



Russell Avenue at Dean Street, Tom Hanchett photo, May 10, 2017

OAKLAWN PARK, an African American neighborhood in Charlotte History essay prepared for an application for Historic District designation

Oaklawn Park is one of Charlotte’s best-preserved post-World War II suburbs. It was created for African American families in the latter days of racial segregation by Charles Ervin, the city’s most prolific suburban developer. Today the brick ranch houses and split levels lining Gunn Street (likely named for educator and nationally known jazz musician J.H. “Jimmie” Gunn), Waddell Street, Dean Street, Orvis Street, Miles Court, Kay Street and parts of Russell Avenue and Mulberry Avenue look much as they did when first built during the years 1955 – 1961. The neighborhood’s original homeowners worked in wide array of occupations from ministers and educators to warehousemen and janitors. Most households were what would now be called “two career families” with women employed as teachers. Notable history-makers included Dr. C.W. Williams, a pioneer in desegregating healthcare, Dr. Mary T. Harper, co-founder of the museum that is now the Harvey Gantt Center for African American Art and Culture, Rev. Raymond Worlsey, pastor at the city’s leading black Presbyterian Church and a spokesperson for Civil Rights, and Willie L. Johnson, Sr., and his son Gerald Oren Johnson, who published the black *Charlotte Post* newspaper for over four decades.

Architectural Integrity:

Oaklawn Park retains architectural significant architectural integrity because the houses have undergone few alterations. The Oaklawn Park neighborhood continues to look much as it did in its early hey-day half a century ago. Marvin Brown, a North Carolina based historic preservation consultant, prepared a survey in 2010 that resulted in Oaklawn Park being labelled as “eligible for the National Register of Historic Places” by the North Carolina State Preservation Office. He wrote: “Oaklawn Park’s houses have been little altered over the years, retaining original brick-veneered walls, sash, and accents of applied brick and stone.” Many houses have additions, but usually at the rear rather than disrupting the appearance from the street. Most additions were done for the original owners as their families grew over the years and thus seldom disrupt the initial design aesthetic. Noted Brown: “The lots continue to be grassy and well-maintained with a scattering of mature shade trees, mostly at their rear. There is virtually no modern infill in the neighborhood.”¹

Oaklawn Park retains integrity of location, feeling, setting, and association with grassy lawns, mature shade trees, and its original street plan. It also retains integrity of materials, design, and workmanship because so few alterations have occurred.

Significance:

Oaklawn Park is significant for its architecture, which reflects post-war prosperity. It is also significant for its association with African American history and the upheaval of African American residents in the aftermath of urban renewal.

Location and context:

Oaklawn Park is part of the Beatties Ford Road corridor in west Charlotte, a quadrant of the city that is today known as the heart of African American life, anchored by Johnson C. Smith University. Construction of Oaklawn Park, along with the University Park neighborhood and West Charlotte High School’s current campus – all begun in 1954 – helped define the western part of Charlotte as “the black side of town.” The development of Oaklawn Park and University Park also occurred in the wider context of a post-World War II suburban building boom, both in Charlotte and nationwide, which was shaped by U.S government actions including FHA lending policies, so-called “urban renewal” and the Supreme Court’s landmark *Brown v Board* desegregation ruling.

* * *

Beatties Ford Road came into being in Colonial times to carry travelers from the hamlet of Charlotte toward a spot where the Catawba River was shallow enough “ford” -- to walk across. In the 1860s, the African American school originally called Biddle Institute – now Johnson C. Smith University – was established on a hilltop along the

¹ Marvin Brown, “Intensive-Level Historic Architectural Analysis for Conversion of High Occupancy Vehicle Lanes to High Occupancy Toll Lanes on I-77 Between I-277 and I-85, Charlotte, Mecklenburg County” (Morrisville, NC: URS Corporation – North Carolina, 2012), pp. 31 – 41.

route and a black neighborhood known as Biddleville sprang up nearby.² In the 1910s it was joined by Washington Heights, an African American streetcar suburb named for national economic and educational leader Booker T. Washington.³

But whites settled along Beatties Ford Road, as well.⁴ Seversville (today's Bruns Avenue vicinity) began as a white settlement in the nineteenth century and remained white into the 1960s. Western Heights (today's Martin Street vicinity) mixed white and black residents in the first decade or so after its founding in 1893. Wesley Heights (Grandin Road area) was built as a white neighborhood in the 1920s and remained so for decades. Further out, what is now Lincoln Heights was platted as a subdivision in the 1920s with deed restrictions that said: "This property shall not be owned or occupied by any person of the Negro race."⁵

A turning point came in 1938 when West Charlotte High School, an African American public school, opened at 1415 Beatties Ford Road (today the building holds Northwest School of the Arts). The new facility made Beatties Ford Road a beacon for African Americans who sought suburban living with the best educational advantages for their children. As soon as the tough times of the Great Depression and World War II passed, developers began laying out new streets lined with modern ranch-style houses for African American homeowners.

The most notable of the post-World War II subdivisions were

1. **McCrorey Heights**, envisioned by JCSU president Rev. H.L. McCrorey in the 1910s but developed in earnest beginning in 1949.
2. **Oaklawn Park**, laid out and built by white developer Charles Ervin 1954 – 1961.
3. **University Park**, laid out and built by white developer C.D. Spangler in association with black civic leader Frederick Douglas Alexander beginning in 1954.⁶

² "Beatties Ford Road, River of Life," a *Charlotte Observer* article by reporter Frye Gaillard, June 8, 1990, exploring the corridor's past and present, is reproduced in the *African American Album*, vol. 2 website of the Carolina Room of the Charlotte Mecklenburg Library: <http://www.cmstory.org/aaa2/heritage/>. Tom Hanchett, "A Guided Tour of the Northwest Corridor," in Ron Stodghill, editor, *Let There Be Light: An Anthology Exploring How Charlotte's Historic West End is Shaping a New South* (Johnson C. Smith University, 2014). A version of the essay is also on-line at: www.historysouth.org/jcsu/

³ Thomas Hanchett, "Washington Heights," Charlotte Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, c 1984, on-line at: <http://cmhpf.org/educationneighbhistwash.htm>. C.H. Watson, ed., *Colored Charlotte: Published in Connection with the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Freedom of the Negro in the County of Mecklenburg and the City of Charlotte, North Carolina* (Charlotte: AME Zion Job Print, 1915).

⁴ Thomas Hanchett, *Sorting Out the New South City: Race, Class and Urban Development in Charlotte, 1875 – 1975* (UNC Press, 1998), pp. 137 – 139

⁵ For instance, see deed book 1114, page 259 for the lot that became 1708 Newland Road. For an early advertisement, see "Lincoln Heights Lots on Our New Weekly Payment Plan," classified ad in the *Charlotte Observer*, August 16, 1925. "Lincoln Heights, a white sub-division" was mentioned in "Negroes to Get Biddle Heights," *Charlotte Observer*, February 21, 1929.

⁶ "New Housing Development is Planned," *Charlotte Observer*, September 5, 1954.

4. **Dalebrook**, laid out and built by white developer Charles Ervin starting in 1960.⁷
5. **Northwood Estates**, laid out and built by white developer Charles Ervin starting in 1964.⁸
6. **Hyde Park**, developed by black physicians Dr. C.W. Williams and Dr. Walter Washington beginning in 1962.⁹

The creation of these neighborhoods occurred in the context of rapid post-war expansion of Charlotte. The years after the end of World War II in 1945 saw one of the biggest-ever booms for suburban construction in American history, both in Charlotte and across the nation. People who had put off buying a house during the Great Depression of the 1930s and the privations related to World War II in the 1940s now raced to suburbia during the 1950s. A wide band of new houses encircled Charlotte as the city's population shot up by 50% between 1950 and 1960. New subdivisions rapidly tripled the city's built-up area from barely twenty square miles at the start of the Depression to more than sixty-five square miles by the 1960s.¹⁰

Even as suburbs sprawled outward, a series of federally funded programs referred to as “urban renewal” demolished large areas near the centers of America's cities, including Charlotte. The initiatives initially promised to replace run-down housing with new dwellings for low-income citizens. But over time, urban renewal evolved into a program of “slum clearance” with little or no new construction.

Charlotte leaders began discussing urban renewal with creation of an Urban Redevelopment Commission in 1951.¹¹ Even at that early date, local officials made no

⁷ “Grand Opening: Dalebrook,” ad in *Charlotte Observer*, October 2, 1960.

⁸ Full-page ad for Charles Ervin included “Northwood Estates, Charlotte's Exclusive Negro Community,” *Charlotte Observer*, July 19, 1964. Also “At Northwood, Ervin Will Build 200 More Homes,” *Charlotte Observer*, April 13, 1965.

⁹ John G. Howard, Jr., “The Friendly Village of Hyde Park Estates: A Mid-Twentieth Century African American Suburb in Charlotte, North Carolina” (unpublished report for Charlotte Mecklenburg Planning Commission, 2014).

¹⁰ *Metrolina Atlas*. Sherry Joines Wyatt and Sarah Woodard for David E. Gall Architects, “Final Report: Post World War II Survey” (Charlotte Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, 2016). <http://landmarkscommission.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Post-World-War-II-Survey-Study.pdf> Also <http://www.cmhpf.org/essays/postwarcommdev.html> And see Mattson, Alexander & Associates, “Charlotte Comprehensive Architectural Survey, Phase I, Charlotte, North Carolina” (unpublished report prepared for Charlotte Historic District Commission of the Charlotte Mecklenburg Planning Department, 2014).

¹¹ “Council Slates Study of Slum Clearance,” *Charlotte Observer*, August 2, 1951.

The effort stalled when initial federal regulations required that any area slated for demolition consist entirely of substandard housing. That requirement was eventually dropped and planning began in earnest in 1958. “Planners Eye Redevelopment of Slum Areas,” *Charlotte Observer*, February 24, 1956. “Must Designate Area: Next Slum Step Up to Planners,” *Charlotte Observer*, January 15, 1958.

pretense of improving housing: “[City] Manager Henry A. Yancey said that ‘The public mind has been more or less confused’ about urban redevelopment which is not, he declared, aimed primarily at building of more low-rental public housing. Additional housing of any kind may not enter the picture, he explained. The program is one offered by the Federal government to assist cities in the clearance and the redevelopment of undesirable slum areas in reclaiming the land for more beneficial use.”

Noted a subsequent *Observer* story, “The Brooklyn slum area behind City Hall has been repeatedly mentioned, almost to the exclusion of any other locale, as having priority in any redevelopment plans.”¹² Brooklyn was entirely African American. “Slum” was a mis-characterization. The district did have large amounts of run-down rental housing owned by absentee landlords, but it also held black homeowners, handsome black churches and city’s “black main street” along East Second and North Brevard streets. All would be demolished 1964 – 1968, displacing more than 1000 African American households. Though it would be many years before the bulldozers actually went to work, it was clear to far-sighted real estate men by the early 1950s that black residents would need some place to go.

