

SURVEY AND RESEARCH REPORT

ON

The Ralph Johnson House



1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the Ralph Johnson House is located at 115 Mock Circle, Davidson, North Carolina.

2. Name and address of the present owner of the house is:

Floyd D. and Jacklyn B. Ross

P.O. Box 293

121 Mock Circle

Davidson, N.C. 28036

(704) 896-0689

Name and address of the present owner of the land upon which the house is situated is:

The Davidson Housing Coalition, Inc.

P.O. Box 854

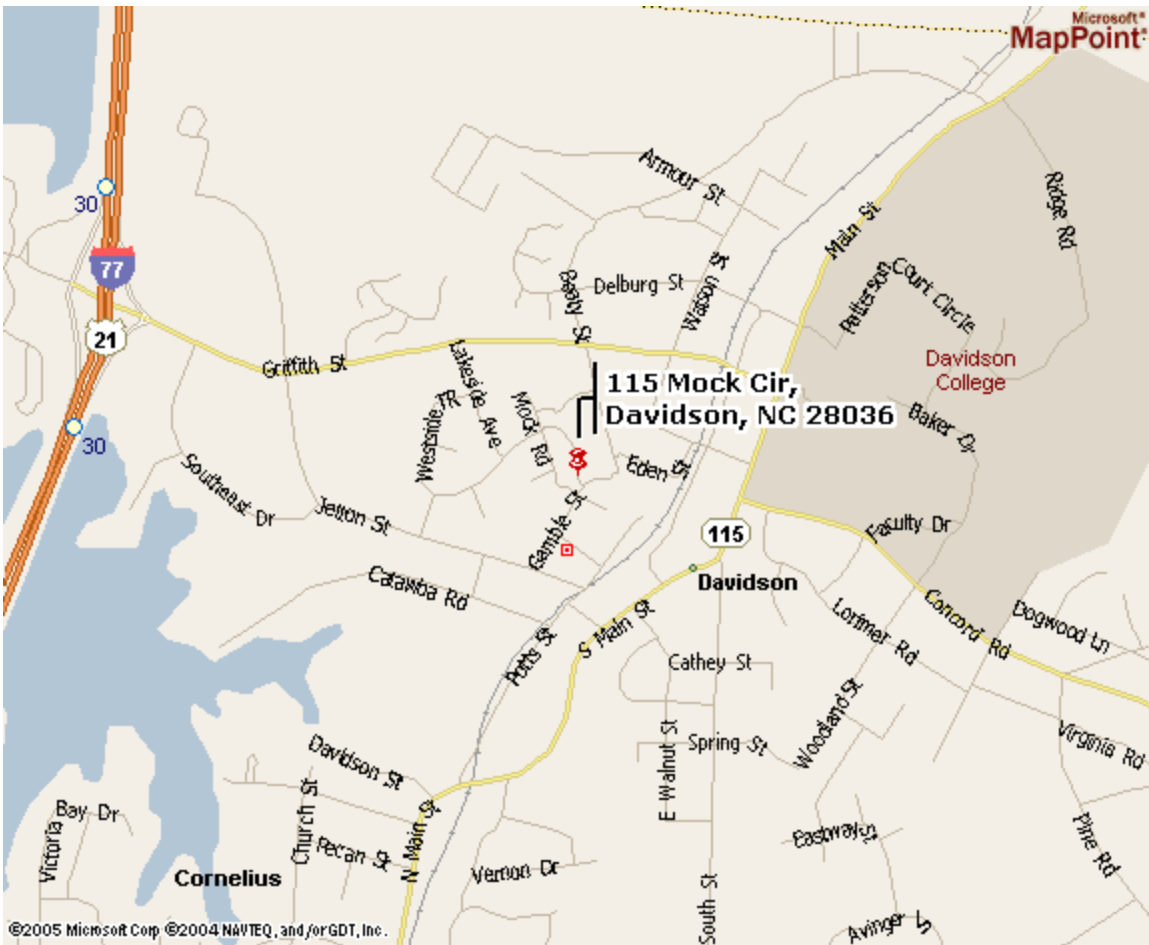
220 Sloan St.

Davidson, N.C. 28036

(704) 892-4486

3. Representative photographs of the property: This report contains representative photographs of the property.

4. Maps depicting the location of the property: This report contains a map depicting the location of the property. The U.T.M. coordinates of the property are 17 513307E 3928499N.



