

NORTH CAROLINA STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICE
Office of Archives and History
Department of Cultural Resources

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

James H. and Anne B. Willis House

Greensboro, Guilford County, GF6913, Listed 4/23/2015

Nomination by Heather Fearnbach

Photographs by Heather Fearnbach, April 2014



Overall view



Street façade

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form**

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Willis, James H. and Anne B., House

other names/site number N/A

2. Location

street & number 707 Blair Street

N/A not for publication

city or town Greensboro

N/A vicinity

state North Carolina

code NC

county Guilford

code 081

zip code 27408

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set for in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title

Date

North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. (See Continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

entered in the National Register.
 See continuation sheet

determined eligible for the National Register.
 See continuation sheet

determined not eligible for the National Register.

removed from the National Register.

other, (explain:) _____

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

James H. and Anne B. Willis House
Name of Property

Guilford County, NC
County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Check as many boxes as apply)

Category of Property
(Check only one box)

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources in count.)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	0	buildings
0	0	sites
0	0	structures
0	0	objects
1	0	Total

Name of related multiple property listing
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)
N/A

Number of Contributing resources previously listed in the National Register
N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

DOMESTIC: Single Dwelling

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

DOMESTIC: Single Dwelling

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)

Modern Movement

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation BRICK
walls BRICK
WOOD: vertical board
roof SYNTHETICS: rubber
other

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location.
- C** a birthplace or grave.
- D** a cemetery.
- E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F** a commemorative property
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

Architecture

Period of Significance

1965

Significant Dates

1965

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Loewenstein-Atkinson, architects

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- Previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record _____

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State Agency
- Federal Agency
- Local Government
- University
- Other

Name of repository: _____

James H. and Anne B. Willis House
Name of Property

Guilford County, NC
County and State

10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of Property 0.7 acres

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

See Latitude/Longitude coordinates continuation sheet

1	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	3	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	<u> </u>
	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
2	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	4	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	<u> </u>

See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Heather Fearnbach
organization Fearnbach History Services, Inc. date 9/1/2014
street & number 3334 Nottingham Road telephone 336-765-2661
city or town Winston-Salem state NC zip code 27104

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

Additional items

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items.)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.)

name Thomas H. Sears Jr. and Sara H. Sears
street & number 707 Blair Street telephone 336-379-8411
city or town Greensboro state NC zip code 27408

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listing. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 *et seq.*)

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P. O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20303.

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Section 7. Narrative Description

Setting

The James H. and Anne B. Willis House stands on a plateau at the south end of the steeply sloping lot at 707 Blair Street in north Greensboro's Irving Park subdivision, which was developed in phases beginning in 1911. Subsequent plats greatly increased the neighborhood's size. The Willis House occupies Lot 10 and a small triangular section of Lot 11 in Irving Park's sixteenth section, platted by Watcher Surveys, Inc., in April 1956, and developed by Brown Realty Company of Greensboro.¹

The long, one-story, front-gable-roofed, Modernist dwelling differs in architectural character and orientation from the neighboring predominately traditionally styled homes, most of which were erected in the 1950s and 1960s. These residences stand closer to Blair Street and Hammel Drive than their rear lot lines, contributing to a regular façade rhythm and allowing for large back yards. The Willis House siting, dictated by the lot's topography, is reversed. The residence occupies the 0.7-acre lot's southwest corner and is screened on all sides by either vegetation or wood fences. Deciduous and evergreen trees fill the front yard's slope, providing privacy, while landscaped beds along the dwelling's perimeter contain woody shrubs and perennials.

The dramatic change in elevation between street level and the house site resulted in a steep concrete driveway that splits at the façade's northwest corner, turning at the screened-porch and terminating at parking areas in front of the house and on its west side. A vertical board fence separates the lot from that of the residence to the west at 709 Blair Street, which, like the Willis House, is owned by Thomas H. Sears Jr. and his wife Sarah H. Sears. The wooded setting and sloping grade continues on Blair Street's opposite side, as the City of Greensboro maintains a 2.6-acre wooded tract flanking a creek that is part of the approximately four-acre Nottingham Park.

Exterior

A low-pitched front-gable roof with deep eaves covers the T-shaped Willis House. The (north) facade's expansive plate-glass windows indicate the public function of the space within, which contains the kitchen, dining room, and living room. Inside the primary entrance, which is on the long west side rather than the gabled north elevation fronting Blair Street, a central foyer separates the public area to the north from the private spaces (bedrooms and bathrooms) to the south. Shed-roofed porches shelter the primary entrance as well as the auxiliary entrance at the dwelling's southwest corner that provides access to the brick-veneered utility room that extends from the south elevation.

¹ Guilford County Plat Book 23, p. 66.

