**UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR**  
**NATIONAL PARK SERVICE**

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS  
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS

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**1 NAME**  
HISTORIC  
John Sprunt Hill House

AND/OR COMMON

---

**2 LOCATION**  
**STREET & NUMBER**  
900 South Duke Street

**CITY, TOWN**  
Durham  
**VICINITY OF**  
**CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT**  
4th

**STATE**  
North Carolina  
**CODE**  
37  
**COUNTY**  
Durham  
**CODE**  
63

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**3 CLASSIFICATION**

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<th>STATUS</th>
<th>PRESENT USE</th>
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<td><em>OCCUPIED</em></td>
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<td><em>WORK IN PROGRESS</em></td>
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<td><em>PUBLIC ACQUISITION</em></td>
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<td><em>ENTERTAINMENT</em></td>
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**4 OWNER OF PROPERTY**

**NAME**  
Annie Watts Hill Foundation

**STREET & NUMBER**  
900 South Duke Street

**CITY, TOWN**  
Durham  
**VICINITY OF**  
**STATE**  
North Carolina  
27701

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**5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION**

**COURTHOUSE, REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.**  
Durham County Courthouse

**STREET & NUMBER**  
Main Street

**CITY, TOWN**  
Durham  
**STATE**  
North Carolina

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**6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS**

**TITLE**

**DATE**

**DEPOSITORY FOR SURVEY RECORDS**

**CITY, TOWN**

**STATE**
The Hill House, an impeccably maintained Spanish Colonial Revival style house, is among the most splendid and luxurious dwellings remaining in Durham. Most of its rivals, homes of the builders and heirs of tobacco and commercial fortunes, have been destroyed, but the Hill House remains a monument to the lavishness of domestic building that followed in the wake of Durham's early twentieth century period of prosperity. Though today the few surviving mansions no longer dominate Durham's domestic landscape, the Hill House still boldly commands its spacious, shaded, suburban site with the same confidence that it originally assumed.

Its immediate grounds constitute an entire city block. The grassy, parklike setting surrounded by a low hedge slopes gradually to the south and east and contains a host of evergreens, tall deciduous trees, boxwood, crepe myrtle, magnolia, holly, fruit trees, azaleas, beds of flowers and foliage, and other varieties of trees and shrubs.

The house is basically L-shaped with a formal, symmetrical facade facing Duke Street. The main block of the house contains the principal living area with the dining room and service areas in the rear extension. The side and rear facades are anything but symmetrical.

The Duke Street (east) facade is five bays wide. A heavily tiled hipped roof, pierced by interior end chimneys with decorated caps, covers the house. Louvered blinds flank the windows with their twelve-over-one sash. The main entrance in the center bay features a glazed door with transom, sidelights, and cornerlights. The shape of the roof, location of the chimneys, and design of the fenestration and entrance are elements which give the facade a traditional flavor in spite of the rich ornament and exotic Spanish detail. The white stuccoed house is dominated by the high red tile roof, the eaves of which extend about four feet beyond the walls, sheltering the second-floor windows from the midday sun. The decorative treatment of the eaves is typical of the lavish detail that permeates the building: The dark stained wooden eaves are ornamented by molded brackets, drop pendants, and elegant tongue and groove surface. Copper gutters collect rainwater and large ornamental fixtures fasten the downspouts to the wall.

Piercing the roof is a large white curvilinear Spanish style frontispiece outlined in gray and accented by a small casement window surmounted by a curvilinear lintel and elaborate baroque ornament. This ornament, recurring on the porch below and on the side porches, features various combinations of scrolls, shells, ribbons, pendants, cartouches, urns, and the like. Its light brown color causes it to stand out conspicuously against the white background.

The porch, skirted by a band of tile, consists of three arched bays. The center arch, supported by pairs of heavy stuccoed columns with molded concrete bases and cushion capitals linked by Moorish arches, is the focal point. It leads from a lower terrace up granite steps to the covered area with its red tile floor and shallow vaulted stuccoed ceiling. The concrete railings screening the subsidiary bays and framing the terraces which stretch to each side feature a simple, heavy chain pattern. Above the porch is a parapet which curves above the entry. The entrance door and surround are stained dark (unlike the window sash, which is painted gray) and embellished with stylized columns, fluting, and foliated detail.
Small, one-bay porches extend from the north and south sides of the house. Like the front porch, their principal features include heavy columns with capitals and bases, fancy applied ornament, vaulted ceilings, tile skirt, and dark eaves. That on the south side differs in that it has an open timber gable end which forms a cantilevered porte cochere. The side and rear elevations contain curvilinear frontispieces (doubling as oversized dormers), conventional dormer windows, and bay windows. Rooflines are irregular and there is a mix of interior and exterior chimneys. At ground level the exposed raised basement (painted pale green) with its heavy watertable supports the structure. Ornamental downspouts and a range of rectangular shapes for windows are among this multifarious collection of architectural and decorative elements that gives the house its rich complexity.

