

INDIVIDUAL PROPERTY FORM FOR

MULTIPLE RESOURCE OR THEMATIC NOMINATION

1 NAME

HISTORIC William Thomas O'Brien House
AND/OR COMMON

2 LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER 820 Wilkerson Avenue NOT FOR PUBLICATION
CITY, TOWN Durham VICINITY OF 2nd CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT
STATE North Carolina CODE 037 COUNTY Durham CODE 063

3 CLASSIFICATION

CATEGORY	OWNERSHIP	STATUS	PRESENT USE
<input type="checkbox"/> DISTRICT	<input type="checkbox"/> PUBLIC	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> OCCUPIED	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE <input type="checkbox"/> MUSEUM
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BUILDING(S)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE	<input type="checkbox"/> UNOCCUPIED	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCIAL <input type="checkbox"/> PARK
<input type="checkbox"/> STRUCTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> BOTH	<input type="checkbox"/> WORK IN PROGRESS	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATIONAL <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE RESIDENCE (S)
<input type="checkbox"/> SITE	PUBLIC ACQUISITION	ACCESSIBLE	<input type="checkbox"/> ENTERTAINMENT <input type="checkbox"/> RELIGIOUS
<input type="checkbox"/> OBJECT	<input type="checkbox"/> IN PROCESS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> YES RESTRICTED	<input type="checkbox"/> GOVERNMENT <input type="checkbox"/> SCIENTIFIC
	<input type="checkbox"/> BEING CONSIDERED	<input type="checkbox"/> YES UNRESTRICTED	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRIAL <input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
	<u>N/A</u>	<input type="checkbox"/> NO	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY <input type="checkbox"/> OTHER

4 OWNER OF PROPERTY

NAME Guy T. Solie
STREET & NUMBER 402 Watts Street
CITY, TOWN Durham VICINITY OF STATE North Carolina 27701

5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC Register of Deeds, Durham County Judicial Building
STREET & NUMBER 201 E. Main Street
CITY, TOWN Durham STATE North Carolina 27701

6 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME / TITLE Patricia S. Dickinson
ORGANIZATION Consultant to the City of Durham Planning Department DATE December 31, 1983
STREET & NUMBER City Hall Plaza TELEPHONE (919)683-4137
CITY OR TOWN Durham STATE North Carolina 27701

7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION		CHECK ONE	CHECK ONE
<input type="checkbox"/> EXCELLENT	<input type="checkbox"/> DETERIORATED	<input type="checkbox"/> UNALTERED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ORIGINAL SITE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> RUINS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ALTERED	<input type="checkbox"/> MOVED DATE _____
<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> UNEXPOSED	(interior)	

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

One of the oldest and most distinctive houses in Durham's West End neighborhood is the virtually intact, well-preserved William Thomas O'Brien House, located at 820 Wilkerson Avenue. Facing south, the two-story frame house is set back a short distance from the quiet street behind a hedge, and is surrounded by a lawn and shaded by a mixture of evergreen and deciduous trees. When the vernacular Victorian residence was constructed c. 1890, the area was still rural in character as this portion of the neighborhood began to evolve from the subdivision of two large adjoining tracts. Originally, the lot occupied by the O'Brien House was much larger, extending one block north to Rome Street (formerly Spring Street). According to the 1913 Sanborn map, a number of outbuildings were located at the rear of the house. These included a large poultry house, smoke house, and servant's house. Only one outbuilding survives—a deteriorated, small, frame, gable-roofed, one-room structure whose original use is unknown. Today, this block of Wilkerson is densely developed with small, frame predominantly one-story houses set close to the street. The O'Brien House is distinguished by its two-story scale, somewhat larger lot, and deeper set-back.

