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MARGARET RUTH LITTLE

Getting the American Dream for Themselves

*Postwar Modern Subdivisions for African Americans
in Raleigh, North Carolina*

A collection of mid-century modern housing hides in plain sight in Raleigh's postwar African American suburbs behind the still-existent color line. Few white residents are aware of these black neighborhoods. African Americans who had fought in World War II and entered the middle class in such professions as education, medicine, pharmacy, and the building trades created a separate existence for themselves in segregated east and south Raleigh. The custom ranch and split levels built for these upwardly mobile black families represent a startling divergence of architectural taste between middle-class whites and blacks in the small conservative southern city. Blacks looked toward a brighter future and chose clean modern forms; whites preferred expressions of the Colonial Revival style that harkened to an era of white dominance.

Urban historians who have tracked the movement of African Americans to the suburbs in tandem with whites in the post-World War II era have focused on the sociology of black suburban migration rather than the physical appearance of housing. This literature offers little architectural analysis, thereby implying that the suburban houses of blacks and whites are generally identical. Andrew Wiese's seminal study *Places of Their Own* does not distinguish between the architectural appearance of houses in white and black suburbs but does find a different pattern of black suburbanization in the South. African Americans' escape from most Northern and Midwestern inner cities occurred through expansion into older existing white neighborhoods, resulting in a contentious struggle between white

suburban officials, realtors and developers, and upwardly mobile blacks. In the urban South, black and white civic leaders often collaborated to solve the postwar housing crisis, thus African American communities grew largely through construction of new developments on the edges of existing black neighborhoods. "Separate but equal" had been the modus operandi in the South since the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision set in place the doctrine of racial segregation and created the so-called Jim Crow era that lasted until the 1960s. Whites wanted to avoid turmoil and to maintain segregation. Southern middle-class blacks, like their counterparts elsewhere, wanted to express their newly won status through a physical separation from poor and working-class blacks. Most of them preferred new houses in strong black suburbs, equal in quality to those of whites, rather than the fear and isolation of attempting to integrate a white neighborhood.¹

Segregation in North Carolina resembled that in the rest of the South, although the state enjoyed an atmosphere more enlightened than most others in the region during the term of progressive governor Terry Sanford in the early 1960s and within pockets of liberalism, as in Chapel Hill, home of the University of North Carolina. North Carolina's larger cities—Greensboro, Durham, Charlotte, Raleigh, and Fayetteville experienced significant civil rights struggles in the early sixties.² Segments of the black population participated in the nonviolent civil disobedience movement that began with the lunch counter sit-in on February 1, 1960, at the Woolworth store in

Greensboro. Sit-ins, picket lines, and freedom rides spread to cities across the state during 1960 and 1961, and by 1963 some eating facilities and movie theaters had been integrated. The federal Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965, which proscribed discrimination in public accommodations, employment, and voting, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968, which forbade discrimination in housing purchase and rental, expanded African American opportunities in both the public and private spheres.³

Raleigh occupied a special status in North Carolina as a black educational center nicknamed "Culture Town" by African Americans for its wealth of opportunities.⁴ Shaw University and St. Augustine's College, established at the end of the Civil War, were twin pillars of strong African American neighborhoods with black public and private elementary and secondary schools. A segregated black business district thrived on East Hargett Street at the east edge of downtown. A strong local civil rights movement flourished in the city. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), whose seal shows a black hand shaking a white hand, was founded at Shaw University in 1960. Integration of public schools proceeded defiantly across the state from 1957 to 1965. In 1960 Bill Campbell was the first black child to integrate a white school in Raleigh. Efforts to integrate the white public swimming pool at Pullen Park failed in 1960 but succeeded later in the decade. Pickets and sit-ins continued in 1962 and 1963 at public facilities such as restaurants and theaters.⁵

Although blacks represented one-third of the population of Raleigh in the postwar years, their housing was restricted to the areas around the two black colleges in the east and southeast quadrants, as well as to a constellation of small former freedman's villages around the outer edges.⁶ The *Shelley V. Kraemer* Supreme Court decision of 1948 rendered racially restrictive covenants unenforceable, but de facto, if not legal, segregation against African Americans was practiced in subdivisions throughout North Carolina.⁷ Raleigh in 1950 was a quiet capital city of some 66,000 with a segregated grid-patterned city core. Much of the city's white housing was protected by deed

covenants restricting ownership to Caucasians. Even after these racial covenants expired or were struck down, Raleigh's color line held by custom, tradition, and subservience.