Though the interior is elaborately decorated, the plan is clear and straightforward. The main block of the house contains a wide T-shaped space, the body of which originally functioned as a living room but is at present furnished as a hall. In the right (north) arm is the stair, to the left (south) is a sun room leading to a side porch. A small vestibule in the front (east) has a patterned marble floor and is flanked by closets.

The hall is paneled to a height of about seven feet with small flat panels of oak. From this height to the heavy modillion block cornice the walls are covered with luxurious stamped leather. At the intersection of the T-shaped hall is the focal point, an enormous fireplace with fire opening framed in marble, sloping chimney breast, and highly plastic carved wood ornament, featuring foliated consoles, cartouches, urns, shields, cornucopiae, and other details of uninhibited grandiloquence.

The elegant staircase with its heavy molded handrail and balusters rises to a wide landing, then returns for the remaining short flight to the second floor. Where the cornice reaches the stairwell, it terminates in a foliated console, a subtle and sensitive detail. Opposite, glass doors lead to the light and airy sun room with its stucco walls and simple details.

To the left and right of the hall are balancing rooms. On the right (north) is the music room. Dominating this room is the elaborately decorated Georgian style north wall. The fireplace in the center features a crosseted backband, cushion frieze, crosseted and mirrored overmantel, and marble framed fire opening. Flanking the fireplace are round arched niches with window seats, framed by fluted Ionic pilasters on pedestals. The Ionic pilasters support a full entablature ornamented with dentil blocks and egg and dart molding; the entablature carries around the entire room. The remaining walls are covered in silk damask.

Across the hall in the southeast corner of the house is the library. As in the music room, the fireplace dominates the space. Foliated consoles support a high shelf. A rich series of classical moldings accent other details. The room is surrounded by bookshelves and a high, raised panel wainscot. Heavy molded architraves from the doors, which are capped with cushion friezes and cornices. At ceiling height is a molded cornice.
All unpainted woodwork, including the bookcases, is Honduras mahogany.

In the wing to the rear is a dimly lit dining room with a bowed end. Surrounding the room is a low chair rail, baseboard, and simple dado and above, a dentil cornice. A brass Tiffany-style chandelier and sterling silver wall sconces decorate the ceiling and walls. The important feature of this room is, predictably, the mantel, an extraordinarily rich pageant of Georgian style ornament including luxuriant swags of fruit and foliage, egg and dart, and other classical moldings, and a swan's neck pediment. As in the library the woodwork is mahogany. A tapestry fabric bordered in gimp covers the wall.

A small chamber, probably a sitting room or morning room, now an office, opens from the stair hall. It is simply detailed and has a low, vaulted ceiling.

Beyond the dining room is a breakfast room and a series of service rooms, among them a pantry, butler's pantry, kitchen, servants' hall, servants' stair, and hall. Particularly notable are the pine tongue and groove paneling, glazed cabinets, and wood countertops in the pantry. In the kitchen is the original stove, an enormous iron construction by the Majestic Manufacturing Company of Saint Louis.

Upstairs six principal bedrooms (all but one with fireplaces) open onto a center hall. There is a seventh opening onto a secondary passage. The hall walls are covered with leather, as below, but the bedrooms are light and airy and feature Adamesque mantels. Most of the details in the elegant baths are original. The owner's suite is simply detailed but extensive. It contains a large bedroom, hall, three large closets, access to the elevator, dressing room, and bath with tub, marble shower, toilet, basin, and elegant foot bath.

The third floor contains storage facilities and servants' rooms. Above that is an attic.
The John Sprunt Hill House is both an architectural and historical landmark. The Spanish Colonial Revival dwelling designed by Kendall and Taylor of Boston in 1910 is one of the three mansions remaining in the city from Durham's second boom period. The stuccoed exterior is formal and traditional yet rich with variety of massing and detail and exotic Iberian ornament. The interiors are lavishly appointed and notable for their elegant and elaborately carved woodwork by Irving and Casson of Boston. Built for John Sprunt Hill (1869-1961), a prominent lawyer, banker, bibliophile, businessman, politician, social leader, and philanthropist of statewide importance and influence, the house reflects the character of the man, his family, and the cultural development of the booming city of Durham in the first half of the twentieth century.

John Sprunt Hill was born on his father's plantation near Faison, Duplin County, North Carolina, on March 17, 1869. He was a member of a planter family long prominent in southeastern North Carolina which, like many of this class, had been considerably reduced financially by the Civil War. Hill graduated from high school at age twelve, and worked for four years in a country store, earning money to enter the University of North Carolina in 1885. He gained many academic honors and was graduated in 1889. In 1894 he received his law degree from Columbia University, and the following year established a practice under the name of Hill, Sturcke and Andrews. After service in the Spanish-American War, Hill returned to New York and unsuccessfully sought a seat in Congress as a Tammany Hall-backed Democrat.

On November 29, 1899, John Sprunt Hill married Laura Valinda Watts, only child of George W. Watts and Laura Valinda Beall Watts of Durham, North Carolina—a step which was to bring Hill back to North Carolina as a member of one of the wealthiest families in the newly industrial city of Durham. George Washington Watts was a partner in the tobacco firm of W. Duke Sons and Company, a major contributor to Durham's tobacco-based post-Civil War boom. The Watts were eager to have their daughter live in Durham, and in 1903 the hills returned to Durham.