Resting on a low brick foundation, the O'Brien House was originally a two-story, three-bay wide, one-room deep dwelling. At the rear is a nearly two-story one-room deep shed roofed addition with an exterior brick chimney. Two-story projecting bays with pedimented gables accenting the bays' clipped corners extend from the south and east elevations. Two tall interior brick chimneys with decorative corbelled caps rise above the cross gable roof covered with its original embossed tin shingles. Large, two-over-two double-hung sash windows with plain surrounds light the south, east and west elevations; at the rear, three-over-one double-hung sash windows light the first story, with six-over-six sashes on the second story. The exterior is trimmed with simple corner boards and rakeboards, and plain window surrounds. The house's major decorative element is the handsome, carefully detailed attached one-story wraparound porch which accentuates the projecting bays by following the contours of the south and east elevations. The porch features turned posts, sawn spandrels, turned balusters, molded handrail, and a spool frieze with scalloped edge. It shelters the main entrance with double-leaf doors, each composed of a single tall rectangular pane of decoratively figured opaque glass above a recessed panel. Other important decorative elements of the O'Brien House are the sawn brackets with bosses which support the pedimented gables of the projecting bays. Centered in the gable ends are round louvered ventilators.

On the interior, the O'Brien House follows a center hall plan, currently divided into four apartments. The staircase features massive twin chamfered newel posts with decorative applied sawn trim, topped by heavy molded caps and large turned knobs. Turned balusters carry the heavily molded handrail. The stairs ascend to a small landing with a square, ball-topped newel and then turn forty-five degrees to ascend in a straight flight to the second story. Fluted tongue and groove wainscotting lines the hallway. According to the owner, the interior trim is intact throughout the house and exemplified by one of the first floor apartments, the only unit available for viewing. The trim, includes fluted

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tongue and groove wainscotting, wide fluted baseboards, and fluted door and window surrounds with roundel corner blocks. The original doors are two-over-two raised fluted panels with chamfered rails and stiles. The handsome oak parlor mantel frames the original tiled opening. Slender carved and fluted colonettes, carried on tall rectangular bases, flank the frieze with a center tablet featuring a ribboned garland, a shallow plain mantel shelf, and a bevelled glass overmantel. In contrast to the verticality of the parlor mantel, is the mantel in the room directly behind, now used as a bedroom, features wide fluted and chamfered pilasters with heavy molded caps that support a robust chamfered frieze of two plain raised panels centered with a large bulls eye roundel. The edges of its heavy, deep, fluted and curved mantel shelf extend well beyond the pilasters and frieze to give the mantelpiece a decidedly horizontal, squat feeling. The original wide board heart pine floors occur throughout the house. The house is heated with individual gas space heaters now, but decorative iron floor grills remain as evidence of an earlier central heating system.

The structure, of course, is closely related to the surrounding environment. Archaeological remains, such as trash pits, wells, and structural remains, which may be present, can provide information valuable to the understanding and interpretation of the structure. Information concerning use patterns, social standing and mobility, as well as structural details are often only evident in the archaeological record. Therefore, archaeological remains may well be an important component of the significance of the structure. At this time no investigation has been done to discover these remains, but it is probable that they exist, and this should be considered in any development of the property.

8 SIGNIFICANCE

_____ NATIONAL

_____ STATE

___X___ LOCAL

PERIOD	AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW			
___PREHISTORIC	___ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	___COMMUNITY PLANNING	___LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE	___RELIGION
___1400-1499	___ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	___CONSERVATION	___LAW	___SCIENCE
___1500-1599	___AGRICULTURE	___ECONOMICS	___LITERATURE	___SCULPTURE
___1600-1699	X___ARCHITECTURE	___EDUCATION	___MILITARY	___SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN
___1700-1799	___ART	___ENGINEERING	___MUSIC	___THEATER
X___1800-1899	___COMMERCE	___EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	___PHILOSOPHY	___TRANSPORTATION
___1900-	___COMMUNICATIONS	X___INDUSTRY	___POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	___OTHER (SPECIFY)
		___INVENTION		