At about the same time, the famous *Brown v Board* lawsuit challenging the legality of “separate but equal” schools was winding its way through the U.S. Supreme Court, eventually decided on May 17, 1954. NAACP attorney Thurgood Marshall had begun the case in South Carolina with a suit known as *Briggs v Elliott*. White leaders there, worried that the Court would rule against them, moved belatedly to fund new schools for African Americans in the early 1950s.¹³ Perhaps black people would drop their attempts at integration, whites hoped, if they had good new facilities of their own.

Similar calculations seem to have influenced school and neighborhood development in Charlotte during the early 1950s. In 1953 school officials called for bids to construct a big state-of-the art high school campus for West Charlotte High. The existing building would become Northwest Junior High, the city’s only black middle school. Just a few months later Charlotte’s two biggest developers announced plans for “Negro” subdivisions within walking distance of the new facilities. C.D. Spangler, who had won the bidding to construct West Charlotte High, laid out University Park adjacent to the high school beginning in 1954. Charles Ervin created Oaklawn Park across from the junior high starting that same year.

The flurry of activity definitively marked the western part of Charlotte as the most desirable spot for African Americans to live. Long-established white areas such as Seversville and Wesley Heights near JCSU and postwar white subdivisions such as Barringer Woods off West Boulevard all would now gradually fill with black families – a transition that accelerated as urban renewal finally knocked down not only Brooklyn but also other smaller black areas including the Greenville district just north of downtown.

¹² “Must Designate Area: Next Slum Step Up to Planners,” *Charlotte Observer*, January 15, 1958.

¹³ Rebecca Dobrasko, “Equalization Schools in South Carolina, 1951 – 1959,” National Register of Historic Places, 2008. <http://nationalregister.sc.gov/SurveyReports/EqualizationSchoolsHistoricContext.pdf>

By the 1970s, nearly all of west Charlotte would be African American, particularly along the Beatties Ford Road and West Boulevard corridors.

Developing Oaklawn Park: Charles Ervin and the FHA

Oaklawn Park was the sixth subdivision created by a young developer-contractor named Charles Ervin, who emerged as the city's busiest builder during the 1950s. Ervin learned bricklaying in the Navy during World War II, then gained managerial skills attending Duke University under an officer training program. Mustering out at the war's end, he came to Charlotte to help his brother run a pair of grocery stores. Housing was scarce here as it was everywhere in America, thanks to lingering wartime shortages of construction materials and the wave of returning veterans. So Ervin put his bricklaying skills to use erecting a small residence for himself. Before the house was finished, an eager veteran offered a price Ervin could not refuse. With that, his career as a homebuilder was off and running.

Charles Ervin became Charlotte's biggest developer. Indeed by the early 1960s the Ervin Company -- with subsidiaries handling everything from land acquisition to interior decorating -- ranked as the seventh largest homebuilding firm in the entire United States.¹⁴

Ervin's rise benefitted from the new Federal Housing Administration in Washington. Launched by President Franklin Roosevelt in 1938, the new agency offered loan guarantees that helped banks make 30-year mortgages. Before this government intervention, banks had required borrowers to pay off home loans in two to five years. The FHA, together with similar mortgages offered by the Veterans Administration starting in 1944, dramatically boosted homeownership, especially among blue-collar Americans. FHA and VA (also sometime dubbed "GI") loans accounted for "nearly a quarter of the new housing units during the period of 1946 through 1967" constructed in the United States.¹⁵ Charlotte alone had 15,000 VA mortgages by 1962.¹⁶ Home ownership in the Queen City zoomed from less than one-third of households in 1940 to over one-half by the end of the 1960s.¹⁷

¹⁴ Charlotte Observer, May 1, 1960; March 10, 1968.

¹⁵ National Commission on Urban Problems, Building the American City, pp. 94 - 107. Wheaton, "Evolution of Federal Housing Programs," pp. 336 - 338.

¹⁶ Charlotte Observer, October 1, 1962.

¹⁷ A survey of Charlotte families for the 1940 U.S. Census showed 7,000 homeowners compared to 18,180 tenants. By 1970, a survey of housing units showed 39,943 owner-occupied, versus just 37,049 rental. United States Bureau of the Census, Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940: Population and Housing: Families, General Characteristics, p. 226. United States Bureau of the Census, 1970 Census of Population and Housing, table H1. On the national level, see the careful analysis by Ronald Tobey, Charles Wetherell and Jay Brigham, "Moving Out and Settling In: Residential Mobility, Home Owning, and the Public Enframing of Citizenship, 1921 – 1950,"


EAST SIDE, WEST SIDE, ALL AROUND THE TOWN.

ERVIN HOMES TO FIT EVERY BUDGET.

BEECHWOOD ACRES

In the western section of Charlotte, this new subdivision features the very finest in white veneer homes ranging in price between \$10,000 and \$12,000. Individual homes and lots may be selected by purchaser. Two and three bedrooms. Beach wood homes can be reached by driving out Tuckersville Road to the 100 Block and turning right on Glenwood Drive, thence follow the signs. Approved for FHA and GI loans. 100% terms to 10% Liberal FHA loans.

400 WOODLAND AVENUE—
OPEN FOR YOUR INSPECTION



MARKHAM VILLAGE

Off Eastover Drive and Arnold Drive, Ervin's newest and finest growing subdivision is proving to be a most desirable residential area for home-owners. Prices range from \$10,000 to \$12,000. Just out with the city limits — on city terms — with all city conveniences. FHA and GI approved loans. No down payment for GI's Liberal FHA loans.

PROVIDENCE PARK

Located just off Providence Road about three blocks beyond Shallowford Road, with a connecting street to Randolph Road. If you are looking for a beautiful wooded lot for a home in the \$10,000 price range, this subdivision is the best.

EASTWAY PARK


One of Charlotte's finest residential areas, with typical properties ranging from \$10,000 to \$12,000. Just off Glenwood Drive and Independence Blvd., it is the ultimate in convenience to shopping areas, schools, churches, and only two minutes from the Square. FHA and GI approved loans. No down payment for GI's Liberal FHA loans.

LONGWOOD PARK

Off Park Road, one block beyond Shallowford Drive, on off Longwood Drive in Station Park, are some of the finest wooded lots you have ever seen. All city conveniences, including paved streets, this subdivision will be one of Ervin's most outstanding. Approved for FHA and GI loans. No one to visit the lot. Some built homes. Open for your inspection, for purchasers of the most, on Sunday, September 10th, only at 100 HARLEY PLACE.


OAKLAWN PARK (COLORED)

Steady are now being put in this new subdivision and construction will be started within a week about what. Lots are now being reserved for those who wish a brick veneer home in an up-to-date residential area within the city limits, with all city conveniences. We certainly hope that you will realize about this location before having. Watch the earlier announcements on this subdivision.




EASTWAY PARK

(Typical Home)
The ideal residential area for the home of your choice. Approved for FHA and GI loans. No down payment for veterans. Liberal FHA loans.



BEECHWOOD ACRES

(Typical Home)
Ervin Construction Company features the best in design for modern living. Homes in Beechwood are approved for FHA and GI loans. No down payment to veterans.



MARKHAM VILLAGE

(Typical Home)
Designed for family living in a most desirable residential area. Approved for FHA and GI loans. No down payment to veterans. Many other plans to select from.

ERVIN CONSTRUCTION CO.


3400 ROZZELLS FERRY RD.—TELEPHONE Franklin 5-8436 or 5-8437

Charlotte Observer January 13, 1957

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IS THE TIME to plan and build your home!

CHARLOTTE'S FINEST NEIGHBORHOODS

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\$12,500 to \$18,000

MARKHAM VILLAGE
\$11,500 to \$18,000

COUNTRY CLUB ACRES
\$25,000 to \$25,000


SHARONWOOD ACRES
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AMITY GARDENS
\$11,500 to \$15,000

WESTERLY HILLS
\$11,500 to \$15,000

BEECHWOOD ACRES
\$10,500 to \$12,000

OAKLAWN PARK
(Colored)
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Let Ervin design a house to meet your requirements and place it in a location of beauty and convenience

Yes, if you start planning now with the help of Ervin's competent staff, you can be living in your completed home this Spring. Ervin is proud to offer complete services in designing, mortgage loans, construction and landscaping. When you select your plans from Ervin's many custom designs, you are able to include features especially suited to your family's needs. And it's as easy to finance your home with Ervin today as it was two years ago through Ervin's maximum home loan financing. Take advantage of expert planning and financing offered to you by Ervin Construction Company, and start planning your new home NOW.

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 Davis ED 6-5929

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CONSTRUCTION COMPANY

MAIN OFFICE FR 5-8437 BRANCH OFFICE FR 5-8437

American Historical Review (December 1990), pp. 1395 – 1422. On the VA program, see William Cody Wheaton, "The Evolution of Federal Housing Programs" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1953), pp. 234 - 243, 375 - 382.

Top: *Charlotte Observer*, September 19, 1954. Bottom, *Charlotte Observer*, January 13, 1957

Ervin's initial subdivisions were Beechwood Acres, Eastway Park, Providence Park, Markham Village and Longwood Park, then Oaklawn Park starting in 1954. By the time the map advertisement appeared in the *Observer* in 1957, Ervin had added Amity Gardens, Westerly Hills and Country Club Acres to his roster.

Note that white Beechwood Acres and Westerly Hills were in west Charlotte – begun before that sector of the city became seen as the “black side of town.”

Scholarly studies of FHA/VA lending emphasize that African Americans received sharply less benefit from this massive subsidy than did whites. “Contemporary estimates suggested that less than 2 percent of FHA-insured loans and 3 percent of VA-guaranteed loans” went to non-whites in the 1950s, despite that fact that they made up 11 percent of the nation's population, housing historian Andrew Wiese has written.¹⁸

That did not mean that black Americans were totally frozen out of FHA lending. A developer who wanted to serve the African American market could get the FHA's attention – though that typically required big effort. Fred Alexander, later Charlotte's first black City Council member in the twentieth century, worked with developer C.D. Spangler to find funding for University Park: “Bankers backed off and the deal was slithering down the drain,” a biographer recounted. “Alexander walked into Spangler's office” and said “‘We ain't dead yet. Just tell me if you have any objection to the color of money we use.... I picked up the phone, called [the black-owned North Carolina Mutual corporation in] Durham and said I needed to talk with the board. It met the next morning at eight. So I said I'd be there, save me a seat.’ When he came home the next afternoon, he had borrowed a quarter of a million dollars and had savored his moment of triumph by asking that the loan be channeled through the same bank that had frozen up on the project.”¹⁹

¹⁸ Andrew Wiese, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 140.

¹⁹ Mary Snead Boger, *Charlotte 23* (Bassett Printing, 1972), p. 6.

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BRICK HOMES
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"We like the spaciousness of our home in University Park. The kitchen is so well arranged, it saves so very many steps. Also the closets are ample, and have attractive sliding doors. Another feature we like is the awning-type windows, and the Carport offers a lot of shade, and a place for the children to play."