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Large wood-frame plate-glass windows, anodized metal-frame sliding-glass doors, and high, horizontal, one-over-one sash, paired in some locations, illuminate the interior and create a sense of openness, particularly in the public areas. The use of natural materials further perpetuates continuity between inside and outside spaces. Exterior cypress vertical board and variegated brick veneer walls complement the interior walnut and birch wall paneling and variegated brick veneer fireplace surround. Slate covers both the west entrance porch and foyer floors.

The twenty-foot-wide by ten-foot-deep, flat-roofed, screened porch at the dwelling's northwest corner is the most visible feature from the street. The current owners enclosed the originally open space, called a "covered terrace" on the 1965 plans, with removable cypress-framed screen panels, designed and built by Thomas Sears to complement the dwelling's cypress siding. A screen door on the east elevation provides access to the patio, while sliding-glass doors connect the porch and the kitchen dining area.

On the west elevation, at the intersection of the dwelling's north public block and the private bedroom wing that extends to the south, a square post supports the shed-roof extension that shelters the single-leaf primary entrance and two adjacent full-height plate-glass windows. The slate porch floor continues into the foyer, which leads to the living/dining room and kitchen located at the dwelling's north end. These spaces extend slightly east and west of the south bedroom wing, allowing for additional clerestory windows and metal-frame sliding-glass doors in the gable ends.

On the north elevation, deep boxed eaves with flat, plain soffits deflect light and heat from large plate-glass windows and doors. Metal-frame sliding-glass doors and clerestory windows inside the screened porch provide kitchen access and light, while similar doors and windows illuminate the living/dining room and facilitate connectivity between the dwelling's interior and its setting. An expansive poured-concrete patio extends across the cypress-vertical-board-sided north elevation outside of the living room, while a small poured-concrete, brick-lined patio fills the space outside the living room's southeast corner. The current owner added the brick as well as the adjacent rock garden. A broad, tall chimney executed in light-colored variegated brick veneer rises at the living room's east end.

On the east and west elevations, in contrast with cypress vertical-board siding that has been protected by brown stain, tall, light-colored variegated brick veneer kneewalls executed in running bond capped with an angled brick header course add visual interest. Single and paired, high, horizontal, one-over-one, double-hung, wood sash with aluminum-frame storm windows light the interior.

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North of the main entrance on the west elevation, a single-leaf door opens into the kitchen. A cypress vertical-board fence erected, as specified on the 1965 architectural drawings, in a “shadowbox” pattern, encloses the small poured-concrete, brick-lined patio outside of the kitchen door.

An approximately thirteen-foot-wide by twelve-foot-deep brick-veneered utility room protected by an extension of the bedroom wing’s low-gable roof projects from the south elevation. A high, rectangular, wood-framed casement window south of the door and one on the east elevation light the room. At the dwelling’s southwest corner, a narrow porch created by a roof extension supported by a square post covers the poured-concrete floor outside the single-leaf utility room entrance.

Work completed in 2003 included replacement of the original tar and gravel roof with a rubber membrane roof. Rot created by unattended gutter overflow and moisture wicked up through the chimney brick necessitated replacement of some fascia, soffit, and roof sheathing boards, as well as selected rafters and rafter ends, with materials that exactly replicated the originals. The roof repair project also involved installing a new ridge vent and waterproofing the chimney.

Interior

The Willis House has a T-shaped plan, with a central entrance foyer separating the public spaces (kitchen, dining room, and living room) to the north from the private spaces (bedrooms and bathrooms) to the south. The interior retains many original character-defining features, with the living/dining room and kitchen being the most distinctive interior spaces. In the sizable open-plan living/dining room, exposed ceiling beams reveal the building’s structure and walnut paneling covers the walls. Built-in bookshelves line the south elevation as well as most of the east wall, which features a central variegated brick fireplace surround which extends to the ceiling. An approximately two-foot deep slate hearth spans the entire east elevation. The north elevation’s expansive wood-frame plate-glass windows and anodized metal-frame sliding-glass doors coupled with the site’s elevation and wooded yard facilitate connectivity with the natural environment despite the urban location. The room retains a square, variegated-brown, vinyl composition tile floor.

A dining area occupies the room’s west end. Its west wall includes a single-leaf door and a pass-through window opening above what was a bar in the kitchen. That space and the adjacent breakfast room, called the “family area” on the 1965 plans, retain birch-paneled walls and birch-veneered cabinets manufactured by Murray’s Wood Works of Greensboro. The cabinets line three walls and also create a partition between the kitchen and breakfast room. Round metal posts elevate the partition’s upper cabinets from the base, leaving an opening between them. The area above the cabinets is open as well.