5. Current deed book and tax parcel information for the property: The most recent deed to this property is recorded in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 16219 on page 738 (deed for house) and Book 16219 on page 759 (lease of land upon which house is located). The Tax Parcel Number of the house is 0032407B (the land has a separate Tax Parcel Number 0032407A).
6. A brief historical sketch of the property: This report contains a brief historical sketch of the property.
7. A brief architectural description of the property: This report contains a brief architectural description of the property.
8. Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets 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 Ralph Johnson House does possess special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations:

(1) The Ralph Johnson House, originally built by Otho (“Tobe”) Johnson in 1924, was the home of his nephew, and longest-lasting resident, Ralph W. Johnson. Johnson was one of the most successful African-American businessmen in Davidson throughout the twentieth century and continues to be a benefactor to the town of Davidson and to Davidson College.

(2) The Ralph Johnson House features Eclectic architectural elements, primarily those of the Craftsman Bungalow style that were popular during the early twentieth century.

(3) The Ralph Johnson House, located approximately one-half mile from the center of center city Davidson, is now surrounded by low income and multifamily residential development on all sides. Despite the home’s altered surroundings, the Ralph Johnson House still retains the physical integrity of a small town domicile.

b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling and/or association: The Commission contends that the architectural description which is included in this report demonstrates that the Ralph Johnson 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 designated "historic landmark." The current total appraised value of the Ralph Johnson House is \$31,900.00. The current total appraised value of the lot is \$54,400.00.

Date of preparation of this report: December 2005

Prepared by: Gwendolyn L. Gill and edited and revised by Dr. Dan L. Morrill

Historical Overview

Summary Statement of Historical Significance

The Ralph Johnson House, a Craftsman Bungalow style abode built in 1924 and named for its long-time resident, possesses special historical significance as the

home of one of the most prominent African-American businessmen in Davidson, North Carolina, who served both nearby Davidson College and the surrounding farming communities with his barbershop being a fixture on Main Street from 1921 to 1971. Ralph Johnson also owned several properties in the African-American section of then-segregated Davidson, providing housing to families that met standards commonly only found in the “white” housing of the community. Moreover, Johnson was a central, albeit unwilling, figure in the events surrounding the civil rights movement in Davidson. In 2001, Johnson provided the aforementioned properties – including his long-time residence – to be transformed into affordable housing for lower income families trying to live in an increasingly affluent Davidson; and he also established a scholarship at Davidson College for deserving African-American students, thus serving both the college and community well into the twenty-first century.

Statement of Historical Context

The future town of Davidson (established, 1879) sprang into existence on April 7, 1836, the same day the cornerstone of the first building of Davidson College was laid in a rural area of northern Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, surrounded by small farming communities.^[1] The first structures and businesses in the town were for the support of the college.^[2] The railroad came to town in 1871, opening the community to the outside world, bringing additional businesses to the area and also making the town a center of commerce for the surrounding farms, which were primarily cotton growers.^[3] The railroad also encouraged a rise of diversification in the local built environment by providing affordable and easily accessible modern manufacturing materials such as pre-cut lumber and mass-produced nails and bricks. The future of the town remained inextricably linked to the fortunes of the college, though, until a core group of permanent non-college affiliated families settled in the town; and, by 1879, Davidson College, the town, was chartered and existed independent of Davidson College.^[4] Since then, Davidson has existed in two worlds: a small town hosting a thriving college and supporting the rural community surrounding it. The recent rapid expansion of suburban sprawl in northern Mecklenburg County is threatening this rare vestige of an earlier time. In particular, several long-standing houses and other structures are especially vulnerable to external development pressures. The Ralph W. Johnson House, located in what was then the African-American area of segregated Davidson and which is still predominately African-American, is one such structure.