Dr. William W. Guinard recently purchased a home at 3751 Broadhart Street in University Park. Dr. Guinard is a Pediatrician at the Good Samaritan Hospital.

Yes . . . THEY HAVE MANY MODERN FEATURES
↓
Forced hot air heat, insulated, Carport and storage room, sliding closet doors, ceramic tile baths, 1,000 sq. feet, heated area, gas water heaters.

After these 5 houses are sold we will give away a 1956 Chevrolet 4-door sedan.

DON'T MISS THIS OPPORTUNITY **\$8,854 TO \$9,100**
SMALL DOWN PAYMENT

LOW MONTHLY PAYMENTS * FHA AND GI LOANS

Spangler Realty Co.
1028 S. Blvd. FR 5-3736

Ad for Spangler's University Park promised
"Low monthly payments – FHA and GI loans,"
Charlotte Observer, August 5, 1956.

In short, even though the scales were tilted, FHA/VA lending still improved hundreds of thousands of lives. Estimates Wiese, "As much as 40 percent of new housing occupied by African Americans" – both renters and home-owners – was FHA/VA assisted during the 1950s.²⁰

²⁰ Andrew Wiese, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 140.

A recent and influential book on the role of the federal government in racial segregation, Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (Liverwright, 2017) gives the impression that African Americans were entirely barred from FHA lending. See especially pages 50, 67. This overstates the reality, as the history of Oaklawn Park shows.

That included Oaklawn Park. A 1955 *Charlotte Observer* story on “Charlotte’s finest Negro subdivision” noted: “maximum FHA and GI loans are available on all homes in Oaklawn Park.”²¹

Charles Ervin and C.D. Spangler qualified for FHA assistance because they were “operative builders,” in the parlance of the FHA. This new breed of developer not only bought land and laid out suburban streets and lots, but also constructed the houses. An Ervin project such as Oaklawn Park thus was different from McCrorey Heights, begun a few years earlier on the other side of Oaklawn Cemetery. There, developer H.L. McCrorey – president of Johnson C Smith University -- and his daughter Novella McCrorey Flanigan sold lots to individual buyers who erected houses one at a time. But the trend in the postwar U.S. was toward “operative builders” who could handle every task from buying raw land to selling finished dwellings. The Federal Housing Administration encouraged banks to favor operative builders when it came to making home loans, believing this to be the most efficient way to deliver housing to America’s growing population.²²

A *Charlotte Observer* profile of the Ervin firm in 1954 described the assembly-line-like process, marveling at its novel departure from the old method of “one crew doing all of the work on a single house:”

“In the construction of a new house, the first crew to go to work is the woodshop outfit who make and assemble the doors and windows and pre-cut lumber for their frames. Meantime the building lot has been cleared and made ready for the staking crew.

“After the foundation has been laid, one of the framing crews will report to the site and all framing will be completed. Following the framing crew will come the roofing crew.

“When this job is finished the building is ready for the brick masons. After brick veneering, the house is ready for one of two plaster crews. Trim crews come next and complete the interior trim work. Finally the outside boxing crew moves in to make ready for the finishing crew.

²¹ “Oaklawn Park Homes Well-Planned,” *Charlotte Observer*, October 23, 1955. Similarly, “Ervin Company Proud of Five Subdivisions,” *Charlotte Observer*, September 19, 1954. Further confirmation that loans were indeed granted can be found in a 1964 “FHA Re-sale” advertisement for 1410 Gunn Street; the house was put back on the market after the previous owner was unable to keep up with FHA loan payments.

²² Other operative builders who rose to prominence in Charlotte in this era included John Crosland and Lex Marsh, whose firms remain big players in real estate in the 2010s.

“The landscaping crew comes next to plant shrubbery and grass. Right behind this outfit is the concrete finishing crew. While this outfit is at work, another crew is installing the heating plant.”²³

A painting crew and a clean-up crew finished off the work and the home was ready for sale.

The FHA specified the arrangement of streets in subdivisions that sought its aid. Seclusion and the "privacy of the residential area" were paramount. Most avenues should not "carry through or be connected to existing streets," FHA guidelines recommended. "[T]he minor residential streets should follow the topography closely . . . with the result that an attractive unforced curvilinear layout is secured."²⁴

Ervin's street map for Oaklawn Park followed those regulations carefully. He made it self-contained, connecting to the outside world only via Russell Avenue and Mulberry Avenue. Oaklawn Park's streets branched off a single spine: Russell Avenue. Part of Russell already existed, shooting off of Beatties Ford Road directly opposite the old West Charlotte High complex, now Northwest Junior High. That connection was highly desirable for young families who wanted their youngsters to walk to a good school.

The already extant Russell Avenue and a one-block sidestreet called Jennings Avenue had appeared on plat maps filed in 1942 and 1945. The 1942 map showed Margaret Welsh-Russell as the landowner of the first blocks of Russell Avenue just off Beatties Ford Road.²⁵ The 1945 map, which laid out Russell's next blocks eastward and added Jennings, referred to Mrs. A.L. Hendrix as owner.²⁶ Adela L. Hendrix was part of the white family that controlled Oaklawn Cemetery (see below). Actual homebuilding in these blocks seems to have proceeded slowly; four clapboard-sided houses seen today at 1624 and 1932 Russell Avenue and 1534 and 1542 Jennings Street may date from this early period. Mrs. Hendrix was likely glad when Charles Ervin offered to buy her land on Russell and Jennings and incorporate it into his new Oaklawn Park plat.²⁷

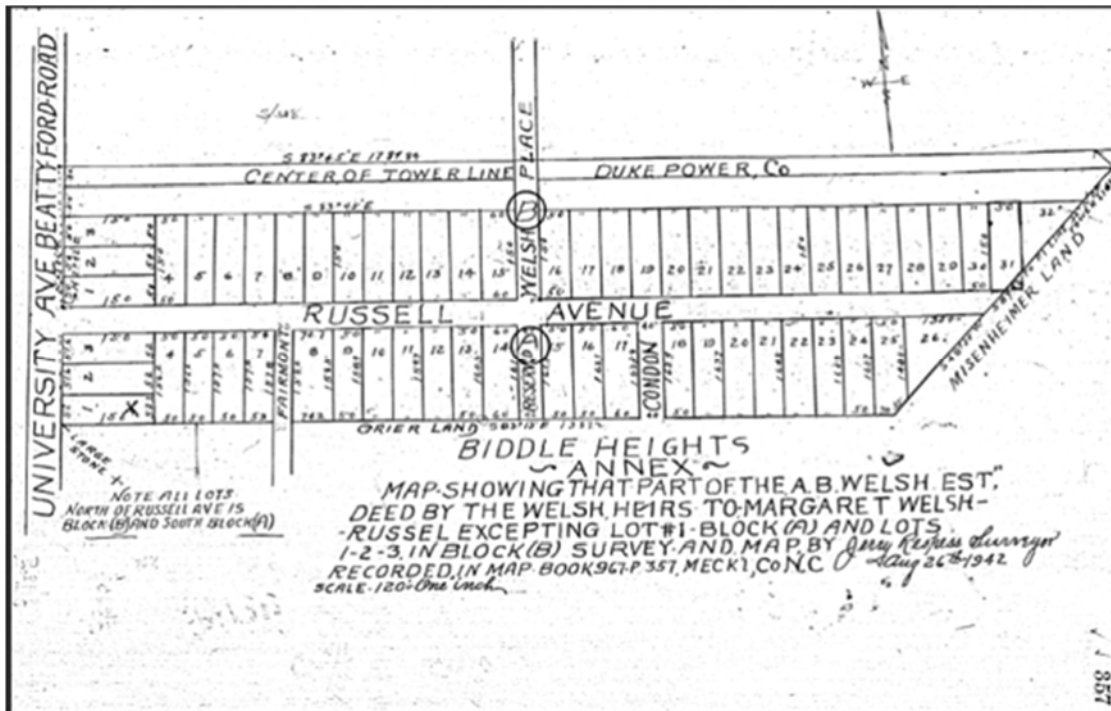
²³ "Ervin Firm is One of the Biggest," *Charlotte Observer*, September 19, 1954.

²⁴ "Ervin Company always plans its subdivisions according to the standards set by the FHA," noted the *Charlotte Observer*, October 23, 1955. FHA, Planning Neighborhoods for Small Houses, Technical Bulletin Number Five (1936), pp. 12 - 15. Spiro Kostof, The City Shaped: Urban Patterns and Meanings Through History (Boston: Little, Brown, 1991), pp. 80 - 82. Michael Southworth and Eran Ben-Joseph, "Street Standards and the Shaping of Suburbia," *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 61:1 (1965), pp. 65 – 81.

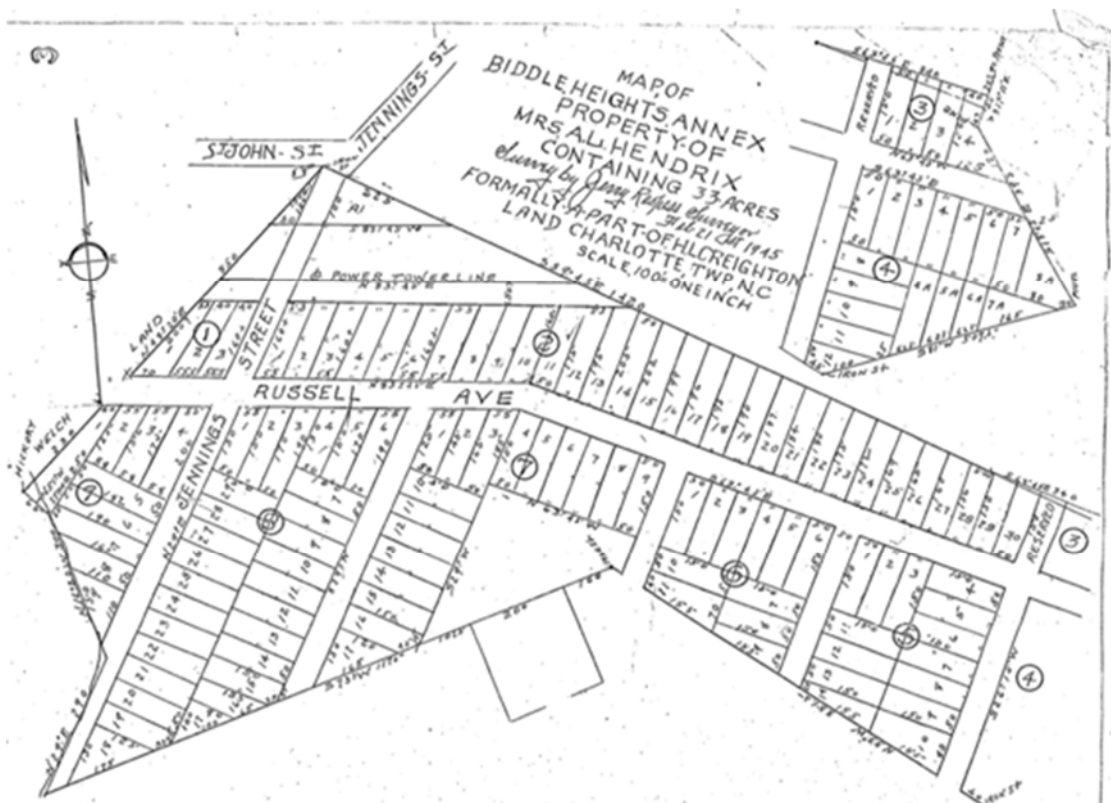
²⁵ Deed book 967, page 357, Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds, August 26, 1942.

