

James S. Morgan House
Landmark Designation Report
Prepared for the Raleigh Districts Commission

Originally prepared 1995
by Kitty Houston

Revised April 2008
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Architectural Description

The James S. Morgan House, located at 1015 Oberlin Road is a rare intact example of a traditional early-twentieth century vernacular dwelling (Triple-A I-house form) constructed ca. 1900. Situated on a .32 acre parcel, the house sits at the northeast corner of the intersection of Oberlin and Mayview Roads. Mature oaks and pines surround the structure on the south and west sides of the parcel. Foundation and hedge plantings are predominantly on the north and east elevations. The James Morgan house is the only extant residential structure associated with the Morgan family that remains in the Oberlin community, a historically African-American neighborhood. The Wilson Chapel Methodist Church is also associated with the Morgan family.

The James Morgan House is a two-story, frame I-house with a two-story rear ell and a front gable with diamond vent that is flush with the façade wall. The side gable roofline is pierced by brick chimneys in two locations: at the apex of the roof on the south end and near the north end on the rear slope. The house retains its original six-over-six double-hung sash windows and half-glazed entry door. Diamond vents are present in the gable ends.

The most notable alteration to the structure is the application of vinyl siding. In addition, the original hipped-roof porch posts have been replaced by metal posts. The west (rear) and south elevations of the house indicate that later additions to, and enclosure of, porches on the rear ell have resulted in a flattening of the roof slope when viewed from the rear and a variety of wall finishes when viewed from the south. The original roof covering is unknown; the current covering is asphalt shingle. False shutters flank the front façade windows and storm windows have been added on all elevations.

A 1988 survey of Raleigh's African-American neighborhoods recorded 1,445 structures classifying their significance by building type, form, and architectural style. Only twenty-nine of these surveyed structures were I-houses. The I-house, a two-story, three-bay, single-pile dwelling, was a common vernacular form throughout the South during the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. The presence of a front gable on the façade was also common, and referred to locally as a Triple-A for the three "A" forms two at the gable ends and the third at the front gable. The rarity of the James Morgan House as a Triple-A is due to its location and its ownership. While common, the I-house form was largely associated with substantial rural farms and constructed by the land owners as evidence of their financial success. The fact that Wilson Morgan, James' father, was African-American and built this house in the Oberlin community, an in-town African-American community comprised of more modest dwellings, is what makes the structure stand

out. The Morgan House was one of the first houses of its type in the Oberlin community and was representative of a more prosperous African-American population in Raleigh in the early-twentieth century¹.

Historic Significance

The James S. Morgan House and the Wilson Chapel Methodist Church are the two remaining structures associated with the Morgan family, a prominent family in the history of the Oberlin community. Wilson W. Morgan, father of James S. Morgan, was among the earliest settlers of the Oberlin community². Wilson Morgan was a Wake County representative in the General Assembly of 1870-92³ and one of the incorporators of the Colored Educational Association of North Carolina, organized in 1866 and chartered by the General Assembly the following year⁴.

What would become Oberlin began in 1866 when Lewis Peck, a wealthy white grocer, divided his farm into lots and sold them to African-Americans. The selling off of land to 'freedmen' was common during this era as their Raleigh population nearly doubled between 1860 (2,087) and 1870 (4,094). Several other land owners in the area followed Peck's model. No plat exists for Oberlin; rather, it appears to have been built in fits and starts, whenever land became available⁵.

The means with which these lots were purchased is unknown but one possibility was the Raleigh Cooperative Land and Building Association which, during the 1870s, offered loans payable at ten dollars a month. The connection between the Association and Oberlin is in James Henry Harris. Harris was a prominent African-American politician, founder of the Raleigh Cooperative Land and Building Association as well as the Freedmen's Savings and Trust Company. Harris was a graduate of Oberlin College in Ohio. An 1872 letter to the editor of the *Daily News* from the citizens of the area stated that their community should be referred to as "Oberlin"⁶.

The establishment of the Oberlin community was evidenced not just in land sales and home building, but also in the establishment of churches and a school, each of which was present in the community by the 1870s⁷. Wilson Temple United Methodist Church is believed to be the oldest church in Oberlin. Loosely organized as early as 1865, the

¹ Culture Town, 22.

² Culture Town, 18.