SPECIFIC DATES c. 1890

BUILDER/ARCHITECT unknown

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

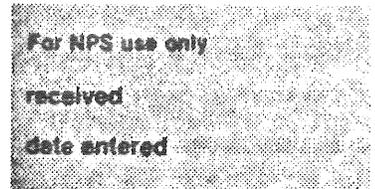
The c. 1890 William Thomas O'Brien House is important both for its architecture as well as its historical associations. This intact and well-preserved two-story frame, late Victorian dwelling with its handsome, carefully detailed one-story wraparound porch and original embossed tin shingle roof is one of the oldest and most distinctive houses in Durham's early West End neighborhood. The house was owned and occupied by William T. O'Brien, a master mechanic for the Bonsack Cigarette Machine Company, and later for W. Duke Sons & Company. O'Brien moved to Durham in 1884 to oversee the installation of automatic cigarette rolling machines in the W. Duke Sons & Company tobacco factory. James B. Duke hired O'Brien, who succeeded in perfecting the machine, thus enabling the Dukes to increase cigarette production tremendously, lower prices to their customers and achieve dominance in the lucrative young industry. O'Brien was also instrumental in establishing the Roman Catholic Church in Durham.

CRITERIA ASSESSMENT

- B. The O'Brien House is associated with the life of William Thomas O'Brien, a mechanic who perfected the Bonsack Cigarette Machine for W. Duke Sons & Company. This machine revolutionized the manufacture of cigarettes and enabled the Dukes to dominate the large and lucrative market. O'Brien, a devout Catholic layman, was also instrumental in establishing the Catholic church in Durham.
- C. The well-preserved and intact two-story late Victorian O'Brien House is one of the oldest and most distinctive in Durham's early West End neighborhood, featuring a handsome, carefully detailed wraparound porch and original embossed tin shingle roof.

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As he watched the machines being installed, 'J.B.,' impressed by one of the mechanics who seemed to him unusually bright and capable, turned to his brother Ben and said, 'We must keep with us that young Irishman.' The young Irishman, William T. O'Brien, proved to be a mechanical genius and became one of their mainstays.⁴

W. Duke Sons & Company did hire O'Brien. With James B. Duke's encouragement, O'Brien continued work on the machine, and "defects, one by one, were remedied and improvements made...at last they had a machine which worked perfectly. The problem of quantity production was solved."⁵

The greatly increased production capacity of the Bonsack machine as perfected by O'Brien, reduced the Dukes' production cost from eighty cents per thousand cigarettes to thirty cents. The Dukes passed on these savings to their customers with lower cigarette prices. This factor, combined with James B. Duke's marketing genius, made machine manufactured cigarettes both enormously popular among American smokers and profitable for the manufacturer. Within a short time, America's smoking habits were changed forever. In 1891, shortly after he formed the American Tobacco Company which combined W. Duke Sons & Company, and several other firms, Duke persuaded Bonsack to grant the new trust exclusive use of the machines, and by 1895 the American Tobacco Company had an overwhelming lead over its competitors in the cigarette manufacturing business.⁶ O'Brien continued to work⁷ for the Dukes as a "master machinest," advancing in 1903 to "superintendent."

In 1891 O'Brien began acquiring parcels of land on Wilkerson Avenue to create the sizable tract on which his residence was located. According to a January 26, 1891 deed, O'Brien purchased almost one acre on the north side of Wilkerson Avenue extending to Spring Street from William and Kate Watkins of Caswell County and Charles and V.R. Watkins of Richmond, Virginia for \$2,950.⁸ In 1893 O'Brien purchased an adjoining three-quarter acre lot from William and Kate Watkins for \$390.⁹ It appears that the remainder of O'Brien's large home tract was acquired in March, 1899 when he purchased four other adjoining lots from the William Watkins estate.¹⁰ These parcels were part of several tracts on both sides of Wilkerson Avenue that the Watkins had purchased in 1887 and 1888.¹¹