²⁶ Map book 5, page 3, Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds, February 21, 1945.

²⁷ "Oaklawn Cemetery Corporation to Ervin Construction Co., Inc, \$75,2000 Biddle Heights," in "Deeds in Mecklenburg," *Charlotte Observer*, February 6, 1955.



Creating Russell Avenue, 1942.
Deed book 967, page 357, Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds.



Extending Russell Avenue, creating Jennings Street, 1945.
Map book 5, page 3, Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds.

Ervin kept Russell Avenue much as Mrs. Hendrix's surveyor had drawn it, ending at a point where the land sloped down sharply to Stewart Creek (which would become the route of Interstate 77 in the 1970s). Off of Russell Avenue he created new Orvis Place, Gunn Street, Waddell Street and Dean Street, plus short Miles Court, Heil Place and Kay Street. He also joined the extant block of Jennings with Mulberry Street, which already existed south of his land – creating an avenue that unexpectedly changes names as you head south off of Russell. All of Ervin's avenues curved with the lay of the land rather than conforming to a rigid grid as older areas (such as McCrorey Heights) had often done.

The seclusion of the neighborhood was enhanced by the fact that it wrapped around existing Oaklawn Cemetery, a large and well-appointed privately-owned cemetery, white-only at that time but integrated in the mid 1960s. Part of the cemetery was split off to create a neighborhood park facing Waddell Street for the Oaklawn Park neighborhood about 1968.²⁸

²⁸ “An unused part of the rear area of the graveyard which fronts on Oaklawn Avenue was developed into a park by the city almost two years ago,” wrote Rev. Raymond Worsley in a letter to the editor in the *Charlotte Observer*, June 2, 1970.



Plat map of northwestern portion of Oaklawn Park, at left, and southwestern portion, at right, 1955 (source: Mecklenburg County Plat Map Book 7/Sheet 325, at left, and Sheet 327, at right)



Plat map of a southwestern portion of Oaklawn Park, 1955 -- map book 7/sheet 331



Plat map of a southeastern portion of Oaklawn Park, 1955 -- map book 7/sheet 329



Plat map of an extension of Dean Street, 1959 -- map book 8/sheet 459

The Gunn and Waddell street names helped set a tone for the neighborhood. James H. Gunn was highly respected in Charlotte as a school principal. The institution he led in eastern Mecklenburg County is now known as J.H. Gunn Elementary in his honor. He was also much loved as the music director at what is now First United Presbyterian Church on Seventh Street in downtown Charlotte, one of the city's leading congregations. But his reputation extended further, across the South and beyond, as leader of J.H. Gunn's Dixie Serenaders. One of the early ensembles of the big-band era, the group toured throughout the eastern United States and recorded for Victor Records as "Jimmie Gunn and his Orchestra" in 1936.²⁹ It is not known for whom Waddell Street was named when Ervin laid it out in 1955. But it acquired additional *cache* in 1963 when the Charlotte school system recruited distinguished educator E.E. Waddell from nearby Albemarle, N.C. to become principal of Second Ward High School. Dr. Waddell went on to be a top official in Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools and his wife Joyce Waddell became a long-time elected official with the school board and then the Senate of North Carolina, serving into the 2020s. (It is not known for whom the other streets of Oaklawn Park were named.)

²⁹ "Taylor's Dixie Orchestra (1931) / Jimmie Gunn and His Orchestra (1936)," on-lne at http://www.heypally78rpms.com/2016_07_31_archive.html "News of Statesville Colored Folk," Statesville (NC) Landmark, November 14, 1933, announced a concert by "Jimmie Gunn and His Dixie Serenaders of Charlotte Mr. Gunn has just returned from New England where they played last season, having much success."



Kingsport Times (Tennessee), April 15, 1934.

Charles Ervin announced the creation of Oaklawn Park in a September 1954 newspaper ad that discussed all of his projects around the city:

“OAKLAWN PARK (Colored)

“Streets are now being cut to this new subdivision and construction will start within a very short while. Lots are now being reserved for those who wish a brick veneer home in an up-to-date residential area within the city limits, with all city conveniences.”³⁰

By fall of 1955, a model house was ready for visitors at 1525 Russell Avenue. As buyers signed mortgage agreements, Ervin’s staff took out building permits for a dozen

³⁰ “East Side, West Side, All Around the Town, Ervin Homes are Well Planned,” advertisement in *Charlotte Observer*, September 19, 1954.

The streets were officially put on record in the plat map books at the Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office in September 1955, except for the lower part of Dean Street in February 1959. Map Book 7, pages 325 – 331. Lower portion of Dean Street, February 25, 1959, Map Book 8, page 459.

or more houses at a time. Then the construction crews got to work. Today nearly all dwellings date from 1957, 1958, 1959 and 1960. When the city directory began covering the neighborhood in 1961, almost every home was occupied.

Oaklawn Park Homes Well-Planned

A "must" for the colored citizens of Charlotte is a visit to **Oaklawn Park**, Charlotte's first really modern subdivision for the Negro homeowner.

Oaklawn Park is ideally located just behind the intersection of Oaklawn Ave. and Beattys Ford road.

To reach the section, drive out to the 1400 block of Beatty's Ford road and turn right on Russell Ave., or down Oaklawn Ave. to Mulberry Ave., just opposite the Catholic Mission.

Once in this modern sub-

division, you will find 160 carefully planned building sites of various sizes. The average lot size is 60 by 150 feet. Many have frontages of 70, 75, or even 90 feet.

Notice too, the many beautiful brick homes already under construction. These homes vary in cost from as low as \$10,000 up to \$12,000.

A typical home in **Oaklawn Park** will have two large bedrooms with big closets, spacious living room, good size

den which may also be used as a third bedroom or dining room, a modern kitchen with plenty of cabinet space, plus a back porch and a storage room for those odds and ends.

Children have no trouble in getting to school in **Oaklawn Park**. One of the prime factors in the location of **Oaklawn Park** is its easy accessibility to elementary and high schools.

Churches, food stores and bus service are only 21 blocks away, just a few min-

utes walk from the front door of a home.

Ervin Construction Co. has spared no expense in planning this modern community, complete with all city conveniences — broad paved streets with curbing, natural gas for heating, and, of course, other necessary utilities such as city sewage, water, street lights, fire hydrants etc.

Because of this planning, one may feel certain that an investment in a new modern Ervin Home is fully protected.



TYPICAL HOME IN OAKLAWN PARK.—The above home is typical of those built in **Oaklawn Park**, Charlotte's finest Negro subdivision. Homes range in price from \$10,000 to \$12,000

in this new residential development and maximum GI and FHA loans are available on all homes in **Oaklawn Park**.

"Maximum GI and FHA loans are available on all homes in Oaklawn Park," reads the caption under the photo of the model residence at 1525 Russell Avenue. *Charlotte Observer*, October 24, 1955.

I A W A I**USE 2 TO 5 P. M.**

6. turn right one block past East Mockwood. Proceed to first street on left, see our sign on the 3rd house on right. A charming home is only 6 months old. One story ranch type with 3 bedrooms, bath, dining room, den, beautiful kitchen, tile oven and range, dishwasher, rug, a sales price of \$24,500.00.

near Rd. West—Four Bedrooms—Here is a fine dining living. This large 4-bedroom home of the Myers Park School as one of Park. It is situated on a large wooded lot. It features that await your inspection. 12 room, paneled den, kitchen, breakfast room, screened porch, large basement, oil tile bath upstairs, ample closet space, a better price \$37,500. Call for an appointment.

1. Residential Area—One story brick home, in perfect condition. Decorated to suit one's taste. Living room, dining room, large kitchen and built-in breakfast room. 3 large bedrooms, kitchen with dishwasher and dining room with ceiling fan for summer enjoyment. 1/2 bath. The lot is wooded and beautifully landscaped.

VPR SECTION—This is the best buy in the city. Roomy, modern kitchen—large panel, washer—laundry room—attached garage listed at \$23,500.

1. frame with 3 full baths at a low, low price. It is about 30 years old but it is in A-1 condition. Good financing on the selling price of \$23,500.

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128 Allen Gant, FR 6-9958
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Howard Dunaway, Jr.

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In That Home Today****A Rainbow At The End**

own your home, so you should see it. It's neat with dining room, space disappearing stairs, garage, a young ones can play safely. This is not miss. Plaza Section. Priced

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then you'll change that, when you own bungalow. Living room, breakfast room, fireplace, disappearing stairs, let us show you, then you'll be singing "Country Club Hills. Only \$790 FHA. Priced to go for \$7500. It won't last. So call now.

Getting Started

it this neat 2 bedroom brick home in room, dining room, nice kitchen, tile, near bus and school. You'll ride of only \$8,000. Can be bought

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ice, then let us show you this brick home sub-division. 3 bedrooms, a pretty kitchen, nice closet space, this and make it yours, Only \$675 \$12,675.

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In Beautiful
ROYAL MANOR*

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Maximum FHA and VA Financing. These homes are now well underway and your inspection is invited anytime. Drive out today and look them over—

DIRECTIONS: Drive out either Park Rd. or Pineville Rd. to Woodlawn Rd. Follow Woodlawn to our sign and proceed 3 blocks to Baylor Drive.

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**HOUSES****OPEN TODAY**

3:00 TO 6:00

SELWYN AVE. SECTION — Drive out Selwyn Ave. to Park Rd., turn left, go 2 blocks, turn left again on Scofield and look for signs.

4 New Homes — For Those Who Want the Best

4 NEW HOMES — 1 story, 6 and 7 room brick colonial type homes. The 7 rooms feature an entrance hall, living room with marble fireplace, separate dining room with double doors opening onto a large screened porch. Modern kitchen with breakfast nook, paneled den, 3 nice bedrooms, 2 full baths, oil heat, attic fan, 52-gal. water heater. Situated on wonderful wooded lots. Priced \$19,700 to \$20,500. See our signs.