The housing shortage was acute for both blacks and whites after World War II. Like most American cities, Raleigh had seen little housing construction since the late 1920s due to the Great Depression and the building-material shortages of the war. When it ended, developers and builders went on a two-decade spree to satisfy the pent-up housing demand from veterans and their families and others.⁸ Postwar white subdivisions appeared by 1947, sprouting like mushrooms along the edges of established neighborhoods. African American veterans, who fought alongside white soldiers in the war, believed winning the war for democracy abroad would change segregation at home, but Jim Crow segregation remained in force in Raleigh. Keeping their "eyes on the prize" gave African Americans integrated public schools, lunch counters, and swimming pools in the 1960s, but the suburbs remained lily white.⁹

One avenue of escape after World War II for middle-class African Americans in Raleigh, as throughout the country, was the acquisition of a house in a white neighborhood bordering a black area: so-called trickle-down housing.¹⁰ This was not the aggressive block busting so incendiary in larger cities, including Atlanta and Dallas, but a more incremental expansion of black homeownership. As white families in Raleigh's eastern core moved to the suburbs, middle-class blacks purchased their dwellings. In Longview Gardens, a large white subdivision in east Raleigh, the original covenants prohibiting occupancy by blacks expired in 1965. By this time adjacent white tract subdivisions such as Worthdale had largely converted to black occupancy. Blacks gradually acquired houses in Longview Gardens when the original owners died and their heirs sold, but this did not cause white flight. The grandson of the subdivision's developer acknowledged, "The neighborhood was ahead of the rest of the town in accepting integration."¹¹ Over the past forty years, the number of black families living in Longview Gardens has gradually increased

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However most Raleigh blacks, like the majority of postwar black suburbanites, avoided the threat of hostility and even violence by settling in what Andrew Wiese calls "safe, black spaces in the suburbs."¹² These safe spaces—new, separate housing developments—may seem a more passive approach than block busting. But by following this path of growth, Southern blacks succeeded in constructing some of the finest African American residential suburbs in the United States because they had greater freedom to move to the suburbs than in anywhere else in the country. Atlanta and Dallas are the best-known examples of success in "Negro housing" efforts in the South, but many more successful historically black suburbs may exist outside the South's smaller cities.¹³

A full decade after the end of World War II, Raleigh's white and black development community cooperated to create four new black housing developments: Rochester Heights, Battery Heights, Madonna Acres, and Biltmore Hills (Figure 1). Finding building lots in east and south Raleigh was one of many obstacles. Black developers faced loan limitations that prevented them from speculative construction, thus all but the latter subdivision contains custom houses. These developments conformed in street layout, building setback, minimum lot size, and general suburban ranch and split-level architectural forms to the white postwar suburbs that had flourished since the late 1940s. Black families who purchased lots in these new subdivisions had limited access to mortgages, so they built as economically as possible. Despite these hardships, middle-class blacks, including many prominent community leaders, bought lots, built new houses, and created a stable life for themselves that has in many cases lasted to the present.

