porch is in keeping with the Contemporary Style. A trademark of this style is to blur the distinctions between interior and exterior space. On the Purcell House the roof over the porch is essentially identical to the roof over the interior spaces. The large bank of windows allows both air and light to flow between the space. A beam running through the living room extends out to the porch. There is no significant change in the floor level between the porch and the interior spaces. On earlier styles, porch architecture was often distinct from the design of the rest of the house. Most early 20th century houses in Davidson feature a shallow porch across the facade. In contrast, the side porch on the Purcell House has dimensions similar to an interior space.



The rear of the Purcell House features a flat-roof, two-room-deep, one-room-wide wing. The wing divides the rear elevation of the principal section of the house into two sections. The west section is pierced by two window openings, including a bank of six sash set near the west elevation. Like the windows on the west elevation, the sash are set in three rows withoppers on the bottom and awnings on the top row. To the east of the bank of windows is a smaller window composed of two stacked awning-sash. The same deep overhang found on the facade is used on the rear elevation.



On the rear elevation, to the east of the rear wing, the daylight basement is largely exposed and features a single-light replacement door set close to the east elevation. To the west of the doorway is located a bank of four awning sash. To the west of the windows a brick flue rises from the basement level. The masonry basement wall is also pierced by a single-light window adjacent to the rear wing. The frame main story is pierced by a window composed of two stacked sash. To the west of this window are two small single-light windows. A recently installed scupper drains the roof into a grate in the ground. Scuppers were added to aid the original roof drains.



The rear wing was added soon after the house was completed, and utilizes the same roof design and siding found on the rest of the house. The wing was built

over a basement/crawlspace. The east elevation of the wing features a small cantilevered wooden porch with a replacement handrail. The porch is accessed by metal stairs with wooden treads. The east elevation of the rear wing features a single-light door and a window composed of two stacked sash. The southmost section of the wing was originally a screened porch, but was enclosed with glazing. The west elevation of the rear wing contains a set of sliding single-light doors. The enclosed screen porch is accessed on the west elevation by a second set of sliding doors topped with a small single-light transom. A basement room is located under the glazed porch and is accessed by a two-light exterior door.

The simple east elevation of the Purcell House features four single-light windows set in a symmetrical pattern, with two piercing the main story, and two directly below the upper windows, piercing the masonry basement wall.



Retaining walls, utilizing the same smooth brick found on the house, are located adjacent to the front entrance, around the side porch, and to the rear of the rear wing. Another landscape feature is a rough-aggregate concrete walk that leads from Hillside Drive to the front entrance.



Portions of the interior of the Purcell House have been altered. Walls in the kitchen were removed and all of the cabinetry was replaced. Walls in the rear wing were removed. The stairwell was enlarged, and a wall forming the original foyer was removed.

The living room and the dining room have been well preserved. The living room features a minimal fireplace consisting of a metal hood and chimney suspended over an open brick hearth. An angled partial-height brick wall forms the rear of the fireplace and extends beyond the wide brick hearth. This is the same brick wall that borders the recessed entrance and projects out from the facade. The brick wall does not reach the ceiling. This allows the openness of the living room to extend to the entrance foyer behind the fireplace. A boxed beam rests on the angled brick wall and extends to the west elevation. This beam carries the weight of the room and allows for the open area containing the living room and the dining room.



Original Oak floors in the living room, dinning room, and hallway have been retained.