Within a few years, the Hills prepared to build a major house. On April 11, 1910, Hill and his wife purchased several parcels of land in the southwest section of Durham, located on Duke (formerly Lea), Proctor, and Cobb Streets, creating a single large tract. In addition, the Hills had been previously deeded property in this section by the Watts family.

Construction on the Hills' house took place in 1911. The Boston firm of Kendall and Taylor and Company served as architects. As early as 1895 Bertrand E. Taylor, then with the firm of Rand and Taylor, had designed the first Watts Hospital complex in Durham—
George W. Watts' handsomely endowed gift to the city. Taylor was architect as well for the present Watts Hospital, and was thus not a surprising choice for the Hills' home. Norman Underwood of Durham served as general contractor for the project, and the well-known woodcarving firm of Irving and Casson of Boston executed the splendid woodwork and many of the furnishings.

Settled and well-connected in Durham, John Sprunt Hill soon established a solid fortune and gained a respected reputation in the state. He founded the Home Savings Bank and the Durham Bank and Trust Company, and he served in the state senate 1933-1938. Like many of North Carolina's men whose early twentieth century fortunes were based on industrial growth, he was a generous philanthropist; Hill took a particularly strong interest in education—particularly his alma mater the University of North Carolina—and in libraries. Hill was chairman of the university building committee during the institution's two great surges of growth—following each of the world wars. Under his leadership the size of the university's physical plant was doubled in the 1921-1931 decade, and in 1924 the Hills gave the Carolina Inn to the university. He endowed the respected North Carolina Collection at the Library of the University of North Carolina. During a sixty-year period Hill gave the university more than a million dollars, and always declared that the university was "the institution of learning that gave me a thousand times more than I can ever repay." In Durham, too, the Hills were generous, funding in 1930 the renovation of the old Carnegie Library into Hill Music Hall, donating real estate to the city for recreational uses including parks and a public golf course, and other purposes. Mrs. Hill was active in a number of civic efforts in Durham, including the Watts Hospital Auxiliary, the YMCA, and the First Presbyterian Church. She died in 1940.

John Sprunt Hill lived until 1961, participating actively in a wide range of activities throughout his life. In 1933, when he was conferred an honorary degree by the University of North Carolina, the variety of his contributions was cited:

"John Sprunt Hill . . . lawyer, farmer, forester, manufacturer, banker, legislator, father of rural credits in North Carolina /an innovative cooperative system of providing loans to farmers/, co-builder of Durham, roads, and the University of North Carolina. . . . Buildings, libraries, farms, factories, banks, roads, trees and music are the playthings of his valiant imagination and creative spirit. A builder without vainglory, a fighter with abandon but without guile, a dreamer whose youthful dreams go daily into the making of a better University and a more beautiful state."16

This innovative spirit continued through Hill's life; not long before his death, he furnished the original funds for programming the Research Triangle Institute which brought a vast new research and industrial complex to the Durham-Raleigh-Chapel Hill area.
As specified in his will, at his death Hill's house was left to the Annie Watts Hill Foundation and used as a meeting place for non-sectarian, non-political women's groups. A nine-member board chaired alternately by the Hills' two daughters, meets twice a year to administer the foundation; the Hill House is used by the Junior League of Durham as the group's headquarters.

FOOTNOTES

1 Interview with Virginius Faison Williams, Liberty Hall, Faison, North Carolina, and with George Watts Hill, Durham, North Carolina.


3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Durham County Deeds, Durham County Courthouse, Durham, North Carolina, Deed Book 40:543.


7 Architectural drawings now at Hill House, and a copy in the offices of George Watts Hill, Central Carolina Bank Building, Durham, North Carolina.


9 Interview with George Watts Hill, Durham, North Carolina.

10 Interview with George Watts Hill, and Mrs. Herbert J. Fox, Jr. (Frances Faison Hill) both of Durham, North Carolina.


13 Ibid., p. 37.

14 Ibid., p. 82.

MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES


10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY approx. 20 acres

UTM REFERENCES

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VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

Two city blocks bounded by Proctor Street, Hill Street, Lakewood Avenue, and South Duke Street.

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

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<th>State</th>
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FORM PREPARED BY

NAME/TITLE Description prepared by H. McKelden Smith, Survey Specialist

Significance prepared by John B. Flowers, Research Historian

ORGANIZATION Division of Archives and History

DATE

STREET & NUMBER 109 East Jones Street

TELEPHONE 733-4763

CITY OR TOWN Raleigh

STATE North Carolina

CODE 27611

STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION

THE EVALUATED SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PROPERTY WITHIN THE STATE IS:

NATIONAL ___ STATE X ___ LOCAL ___

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER SIGNATURE

TITLE State Historic Preservation Officer

DATE July 14, 1977

FOR USE ONLY

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

DATE

DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF ARCHEOLOGY AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION

ATTEST:

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

GPO 892-453

Interviews with George Watts Hill and Mrs. Herbert J. Fox, Jr. Durham, North Carolina.