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Despite this effort to create a sense of spaciousness and allow light to permeate the galley kitchen, the space remained so dark that the Searses added skylights. They also restored the original copper cabinet door pulls, reconditioned the birch veneer, replaced the Celotex ceiling tiles with matching tiles, upgraded the appliances, and installed laminate countertops and a Pergo floor after purchasing the property in 2002. The cabinet unit on the breakfast room's west elevation includes open shelves intended to accommodate, among other things, a television and stereo system. Three original pendant light fixtures made in Finland with rubbed-brass canopies and opaque white glass globes illuminate the kitchen and breakfast room.

A door in the kitchen's south wall connects that room to the foyer, which features a random-pattern slate floor. Between the foyer and the living room, a partial-height gypsum-board wall backs a narrow walnut-sheathed cabinet with three doors on the living room side and a laminate counter top. A roughly-executed wood screen originally surmounted the cabinet, but the Searses removed the screen due to its poor condition. Like the bedroom wing, the foyer is otherwise finished with gypsum-board walls and ceilings, simple window and door trim with mitered corners, and birch-veneered solid-core doors with original long, hour-glass-shaped, black-metal door pulls. As part of the 2003 restoration and 2014 refurbishment, Thomas Sears meticulously repaired all of the door veneer, reattaching loose and replacing damaged sections and staining the repairs to match the original.

The lot's topography influenced the house plan, resulting in the bedroom wing's elevation three steps higher than the kitchen/breakfast room, foyer, and living/dining room. A long central hall extends from the foyer through the south wing, which encompasses four bedrooms, three bathrooms, a laundry closet, and a utility room. The Searses installed carpeting in the bedrooms and hall in March 2014 following a water leak that necessitated flooring replacement in those areas.

The master suite is located on the hall's east side at its north end. As with the kitchen, the Searses, in conjunction with the execution of necessary roof repairs, added a skylight to the bedroom ceiling. The master bedroom's birch-veneered bi-fold closet door collapses into four sections, while in other bedrooms and linen closets folding painted-wood doors have louvered upper sections. The master bath suite comprises two rooms, the smaller of which contains its original white tile floor and shower walls and white-enameled porcelain tub, as well as a toilet installed by the Searses. The larger adjacent carpeted dressing room has a built-in dressing table, vanity, base cabinets, and linen closet.

A birch-veneer accordion door fills the wide hall laundry closet, allowing access to the appliances, a laundry sink in a base cabinet and built-in shelves extending to the ceiling. The southeast bedroom's adjacent bathroom retains original white tile floor and shower walls, a white-enameled porcelain toilet and tub, and a wood vanity with a laminate top and a drop-in-sink. The third bathroom, located between the two bedrooms on the hall's west side, has identical finishes and fixtures. A pocket door

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separates the main hall from the short hall connecting the two west bedrooms and bathroom. A linen closet occupies the west hall's southwest corner. In each of the southeast and southwest bedrooms, built-in desks span the space between two closets with louvered doors. The center hall terminates at a utility and storage room with an exterior door and high, horizontal, rectangular windows.

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Section 8. Statement of Significance

The 1965 James H. and Anne Willis House is locally significant under National Register Criterion C for architecture due to its retention of character-defining features specified by Greensboro architects Loewenstein-Atkinson. Principals Edward Loewenstein, a Chicago native and Massachusetts Institute of Technology alumnus, and North Carolina State College graduate Robert A. Atkinson Jr. led a firm notable for its promotion of Modernist architecture in North Carolina during the mid-twentieth century. The Willis residence manifests Modernist principles in its long, low form and T-shaped plan dictated by function rather than exterior appearance. Generous use of glass and high-quality natural materials such as cypress vertical board siding, walnut and birch paneling, variegated brick veneer, and slate create continuity between the interior and exterior. Beneath the low-pitched front-gable roof, deep eaves shelter large wood-frame plate-glass windows, anodized metal-frame sliding-glass doors, and high, horizontal, one-over-one wood sash, paired in some locations.

The house's interior integrity is exceptional. A central entrance foyer separates the public spaces (kitchen, dining room, and living room) to the north from the private spaces (bedrooms and bathrooms) to the south. In the spacious open-plan living/dining room, exposed ceiling beams reveal the building's structure and walnut paneling covers the walls. The space also retains built-in bookshelves and a variegated brick fireplace. The adjacent kitchen features birch-paneled walls and birch-veneered cabinets manufactured by Murray's Wood Works of Greensboro. The foyer has a random-pattern slate floor. Like the bedroom wing, the space is otherwise finished with gypsum board walls and ceilings, simple window and door trim with mitered corners, and birch-veneered solid-core doors with original long, hour-glass-shaped, metal door pulls. Bathrooms retain original white tile floors and shower walls, white-enameled porcelain lavatories and tubs, and wood vanities with a laminate tops and drop-in-sinks. Closets with louvered doors and built-in desks and cabinets provide ample storage in the master dressing room, short bathroom hall, and bedrooms.

