INDIVIDUAL PROPERTY FORM FOR

1 NAME
HISTORIC
William Thomas O'Brien House

2 LOCATION
STREET & NUMBER
820 Wilkerson Avenue
CITY, TOWN
Durham
STATE
North Carolina

3 CLASSIFICATION
CATEGORY
-X BUILDING(S)
-STRUCTURE
-SITE
-OBJECT
OWNERSHIP
-X PUBLIC
-X PRIVATE
-BOTH
PUBLIC ACQUISITION
-IN PROCESS
-BEING CONSIDERED
N/A
STATUS
-X OCCUPIED
-X UNOCCUPIED
-WORK IN PROGRESS
-ACCESSIBLE
-X YES RESTRICTED
-X YES UNRESTRICTED
-X NO
PRESENT USE
-X AGRICULTURE
-X COMMERCIAL
-X PARK
-X EDUCATIONAL
-X PRIVATE RESIDENCE
-X ENTERTAINMENT
-X RELIGIOUS
-X GOVERNMENT
-X SCIENTIFIC
-X INDUSTRIAL
-X TRANSPORTATION
-X MILITARY
-X OTHER

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

5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION
COURTHOUSE
Registry 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
CITY OR TOWN
Durham
STATE
North Carolina 27701
TELEPHONE
(919)683-4137
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. Pluted tongue and groove wainscoting 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...
tongue and groove wainscoting, 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 invidual 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.
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.
Historical Background

The William Thomas O'Brien House is important both for its architecture and its historical associations. As one of the oldest and most distinctive houses in Durham's early West End neighborhood, the well-preserved vernacular late Victorian dwelling stands as a reminder of the city's tremendous prosperity in the late nineteenth century, reflected in the construction of stylish residences by artisans, tradesmen and industrialists alike. The c. 1890 house derives its primary significance from its association with William Thomas O'Brien, master mechanic who moved from Virginia to Durham in 1884 in order to install and perfect the Bonsack Cigarette Machine for W. Duke Sons & Company. This machine, as modified by O'Brien, was crucial to the overwhelming success of the Dukes' cigarette manufacturing business. O'Brien was also instrumental in establishing the Roman Catholic Church in Durham.

Although cigarette smoking was popular in Europe as early as 1860, it was not until the early 1880s that W. Duke Sons & Company, headed by James B. Duke, added cigarettes to their line of tobacco products. During the previous fifteen years the rival W.T. Blackwell and Company and its Bull Durham smoking tobacco had dominated the tobacco manufacturing market. In order to successfully compete, the Dukes chose to appeal to a new consumer market with a novel product—pre-rolled and packaged cigarettes. According to local tradition, James B. Duke said: "My company is up against a stone wall: it cannot compete with the Bull. Something has got to be done, and that quick. As for me, I am going into the cigarette business." Cigarettes were hand rolled at this time, and limited commercial production was handled primarily by eastern European Jews who had immigrated to New York. In 1881, W. Duke Sons & Company hired about 100 of these laborers who moved en masse to Durham.

By 1883, a young Virginia inventor, James Bonsack, had constructed an automatic cigarette rolling machine. Minor mechanical problems plagued the new invention, and it was not a success with the European cigarette manufacturers who first leased it from Bonsack. However, James B. Duke and his partner Richard Wright saw great promise in the machine if it could be perfected. Cigarette production could be increased tremendously: an expert hand-roller could make approximately 2,500 cigarettes daily, while the machine, functioning properly, could produce 120,000 daily. The Dukes gambled on the machine and in 1884 ordered two Bonsack machines for their factory. Along with his machines, Bonsack dispatched to Durham his best mechanic, William Thomas O'Brien, to oversee their installation. In James B. Duke, Master Builder, John W. Jenkins wrote of O'Brien:

Major Bibliographical References


Geographical Data

Acreage of Nominated Property: Less than one acre

UTM References

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Verbal Boundary Description

Durham Tax Maps Map 037 Block 03 Lot 028
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.

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."

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. O'Brien continued to work 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. In 1893 O'Brien purchased an adjoining three-quarter acre lot from William and Kate Watkins for $390. 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. These parcels were part of several tracts on both sides of Wilkerson Avenue that the Watkins had purchased in 1887 and 1888. 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. It is possible that the Watkins brothers built the two-story frame residence on speculation in
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.

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.

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

NOTES


5 Jenkins, pp.67-68.

6 Winkler, p.79.


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.

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