The Ralph Johnson House

The Ralph Johnson House was built by Otho (“Tobe”) Johnson, the uncle of Ralph Walter Johnson. The one and one-half story residence was purportedly built

partially of bricks salvaged from the (Old) Chambers Building of Davidson College, which was destroyed by fire in November, 1921.^[5] The house was a symbol of Tobe Johnson's success as the proprietor of the first and best known "pressing club" – a precursor to dry cleaning – in Davidson.^[6] Tobe Johnson, and later his son Odell, borrowed against the property; and, in 1933, the house came under the ownership of the creditor, J. R. Withers, a local banker. In 1934, Withers sold the house to Ralph Johnson, his sister Erving E. Johnson, and their mother, Bessie Johnson, after their previous house had burned under mysterious circumstances.^[7] Electricity and plumbing were installed after 1934. The house was continuously occupied by the Johnsons until 2001, when it was sold to the Trustees of Davidson College.^[8] The Trustees immediately transferred ownership to the Davidson Housing Coalition, which sold the house to Floyd G. and Jacklyn B. Ross in 2003. The Davidson Housing Coalition maintains ownership of the land upon which the house is located and leases the land to the Rosses. The house is currently unoccupied.

Ralph Johnson's father, Walter Johnson, was the best known barber in Davidson before his death in 1912.^[9] Ralph Johnson followed his father and opened his barbershop in 1921, at the age of 16, next to Tobe Johnson's pressing club.^[10] In 1922, the wooden buildings were demolished to make way for a new brick building and both the barbershop and the pressing club moved to a store front farther south on Main Street. In 1924, Frank Knox completed his brick building, also supposedly using salvaged bricks from the (Old) Chambers Building, and Ralph Johnson moved into a downstairs section. Here his barbershop remained until 1966, serving both the Davidson College community as well as the permanent residents of Davidson and the surrounding farming communities.

During the 1960s, Johnson had steadily increased the size of his shop; and, by 1966, he had a total of seven barbers (all African-American) in his barbershop. As was custom throughout his career, the barbers were African-American and the customers were white; no African-Americans could get a hair cut or a shave during regular business hours. In early 1966, Johnson bought the Dime Store building (a.k.a. the Thompson building) and moved his barbershop to the corner of Main Street and Depot Street.^[11] The barbershop remained at this location until Johnson closed his business for good in 1971, over fifty years after he had started.^[12]

In 1951, Johnson opened a grocery store in the African-American section of town, which was situated on the west side of the railroad; and his sister, Erving, operated the store for its entire fifteen year existence.^[13] Starting in the mid-1950s, Johnson began buying, relocating and renovating rental property in the African-American part of still-segregated Davidson.^[14] His renovations included covered foundations

(warmer in the winter) and indoor plumbing with full baths (very rare in the African-American community). While purchasing and renovating such property, Johnson continued to operate his barbershop.

Johnson also continued having problems with certain members of the Davidson College community which he claimed started during World War II when Johnson resisted efforts by faculty at Davidson College to “kick-back” ten-cents of each haircut given to Army Air Corps cadets being trained at the college.^[15] According to Johnson, this resistance engendered a long-running animosity toward Johnson by members of the Davidson College population. In 1968, this hostility culminated in a protest and boycott staged by students of Davidson College, which was supported by the faculty and approved by the administration, as the civil rights movement made its way to Davidson, North Carolina.

The protest was purportedly against the “segregationist policies” of Johnson’s barbershop to not serve African-American customers.^[16] It started when three local African-American men entered Johnson’s shop, during regular business hours, asking for hair cuts and, keeping with custom, were refused. Immediately following the refusal, several Davidson students began picketing his barbershop; and a boycott was later called by student leaders. Interestingly, the other barbershops in town, which were also segregated, were not picketed even though one (Norton’s barbershop) was in close proximity to Johnson’s shop.^[17] It is also interesting that the business attacked for its discriminatory actions toward African-Americans was itself owned by an African-American and employed several African-Americans, even though there were segregated barbershops in town that were owned and operated by white proprietors. After five weeks of picketing and boycotting, Johnson quietly instructed his barbers to start serving African-American customers.^[18] This action caused him to lose many of his long-time white customers (many of whom went to the other still-segregated barbershops in town). Within three years, his business had dwindled to a level that he only employed one other barber. After breaking up a fight between two customers, and being fearful of future violence, Johnson closed his barbershop for good in 1971.