2009 MARGUERITE AVE. — 6 rooms. Plaza Section \$10,000.

509 MELBOURNE COURT — (Sedgefield) 5 room brick \$8,450 & I.

600 HARTFORD AVE. — (Colonial Village) 6 room \$13,950 (\$2,100 cash).

4506 WENTWORTH PL. (Madison Park) 6 room \$17,900 (G.I.).

5400 PARK RD. — 6 room, new. \$17,325.

208 WALES AVE. (Off Selwyn Ave.) 6 room brick, near schools. \$15,500.

5465 TOPPING PL. (Parkdale) Old brick \$19,750.

1365 KINGS DR. — Duplex. \$25,750.

MYERS PARK — New 1 story, 7 rooms. \$26,500.

MYERS PARK — 2 story 8 rooms. \$33,000.

SELWYN AVE. — 2 story brick, 8 rooms. \$42,000.

McALWAY RD. — Beautiful 1 story brick home. 3 bedrooms plus den, porch, 2 baths. \$24,700.

NOTE—We have a few nice wooded wooded lots left in the Selwyn Ave. Park Road section. Priced \$2,400 to \$4,500.

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Moving into Oaklawn Park: Early residents

Families notable in Charlotte's history made Oaklawn Park their home in its early years and a large number of the original owners or their descendants remain today in 2019. The Johnson family, publisher of the black *Charlotte Post* newspaper, lived at 1400 Russell Avenue from 1959 onward. Dr. Mary T. Harper, who developed the Black Studies program at UNC Charlotte and co-founded the museum that is now the Harvey Gantt Center for African American Art and Culture, resided at 1323 Dean Street during most of her distinguished career. Rev. Raymond Worsley, and his wife Magnolia a registered nurse, at 1731 Miles Court, who headed the city's leading black Presbyterian Church, became one of Charlotte's most outspoken voices for Civil Rights. Dr. C.W. Williams, best remembered today for founding the C.W. Williams Clinic on the city's underserved west side, resided at 1418 Russell Avenue.

Nearly all of the initial occupants were what would now be called “two career families” and most of the women worked as teachers. Elaine Taylor Brown is one example. Now in her nineties, she still lives in the house at 1400 Waddell that she and her husband, school teacher Clyde H. Brown, moved into in May of 1958. A minister's daughter from Charleston, South Carolina, she had earned a degree in mathematics at Hampton University and aimed to be a statistician, but such jobs were seldom open to African Americans. She became an educator, attaining a masters degree in education from University of Wisconsin. She taught in Charlotte public schools and became the first African American teacher at Huntingtowne Farms Elementary School.³¹ She was also active in the city's social life, president of the Charlotte alumnae chapter of Delta Sigma Theta sorority, sponsors of Charlotte's annual black Debutant Cotillion.³²

Another example of Oaklawn park's high-achieving women was Lydia Pride. Chamos Pride Tate, who still lives in home at 1314 Dean street where she grew up starting in 1959, recalls her father Amos Pride working his way up from maitre d' to management at the Hotel William Barringer and later the Queen Charlotte Hotel. Her mother Lydia Carnell Pride earned masters degrees in music and English and taught music in the public schools for decades. Outside of work, she led community choruses, including Christmas carolers at Good Samaritan hospital, and sang opera with the Charlotte Oratorio, most memorably at the inauguration of President Lyndon Johnson.³³ A 1973 *Observer* article spotlighted Lydia Pride's election as Mid Atlantic regional leader of Jack and Jill, Inc. The elite national organization offered educational and networking opportunities for African American youngsters.³⁴

³¹ Elaine Brown, interview with Cindy Kochanek, April 25, 2019, notes and audio file in the collection of Charlotte Historic District Commission.

³² “Preview Party Next Friday Sets Stage for ASID Designer House,” *Charlotte Observer*, 1982.

³³ Chamos Pride Tate, interview with Candice Leite, May 6, 2019, notes and audio file in the collection of Charlotte Historic District Commission.

³⁴ “She'll Help Jack and Jill Mothers to Help Their Kids,” *Charlotte Observer*, July 9, 1973.

Women who joined the neighborhood after the initial wave in the 1950s had similar levels of accomplishment outside the home. Gladys Ervin, for example, bought the house at 1301 Dean Street in 1970 and was joined there by her niece Eleanor Ervin about 1973. Eleanor worked for the telephone company in billing and the call center for forty years before retiring in 2012. Gladys grew up in Charlotte's Greenville section, graduated in the first class to go all the way through West Charlotte High (1941), went away to business school in Philadelphia and came back to a job with the Charlotte Housing Authority. The CHA was new then and Gladys worked at the city's first black public housing, Fairview Homes. She eventually moved up to become manager, the first African American in that position with the Housing Authority.³⁵

Men in Oaklawn Park held a broad spectrum of jobs – as was typical of post-war FHA/VA subdivisions nationally. Some male heads of household were ministers, educators or owners of small businesses. But such white-collar professionals were outnumbered by blue-collar workmen. This marked it as different from the McCrorey Heights subdivision, begun earlier, closer to downtown. McCrorey Heights held many African American church leaders, school principals, and Johnson C. Smith University professors, but few men who worked in unskilled or semi-skilled jobs.³⁶ It seems likely that the difference is attributable to success of the FHA/VA program in making homeownership possible for a much wider swath of Americans.

The 1961 city directory listed several Oaklawn Park men as custodians or maintenance workers, including Willie Brown at the public library (1411 Orvis Street), Adam Turner at General Mills (1800 Russell Avenue) and Thurston E. Frazier at Lawing Realty (1418 Waddell Street). Others were laborers, such as Willie J. Gilliam (1321 Orvis Street), Clifford Harris (1705 Miles Court) and William Hughes (1513 Russell Avenue) who all sweated at the hot metal furnaces of Charlotte Pipe & Foundry.

“Warehouseman” was another common designation shared by Oaklawn Park men in the 1961 directory, including Ernest Platt (1417 Russell Avenue) who worked for General Tire and Rubber, and Joseph B. Kinnard (1427 Dean Street) and John O. Hines (1515 Dean Street), who both labored for the Roadway Express trucking company. Charlotte was a big regional trucking hub in those days, reputed to be the largest east of Chicago, and those firms seemed to have encouraged a modicum of African American advancement. Howard Johnson, Jr. (1415 Orvis Street) worked as a “jockey,” moving trucks in the yard at Overnight Transfer. David Irby (1508 Russell Avenue) served as clerk at Hennis Freight Lines.

Moving upward in the class structure of jobs available to African Americans circa 1960, nearly a dozen Oaklawn Park men worked for the Post Office. Protests by Civil Rights activists back in the 1940s had opened postal positions to black applicants and that

³⁵ Eleanor Ervin, interview with Cindy Kochanek, May 6, 2019, notes and audio file in the collection of Charlotte Historic District Commission.

³⁶ Tom Hanchett, “McCrorey Heights: Making History in an African American Neighborhood,” 2018, on-line at <https://mccrorey.historysouth.org/>.

line of work became highly desirable for its job security.³⁷ C. Willie McKnight, William Hall and Rueben Scott, for instance, all purchased homes in the 1500 block of Russell Avenue (1501, 1504 and 1519) on postal salaries.

Another dozen or so Oaklawn Park homeowners worked in the building trades. This area of employment, often highly skilled and well paid, dated back to slavery times when most construction was done by African Americans. In the 1960s black tradesmen still dominated such specialties as brick and masonry work. Examples included plasterer Floyd Walls (1509 Dean Street), tile setter Lloyd Williams (1505 Gunn Street), and brickmason Jefferson Reese (1600 Russell Avenue). Andrew Perry (1439 Dean Street) served as business agent for Charlotte's black-run Bricklayers Local Union No. 9, BIMPU of America.

Other skilled workers in Oaklawn Park included Utah Worthy, barber at the Brookhill Barber Shop (1712 Russell Avenue), James A. Smith, window glazier at Pittsburgh Glass (1801 Russell Avenue) and Hezekiah W. Millwer, meat packer at Armour & Co. (1506 Gunn Street). There were also hotel and restaurant workers, such as Samuel A. McEachern, head waiter at the prestigious downtown Hotel William Barringer (1534 Gunn Street), James A. Roddey, chef at the Heart of Charlotte Motel (1828 Russell Avenue), and Louis W. Phillips, a waiter on the dining cars of the Southern Railway (1431 Dean Street).

Black business owners were part of the mix in Oaklawn Park, though numbering only half a dozen people. Napoleon T. Neal (1401 Russell Avenue) ran Double Oaks Sundries, the Modern Newsstand and Oaklawn delicatessen. Melvin A. Quick (1435 Dean Street) owned Quick's Shoe Repair; John L. Brewer (1700 Miles Court) had Brewer's Service Station; James Crawford (1230 Dean Street) operated Crawford's House and Commercial Cleaning.

Oaklawn Park took pride in its education leaders. Along with the numerous women who worked as teachers, men in the classroom included Howard E. Jones (1335 Dean Street) an art teacher at Northwest Junior High and also a well-regarded artist in his own right; Grady A. McDonald (1438 Dean Street) who taught agriculture at Sterling High in then-rural Pineville and later worked internationally teaching farming for the U.S. State Department; and West Charlotte High music teacher William B. Lindsay (1708 Miles Court) who made Civil Rights headlines in 1965 when he was chosen to be one of the initial cohort of four black teachers assigned to white Charlotte schools.

The most prestigious occupations in Oaklawn Park were school principals, ministers and physicians. The neighborhood in 1961 had about half a dozen residents in each of the first two categories and one in the third.

Even more than today, school principals were highly revered in African American Charlotte during the years prior to school desegregation in the mid 1960s. They were usually the community's most learned and accomplished individuals and often served as

³⁷ Willie James Griffin, "Courier of Crisis, Messenger of Hope: Trezzvant W. Anderson and the Black Freedom Struggle for Economic Justice" (Ph.D. dissertation, UNC Chapel Hill, 2016).

spokesmen for African American interests in the wider society. There were almost no other places in government -- nor in the corporate world -- where a black executive hired and led a team, controlled a budget and managed a physical plant.

Oaklawn Park's principals included James Swain (1424 Dean Street) at Druid Hills Elementary; James A. Clark (1446 Dean Street) at Plato Price High School; Jerome T. Moten (1309 Dean Street) was a teacher at Second Ward High when he bought his house, then moved up to Principal at Northwest Junior High in the 1970s; and Calvin C. Davis (1607 Russell Avenue) who taught at York Road High, became principal at Lakeview Elementary, then moved onto Superintendent's staff as director of special education for the Charlotte Mecklenburg School system. James F. Alexander (1331 Orvis Street) headed Mecklenburg College, a black two-year school that was eventually absorbed into Central Piedmont Community College.

Ministers offered religious inspiration and also, like principals, were respected as executives and civic leaders. Rev. Leonard L. Boyd, an AME Zion (African Methodist Episcopal Zion) minister, bought his retirement home in the neighborhood at 1429 Waddell Street after a distinguished career in which he managed the Charlotte-based publication facility for the denomination worldwide. He also served as founding director of the Morrison Training School, North Carolina's first prison that treated young African American lawbreakers not as adults but rather as juveniles to be educated.