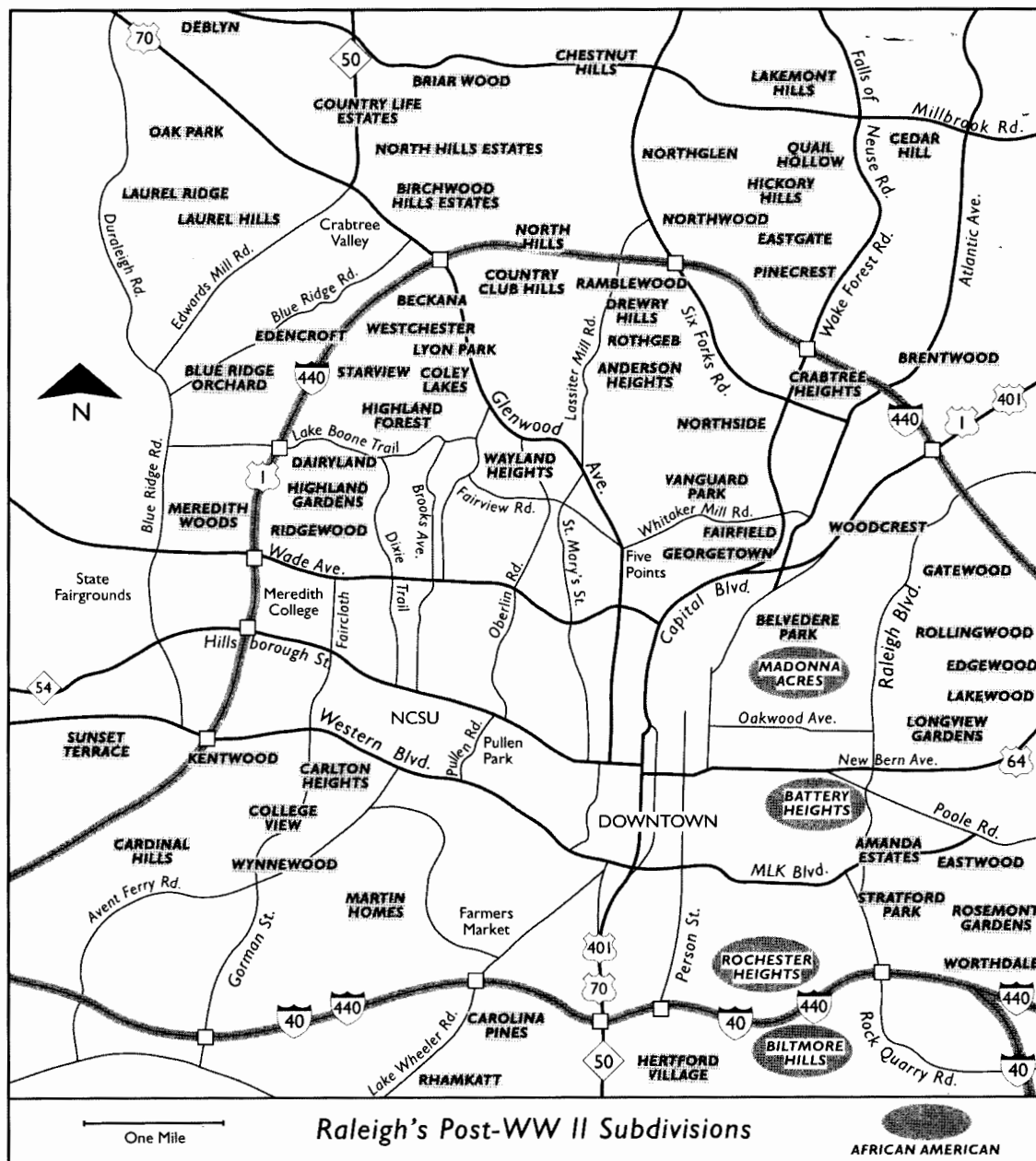
Rochester Heights was platted about 1956 by white developer E. E. Phillips on farm acreage purchased from the black farmer L. E. Lightner. The principal street, Calloway Drive, is named for popular jazz/blues musician Cab Calloway, a native of Rochester, New York. The subdivision may also be named for Calloway's hometown.

