



1648 Patton Avenue

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



Built in 1976 for Matilda Spears, an educator and pathbreaking school principal, wife of important Charlotte economic leader Arthur Eugene “A.E.” Spears.

As one might suspect from this remarkable house, Mrs. Spears lived a remarkable life. When she died in 1999, her funeral program listed her as Matilda Brandon Hairston Spears Samuda (1.22.1905-4.12.1999) and described her three marriages and a bevy of accomplishments stretching across nearly the whole of the 20th century.

Matilda Brandon was born in Halifax County in rural southern Virginia, the second of thirteen children. She graduated from elementary school in just three years and by her early teens had already embarked on her career as a teacher.

She met AME Zion minister Rev. George Howard Hairston and married him in Williamston, West Virginia. When they wed, neither had completed high school. As Rev. Hairston served at a succession of

small churches in Tennessee and North Carolina, Matilda “was instrumental in helping her husband obtain his high school diploma,” earned one herself, then got a Bachelor’s degree in early childhood education at Winston Salem State. She would eventually secure a Masters from Temple University in Philadelphia and do graduate study at New York University.

Rev. Hairston’s work took him to Charlotte where he pastored Clinton Chapel on Mint Street, the city’s oldest and largest AME Zion congregation. Matilda taught at small schools in Gaston County, then at Charlotte’s venerable Myers Street School during the 1950s. In the 1960s she moved into administration as a school principal. According to her funeral program, she became “one of the first black female school principals to work in an integrated community when she became Principal of Park Road Elementary.” She also served as principal at Zeb Vance Elementary School, and late in her career taught as Associate Professor of Education at Barber Scotia College.

Rev. Hairston died unexpectedly in 1950 and several years later Matilda became the second wife of Charlotte insurance and banking executive A.E. Spears. In 1976, during that marriage, she built this house.

Arthur Eugene Spears headed the Charlotte office of North Carolina Mutual Insurance. NC Mutual, headquartered in Durham, NC, ranked as perhaps the largest African American economic force in the Southeast. With branches throughout several states, it not only helped black families earn a measure of security thanks to insurance, but it also amassed a pool of investment capital that seeded African American enterprises. Among those was Mechanics and Farmers Bank in Durham. A.E. Spears served on the board of the bank and played a key role in getting Mechanics & Farmers to open a Charlotte branch in a handsome new building on Beatties Ford Road in 1963 — a fact mentioned in his obituary in the Baltimore-based national newspaper *The Afro American*.

Mr. Spears’ longtime home was at 2032 Oaklawn Avenue on the edge of McCrorey Heights. When the City widened Oaklawn in 1974, it took much of the dwelling’s front yard. That evidently inspired Mrs. Spears to acquire this lot on Patton Avenue deeper in the neighborhood. She took out the permit to build the new residence in 1976. She continued to live here after Mr. Spears passed away at age 96 in 1981.

Late in her long life, Matilda married A. James Samuda (10.29.1925 – 6.13.2011). Mr. Samuda grew up in Boston, then won a full scholarship to prestigious Howard University in Washington, DC, where he earned an engineering degree. He became an engineer with the U.S. Department of Commerce, supervisor of the Southern Region by the time he retired.

Matilda and James Samuda were active members of First United Presbyterian Church in downtown Charlotte, an affiliation shared by many McCrorey Heights neighbors. Both were elected as Elders, Mrs. Samuda became one of the first female Deacons, and she also served as Supervisor of Religious Education.

The couple loved to travel. Matilda's funeral program proudly listed her lifetime of trips to many destinations in Asia, Africa, Europe, the Caribbean "and most of the states in the United States."



ARCHITECTURE

The Matilda Spears House is one of the most architecturally important dwellings in McCrorey Heights, an early work of the noted African American architect Harvey Gantt. Born in Charleston, SC, Gantt first garnered national attention when he integrated the South Carolina state university system, earning admission to the architecture graduate program at Clemson University in 1963. He would go on to make Civil Rights history again when he won two terms as Charlotte's first black mayor 1983 – 1987.

This residence dates from 1976, soon after Gantt launched his own architecture office Gantt-Huberman in 1971. The home's bold massing, with sharply angled roofs meeting red brick walls, was a hallmark of designs that flowed from Gantt's pen. See also his First Baptist Church, constructed five years later nearby in McCrorey Heights. The Spears House is aligned to its prominent corner lot at Patton and Clifton avenues. The long side of the dwelling, include a large front chimney, faces Patton Avenue. A rear block is offset in such a way as to create a "notch" facing the corner.

BUILDING PERMITS

[Patton-1648-permit-a](#)

Date issued: February 11, 1976

Owner: Mrs. Matilda Spears

Contractor: Evans Bros. Homebuilding, Lakeview Rd.

Estimated cost: \$58,875

Other permit info: new residence

FIRST APPEARED IN CITY DIRECTORY

1978 – Matilda Spears, Retired.

City directory collection, Robinson-Spangler Carolina Room, Charlotte Mecklenburg Library.

OBITUARIES

[Spears, Matilda](#), Funeral program in the History Room, First United Presbyterian Church, Charlotte.

[Samuda, James](#), Funeral program in the History Room, First United Presbyterian Church, Charlotte.

RESOURCES

"AE Spears, NC Banker, dead at 96," *Afro American*, March 28, 1981.

"Harvey Bernard Gantt," entry in the website *North Carolina Modernist Houses*. On-line at: <http://www.ncmodernist.org/gantt.htm>

Harvey Gantt told Tom Hanchett that Gantt designed this house for Mrs. Spears.

"School Plan Called 'One Way Street,'" *Afro American*, August 2, 1969.

"A resolution authorizing condemnation proceedings for the acquisition of property belonging to A.E. Spears and wife Matilda B. Spears," October 14, 1974, City of Charlotte Resolutions Book 10, page 143. On-line at: <http://charlottenc.gov/CityClerk/Resolutions/October%2014,%201974.pdf>

[Patton-1648-permit](#)

Date issued: February 19, 1976

Owner: Matilda Spears

Contractor: Horne Electric

Other permit info: "Saw service" [initial elec connection during construction]

Building permit files, Robinson-Spangler Carolina Room, Charlotte Mecklenburg Library.

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