Ownership History

On March 3, 1961, James H. and Anne B. Willis acquired from Harry H. and Marian Clark Kemp Lot 10 and a small triangular section of Lot 11 in the Irving Park neighborhood's sixteenth section, platted by Watcher Surveys, Inc., in April 1956, and developed by Brown Realty Company of Greensboro. As the Willises planned their home, they interviewed Greensboro architects including Loewenstein-Atkinson and I. A. Sigmon, who drafted a series of schematic plans for the residence. The Willises selected Loewenstein-Atkinson's plans and occupied the house in 1965.² The couple made no significant changes to the property over the next thirty-seven years, undertaking only routine

²Guilford County Deed Book 1672, p. 296; Deed Book 1944, p. 78; Plat Book 23, p. 66; Loewenstein-Atkinson, "Residence for Mr. and Mrs. J. H. Willis," 1965 plans in the collection of Thomas H. and Sara H. Sears, Greensboro, N. C.

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maintenance during their tenure. Thomas H. and Sarah H. Sears purchased the house from the Willis family on October 21, 2002, and executed a restoration finished in 2003 as well as a 2014 renovation. The house has served as a rental since 2003.³

James H. and Anne B. Willis

Chicago native James Hughson Willis graduated from Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia, and found employment with Vick Chemical Company before enlisting in the United States military. Stationed first in California and then in Italy during World War II, he earned a Silver Star, Bronze Star, and Purple Heart in recognition of his successful effort to save the lives of three men in his unit.⁴

Upon his return to the United States, James Willis and his wife, Anne Booth of Richmond, Virginia, moved to Greensboro, where they remained for almost sixty years. Willis worked in the construction industry for much of that time, initially as a Bonitz Insulation Company acoustical engineer and then as a Weaver Construction Company project manager. The Willis family served on numerous civic boards and were active members of Saint Francis Episcopal Church and Holy Trinity Church. After selling their Greensboro home, the couple resided at Our Lady of Hope Health Center in Richmond, Virginia, where James Willis died on September 7, 2008. Anne Willis followed on June 25, 2009.⁵

Modernist Architecture Context

Most early-twentieth-century American architecture was rooted in the past rather than the future. The 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago created a national preference for classicism that became part of the "City Beautiful" movement—the antithesis of the polluted, unhealthy, industrial city. Other revival styles such as Georgian, Mediterranean, Tudor, and Spanish Colonial also enjoyed widespread popularity. However, architects Frank Lloyd Wright in Chicago, Irving John Gill in San Diego, and brothers Charles Sumner and Henry Mather Greene in Pasadena were among the proponents of a radically different approach, creating buildings that blended organically into their surroundings. Horizontal massing, asymmetrical plans, geometric angles, deep overhanging eaves, bands of windows, and the use of contemporary materials including concrete and steel in conjunction with traditional materials such as wood and stone defined their designs.⁶

³ Guilford County Deed Book 5657, p. 521; Thomas H. and Sarah H. Sears, discussions and email correspondence with Heather Fearnbach, January-May 2014.

⁴ "James Hughson Willis," *Greensboro News and Record*, September 11, 2008, B2.

⁵ Ibid.; "Anne Booth Willis," *Greensboro News and Record*, June 25, 2009, A11.

⁶ Peter Gossel and Gabriele Leuthauser, *Architecture in the Twentieth Century* (Koln, Slovenia: Taschen, 2001), 67-68.

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Frank Lloyd Wright's early work frequently combined English Arts and Crafts movement features including stained-glass windows, heavy interior woodwork, and built-in furniture with Japanese architectural elements such as spare detailing, open plans, and expressed structural systems. He espoused a functionalist approach, replacing traditional load-bearing walls with curtain walls that served as decorative screens rather than structural supports. In the Robie House in Chicago, completed in 1909, he used massive steel beams to carry broad cantilevered roofs over terraces. Other Chicago architects such as William Drummond, Marion Mahony Griffin, Walter Burley Griffin, George W. Maher, William G. Purcell, and Robert C. Spencer Jr. emulated these design components in myriad commissions, resulting in what architectural historian H. Allen Brooks deemed the Prairie School.⁷ Defining characteristics range from horizontal massing to low-pitched roofs with deep boxed eaves, expansive windows, porches and terraces, and the use of natural materials. Although the Prairie style declined in popularity after 1920, mid-twentieth-century Modernist dwellings such as the Willis House display similar features.