Other black entertainers for whom streets are named are singer Pearl Bailey and famous tap dancer Peg Leg Bates. The 39-acre development contains 135 middle-class brick ranches and split levels, the earliest built in 1957. Middle-class teachers and other professionals purchased lots along Calloway Drive; many of them previously lived in Washington Terrace, a nearby inner-city black apartment complex around Washington School, the first black high school in Raleigh.¹⁴

The African American masonry contractor Millard R. Peebles constructed all of the Calloway Drive houses and some of those on Charles Street. Peebles learned masonry at Hampton Institute in Virginia in the 1940s and then moved to Raleigh with his wife Allie Muse Peebles around 1947, settling on Person Street in southeast Raleigh. One of his first jobs was on the construction crew for Cameron Village, an innovative shopping, office, and residential project by Raleigh developer Willie York. Peebles built the first house in the subdivision at 721 Calloway Drive in 1957, as a model. The substantial brick ranch with front picture window became his residence. Millard's foreman, Sidney Cooley, built the large brick ranch next door at 801 Calloway Drive for himself.¹⁵ The standardized ranch and split-level plans with modest modern features may have been provided by the developer (Figure 2).

Battery Heights stands in an earlier twentieth-century urban neighborhood created from the ancestral land of the Gatlings, a white landowning family who built and rented small houses to blacks. In the mid-1950s John Gatling inherited the eastern blocks that had already been platted into narrow lots for rental houses. George C. Exum, an African American brickmason from eastern North Carolina who moved to Raleigh in 1947, taught masonry classes at nearby Ligon High School, Raleigh's postwar black high school, for twenty-eight years. Looking for land on which to build his house, Exum approached Gatling with the concept of allowing middle-class blacks to purchase several adjacent lots in order to construct substantial homes.¹⁶ Gatling agreed to change his development direction and created protective covenants stipulating a minimum house size of 1,600 square feet with 30-foot

Figure 1. Map of Raleigh suburbs by race, 1968. Adapted by Michael Southern, 2011.



setbacks.¹⁷ He sold lots only to black professionals, many of whom were introduced to him by Exum. David P. Lane, a dentist, and his wife Vivian, a teacher, were the first purchasers, building their ranch house across three narrow lots at 1601 Miller Street in 1957. D.P., descended from a distinguished local black family, and Vivian, who moved to Raleigh to attend Shaw University, had searched far and wide for a building lot, but there were “just certain places where blacks could buy.”¹⁸ The Lanes gathered design ideas