Stylistically, the O'Brien House is consistent with a circa 1890 construction date, but it is unclear exactly when or by whom the house was constructed. Perhaps the large difference in the prices for the first two similarly sized lots that O'Brien bought indicates that there already was a house or some other structure on the one-acre lot. O'Brien's 1891 deed specifically grants him "said lot or parcel of land together with all buildings, fixtures, improvements, rights of way, privileges and appurtenances thereto...", although Durham deeds from this period rarely mention existing buildings. An 1888 plat of the Watkins' land does not show a house on what later became the O'Brien House tract, but houses are drawn on other nearby unrelated lots.¹² It is possible that the Watkins brothers built the two-story frame residence on speculation in

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response to the growing popularity of the West End neighborhood among employees of the nearby tobacco factories in the late 1880s and early 1890s. City directories do not clarify the matter either. While the 1902 directory definitely located O'Brien at 820 Wilkerson Avenue (then numbered 420), the 1890 and 1892 directories list his residence only as "West Durham." According to the directories, O'Brien lived in the house at 820 with his wife Kate, children Leonard, Margaret, and William J., and Mrs. John (Kate) O'Brien, widow, possibly a sister-in-law or aunt. Durham's early historian, W.K. Boyd, implies that early in this century, O'Brien was planning a new home for his family, but only after a Catholic church was constructed. The church was completed in 1905 and O'Brien died early in 1906.

William O'Brien's contribution to the Roman Catholic Church in Durham and in North Carolina is significant. Boyd wrote:

...the early development and integration of Catholicism was due to a large degree to the loyalty and interest of one layman, William T. O'Brien--he who made the Bonsack Cigarette Machine in the Duke Factory do its work. Under his leadership the congregation in 1887 rented a hall on Corcoran Street. {A few Catholics had moved to Durham by 1879 and occasional services, conducted by visiting priests from Raleigh, were held in private homes, including O'Brien's.} With the passing of the years his devotion to his church increased. When he planned a new home, he declared that he could not conscientiously build for himself and his family while his church was homeless. And so he gave a lot on Chapel Hill Street and contributed liberally to a building.¹³

Immaculate Conception Church was completed and dedicated in 1905 and the charming frame church stood until 1957, when it was replaced by a larger brick building. O'Brien further proposed building a home for the priest, but, according to Boyd, the Bishop forbade it, "saying that that should be done by the congregation," Boyd continued:

In his day and generation Mr. O'Brien was the most liberal Catholic layman of North Carolina. He contributed to the Nazareth Orphanage at Raleigh, to another at Belmont and he also promised to construct a library at Belmont Abbey--a desire thwarted by his death, which occurred in 1906.¹⁴

After his death, O'Brien's family moved to South Duke Street in 1907 and later, in 1915, to West Chapel Hill Street. According to city directories, the O'Brien House was owned and occupied by Edward J. Long, interior decorator, and his family from 1919 until 1939 when it was purchased by Thomas H. and Kate Lindsey. Thomas Lindsey died in 1942 and his widow continued to live in residence until 1976. At some undetermined point during Mrs. Lindsey's long tenure, the house was divided into four apartments. In 1976, owner Mrs. Dorothy Pickett received one of the first Architectural Conservator Awards given by the Historic Preservation Society of Durham for her exterior restoration of the

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O'Brien House. The property, currently owned by Guy T. Solie, continues in use as four apartments.

NOTES

¹ Claudia P. Roberts, The Durham Architectural and Historic Inventory (City of Durham and the Historic Preservation Society of Durham, 1983), p.321.

² William K. Boyd, The Story of Durham (Durham: Duke University Press, 1925), p.87.

³ John K. Winkler, Tobacco Tycoon: The Story of James Buchanan Duke (New York: Random House, 1942), p.55. See also Hiram K. Paul, History of the Town of Durham, North Carolina (Raleigh: Edwards & Broughton, 1884), p.207.

