

State of North Carolina
Division of Archives and History

EXP 12-31-84

Wilkes COUNTY

Wilkesboro QUAD

INDIVIDUAL PROPERTY FORM FOR

Historic Resources of Wilkesboro (Partial Inventory: Historic & Architectural Properties)

☒ MULTIPLE RESOURCE

OR ☐ THEMATIC NOMINATION

1 NAME

HISTORIC

Wilkesboro-Smithey Hotel

AND/OR COMMON

Smithey Hotel or Smithey's Department Store

2 LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER

N.E. corner, Broad & E. Main Streets

☐ NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN

Wilkesboro

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

STATE

N. C.

☐ VICINITY OF

CODE

COUNTY

Wilkes

CODE

3 CLASSIFICATION

CATEGORY

☐ DISTRICT

☒ BUILDING(S)

☐ STRUCTURE

☐ SITE

☐ OBJECT

OWNERSHIP

☐ PUBLIC

☒ PRIVATE

☐ BOTH

PUBLIC ACQUISITION

☐ IN PROCESS

☐ BEING CONSIDERED

N/A

STATUS

☒ OCCUPIED

☐ UNOCCUPIED

☐ WORK IN PROGRESS

ACCESSIBLE

☐ YES: RESTRICTED

☒ YES: UNRESTRICTED

☐ NO

PRESENT USE

☐ AGRICULTURE

☒ COMMERCIAL

☐ EDUCATIONAL

☐ ENTERTAINMENT

☐ GOVERNMENT

☐ INDUSTRIAL

☐ MILITARY

☐ MUSEUM

☐ PARK

☐ PRIVATE RESIDENCE

☐ RELIGIOUS

☐ SCIENTIFIC

☐ TRANSPORTATION

☐ OTHER

4 OWNER OF PROPERTY

NAME

N. B. Smithey Estate (N. B. Smithey Realty Co.)

STREET & NUMBER

P. O. Drawer 1227

CITY, TOWN

North Wilkesboro

STATE

NC 28659

☐ VICINITY OF

5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE

REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC

Wilkes County Courthouse

STREET & NUMBER

Courthouse Square

CITY, TOWN

Wilkesboro

STATE

N. C.

6 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME / TITLE

Laura A. W. Phillips, Consultant

ORGANIZATION

for Wilkesboro Historic Properties Commission

DATE

May 1980

STREET & NUMBER

TELEPHONE

CITY OR TOWN

Wilkesboro

STATE

N. C.

7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION		CHECK ONE	CHECK ONE
☒ EXCELLENT	☐ DETERIORATED	☐ UNALTERED	☒ ORIGINAL SITE
☐ GOOD	☐ RUINS	☒ ALTERED	☐ MOVED DATE _____
☐ FAIR	☐ UNEXPOSED		

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The Wilkesboro-Smithey Hotel commands a prominent position at the northeast corner of Broad and E. Main Streets, across from Courthouse Square in the center of Wilkesboro.

This three-story brick, 1891 structure is one of the most architecturally impressive in town, due not only to its size but also to its detailing and relatively good state of preservation. The hotel building runs nine bays wide along Broad Street, its principal facade, and six bays deep along E. Main Street. The Broad Street facade is accentuated by the deeply corbeled cornice, the narrow brick pilasters which divide the facade into three major bays and the third story, segmental-arched windows surrounded by corbelled hood molds. The two-over-two sash windows and doors on the remaining three sides of the building have segmental-arched heads with simple brick hood molds. The main entrance is on the southwest corner of the building, and although the shop windows and several shop entrances have been modernized, much of the original first-story appearance remains intact, including the recessed nature of the doorways and the wood-paneled dados under the shop windows. The Broad Street entranceways are flanked by cast iron pilasters bearing the label "Mesker Bros. Front Builders St. Louis, Mo. Pat. Oct. 4 '87." These pilasters appear to be identical to those which once were located on the first story of the J. T. Ferguson Store across Main Street.