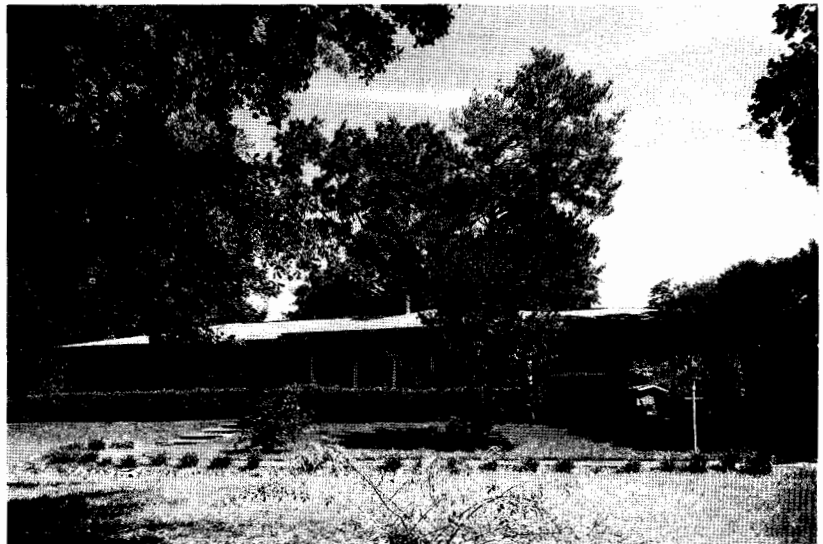
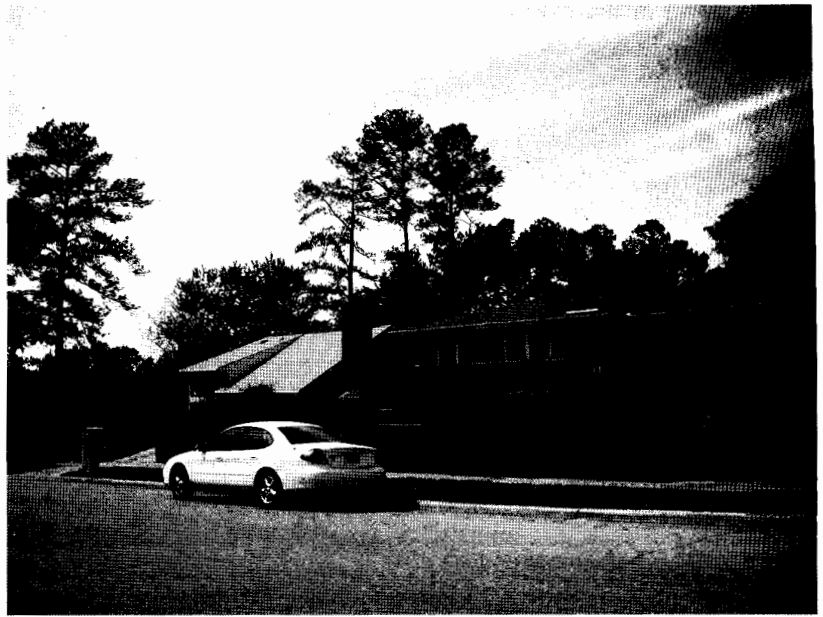
for their three-bedroom brick modernist ranch with large carport from newspapers and magazines, had blueprints drawn by an architect, John Ozart of Savannah, Georgia, and hired George Exum as builder (Figure 3).¹⁹ A block away, at 321 Sherrybrook Drive, George Exum built a large rambler ranch for his family in 1959. A number of Exum’s high school students served their apprenticeships assisting him in construction of the Battery Heights houses, earning wages and meeting the requirements for a profitable trade.²⁰

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"We weren't into columns," recalled Mrs. Lane, "but Mrs. Hunt wanted them." Mrs. Hunt and her husband, physician Christopher Hunt, hired George Exum to build a large brick split level, unconventional because it contains four levels instead of the usual three, at 300 Sherrybrook Drive in 1961.²¹ Mrs. Hunt added a boldly scaled entrance porch with tall posts, a door with a classical entrance pediment, and flanking rows of small square windows that function as a modern interpretation of sidelights (Figure 4). Because there were few spaces available for gatherings of black professionals at this time, the Old North State Medical Society (the state association of African American physicians, dentists, and pharmacists) met in Dr. Hunt's basement.²²

Among the other modernist houses in Battery Heights are two built by educator couples. Lawrence and Blanche Rivers, teachers at the State School for the Blind and Deaf, had an asymmetrical front-gabled modern ranch built for them in 1963 at 1617 E. Martin Street. With its clean sweep of roof and projecting living room with front and side picture windows, this is a sophisticated modern design. In 1964 school principal James Byers and his wife, a teacher, had black builder John Winters construct a distinctive modern split level at 311 Sherrybrook Drive (Figure 5).²³ The bold front-gabled façade features full-height fixed windows and an entrance porch with seven dramatically thin angled posts supporting wide overhanging eaves. The side wing contains a lower level den. The thirty-three families in Battery Heights named their community "Les Pins," a name suggested by a resident who taught high school French because of the stands of tall pine trees scattered throughout the subdivision. "We were cohesive. We knew everybody, and we'd watch out for each other," Mrs. Lane remembered.²⁴ Other names for the subdivision, "The Gatling" and "The Gold Coast," reflected its status in the black community.²⁵

Madonna Acres, adjacent to St. Augustine's College along Oakwood Avenue in east Raleigh, was the first subdivision in the city created for blacks by a black developer. John W. Winters (1920–2004) was born into an old Raleigh family descended from local free blacks. When his



mother died, he went to live with relatives in New York and attended high school in Brooklyn. He took classes at Long Island University and Virginia State College and then returned to Raleigh to study at Shaw University. He and his wife Marie married in 1941 and raised eight children. Winters worked at a variety of jobs, including railroad porter, waiter, and deliveryman for Pine State Creamery, meanwhile building a home for himself and one for another family member.²⁶

Winters formed John W. Winters and Company, a real estate and insurance business, while

Figure 2. Calloway Drive, Rochester Heights, Raleigh, N.C., Millard Peebles House at right, 1957. Photograph by author.