³ Murray, 645.

⁴ Reid, 609-610.

⁵ Wyatt, 6-7.

⁶ Wyatt, 9.

⁷ Wyatt, 9.

church was formally founded in 1872 in a frame structure which also housed a school. The church was given the name Wilson for Wilson Morgan who donated the land for the church and parsonage. The original frame church was replaced in 1911 with the Gothic Revival brick structure that still exists at 1025 Oberlin Road.

The Morgan land stretched from the current site of the James Morgan House north to Wade Avenue⁸. Wilson Morgan had the house at 1015 Oberlin Road built for his son, James S. Morgan, ca. 1900. The house was deeded to James Morgan's granddaughter, Claudia Johnson at his death in the 1930s.

The Oberlin community continued to grow through the early twentieth century as is evidenced by buildings of the period still extant in the community today. However, the numbers of these original structures is reduced. Modern-day Oberlin has experienced a notable amount of demolition and reduction in lot size as the result of road widening and infill development. The number of structures that represent the community is dwindling. Even rarer are examples of sizable homes in the Oberlin community like the James Morgan House, the Turner House at 1002 Oberlin Road, and the Willis M. Graves House at 802 Oberlin Road. One other notable dwelling, the Latta House, was destroyed by fire in 2007. The James Morgan house remains as one of only a few intact examples of a notable house form in an important turn-of-the-century African-American community in Raleigh.

⁸ Virginia Morgan Blount Interview

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Boundary Justification

The area to be designated is the intact legal parcel of .32 acre (Pin Number 1704056214) associated with the James S. Morgan House. There are deciduous trees along the rear of the residential lot, a large hardwood tree in the front yard, and informal plantings in the front and side yards. The lot is delineated on the attached Wake County Tax Map.



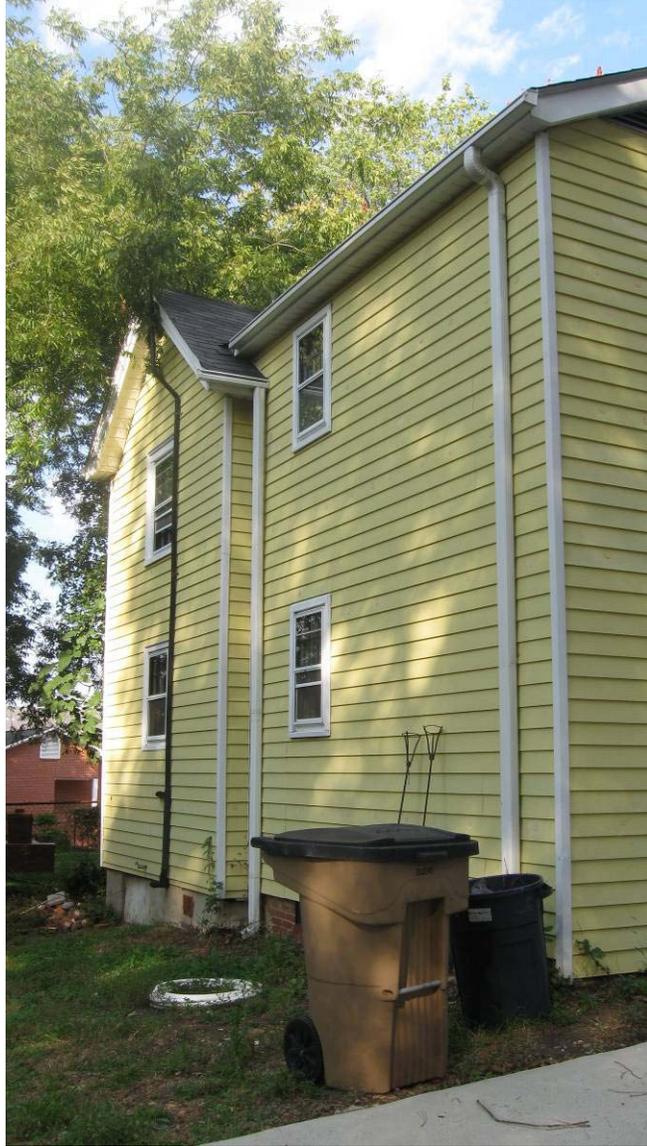
East façade



South façade



East and north façades



West (rear) facade