A two-story gallery wraps around the building on all but the north side. On the second story level, plain wooden posts (now connected by a replacement ironwork balustrade) support a hipped gallery roof. The altered first story level has plain wooden posts set on brick bases. The rear (east side) of the building has been altered by the enclosure of the first story porch with a brick wall surmounted by a screen of perforated concrete blocks, enclosing a service area.

The first story interior has been substantially remodeled for continued use as Smithey's Department Store. On the other hand, the upper two stories, used as the hotel and as the Smithey living quarters, have remained relatively intact. Interior features include paneled doors -- of both the single and double-leaf variety -- fluted door and window surrounds, a wainscot with vertical-board paneling, and a stairway with solid balustrade of vertical boarding.

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	☒ ARCHITECTURE	☐ EDUCATION	☐ MILITARY	☐ SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN
☐ 1700-1799	☐ ART	☐ ENGINEERING	☐ MUSIC	☐ THEATER
☒ 1800-1899	☒ COMMERCE	☐ EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	☐ PHILOSOPHY	☐ TRANSPORTATION
☒ 1900-	☐ COMMUNICATIONS	☐ INDUSTRY	☐ POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	☐ OTHER (SPECIFY)
		☐ INVENTION		

SPECIFIC DATES 1891; 1906

BUILDER/ARCHITECT Unknown

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Wilkesboro-Smithey Hotel building has played a central role in social and commercial life in Wilkesboro since its construction in 1891. It served not only as the most prominent hotel in this county seat town for over half a century, but also as the home of the first store in N. B. Smithey's multi-million-dollar chain of department stores. It is an impressive example of late nineteenth century small town commercial architecture which has been well maintained with relatively few alterations.

CRITERIA ASSESSMENT

- A. The Wilkesboro-Smithey Hotel played a prominent role in the development of commerce in late nineteenth and twentieth century Wilkesboro.
- B. The Wilkesboro-Smithey Hotel is associated with ^{the} adult life of Nikeard Bruce Smithey, local business and civic leader, who developed a multi-million-dollar chain of department stores in North Carolina, Virginia and Tennessee that was based at his hotel building in Wilkesboro.
- C. The Wilkesboro-Smithey Hotel is an excellent and well-preserved example of late nineteenth century commercial architecture.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The northeast corner of Broad and E. Main Streets has been the site of a hotel since at least the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Waugh and Finley had purchased the site in 1817, and by 1831 a legal paper of John Finley referred to a wooden building on the site called the Wilkesborough Hotel. During the mid nineteenth century the hotel was rented successively to James Blackwell, M. E. Hyams and E. Craner.¹

In 1891 the Wilkesboro Hotel Company was organized for the purpose of constructing a new brick hotel. Stockholders of the company were W. M. Absher, J. R. Combs, J. T. Ferguson, J. C. Hubbard, J. W. White, T. B. Finley, J. A. Cooper, I. T. Prevette, H. W. Horton, Eller & Starbuck, A. E. Berrington, S. J. Ginnings and W. W. Barber.²

By 1906 the Wilkesboro Hotel had failed and gone into receivership. On May 1, 1906 Nikeard Bruce Smithey purchased the hotel for \$3,800 and changed its name to the Smithey Hotel.³ On August 1, 1906 Smithey married Hattie Elizabeth Little of Catawba County and together they ran the hotel and resided there until Nike Smithey's death on September 3, 1953.⁴

N. B. Smithey was born August 11, 1880. After obtaining a limited formal education through public schools, he began his career in the business world by selling beef to the people of Wilkesboro. Later he operated a small store in town, but his large-scale ventures began with his purchase of the Wilkesboro Hotel. While operating a hotel on the second two floors of the building, Smithey began a dry goods business on the first floor.⁵ It was Smithey's practice to purchase large quantities of goods directly from factories and mills or from bankrupt stocks and liquidation sales, always paying cash. In this way he was able to purchase his goods at low prices and gained a reputation for sharing his savings with his customers. Smithey's system worked so well that he was able to operate his stores at a profit every year during the Depression. In fact, during the late 1930s or early 1940s Harvard University's School of Business sent a representative to Wilkesboro to study Smithey's buying and selling methods.⁶