Figure 3. Dr. Lane House, 1601 Miller Street, Battery Heights, Raleigh, N.C., 1957. Photograph by author.



Figure 4. Dr. Hunt House, 300 Sherrybrook Drive, Battery Heights, Raleigh, 1961. Photograph by author.

Figure 5. Byers House, 311 Sherrybrook Drive, Battery Heights, Raleigh, 1964. Photograph by author.

working as a skycap at the Raleigh-Durham airport in 1957. He had realized that developers were expanding the city to the north and west, but paying little attention to predominantly black southeast Raleigh.²⁷ The 1959–60 Madonna Acres subdivision carried his business into land development. He purchased the thirteen-acre tract from the heirs of the Reverend Henry Delany, Episcopal rector of St. Augustine's College and the first African American Episcopal bishop in the United States. Among Delany heirs were daughters Sadie and Annie Delany, spinster sisters who lived to be 104 and 109 in New York City and wrote their best-selling memoir *Having Our Say* in 1993. Winters platted the sub-

division in 1960, naming it for one of his daughters, Donna.²⁸

Madonna Acres contains one principal street with three short cul-de-sacs, then a new feature of suburban housing in Raleigh (Figure 6). Subdivision covenants required a minimum 1,100-square-foot house, standard lot setbacks, and approval of house plans by an architectural committee to which Winters belonged. The minimum size was larger than the 800-square-foot minimum required for Rochester Heights but smaller than the 1,600 minimum for Battery Heights. Madonna Acres generated excitement within the black community. Because of its proximity to St. Augustine's College, a number of the homeowners were faculty and staff. Twenty-three of the thirty-eight families who built in Madonna Acres worked in education, either public school, higher education, or as staff for the State Department of Public Instruction. Lot purchasers consulted with Winters and Jerry Miller, a prolific white designer of small and medium-sized houses, to create their house plans. Winters did the preliminary house plans and then referred his clients to Miller to draft detailed blueprints. Miller had studied at the North Carolina State College School of Design but left before graduation to set up a practice.²⁹

Druggist Clarence Coleman and his wife Ola, a medical technician, worked with Miller to design their large 1961 ranch at 810 Delany Drive. Features such as alternating sections of Roman brick and weatherboard siding, an orchard stone front wall, large fixed windows with lower awning panes, and ribbon windows in the bedrooms present a striking modern appearance (Figure 7).³⁰ The cathedral-ceilinged living room includes a dramatic stone fireplace and a ribbon transom that filters light to the adjacent master bedroom. In the original blueprints, the transom may have functioned as a clerestory that admitted outside light, but the roof was constructed as a symmetrical gable rather than as a roof with clerestory window.

Undertaker and civic leader Clarence Lightner and his wife Marguerite worked with Jerry Miller in 1961 to create a large brick split level at 717 Delany Drive. Clarence was the brother of L. E.

Lightner, whose farm had been developed as Rochester Heights. Instead of the standard side-by-side split-level plan, with living, dining, and kitchen rooms in a one-story wing with a two-story side wing of bedrooms one-half level up and a den one-half level down, the Lightners' main rooms are stretched across the front. The upper bedrooms and lower den occupy a two-story section to the rear, accessed by half-height stairs leading from the living room. The living room soars one and one-half stories, with a full-height stone fireplace, and opens through a sliding glass door to a tiled patio breezeway between the house and the original garage. The house appears to be a sleek ranch house from the street since the upper and lower levels are concealed at the rear (Figure 8). Clarence Lightner graduated from North Carolina Central University, a historically black college in Durham, where he was active in the Omega Psi Phi fraternity. He completed mortuary science school in Philadelphia. After serving in the Army during World War II, he returned to his native Raleigh and married in 1946. In 1967, two years after the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965, he was elected to the Raleigh City Council. In 1973 Lightner became the first African American mayor of a metropolitan Southern city. His election was credited to "support from a coalition of white suburbanites concerned about urban and suburban sprawl."³¹