Ralph Johnson was a successful business man and entrepreneur for over fifty years. His barbershop was a fixture on Main Street from 1921 to 1971 (and his father was on Main Street before that). A number of Davidson’s leaders passed many a quiet afternoon in his barber chair. He knew national leaders, especially those who had frequented his barbershop when they were students at Davidson College. He bought property – land and buildings – renovated them to standards not commonly enjoyed in his community and rented to African-American families, thus providing a standard of living previously available only to the “white” part of

segregated Davidson. He became the central focus of the civil rights movement in Davidson (although Johnson always thought ulterior motives precipitated the protests). Finally, he became a respected elder of the community. His largess has provided affordable housing in Davidson and funded a scholarship at Davidson College.^[19]

Architectural Description

Site Description

The Ralph Johnson House is located in Mecklenburg County at 115 Mock Circle, approximately one-half mile west of center city Davidson. The house sits on a level 0.17-acre lot and faces east. A grass driveway, which extends to the rear of the dwelling, is located directly north of the house, separating it from the house at 121 Mock Circle. A row of mature bushes on the south side of the house separates it from a vacant lot. The front yard is grass. There are no outbuildings. A few mature trees are located between the rear of the house and another residential lot, which is on Mock Road. Multifamily dwellings owned by the Davidson Housing Coalition, Inc. are located southeast of the house and a vacant lot is directly opposite the house, both being across Mock Circle.

The Ralph Johnson House

Exterior

The Ralph Johnson House is a one-and-one-half story Craftsman Bungalow style house, three bays wide and three bays deep with a full-width front porch and a side gabled roof with exposed rafter and beam ends. The first story is white-painted brick veneer over a wood frame while the half-story is sheathed in staggered wood shingles. A shed dormer, sheathed in wood shingles, extends from the front (east) elevation above the front entrance and a smaller shed dormer, covered by wooden siding, extends from the rear (west) elevation and is centered approximately between the two side elevations. The roof is covered in metal shingles or tiles that were painted red at one time. Two semi-exterior chimneys, located at the ridgeline of each the south and north elevations, are also covered in white-painted bricks and have a capped by a row of brick corbeling. A section of the northwest corner of the dwelling, the section extending approximately one bay along the north elevation and two bays along the west elevation, is sheathed in wooden siding and is covered by the existing roof, indicating that the differently sheathed area was part of the original structure, although not necessarily in its present, enclosed, form.

The east elevation has two sets of paired windows that flank a centrally located entrance. The windows are double-hung sash, 1/1, and have exposed wooden lintels and a corbeled sill of painted brick headers. The front entrance also has an exposed wooden casing and lintel. The front door is of recent origin and has a fanlight. The shed dormer extending above the front entrance has a row of four double-hung sash, 1/1 windows. The full-width engaged porch is covered by the principal roof which is supported at the front of the porch by posts extending to the porch floor. A set of two closely situated posts are located at the southern and northern ends of the porch while single posts are located on each side of the concrete stairs leading to the porch. The outermost posts have yardarms attached at the top that extend out from the porch to support the wide eaves which continue beyond the vertical sides of the house on the south and north elevations. A metal balustrade of recent origin encloses the porch; and the porch flooring is a faux-stone, also of recent origin.

The north elevation has two sets of windows, located in the lower and upper stories, bracketing the exposed portion of the chimney (Figs. 1 and 3). The lower story portion consists of a single double-hung sash window, 1/1, with an exposed wooden lintel and a row of header bricks for the sill. The upper story portion consists of two deep-set windows, one window being a full-length double-hung sash 1/1 with an exposed wooden casing and the second window being approximately one-half the length of the first, fixed sash, 2/2, with an exposed casing. The smaller windows are centered horizontally along the mid-line of the larger window. The smaller window of the rear upper portion has been covered by louvers and appears to be a ventilation portal. The north elevation of the section sheathed in wooden siding has two smaller, off-set, windows, 1/1, with one having an exposed casing. The rear corner-post has brackets at the top to support the wide eave.

The west elevation has a set of two windows placed proximately to the rear entrance, both of which are located in the portion covered by wooden siding, and a single window located in the brick section. The set of two windows are double-hung sash, 1/1, with exposed casings. The entrance consists of a solid storm door covered by an aluminum screen door, both of which appear to be a recent origin. The single window is also a double-hung sash, 1/1, with no obvious exposed casing. A shed dormer is located above the rear entrance and has two centered windows, each being double-hung sash, 1/1, with exposed wooden casings. A brick patio is attached to the west elevation and is centered about the rear entrance. The patio is elevated by several layers of bricks and has brick steps leading to it from ground level. The foundation bricks appear to be older than the flooring bricks. A metal balustrade of recent origin encloses the patio.