The American public's exposure to European architectural trends was negligible until the contemporary architecture exhibit in 1932 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The exhibit catalog, authored by art historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock Jr. and architect Philip Johnson, identified principles of modern architecture that were henceforth used to describe buildings constructed in what was called the International Style given its European genesis and subsequent diffusion throughout the world. They profiled the movement's leading architects Walter Gropius and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe of Germany, Le Corbusier of France, and J. J. P. Oud of Holland, and explored the characteristics of their work.⁸

Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe were among the European architects and designers who emigrated to the United States beginning in the late 1930s and espoused Modernist principles to a new audience. Gropius, the highly influential founder of the German design school known as the Bauhaus, began teaching at Harvard's Graduate School of Design and used his personal residence in Lincoln, Massachusetts, erected in 1937, to promote the central tenets of Bauhaus philosophy—maximum efficiency and simplicity of design. The house was revolutionary at the time, as it combined traditional building materials including wood, brick, and fieldstone with streamlined modern elements rarely

⁷ Henry-Russell Hitchcock Jr. and Philip Johnson, *The International Style: Architecture since 1922* (New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 1932), 25-26; Mark Gelernter, *A History of American Architecture: Buildings in Their Cultural and Technological Context* (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 2001), 218-220; Virginia Savage McAlester, *A Field Guide to American Houses* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf), 2013, 551-552, 564.

⁸ Hitchcock and Johnson, *The International Style*, 20.

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employed in residential construction such as glass block, acoustical plaster, and chrome banisters.⁹ Despite the efforts of Gropius and others to “soften” the International Style through the use of natural materials, it proved more popular in commercial than residential applications in the United States, as flat roofs, sleek surfaces, and angular lines were often perceived as being impersonal and harsh.

Walter Gropius, R. Buckminster Fuller, and other influential architects and artists taught at Bauhaus painter Josef Albers’s experimental Black Mountain College near Asheville, North Carolina in the 1930s and 1940s. Although they and others continued to promote Modernism, the philosophy never achieved widespread acceptance in the United States. In 1948, North Carolina State College (NCSC) hired architecture professor Henry Kamphoefner, who recruited George Matsumoto, James Walter Fitzgibbon, Edward W. Waugh, and other University of Oklahoma faculty to help him establish the NCSC School of Design. The men, all strong proponents of Modernism, employed the style in commercial, educational, industrial, religious, and residential commissions throughout the state. The design school’s collaboration included a partnership with North Carolina’s Office of School Construction that involved developing design standards and advocating contemporary architecture at workshops for local officials and architects in 1949 and 1950. School of Design professors and visiting lecturers including Frank Lloyd Wright, Walter Gropius, and Mies van der Rohe had a significant impact on North Carolina’s mid-century built environment, both through the buildings they designed and the students they trained.¹⁰

In the mid-1930s, just before Gropius arrived on the American architectural scene, Frank Lloyd Wright developed what he called the “Usonian House” in an attempt to make high-style design accessible to the average homeowner. His compact, economical, and efficiently-planned buildings, constructed of affordable materials, often used passive heating and cooling mechanisms. Like Wright, California architect William Wilson Wurster designed dwellings built with local materials in a manner that connected indoor and outdoor spaces and integrated residences with their sites. He typically eliminated interior walls between public spaces, opening floor plans and thus making even small houses seem larger. Wurster’s influence spread rapidly due to his tenures as dean of the Massachusetts

⁹ Historic New England, “Gropius House,” <http://www.historicnewengland.org/visit/homes/gropius.htm> (accessed September 2014). Gropius designed his house in collaboration with Marcel Breuer, his former student and Harvard School of Design colleague.

¹⁰ Edward Waugh and Elizabeth Waugh, *The South Builds: New Architecture in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1960), preface, 8; David R. Black, “Early Modern Architecture in Raleigh Associated with the Faculty of the North Carolina State University School of Design, Raleigh, North Carolina,” National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form, 1994, E15-16.

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Institute of Technology (MIT) School of Architecture from 1943 until 1949 and then at the University of California at Berkeley beginning in 1950.¹¹

NCSC School of Design faculty members adopted these premises and expanded upon them in dwellings such as Henry Kamphoefner's personal residence, regarded upon its completion in 1950 as the first truly Modernist house in Raleigh. Kamphoefner designed his home in collaboration with George Matsumoto, using thin, horizontal, Roman brick, naturally-finished birch plywood, and insulating glass to effectively integrate interior and exterior spaces. Matsumoto's own flat-roofed, box-like house, finished in 1954, and his subsequent similar residential commissions incorporated Wrightian principles and Miesian forms, as the dwellings are carefully integrated into their settings, constructed of prefabricated panels within exposed structural framework, and cantilevered over masonry foundations.¹² These elements are also manifested in the work of Loewenstein-Atkinson, a firm notable for its promotion of Modernist architecture in North Carolina during the mid-twentieth century.