Smithey's first store was in the Smithey Hotel. In 1928 he purchased a store in North Wilkesboro and soon expanded to other locations, so that by his death in 1953 he had established a multi-million-dollar chain of seventeen stores in Northwest North Carolina, Virginia and Tennessee. In expanding to a new location, Smithey would first rent a building, and if within two or three years the business was profitable, he would buy a lot and build a store, serving as his own contractor.⁷

While Smithey's mercantile business prospered, his hotel became a local institution. According to J. Floyd Jordan, who began practicing law in the Finley Law Office next to the hotel in 1922, crowds would flock from the courthouse to the dining room of the Smithey Hotel when a waitress rang the dinner bell to remind the judge it was time for

(continued)

9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

- Edwards, Arlene. "Time Almost Bypassed Wilkes Law Office." Winston-Salem Journal, July 16, 1978.
Hayes, Johnson J. The Land of Wilkes. Wilkesboro: Wilkes Co. Historical Society, 1962.
Hayes, Kyle, compiler. Biography of N. B. Smithey. n.p., n.d. [1975?].
Old Wilkes Walking Tour, typescript material.

10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY less than 1

UTM REFERENCES

A	1 7	4 8 6	4 0 5	4 0 0	2 4 0	B					
	ZONE	EASTING		NORTHING			ZONE	EASTING		NORTHING	
C						D					

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

The nominated property, located at the northeast corner of Broad and E. Main Sts., consists of the southwest portion of Parcel 2, Block 2, Tax Map 103, Town of Wilkesboro, lying within a square 120 ft. to a side. The property includes the hotel and its most immediate surroundings.

JMB 1024-0018
EXP 12-31-84**United States Department of the Interior
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service****National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form**

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a recess. Lawyers and judges had their own special table in the dining room and the visiting judge always stayed in the hotel's Room No. 3, a corner room with three windows that otherwise served as a honeymoon suite when court was not in session.

In addition to his hotel and mercantile businesses, Smithey at various times served as chairman of the Wilkes County commissioners, chairman of the Wilkes County Republican party, and as a charter director who helped establish the Northwestern Bank.⁹

After Smithey's death, his wife moved to a house in North Wilkesboro. However, Smithey's businesses have continued to be operated by his family members.¹⁰

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 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.

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¹Typescript material for Old Wilkes Walking Tour.

²Johnson J. Hayes, The Land of Wilkes (Wilkesboro: Wilkes Co. Historical Society, 1962), p. 320.

³Arlene Edwards, "Wealth Merchant's Pleasure Is Laying Rocks," in Biography of N.B. Smithey, compiled by Kyle Hayes (n.p., n.d. /1975?/), p. 13. Hereinafter referred to as Edwards, "Wealth Merchant's Pleasure."

⁴Margaret S. Hayes, "N.B. Smithey Stores," in Biography of N.B. Smithey, compiled by Kyle Hayes (n.p., n.d. /1975?/), p. 12.

⁵Ibid., p. 10.

⁶Edwards, "Wealthy Merchant's Pleasure," pp. 13-14.

⁷Margaret S. Hayes, pp. 10-11.

⁸Arlene Edwards, "Time Almost Bypassed Wilkes Law Office," Winston-Salem Journal, July 16, 1978, p. C-1.

⁹Edwards, "Wealth Merchant's Pleasure," pp. 13-14.

¹⁰Margaret S. Hayes, p. 12.

NORTH WILKESBORO

Wilkesboro MRN
Wilkesboro, N. C. Quadrangle
Zone 17 Scale 1:24000

Thomas B. Finley Law Office
17 486400/4000280

Wilkesboro-Smithey Hotel
17 486405/4000240

St. Paul's Episcopal Church
17 486050/4000310

Brown-Cowles House and Cowles Law Office
17 486470/4000300

Wilkesboro Presbyterian Church
17 486520/4000200

J. L. Hemphill House
485180/4000070

Johnson-Hubbard House
17 486420/40002000

J. T. Ferguson Store
17 486400/4000190

Federal Building
17 486150/4000120