The south elevation has two sets of windows, located in the lower and upper stories, flanking the exposed portion of the chimney, and a single window in the lower rear bay. The lower story windows are single double-hung sash windows, 1/1, with exposed wooden lintels and each having a corbeled sill comprised of a row of header bricks. The upper story portion of the window sets consists of two recessed windows, one window being a full-length double-hung sash 1/1 with an exposed wooden casing and the second window being approximately one-half the length of the first, fixed sash, 2/2, with an exposed casing. The smaller window of the front upper portion appears to be horizontally aligned with the bottom of the large window while the smaller window of the rear upper portion is centered horizontally with the mid-line of the larger window.

^[1] Beaty, Mary D., *Davidson a History of the Town from 1835-1937* (1979),4.

^[2] *Ibid.*, 12.

^[3] *Ibid.*, 20. The tracks were destroyed during the Civil War, but were rebuilt by 1871.

^[4] *Ibid.*, 48. In 1891, the “College” part was dropped and the town became known as Davidson.

^[5] Johnson, Ralph W., *David Played a Harp* (Davidson, NC:Blackwell Ink, Inc., 2000) 218-19; Beaty, *Davidson a History*, 153. J. L. Knox relied on the same supply of salvaged bricks to build a commercial building in downtown Davidson in 1922; Ralph Johnson had his barbershop in one of the sections of the building from 1924 to 1966. *Ibid.*, 147.

^[6] Johnson, *David Played a Harp*, 218; Beaty, *Davidson a History*, 140. Tobe Johnson also started the first dry cleaning business in Davidson.

^[7] Johnson, *David Played a Harp*, 218 and 208-209. Their previous home was located along the highway (State Road 115) on the north end of town. This area contained several houses owned by African-Americans and was considered the “elite section of town for Negroes.” *Ibid.*, 219.

^[8] Bill Giduz, *Lifelong Davidson Siblings Create Legacy of Learning and Affordable Housing*(June 11, 2001). Article no longer available online. The article discusses an unusual arrangement between the parties: Ralph and Erving Johnson sold several properties to the Trustees in return for the Trustees arranging payment for the care and support of the siblings in an assisted living facility for the rest of their lives. What makes this arrangement particularly interesting is the strained relationship between

Ralph Johnson and the administration, faculty and students at Davidson College for the last half of his career as a barber in town. See Johnson, *David Played a Harp*, 277-79, 355-429, and Note 16.

^[9] Beaty, *Davidson a History*, 139; Johnson, *David Played a Harp*, 3.

^[10] Johnson, *David Played a Harp*, 80. After Walter Johnson died his barbershop was taken over by his brother-in-law (Ralph's uncle) Rutledge Norton, although Walter's family still owned the shop and derived income from it. Later Rutledge brought his younger brother, Hood, into the business. While Rutledge was serving in World War I, Hood quit making payments to Walter's family; and when they sued to regain control of the shop, he rented the building in which the shop had been located and moved all of Walter's barbershop equipment to the street. Thus began the long-running feud between the two best known barber names – Johnson and Norton. *Ibid.*, 38.

^[11] *Ibid.*, 332-37.

^[12] *Ibid.*, 449.

^[13] *Ibid.*, 309.

^[14] *Ibid.*, 324. Three of these rental properties were barracks that had housed some of the 1,500 Army Air Corps cadets that had been housed and educated at Davidson College under a contract between Davidson College and the U.S. government in 1943-44. This contract helped offset the severe shortage of students (Davidson College was all-male) which threatened to close the college during World War II. These barracks were part of the properties bought by Davidson College in 2001. They have since been moved to Tara Airbase in Mocksville, NC to be part of a 'living museum'. Bill Giduz, *Former Military Barracks at Davidson will Enhance Historic WWII Air Park* (Feb. 18, 2004) <http://www2.davidson.edu/common/templates/news/news_temp01.asp?newsid=1953> (last visited October 18, 2005).

^[15] Johnson, *David Played a Harp*, 277-28. See also Note 16.

^[16] *Ibid.*, 359.

^[17] *Ibid.*, 399-400. Many of those involved in the protest were members of the Davidson College community that either had tried to dictate Johnson's prices or were not customers but rather were customers of other segregated barbershops in town.

^[18] Ibid., 435.

^[19] The first scholarship was awarded in 2002; and, as of December, 2005, the Ralph W. Johnson and Erving E. Johnson Scholarship was still being awarded to a deserving Davidson College student.

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