Loewenstein-Atkinson, architects

Chicago native Edward Loewenstein completed his architecture degree at Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1935 under the direction of William Emerson, the School of Architecture's first dean. The program espoused a holistic and international approach to design and included courses in building construction and materials as well as a city planning class beginning in 1932.¹³ Loewenstein built upon this foundation as he gained experience as a draftsman in the firms of Chicago architects Ralph E. Stoetzel (September 1935 to May 1936) and Newhouse and Bernham (May 1936 to December 1937). After earning a license to practice architecture in Illinois in 1937, Loewenstein established an independent Chicago firm. In 1935, he enlisted in the United States Army as a Coast Artillery and Corps of Engineers reservist and began in May 1941 a four-year active-duty Corps of Engineers posting during which he designed a wide variety of buildings for military installations. Following his January 17, 1945, discharge from the military, Loewenstein and his wife, Greensboro, North Carolina, native Frances Stern, resided in Highland Park, Illinois. He applied to the American Institute of

¹¹ Black, "Early Modern Architecture in Raleigh," E10-13; David Jackson, "Henry L. Kamphoefner House," National Register of Historic Places nomination, 1996; Gordon Young, "Blueprint for Obscurity," *Metro*, January 18-24, 1996, <http://www.metroactive.com/papers/metro/01.18.96/wurster-9603.html> (accessed September 2014).

¹² Black, "Early Modern Architecture in Raleigh," E10-13; Jackson, "Henry L. Kamphoefner House;" Waugh and Waugh, *The South Builds*, 40-41.

¹³ "School of Architecture and Planning," <http://libraries.mit.edu/mithistory/research/schools-and-departments/school-of-architecture-and-planning/> (accessed December 2014).

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Architects in January 1946, and by the time the AIA granted him membership in April 1946, the couple had moved to Greensboro.¹⁴

Edward Loewenstein soon hired Winston-Salem native Robert A. Atkinson Jr., born on January 27, 1923. Atkinson, who was a decade younger than Loewenstein, graduated from North Carolina State College in 1943. During his academic tenure, he worked part-time as a draftsman for Raleigh architect and NCSC architecture school professor Ross Shumaker. He then served as a photo intelligence officer in the United States Air Force from 1943 until 1946, after which Loewenstein employed him in 1947.¹⁵

The 1947-1948 Greensboro city directory enumerated ten architects including Edward Loewenstein, reflecting the demand for design services during the post World War II building boom. The design community grew over the next fifteen years, and in 1963 eighteen architects advertised in the 1963 Greensboro city directory. By that time, the firm established by Loewenstein in 1946 had become Loewenstein-Atkinson, recognizing architect Robert A. Atkinson Jr.'s 1952 elevation to full partnership. Initially the only Greensboro architecture firm to employ minorities, Loewenstein-Atkinson was well known as a proponent of equal opportunities for African American and female designers. African American staff included William Streat, who had attended MIT with Loewenstein; W. Edward Jenkins; and Clinton Gravely, all of whom were licensed architects and later headed their own firms. Loewenstein-Atkinson employees in 1963 included chief draftsmen Charles J. Doss and Clinton E. Gravely, draftsmen Hans I. Koontz and William C. Usher, mechanical draftsmen Richard L. Wells, design coordinator Gregory D. Ivey, mechanical engineer John P. Lichty, architect John G. Pappas, engineer Bennie L. Spencer, office manager Virginia F. Bright, secretary Cathy Davidson, and office staff Lonnie E. Moore and George B. Taylor.¹⁶ It is not clear which firm architect designed the Willis House, as the "drawn by" section of the 1965 plan title blocks contains indecipherable notations, but it was likely a joint effort.¹⁷

Architectural historian Patrick Lee Lucas's examination of Loewenstein-Atkinson's papers indicated that the firm designed about four hundred residences, the vast majority of which were located in North

¹⁴ Edward Loewenstein, "Application for Membership" and associated correspondence, 1946-1970; "Edward Loewenstein, Architect," AIA Architects' Roster Questionnaires, April 9, 1947, and March 5, 1953, AIA Archives, Washington, D. C.; George S. Koyl, ed., *American Architects Directory, First Edition* (New York: R. R. Bowker, 1956), 339.

¹⁵ Koyl, ed., *American Architects Directory, First Edition*, 17.

¹⁶ *Hill's Greensboro (Guilford County, N. C.) City Directories* (Richmond, V. A.: Hill Directory Company Publishers, 1948 and 1963); George S. Koyl, ed., *American Architects Directory, Second Edition* (New York: R. R. Bowker Company, 1962), 428.