Near Rev. Boyd lived Rev. James E. Fiddmont, leader of the Greater Mt. Sinai Baptist Church downtown on Seventh Street. When Fiddmont purchased the new house at 1547 Waddell Street in 1957 for himself and wife Willie J. Fiddmont, a teacher at Myers Street Elementary, he hired busy local photographer James Peeler to take a family photograph. Husband, wife and young daughter, dressed in their Sunday best, stand proudly on the front steps, picture window behind them. Their time in the house would be short-lived, sadly. Rev. Fiddmont died in an automobile accident and the house became the parsonage for Greater Mt. Sinai.³⁸ The longest resident at 1547 Waddell Street, from the 1960s into the 1980s, was Rev. Norman E. Kerry who is best remembered for moving Greater Mt. Sinai to 1243 West Boulevard in the mid 1970s, where it remains one of the westside's largest churches today.³⁹

³⁸ "Auto Wreck Victim Dies," *Charlotte Observer*, February 12, 1958. James Elbert Fiddmont, death certificate, February 15, 1958. I am indebted to fellow Charlotte historian J. Michael Moore for this research.

³⁹ "Church Flourishes Despite Decay at Its Roots," *Charlotte Observer*, October 27, 198.



Rev. Fiddmont and family, James Peeler Collection, Johnson C. Smith University Archives.

Oaklawn Park's sole physician listed in the 1961 city directory was Dr. C. W. Williams. Williams only lived in the neighborhood for a few years but they were crucial ones in an upward trajectory that put him among the city's most energetic medical leaders. Kentucky-born C. Warren Williams came to Charlotte in 1954 after graduating from the prestigious Meharry Medical College in Nashville to be a surgeon at Good Samaritan Hospital.⁴⁰ The institution had made history in the 1880s as one of the South's first black hospitals funded by local government. But by the mid twentieth century its facilities were desperately substandard compared with white Charlotte Memorial Hospital. A decades-long campaign by black physicians to end this second-class treatment took a major step forward in 1961. "Negro Doctor to Join Staff at Memorial," headlined a *Charlotte Observer* article about C.W. Williams.⁴¹ In addition to helping open Charlotte's main hospital to all, Williams also pioneered the notion of neighborhood

⁴⁰ "Dr. C Warren Williams, Charlotte Surgeon," *Charlotte Observer*, November 14, 1967.

⁴¹ "Negro Doctor to Join Staff at Memorial," *Charlotte Observer*, July 12, 1961. People across the South were watching Williams' progress. "May Be First," *Carolina Times* (Durham), July 15, 1961. On the substandard situation at Good Samaritan, see for instance "Good Samaritan Problems: Trustees, Administrator Are Blamed," *Charlotte Observer*, March 10, 1960.

medical clinics in Charlotte – today an important part of healthcare. In 1957 he co-founded Northwest Clinic with physician Dr. Emery L. Rann and dentist Dr. Reginald Hawkins (both also statewide leaders in Civil Rights).⁴² In 1981 he launched the much larger Metrolina Comprehensive Health Center at 3333 Wilkinson Boulevard in west Charlotte. Today it is the C.W. Williams Community Health Center.⁴³ Dr. Williams left his modest home in Oaklawn Park sometime in the 1960s for a much larger residence in the new neighborhood of Hyde Park further out Beatties Ford Road – a neighborhood he co-developed along with fellow physician Dr. Walter Washington.⁴⁴

Though Dr. Williams was the only doctor in Oaklawn Park in the 1961 directory, others lived there over time. Dr. Harold S. Pride, for instance, bought 1508 Waddell Street a year after it was built and resided there the rest of his life.⁴⁵ A Florida native, he earned his Doctorate in Medicine from Meharry Medical College in 1959 and came to Charlotte to work at Good Samaritan Hospital. Along with his career as a pediatrician, Dr. Pride also became a lay leader in the Presbyterian church. He played a role, as well, in developing what is now Charlotte’s Harvey Gantt Center for African American Art and Culture, donating seventy works by local artists in 2004.⁴⁶ His daughter Renee Pride-Dunlap still owns the modest house on Waddell Street – and she serves as president of the Oaklawn Park Neighborhood Association.

Some notable Oaklawn Park residents

In addition to C.W. Williams, Norman Kerry and Harold Pride, dozens of Oaklawn Park people made history in Charlotte. Six stories here will give a sampling of the most notable.

* * *

Anna Hood moved into 1327 Orvis Street with her husband **Rev. Calvin A. Hood** in 1957, the year they got married.⁴⁷ She had grown up in a rural part of

⁴² “Announcing the Formal Opening of Northwest Clinic,” ad in the *Charlotte Observer*, March 10, 1957. The International Style structure still stands at 1218 Beatties Ford Road.

⁴³ John G. Howard, Jr., “The Friendly Village of Hyde Park Estates: A Mid-Twentieth Century African American Suburb in Charlotte, North Carolina” (unpublished report for Charlotte Mecklenburg Planning Commission, 2014), page 12.

⁴⁴ John G. Howard, Jr., “The Friendly Village of Hyde Park Estates: A Mid-Twentieth Century African American Suburb in Charlotte, North Carolina” (unpublished report for Charlotte Mecklenburg Planning Commission, 2014), page 12.

⁴⁵ Renee Pride-Dunlap, email communication with Tom Hanchett, September 12, 2019. “Dr. Harold S. Pride,” funeral program in the collection of Renee Pride-Dunlap.

⁴⁶ “African American ‘Pride’ – AACC Exhibition Looks at the Cream of Area’s Black Artists,” *Charlotte Observer*, April 30, 2004.

⁴⁷ Anna Hood, interview with Cindy Kochanek, April 26, 2019, notes and audio file in the collection of Charlotte Historic District Commission.

Spartanburg County, South Carolina, graduated from South Carolina State University, then taught business administration at Jefferson High School in York County just south of Charlotte before meeting Calvin at Johnson C. Smith University football game.

The young couple bought their house with a GI mortgage and were able to work with the Ervin company as it was being built, picking the finishes, paint colors, window blinds and such. There were originally two bedrooms and a single bathroom. As children were born, additions in 1968 and 1984 brought it up to three bedroom and three baths.

Calvin Hood, a biblical studies professor and Presbyterian minister, taught for all his career at Johnson C. Smith University, where he had been valedictorian of the class in 1951. “In the early 1960s,” noted a *Charlotte Observer* obituary, “Dr. Hood was in the forefront with Dr. Reginald Hawkins fighting for integrated food and medical facilities in the city of Charlotte. He and other leaders carried busloads of students from Johnson C. Smith University where they met Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in the historic march from Selma to Montgomery.”⁴⁸ Dr. and Mrs. Hood signed on with fellow JCSU professor Darius Swann and others as co-litigants in the landmark *Swann v Mecklenburg* school busing lawsuit decided by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1971.⁴⁹

Anna Hood made Civil Rights history in her own right. In 1963 she became the first person of color hired at the Social Security Administration’s Charlotte-area office. She started as a clerk-typist, then worked up to claims representative before retiring in 1990. She was named co-winner of the 1997 Women’s Equality Day Award from the Mecklenburg County Women’s Commission and was honored in the 2019 publication *Who’s Who in Black Charlotte*.⁵⁰

* * *

In a neighborhood of many teachers, **Clara H. Jones** is remembered as uncommonly influential. She and husband Cedric Jones -- also a teacher well-regarded for his decades at Garinger High School -- lived at 1506 Dean Street.⁵¹ Mrs. Jones made the little house into a music studio where she instructed hundreds of students over the decades, in addition to teaching choral music in the public schools. The family, wrote North Carolina’s *Our State Magazine*, “had to expand their home in west Charlotte six times. That’s because the piano collection kept swelling. They are everywhere: vertical and horizontal, console and studio, baby grand and ballroom grand – twenty-six in all.”⁵²

⁴⁸ Calvin A. Hood obituary, *Charlotte Observer*, May 12, 1998.

⁴⁹ Rev. Hood Dies at 74,” *Charlotte Observer*, May 14, 1998.

⁵⁰ “Equality Award Winner’s Involvement Stays Strong,” *Charlotte Observer*, September 14, 1997. Anna Hood, interview with Cindy Kochanek, April 26, 2019, notes and audio file in the collection of Charlotte Historic District Commission. “Who’s Who in Black Charlotte, a Display of Excellence,” *Q City Metro*, April 24, 2019.

⁵¹ “A Mainstay in Education and Faith,” *Charlotte Observer*, October 8, 2007.

⁵² “Piano Lessons,” *Our State Magazine*, November 20, 2010.

Charlotte's Arts and Science Council recognized Mrs. Jones in 2012 with its ASC Honors Lifetime Achievement Award, and an annual Clara H. Jones Summer Institute at Community School of the Arts carries on her legacy. Mrs. Jones' teaching instilled a work ethic as well as a love of music. Over one piano, said the *Charlotte Observer* in 1972, hung the motto "Leisure is a beautiful garment – but it will not do for constant wear."⁵³ The four Jones children all grew up playing instruments, of course, but they also took the broader lessons to heart. Daughter Cedrella, for instance, graduated from elite Vassar College and Harvard Medical School, becoming chief of staff at Atlanta's Veterans Administration Hospital. Son Rev. Cedric H. Jones, Jr., is a long-serving and influential pastor of Mt. Zion Baptist Church in downtown Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

* * *

Rev. Raymond Worsley listed his work as instructor at Johnson C. Smith University in 1961, soon after when he moved into 1713 Miles Court in Oaklawn Park, but his larger calling was as a Presbyterian minister of unusually strong civic vision.⁵⁴ During the 1950s and 1960s he led a pair of rural churches in Mecklenburg County: McClintock near today's Carowinds and Lawrence Chapel in Pineville. The pay was small for what was considered a part-time job, so he was glad to win appointment in 1954 – at age 29 -- as the first Director of Negro Recreation with Mecklenburg County Park and Recreation.⁵⁵ In 1971 he took charge of Grier Heights Presbyterian Church and made it a spark for uplift of the impoverished Grier Heights/Billingsville neighborhood southeast of downtown Charlotte.⁵⁶ In 1978 he was called to head the prestigious First United Presbyterian Church on Seventh Street in the heart of Charlotte, where he finished out his career in the 1990s.⁵⁷ On dozens of issues, Raymond Worsley was an outspoken public voice for racial equality.

He traced that fire for justice back to a childhood incident with his mother in their hometown of Rocky Mount in eastern North Carolina. "I was on the bus, a little city bus," he recalled in an oral history interview, "and they asked my mother to move. I've never forgotten that. Just like that, see. That the blacks had to move back so that the

⁵³ "Mother's Lessons Led Jones Girls to Music," *Charlotte Observer*, April 30, 1971.

⁵⁴ The building permit for 1713 Miles Court was issued on June 26, 1956, making it one of the first dwellings constructed by Ervin in Oaklawn Park. Building permit records on microfilm, Carolina Room, Charlotte Mecklenburg Library.