⁴ John Wilbur Jenkins, James B. Duke, Master Builder (New York: George H. Doran Co., 1927), p.67.

⁵ Jenkins, pp.67-68.

⁶ Winkler, p.79.

⁷ Directory of the Businesses and Citizens of Durham City for 1887, compiled by Levi Branson (Raleigh: Levi Branson, Publisher); Hill Directory Company, Durham City Directory (Richmond, Va.: Hill Publishing Company, 1903).

⁸ Durham County Register of Deeds (DCRD), Deed Book 12, Page 207.

⁹ DCRD, Deed Book 13, Page 427.

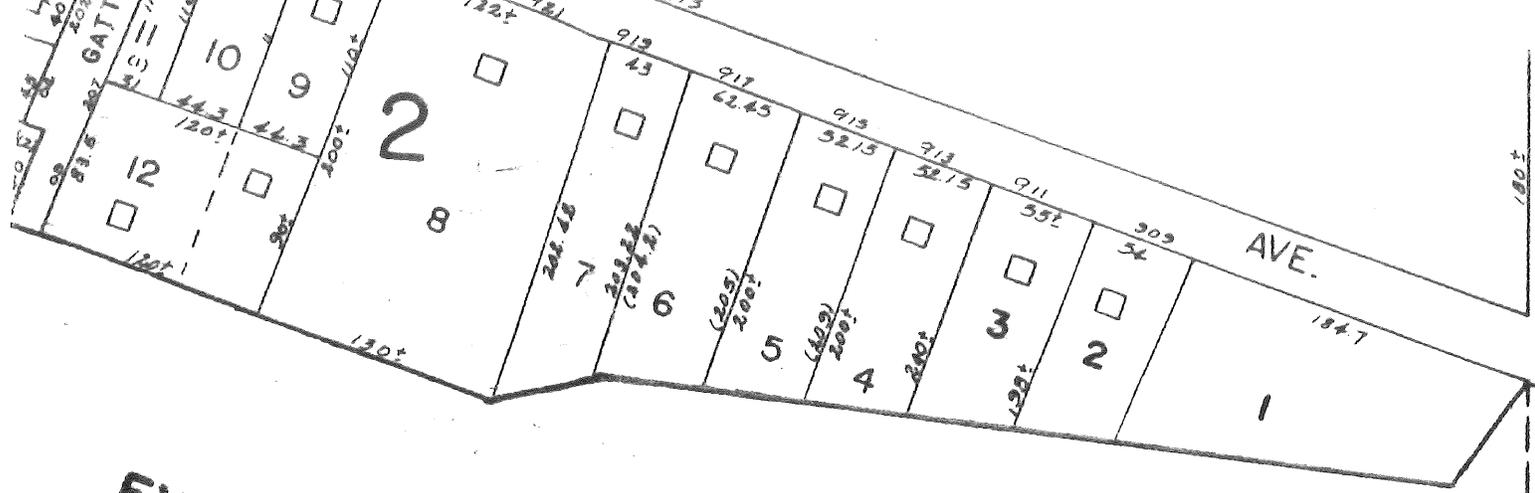
¹⁰ DCRD, Deed Book 8, Page 281.

¹¹ DCRD, Deed Book 8, Pages 4 and 281.