¹⁷ Loewenstein-Atkinson, "Residence for Mr. and Mrs. J. H. Willis," 1965 plans in the collection of Thomas H. and Sara H. Sears, Greensboro, N. C.

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Carolina and were traditional in design. Lucas and his research assistants identified approximately fifty Modernist houses in Loewenstein-Atkinson's oeuvre. The exact number of those homes that were built and are still standing has not been determined, but Lucas profiles fifteen intact Greensboro commissions as well as one each in nearby Sedgefield and Pleasant Garden in his 2013 publication *Modernism at Home*. Completed between 1951 and 1966, these dwellings range from Edward and Frances Loewenstein's 1954 residence, the most sophisticated Modernist design, to simply executed dwellings such as the 1965 James H. and Anne Willis House. Lucas also identifies four additional Loewenstein-Atkinson-designed residences erected in Greensboro between 1954 and 1958 that were demolished during the mid-1990s and in 2007 and 2010.¹⁸

The 1951 Wilbur and Martha Carter House, located just outside of Irving Park at 1012 Country Club Road, is the only Loewenstein-designed residence listed in the National Register of Historic Places. In her 2008 analysis, architectural historian Cynthia de Miranda asserts that the residence is not only Edward Loewenstein's earliest Modernist commission in Greensboro, but the city's first house to fully express Modernist architectural concepts. As in later homes planned by Loewenstein-Atkinson, the Carter House blends in with its setting, embodying the organic Modernism promoted by Frank Lloyd Wright in his Usonian houses.¹⁹

Edward Loewenstein's design for the 1954 home he shared with his family is the most innovative in his oeuvre. As with many Modernist residences, the Loewenstein House's street façade allows for privacy in its high windows and fieldstone and cypress walls, while the secondary elevations, characterized by sliding-glass doors and canted glass curtain walls, are markedly different in their openness. The combination of variegated fieldstone, white-painted brick veneer, and vertical board cypress siding stained dark brown adds texture and dimensionality to the exterior walls. The roof comprises multiple intersecting slightly-sloped sections pierced by clerestory windows with a northern exposure. Deep overhangs supported by steel beams and canted brick walls shelter large wood-frame plate-glass windows.

The interior reveals the building's structural steel beams, which are spanned by a wood ceiling. Most walls are plaster, providing dramatic contrast with the wood and steel surfaces. Bluestone floors line the exterior walls of the foyer, living room, and dining room. Fieldstone, wood sheathing, and built-in bookshelves accent the living room's east wall. On the west wall, fieldstone and wood surround sliding-glass doors. A wall of bookshelves and a curved stone wall separate the living and dining rooms. On the living room's south wall, Loewenstein specified a fireplace with a downdraft flue that

¹⁸ Patrick Lee Lucas, *Modernism at Home: Edward Loewenstein's Mid-Century Architectural Innovation in the Civil Rights Era* (Greensboro, N. C.: Weatherspoon Art Museum, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2013), 11, 16, 106, 107.

¹⁹ Cynthia de Miranda, "Wilbur and Martha Carter House," National Register of Historic Place nomination, 2008.

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vents in the rear yard in order to preserve the view through the glass curtain wall. Closets and built-in cabinets, drawers, and seating abound throughout the house.

The Loewenstein House occupies a 2.14-acre lot. A distinctive flat-roofed, circular, steel-frame, fieldstone apartment with a carport stands north of the dwelling adjacent to a semicircular, asphalt-paved entrance drive. A bluestone terrace leads to the house's main entrance and the swimming pool and concrete patio located to the northeast. Bluestone and moss terraces, low fieldstone walls, gravel paths, a sculpture garden, and naturalized wooded areas occupy the acreage south of the house.

James H. and Anne B. Willis House Architecture

The James H. and Anne B. Willis House is situated in the Irving Park neighborhood, which, like Greensboro's other early-to-mid-twentieth-century subdivisions, displays a wide variety of nationally popular architectural styles ranging from bungalows to Period Revival, Minimal Traditional, Ranch, and Modernist residences. Many neighborhoods platted immediately following World War II manifest Federal Housing Administration design guidelines and contain modest, traditionally-styled dwellings. By the 1950s, Ranch houses, sometimes incorporating Modernist features such as high horizontal windows and deep eaves, enjoyed widespread popularity. Speculative developers built and sold hundreds of almost identical residences in tract subdivisions, while contractors supplied stock plans to potential owner-occupants in custom subdivisions. Popular magazines and catalogs also sold floor plans and elevations that property owners and contractors frequently modified. Residences designed by architects for specific clients represent a very small percentage of the total built environment.