⁵⁵ "Recreation Chief Raymond Worsley," *Charlotte Observer*, September 18, 1954.

⁵⁶ "Serving God" page of the "Grier Heights Presbyterian Church website, on-line at <http://www.grierheightspc.org/GHPC.html>.

⁵⁷ "Installation Service of the Reverend Raymond Worsley, January 8, 1978, First United Presbyterian Church," on-line at Digital Smith, Duke Library, Johnson C Smith University, <https://jcsu.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15170coll10/id/114/rec/6> Worsley passed away on July 24, 2019: <https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/charlotte/obituary.aspx?n=william-raymond-worsley&pid=193500761&fhid=21570>

whites could have a seat. I have never forgotten that. I was, I would say maybe 12 or 13, but I have never forgotten that, in Rocky Mount, North Carolina. That stayed in my mind all of my life up until the present time, [especially] when I was in the Civil Rights movement.”⁵⁸

Worsley came to Charlotte to study at Johnson C. Smith University. He took time out to fight in World War II as one of the earliest African Americans in the Marines. Back stateside, he went on for a masters degree at Union Theological Seminary and eventually earned a doctorate in theology at Emory University in Atlanta.⁵⁹ Along the way he married Magnolia A. Worsley, whose income as a nurse -- at C.W. Williams’ Northwest Medical Clinic among other places -- would help keep the family’s finances afloat. Rev. Worsley began to teach part-time at JCSU in 1957. Over the years he became one of the University’s main professors of religion.

Both of Raymond Worsley’s vocations, church leadership and classroom teaching, came together in a defining episode in 1965. Down in Alabama, Civil Rights leaders were making international headlines as they campaigned for voting rights. When marchers attempted to walk from Selma to the state capitol in Montgomery to present their demands, police on horseback brutally beat and tear-gassed them. Television broadcasts of the attack sparked outcry around the world. At Johnson C. Smith University, Rev. Worsley and fellow religion professor Darius Swann called a meeting of students. “I told those students that ‘justice’ was a word that Jesus used over and over again,” Swann later recalled; “Our students needed to be a part.” On March 25th, a busload of students led by Swann and Worsley joined Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s marchers in Montgomery. Years later, Worsley still remembered the emotion and the risk: “We all realized we were taking a serious step.”⁶⁰ Historians today credit the Selma to Montgomery March with sparking the passage of the landmark 1965 Voting Rights Act.

The experience in Montgomery seems to have transformed Worsley. Before 1965, he worked largely behind the scenes for social change. After 1965, he showed no reluctance to take public stands and demand equality in all aspects of Charlotte life. He mobilized residents in Grier Heights, which like most black areas had few city services, to fight for a park and a community center in their neighborhood.⁶¹ He often joined forces with crusading dentist Dr. Reginald Hawkins, including serving as a key campaign

⁵⁸ Raymond Worsley, interview with John Fraser, 2017, audio file and transcript available on-line from Special Collections, Atkins Library, UNC Charlotte, at the website <https://nsv.uncc.edu/interview/ohwo0483.html>.

⁵⁹ “Overdue Salute for a Black Marine,” *Charlotte Observer*, August 27, 2011. “I’ll Never Forget the Crosses,” *Charlotte Observer*, September 25, 2007.

⁶⁰ “Honoring the Struggle: Local Activists and Everyday Residents – Black and White – Did Their Part for Change,” *Charlotte Observer*, July 24, 2005.

⁶¹ “Strawn Apartments Win Park – Grier Heights Losing Out?” *Charlotte Observer*, March 14, 1972. See also Rev. Worsley’s appearance before Charlotte City Council to call for a Grier Heights community center, Charlotte City Council Minutes, March 13, 1972, minute book 56, page 479.

aid in 1968 when Hawkins became the first African American to run for governor of North Carolina. Worsley peppered the *Charlotte Observer* with letters to the editor: defending the embattled “Wilmington 10” Civil Rights activists; criticizing changes at West Charlotte High School; applauding the hiring of black office staff at Carowinds amusement park.⁶²

Especially, he called out whites who assumed that African Americans should bear the burden of change. He was not ready to let black schools, neighborhoods and other institutions be weakened as Civil Rights advanced. “Perhaps the issue can be understood in a parable I heard,” he wrote. “A chicken and pig saw a hungry man. The chicken said to the pig, ‘Let’s give this man some ham and eggs.’ Black people feel that they and their communities should not have to play the pig role over and over and over.”⁶³

* * *

Dr. Mary T. Harper and husband **Joseph W. Harper III** moved to 1323 Dean Street when it was new. The couple had married in 1956 and found jobs as schoolteachers in Lincolnton, NC. They wanted to be in Charlotte, though. Joseph had grown up there and attended Johnson C. Smith University, and his parents had recently built a house in McCrorey Heights. In 1959, Mary found work in a Charlotte area school and the couple signed a mortgage for one of the smartly-priced houses in Oaklawn Park.

For nearly a decade, Joseph kept on working at Newbold High in Lincolnton, driving about an hour each way every day from Oaklawn Park. He taught science and coached football, attaining a record of 75 wins and only 29 losses, as well as basketball, where he notched 186 wins, 52 losses. That made him one of the most successful athletic leaders in the state. The North Carolina High School Athletic Association named him a Coach of the Year for football in 1966 and basketball in 1967. He was inducted into the Lincoln County Sports Hall of Fame in 2002.

The commuting ended when Harper took a position in 1968 at Charlotte’s East Mecklenburg High, a formerly all-white school. Initially a teacher and coach, he soon moved up to Assistant Principal. For many white parents, Assistant Principal Joseph Harper III would be the first African American they had ever encountered in a position of power.

Meanwhile Mary Turner Harper was gaining a high profile as an educator. At Plato Price school, future U.S. Congressman Mel Watt was among her early students. All the while, she was working on her own Masters in Education from UNC Greensboro. She moved up to college level teaching in the late 1960s, starting at Johnson C. Smith University. In 1971 she signed on as one of the first African American professors at UNC Charlotte — even as she completed her Ph.D. in English at Union Graduate School.

⁶² “Special Prayers Offered for ‘Wilmington 10,’” *Charlotte Observer*, August 16, 1976. “Open School Dooms West Charlotte,” *Charlotte Observer*, February 19, 1974. “Lord Works in Many Ways,” *Charlotte Observer*, January 5, 1973.

⁶³ “Open School Dooms West Charlotte,” *Charlotte Observer*, February 19, 1974.

She made waves. Mary T. Harper and fellow professor Dr. Bertha Maxwell Roddey helped create UNC Charlotte's black studies program, working in partnership with student leaders including future national NAACP chief Ben Chavis. African/African American Studies was a new field then, unknown in formerly all-white colleges. The unrelenting effort by Harper, Roddey and their pupils helped it win respect not just at UNC Charlotte, but also as an academic field at universities nation-wide.

For Mary Harper, African American cultural study was too important to be limited only to college campuses. In 1974 she authored a proposal entitled "Vistas Unlimited: The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Afro-American Cultural and Service Center." It called for the creation of a new institution in Charlotte to showcase black heritage. In 1976 it became a reality as the Afro-American Cultural Center, thanks to much work by Harper and Roddey together with student and community allies. Today it is the Harvey B. Gantt Center for African American Art and Culture.

* * *

The 1961 city directory, the first to show Willie Johnson living at 1400 Russell Avenue, listed the new homeowner as "reporter." That already marked him as an important history-maker in Charlotte. And his career was just beginning.

Willie Lee Johnson, Sr. (3.7.1918 – 6.20.1988) had long dreamed of being a homeowner. Back in 1950 he had helped found an organization of "prospective homeowners" who met at Anthony's Barber Shop. It "extended an invitation to all Negroes — veterans and non-veterans — who are interested in building a home to attend the meetings."⁶⁴

He also had long hungered to be a journalist, recalls son Gerald Oren Johnson.⁶⁵ Willie Johnson wrote freelance articles from Charlotte for the *Baltimore Afro-American* and other national publications. His day-job was with the Post Office where, according to family tradition, he became the city's first black letter carrier.⁶⁶ In the late 1950s, the son recalls, Willie Johnson broke the journalism color barrier in Charlotte, winning a job as the first black staffer at the *Charlotte News*, the city's afternoon daily. There he covered African American sports.

Charlotte also had a proud black newspaper. Dr. Nathaniel Tross published the *Charlotte Post*, an African American weekly whose history stretched back to 1874. When Tross died in 1971, the commercial printer who had handled production took the newspaper over and hired Willie Johnson, Sr., to run it. In 1974, Gerald Johnson recalls, his father secured a city loan that allowed the family to become publishers of the *Post*.

⁶⁴ "Home Owners Will Organize," *Charlotte Observer*, June 25, 1950.

⁶⁵ Johnson, Gerald, telephone interview with Tom Hanchett, January 15, 2017.

⁶⁶ "Helping Others is Just Her Way," *Charlotte Observer*, May 6, 1990.

Today **Gerald Oren Johnson** still lives in the house at 1400 Russell Avenue where he grew up. He graduated from West Charlotte High in 1965, attained a masters in mathematics at Villanova, worked as a computer programmer, then taught computer science at JCSU. In 1978 he joined what is now Bank of America as a programmer and earned promotion to vice president. In 1986 he became CEO and publisher of the *Charlotte Post*, continuing to the present day.⁶⁷

* * *

Love Harrell (1924-2006), born in Marshville, North Carolina moved to Charlotte in 1944 in search of a better life and new opportunities. He worked for Ryder Truck Line as a driver for 38 years. In 1958, Love married Pearline Henderson and they purchased their home at 1446 Waddell Street in Oaklawn Park that same year. Despite little formal education, Love became a successful entrepreneur, starting and operating a pick-up and delivery service for Gonines Dry Cleaners from 1963-1968. Love also owned and operated two different Golf Oil Stations from 1957-1979, the first one located on Oaklawn Avenue and the later one on West Boulevard. In 1979, Love retired from Ryder Truck Line, sold the Golf Oil Station on West Boulevard and transitioned to a new venture, a lawn service business, which he operated until age 79. Love passed away after a paralyzing fall in 2006. Love's wife Pearline still resides at 1446 Waddell Street, and is known as a devoted wife, mother and for her gift of cooking. Early in their marriage, Pearline worked as a beautician for two years and a cook in the Charlotte Mecklenburg School system for five years. Pearline also worked at Duff-Norton for twenty years. Now in retirement, Pearline is proud to be one of the few original residents that still reside in Oaklawn Park.

