HISTORIC PERSPECTIVE OF OXFORD HISTORIC DISTRICT[2]

Oxford's Historic District contains numerous structures or sites of particular architectural interest or historical significance. The district is an architectural mosaic with three property types: Plantation Era Properties, 1746 - 1865; Bright Leaf Era Properties, 1866 – 1937 and to a limited extent, Plantation and Bright Leaf Era Outbuildings, 1746 – 1937. These properties are primarily residential. However, the district also includes churches, government buildings, banks, tobacco processing facilities and other non-residential buildings; a small number of bright leaf era outbuildings, primarily garages and a late nineteenth/early twentieth century commercial district, which radiates out from the 1838 Granville County Courthouse along the central intersection of Hillsboro, Williamsboro, College and Main Streets. However, the district has a sense of cohesiveness which comes from the many streetscapes displaying similarity of scale and materials and from large old trees which line many streets.

Until recently Oxford's economy was strongly dependent on agriculture. Consequently, most of the oldest remaining houses in Oxford were plantation houses. Among the earliest of the town's surviving houses are two fine examples of Georgian/Federalist style properties – the Bryant-Kingsbury House, circa 1825, 417 Goshen Street and the Taylor – McClanahan House, circa 1820, 203 College Street.

Oxford has sixteen Greek Revival style dwellings – most located within the historic district – suggesting the vitality in both the town and the county of the quarter century preceding the Civil War. The other style which was particularly influential in Oxford before the Civil War was the Gothic Revival style. With the exception of minor decorative motifs, such as the trim of the Bryant – Kingsbury House, the pre-Civil War use of Gothic Revival style in the district survives only in photographs or renderings of two exceptional razed buildings – the Oxford Presbyterian Church, circa 1830, and the main building of St. John's College, circa 1858.

The Civil War had a stultifying effect on the development of the town and district, and not until the 1880's did building activity fully recover. Most of the money which built houses in Oxford after the Civil War came from the same source as money for the earlier houses – agriculture, primarily tobacco. Although the plantation economy switched to tenant farming economy, many local landowners still lived in town. Additionally, people providing services for agriculture prospered in Oxford – services such as selling farm supplies, operating warehouses, etc. As county seat, Oxford through the years handled an increasing amount of the county's business; thus lawyers and doctors frequently had lucrative careers in the town.

During the 1880s and to a lesser extent the decades on either side of it, numerous Romantic style buildings with Italianate finish were built. These buildings are particularly evident on the broad, tree-lined expanse of College Street, which retains some of the town's most notable Italianate dwellings and commercial buildings. Perhaps the premier street in the town in the late nineteenth century, it is still one of its most desirable locations.

Among the finer Italianate style residences in the district are the Col. Roger O. Gregory House, circa 1880, at 414 College Street, the Edwards – Cannady House, circa 1880, 200 College

[2] Excerpted from the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form for the Oxford Historic District, Section 7, Pages 1-17, certified by the State Historic Preservation Officer for North Carolina dated January 29, 1988.

Street and the Mary Hunt Parker House, circa 1880, 202 East Front Street. The Italianate was the style of choice for the town's and district's surviving early commercial structures. So popular in the late nineteenth century, the style was seized upon to rebuild the sections of Main, College and Hillsboro streets swept by fire in 1886 and 1887. Unlike the district's Italianate and other late nineteenth and early twentieth century residences, the commercial structures are without exception of masonry construction, another product of the fires that swept away the frame buildings that had previously made up much of the town's downtown. The most elaborate of the Italianate commercial structures is the two story, brick, Granville Furniture Company, circa 1885, 114 Main Street.

The Victorian style followed on the heels of and intermingled with the Italianate in the town and district in the latter two decades of the nineteenth century and the opening decade of the twentieth. The term "Victorian" is used generally here to encompass the Second Empire, Queen Anne, Richardsonian Romanesque and Eastlake or Stick Styles. Its most popular expression was the Queen Anne, though the earliest Victorian structure raised in the district was Second Empire in style.

The district's three Second Empire style dwellings – the only nineteenth century examples of the style in the county – are all among its oldest Victorian buildings. The former St. Stephen's Episcopal Church Rectory at 109 Rectory Street is the earliest known post-Civil War building in Oxford, having been erected on College Street just to the west in 1867. The Hundley-White House, circa 1889, 208 College Street, is the most elaborately finished example of the style in the district. The third of the district's Second Empire style dwellings is the Watkins House, circa 1883, 301 Main Street.

The district's numerous surviving Queen Anne style residences indicate that it was the most popular of the late nineteenth century styles in the town. First appearing in the 1880s, the Queen Anne remained popular into the first decade of the twentieth century, often accompanied by Colonial Revival style decorative features. Small, medium and large examples of the style were built in the district, the larger dwellings in particular reflecting the wealth and vibrancy of the time. The James M. Currin House, circa 1884, 213 High Street, is Oxford's most ornate example of the style. A fine, if slightly less ornate, Queen Anne style residence is the Erwin – Baird House, circa 1900, 209 College Street. The third house in the district to feature a corner tower is the Thomas Lanier House, circa 1900, 410 College Street.