Only a small number of Greensboro residences are truly Modernist in design, and each stands out in neighborhoods of more traditional houses. The 1950s examples tend to embody a softer, more organic approach to Modernism than the hard lines of the International Style. The low, horizontal residences blend in with their settings, reflecting the influence of Frank Lloyd Wright's Usonian House: economical and efficiently-planned buildings constructed of natural materials. Expansive windows and natural materials facilitate continuity between interior and exterior spaces. Common interior features include expressed structural components, radiant heating, passive cooling, cork and stone floors, wood wall and ceiling sheathing, and built-in furniture. Loewenstein-Atkinson employed these elements in Greensboro commissions such as the 1953 Marion and Eleanor Bertling House, the 1954 Oscar and Juliet Burnett House, the 1955 Sidney J. and Katherine Stern House, the 1958 Robert S. and Bettie S. Changie House, the 1958 Charles and Betty Roth House, the 1958 Irvin and Frances Squires House, the 1959 Kenneth P. and Marion Hinsdale House, and the 1959 John and Evelyn Hyman House.²⁰

²⁰ Lucas, *Modernism at Home*, 36, 50, 59, 63, 76, 79, 84, 86.

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The Willis House exemplifies the application of the same principles, which were more mainstream by 1965, in a cost-effective yet stylish residence. Its long, low form is typical of mid-twentieth-century dwellings, but its orientation with a broad, front-gable, secondary elevation facing the street is less common. As with other houses from the period, the owners and architects were more concerned with the building's interior function than its exterior appearance. The T-shaped plan with a central entrance foyer allowed for separation between the public spaces (kitchen, dining room, and living room) to the north and the private spaces (bedrooms and bathrooms) to the south.

A Modernist influence is apparent in the connectivity between inside and outside spaces perpetuated by expansive glass windows and sliding-glass doors as well as terraces and porches. Beneath the low-pitched front-gable roof, deep eaves shelter large wood-frame plate-glass windows, anodized metal-frame sliding-glass doors, and high, horizontal, one-over-one wood sash, paired in some locations. On the north elevation, tall clerestory windows and sliding-glass doors in the kitchen and the living/dining room provide ample light and facilitate connectivity between those areas and adjacent porches and patios.

High-quality natural materials such as cypress vertical board siding, walnut and birch paneling, variegated brick veneer, and slate distinguish the Willis House. As with other Loewenstein-Atkinson-designed residences, the interior, while austere, contains natural materials utilized in a functional, yet striking manner. Walnut paneling, built-in bookshelves, and a variegated brick fireplace ornament the living/dining room. The kitchen features birch-paneled walls and birch-veneered cabinets manufactured by Murray's Wood Works of Greensboro. The original copper cabinet door pulls are intact, as are the round metal posts that elevate the central cabinet's upper cabinets from its base. This feature serves a practical purpose, but also contributes to the Modernist aesthetic, as do three original pendant light fixtures made in Finland with rubbed-brass canopies and opaque white glass globes that illuminate the kitchen and breakfast room. Loewenstein-Atkinson employed a common mid-century kitchen design element—a pass-through between the dining room and kitchen—to enhance the space's functionality.

A random-pattern slate floor adds interest to the foyer. Like the bedroom wing, the space is otherwise finished with gypsum board walls and ceilings, simple window and door trim with mitered corners, and birch-veneered solid-core doors with original, long, hour-glass-shaped, metal door pulls. Bathrooms retain original white tile floors and shower walls, white-enameled porcelain lavatories and tubs, and wood vanities with a laminate tops and drop-in-sinks. Closets with louvered doors and built-in desks and cabinets provide ample storage in the master dressing room, short bathroom hall, and bedrooms.

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Section 10. Geographical Data

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

1. Latitude: 36.093464 Longitude: -79.803568

Verbal Boundary Description

The nominated property consists of Guilford County tax parcel # 7865236819 (0.70 acres), as indicated by the heavy solid line on the enclosed map. Scale: one inch equals approximately thirty-nine feet.

Boundary Justification

The nominated tract is the property historically associated with the James H. and Anne B. Willis House.

Photo Catalog

All photographs by Heather Fearnbach, Fearnbach History Services, Inc., 3334 Nottingham Road, Winston-Salem, NC, on April 9, 2014. Digital images located at the North Carolina SHPO.

1. Northwest oblique
2. Northeast oblique
3. Primary entrance, west elevation
4. Southwest oblique
5. East elevation, looking north
6. Interior – Living/Dining Room, looking east
7. Interior – Living/Dining Room, looking west to kitchen and foyer
8. Interior – Dining Room, looking south into foyer and bedroom wing hall
9. Interior – Kitchen, looking southwest
10. Interior – Breakfast room, looking northwest
11. Interior – Master bedroom and bathroom, looking southwest
12. Interior – Southeast bedroom, looking southeast