* * *

Shirley Chiles' father-in-law was a general contractor who owned Chiles Construction and built 1816 Russell Avenue in 1954. As a general contractor Mr. Chiles and his wife, a secretary at Double Oaks Elementary School, created the floorplan and selected all the materials on the interior and exterior of the building. Shirley's husband, Chiles, grew up at 1816 Russell Avenue and was the neighborhood paperboy in his youth. Shirley recalls her husband and his older siblings talking about the dirt roads and playing in Oaklawn Cemetery, including golf! Mr. Chiles made a living as a firefighter and held down a second job at Office Environments that did work at what was then Wachovia Bank, which is how Shirley and her husband met. After the passing of her mother-in-law (May 1998) and husband (December 1998), Shirley and her son moved to 1816 Russell Avenue to help her father-in-law. Shirley recalls the many changes made to the house since it was first constructed in 1954, including the original roll-out windows, updates to the kitchen and bath, and rear addition of two additional bedrooms, a laundry room and an additional bathroom. Originally, the

⁶⁷ "Gerald Johnson," on "The History Makers" website, on-line at <http://www.thehistorymakers.org/biography/gerald-johnson-39>

laundry was in the kitchen. Other updates include the addition of crown and picture molding in the dining room, driveway widening and refacing of the retaining wall.⁶⁸

* * *

Original neighborhood residents also include⁶⁹:

Lawrence and Martha Brooks moved into their home at 1315 Orvis Street in 1956. Mr. Brooks formed his own company known as Brooks Concrete Company and worked throughout the city and beyond. Martha was a homemaker. They were the parents of eleven children. Their back yard was a playground for their children along with the neighborhood children.

Willie James and Trannie Gilliam moved into their home at 1321 Orvis Streets in 1957. He worked at Charlotte Pipe and Foundry and Trannie worked at Delmar Studios. They were the parents of five children.

James and Charlotte Alexander moved into their home at 1331 Orvis Street in 1958. He was Director of Carver College which was later named as Mecklenburg College. Charlotte was a homemaker. They were the parents of two children.

William “Jake” sand Inez Montgomery moved into their home at 1335 Orvis Street in 1956. William was a postal employee and Inez was a practical nurse. They had four children.

Rudolph “Rudy” and Juanita Torrence moved into their home at 1339 Orvis Street in 1956. He was among the first persons of color to be hired as a city policeman. Juanita was an employee of Wachovia Bank. They were the parents of one son.

Robert and Ruth Cochrane moved into their home at 1347 in 1956. He was a packer at the Pete Kaufman Company. Ruth was an employee of The Nalle Clinic.

Julius and Elizabeth Dixon moved into their home in 1956. He worked as an interviewer at the State Employment Security Commission. Elizabeth was a teacher in the local school system. They also had a realty company and were the parents of five children.

⁶⁸ Shirley Chiles, interview with Candice Leite, August 8, 2019, notes and audio file in the collection of Charlotte Historic District Commission.

⁶⁹ Anna Hood, neighborhood resident, information provided to Charlotte Historic District Commission staff 12 October 2019.

Reverend Robert and Mrs. Leak moved into their home at 1407 Orvis Street in 1956. He worked at International and was the Pastor at New St. John Baptist Church. She was an employee of Belk Department Store. They had three children.

Willie and Daisy Brown moved into their home at 1411 Orvis Street in 1957. He worked as a custodian at the Public Library. Daisy was a machine operator at The Button Shop and was a seamstress as well.

Howard and Mary Johnson occupied 1415 Orvis Street in 1956. He was a Postal employee and she was a secretary in the local school system. They had two children.

Robert “Bob” and Virginia Wood moved into 1427 Orvis Street in 1955. Both were teachers in the local school system. He was promoted as a principal in the local school system. They had four children. Bob also served as President of Oaklawn Park Community Organization.

Wilbur and Mable Latimer occupied 1431 Orvis Street in 1955. They were owners of Latimer’s House and Commercial Cleaning Service. Mable also worked at the airport and served a term as President of Oaklawn Park Community Organization. They were the parents of three children.

ARCHITECTURAL ESSAY

Oaklawn Park today is a time-capsule of late 1950s suburban architecture and planning. No two Oaklawn Park houses looked exactly alike, but all were quite similar, built during the years 1955 – 1961 by Charles Ervin Construction crews. Nearly all are ranch style, the dominant fashion of the 1950s, each a simple rectangular box with the long side facing the street under a low-pitched gable roof. A few are split-levels: ranches with a two-story section. Nearly all exteriors are brick, usually red, often enlivened with a decorative touch of yellow brick or stonework. Every house has a big “picture window” in its front living room.



Johnson House, 1400 Russell Avenue

Representative Oaklawn Park houses, photos by Historic Districts Commission, 2019.



Irby House, 1500 Russell Avenue

The houses each sit near the center of a grassy lot of about a quarter acre or slightly less, set back uniformly from the street. Avenues curve with the natural geography, per FHA guidelines. Russell Avenue is the longest street and forms the neighborhood spine, bringing visitors from Beatties Ford Road. It runs along a natural ridgeline. The other major streets hang off of it: Waddell and Dean, to the south, Gunn to the north. Two minor streets, Mulberry and Kay, connect to adjacent subdivisions. At the edge of Oaklawn Park’s street network, land dips down to small creeks – except at the south where Oaklawn Cemetery forms the boundary. The cemetery is fenced and cannot be entered from the neighborhood.

The Oaklawn Park neighborhood continues to look much as it did in its early hey-day half a century ago. Marvin Brown, a North Carolina based historic preservation consultant, prepared a survey in 2010 that resulted in Oaklawn Park being labelled as “eligible for the National Register of Historic Places” by the North Carolina State Preservation Office. He wrote: “Oaklawn Park’s houses have been little altered over the years, retaining original brick-veneered walls, sash, and accents of applied brick and stone.” Many houses have additions, but usually at the rear rather than disrupting the appearance from the street. Most additions were done for the original owners as their families grew over the years and thus seldom disrupt the initial design aesthetic. Noted Brown: “The lots continue to be grassy and

well-maintained with a scattering of mature shade trees, mostly at their rear. There is virtually no modern infill in the neighborhood.”⁷⁰

* * *

Oaklawn Park, from its very beginning in the late 1950s, held a remarkable array of occupational levels -- but the size and architecture of the dwellings gave little hint of that. Each house had two or three bedrooms with total square footage under 1200 square feet, smallish by today’s standards. No one got a fancier house than anyone else, nor did people clump together by occupation. The 1400 block of Dean Street, for instance, had a policeman, a Post Office clerk, a warehouse laborer, a Southern Railway waiter and the owner of Quick’s Shoe Repair on one side of the street, while on the other were a drugstore deliveryman, an Ervin Construction laborer, two Post Office clerks and two school principals.


In one way, the mix harked back to earlier black neighborhoods such as Charlotte’s Brooklyn. There, families at every income level might share a typical block. Physician and U.S. diplomat Dr. J.T. Williams, for example, resided in a large and stylish two-story dwelling on Brevard Street around the corner from two-room “shotgun” rental houses on Fourth Street. People still talk fondly of how that mix created an active community in which everyone was a member, no matter how rich or poor. *If a child misbehaved, someone was always watching, it is said. They’d give you a spanking right there, then tell your parents so you got another when you got home.*

But in other ways, the landscape in Oaklawn Park was something new. In Brooklyn, most folks had been renters. Here, everyone owned their own home. There, you could gauge a family’s income status by looking at the size and condition of their abode. Here you could not.

* * *

Ervin became Charlotte’s biggest developer in part by investing aggressively in advertising. In September of 1954, for instance, he participated in a thick “Homebuilders” ad section of the *Charlotte Observer*. The newspaper staff wrote fawning articles about aspects of the firm’s work. Ervin’s suppliers purchased ads touting their products. From that it is possible to track specific materials used in Ervin dwellings, from Stanly Shale brick to Autolok brand aluminum-frame windows.


⁷⁰ Marvin Brown, “Intensive-Level Historic Architectural Analysis for Conversion of High Occupancy Vehicle Lanes to High Occupancy Toll Lanes on I-77 Between I-277 and I-85, Charlotte, Mecklenburg County” (Morrisville, NC: URS Corporation – North Carolina, 2012), pp. 31 – 41.



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


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PROPOSED HISTORIC DISTRICT BOUNDARY



Left: Red line shows the Historic District boundary proposed by Charlotte Historic District Commission in partnership with the Oaklawn Park Neighborhood Association, July 2019

Right: Plat maps superimposed on 2019 aerial photo show the location of Charles Ervin's streets and blocks

Boundary Description:

The Oaklawn Park Neighborhood map (left above), created by the City of Charlotte Planning, Design and Development Department, July 2019, depicts the proposed Oaklawn Park Historic District Boundary.

The proposed district contains 220 dwellings, all constructed as single-family residences for African American homebuyers in the two decades following World War II. Oaklawn Park is a well-preserved time-capsule of mid-century American residential architecture and suburban design.

Boundary Justification:

1. **The boundary of the Oaklawn Park Historic District encompasses all of the Oaklawn Park subdivision platted and built by Charles Ervin from 1954 to 1961.**

Russell Avenue is the neighborhood's central street -- the main access point into the neighborhood from the Beatties Ford Road Corridor and also the street from which all other streets spring. The curvilinear pattern of the secondary streets, Orvis, Gunn, Waddell, Dean and Mulberry, form a circulation network championed by the FHA principles for neighborhood planning.

All houses in these blocks were constructed by Ervin's crews, mostly one-story brick Ranch style dwellings plus a handful of brick-and-clapboard Split Level residences. Many of the houses have received rear additions, often by their original owners, but only two have been substantially altered at the front and three masonry houses have been painted. No houses have been demolished, nor have any new dwellings been constructed since 1961.

2. The Historic District also includes three additional blocks of Russell Avenue (1700, 1800 and 1900) at the entrance to the neighborhood, as well as the 1500 block of Jennings Street.

Ervin's Oaklawn Park subdivision incorporated part of pre-existing Russell Avenue, platted in 1942 by Margaret Welch-Russell and extended in 1945 by Mrs. A.L. Hendrix. The Hendrix plat also created the 1500 block of Jennings Street, which Ervin connected seamlessly into his Mulberry Street.

The Oaklawn Park Neighborhood Association has long identified the neighborhood as beginning at the intersection of Russell Avenue and Welch Street. The sign placed by the Association to welcome visitors to the neighborhood stands on the southeast corner of Russell at Welch. The names of those streets recall early landowner Margaret Welch Russell.

Houses in these blocks were not constructed by Ervin, but nearly all are in the same Ranch style with brick exteriors and similar square footage.

Representative streetscapes in Oaklawn Park
Photographed by Marvin Brown, 2012⁷¹



1400 block of Dean Street

⁷¹ Marvin Brown, “Intensive-Level Historic Architectural Analysis for Conversion of High Occupancy Vehicle Lanes to High Occupancy Toll Lanes on I-77 Between I-277 and I-85, Charlotte, Mecklenburg County” (Morrisville, NC: URS Corporation – North Carolina, 2012), pp. 31 – 41.



1236 Dean Street (right)



1500 Gunn Street (right) and 1506 Gunn Street (left), west of Kay Street



1507 Russell Street (right) and 1513 Russell Street (center)



1400 Waddell Street (right) and 1410 Waddell Street (left), looking up from Dean Street

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