The Queen Anne style, coupled with elements of the Gothic Revival, is also represented in two of the district's and town's most imposing churches, the Oxford Presbyterian Church, circa 1892, 121 Gilliam Street, and the Oxford Methodist Church, circa 1903, 105 West McClanahan Street. (The only known non-ecclesiastical Gothic Revival style building erected in the district after the Civil War is the 1888, brick, former Oxford Opera House, at 122 Williamsboro Street which as lost it towers and upper story, but retains two pointed-arched and traceried windows.) The decorative Eastlake style that often accompanies the Queen Anne is found at two of the district's late nineteenth century residences. Its decorative features are displayed at their best in the Thomas White, Jr. House, circa 1889, 203 Main Street and the Hundley – Cannady House, circa 1880s, 517 College Street.

Only two surviving Richardsonian Romanesque style buildings stand in the town and the district- St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, circa 1896, 140 College Street and the former National Bank of Granville, circa 1891, 107 Williamsboro Street.

Building activity apparently lagged in the district and elsewhere in the town between 1890 and 1900, a decade during which the town's population dropped by almost a third, from 2,907 to 2,059. Its rebound in the next three decades – which saw its population climb back to 3,018 in 1910 and to 3,606 and 4,101 in 1920 and 1930 respectively – is evidenced by the district's many Eclectic style buildings. After World War I, the growth of the district followed earlier patterns allowing new houses in the popular styles of the day to be built among the older houses as families sold the lands surrounding their homeplace. The Eclectic style dwellings built between 1900 and 1920 in the district were largely Colonial or Neo-Classical Revival in style, combined with Queen Anne or bungalow style features at either end of the two decades. By the 1920s, the dwellings built in the district primarily utilized the bungalow style, with an occasional Period Revival cottage raised prior to the stultifying years of the Depression. Additional early twentieth century Eclectic styles are found in the district's non-residential buildings, which include examples of the Beaux Arts and Moderne styles.

The Frank Blalock House, circa 1910, 107 East Spring Street, is a typical, modest example of the transition from the Queen Anne to the Colonial Revival in the district. The James W. Horner House, circa1913, 201 Gilliam Street, is a more complete and ornate example of the Colonial Revival style. The W.N. Thomas House, circa 1926, 405 College Street, is a close mate to the Horner house. The Dutch variant of the Colonial Revival is found at the Hancock House, circa 1914, 103 West Front Street. A single Eclectic dwelling that displays elements of the Chateauesque style stands in the town and district. It is the Beverly S. Royster House, circa 1902, 315 Raleigh Street.

Just as the Colonial Revival and Queen Anne styles had met during their overlapping periods of ascendancy – the close of the nineteenth century and the opening of the twentieth – the Colonial Revival merged with the Bungalow style in the teens and twenties. Two examples of this are the Easton – Hancock House, circa 1915, 109 West Front Street, and the Thad G. Stem House, circa 1913, 104 East Front Street.

Related to and coterminous with the Colonial Revival style, was the Neo-Classical style. It is represented exclusively in Oxford within the bounds of the district. Its dominant feature, the colossal two-story column, adorns four of Oxford's larger and finer early twentieth century residences – the R. G. Lassiter House, circa 1908, 221 Gilliam Street, the C. D. Ray House, circa 1911, 404 College Street, the J.G. Hall House, circa 1913, 221 Main Street and the A.A. Hicks House, circa 1903, 503 College Street.

The Neo-Classical and Colonial Revival styles are also found in a number of non-residential buildings in the district. Examples of these are as follows: C. G. Credle School, circa 1911, 223 College Street, the former Oxford Post Office, circa 1913, 145 Main Street, and the Oxford Baptist Church, circa 1928, 147 Main Street.

Two eclectic styles found only at non-residential buildings in the town and district are the Beaux Arts and Moderne. The finest and most complete example of the Beaux Arts is the former Union Bank & Trust Company Building at 108 College Street. The Moderne style is represented at two of the District's buildings – the C & M Hosiery Mills, circa 1928, 118 Main Street, and the Orpheum Theatre, circa 1943, 129 Williamsboro Street.

The Bungalow and Period Revival styles were the last to reach the district prior to World War II. Examples of the bungalow are the Crews – Turner House, circa 1920, 709 College Street, and the

Outlaw Hunt House, circa 1920, 119 West Front Street. The Crews – Cutts House, circa 1931, 201 East Front Street, and the Crews – Washington House, circa 1926, 208 East Front Street are examples of Revival version of the Tudor style and Mediterranean style respectively.

Few buildings were erected in the district after 1937. Those that were are primarily small, minimally adorned, brick veneered, Colonial Revival and ranch style houses. In the 1950s, an industrial development program which brought industries to town was started. This program helped an economy which was badly stagnating. However, only in the 1960s did Oxford really experience growth which was not related to agriculture. Indeed, this growth which has continued has helped to make the notion of a Historic District economically feasible.

Although statistically many buildings may not seem old enough to merit inclusion in a Historic District, the character of this neighborhood is unlike any other in Oxford. This unique character is established largely by the huge trees lining the streets, the wide streets and the older homes.