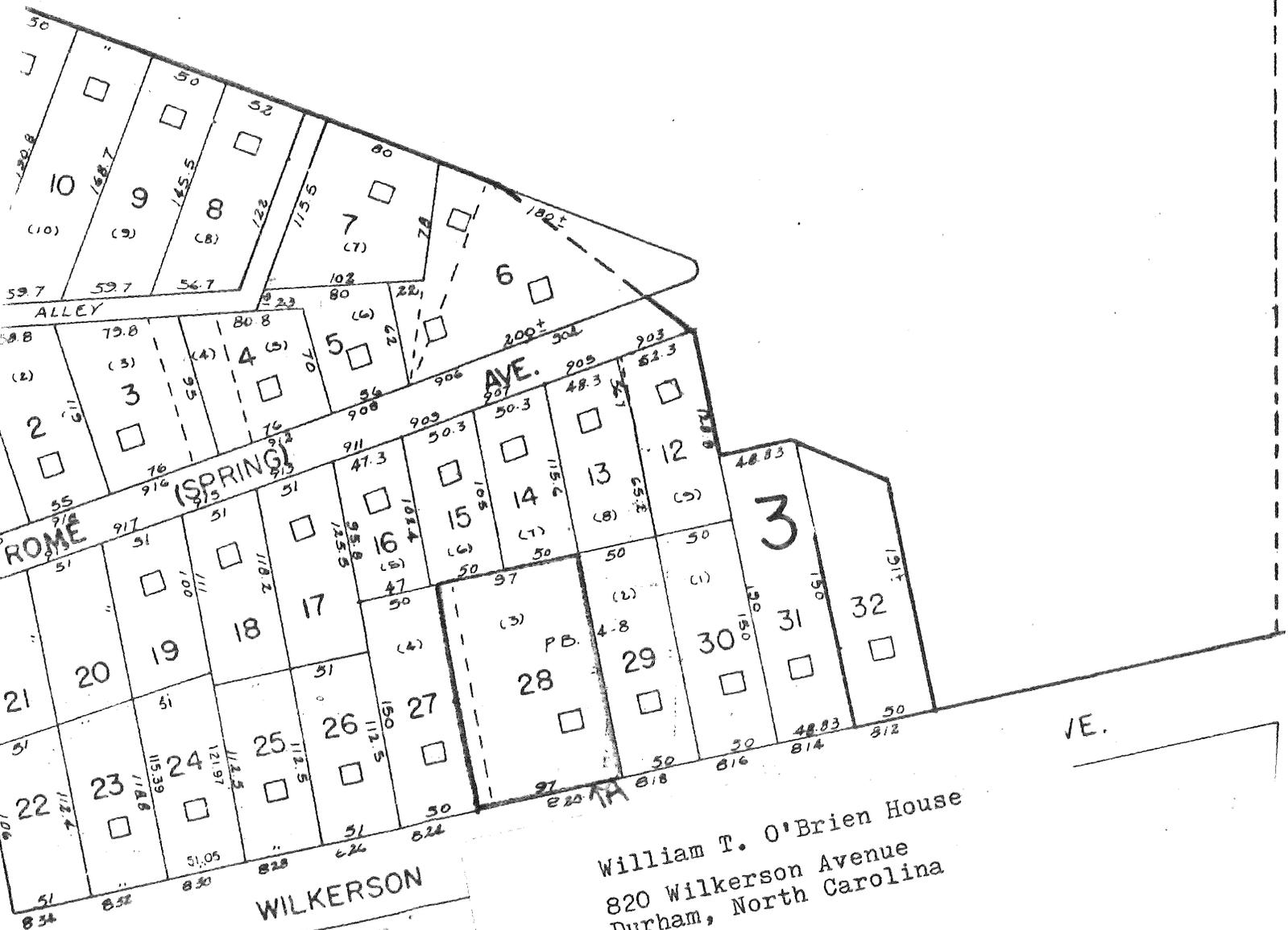
¹² DCRD, Deed Book 20, Page 182. O'Brien continued to acquire many other small investment parcels of land along Wilkerson Avenue and on various other nearby streets in this neighborhood and in the downtown commercial district, with no fewer than forty-five deeds recorded between 1889 and 1906, the year of his death. The other lots were often purchased at courthouse sales, and occasionally they were purchased in partnership with T.J. Walker and J.B. Warren.

¹³ Boyd, p.201.

¹⁴ Boyd, p.202.



EXPRESSWAY



William T. O'Brien House
 820 Wilkerson Avenue
 Durham, North Carolina