In 1962 radio and television personality J. D. Lewis, who served in an elite black Marine Corps in World War II, built at 1505 Tierney Circle a spacious split level with the same front-to-rear floor plan seen in the Lightner House but with a very different room arrangement (Figure 9).³² The plan maximizes the rear-sloping terrain of his cul-de-sac lot, with kitchen, dining room, bedrooms, and carport on the main level. At the rear, a large living room on the upper level overlooks the kitchen through an open balcony. A clerestory and large rear picture windows brighten the living room and integrate the living space into the wooded rear vista. In the rear lower level is a den and extra bedroom.

Harold Webb, a supervisor in the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, and his wife Lucille, a high school teacher, worked with



Jerry Miller to design a sleek two-story modern house next door at 1509 Tierney Circle in 1962.³³ The streamlined rectangle, clad in vertical stained siding, with diagonal metal posts supporting the front overhanging jetty, resembles the affordable prefabricated Techbuilt houses designed by American architect Carl Koch in the 1950s.³⁴ The unusual floor plan contains a family room, bedroom, bath, and two-car recessed carport on the first floor. The second floor living room, set above the carport, has wide bands of windows along the front and rear. The full glass end wall opens to a balcony. Dining room, kitchen, and three bedrooms occupy the remainder of the upper level (Figure 10). Like his neighbors Clarence Lightner

Figure 6. Delany Drive, Madonna Acres, platted 1959–1960, Raleigh, N.C. Photograph by author.

Figure 7. Coleman House, 810 Delany Drive, Madonna Acres, Raleigh, N.C., 1961. Photograph by author.

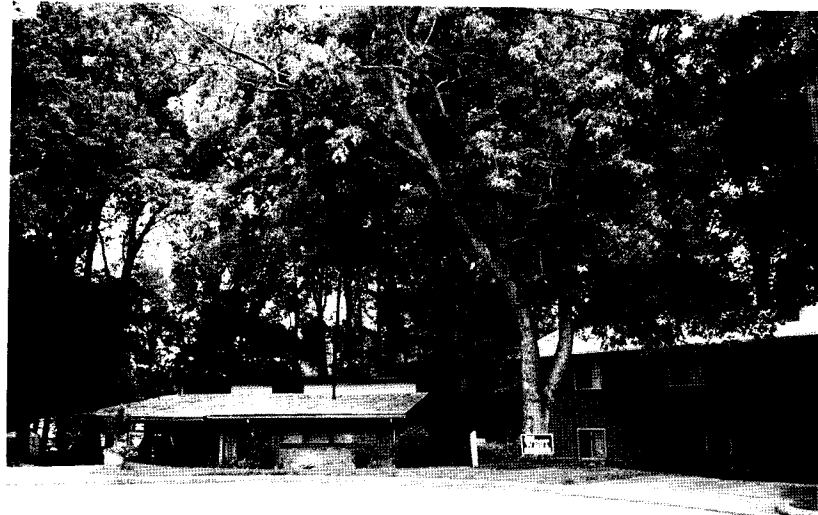


Figure 8. Lightner House, 717 Delany Drive, Madonna Acres, Raleigh, N.C., 1961. Photograph by author.

Figure 9. Lewis House, 1505 Tierney Circle (at left); Webb House, 1509 Tierney Circle (at right), Madonna Acres, Raleigh, N.C., 1962. Photograph by author.

and J. D. Lewis, Webb has been involved in public service in Raleigh and North Carolina on many levels throughout his career. After serving as a Tuskegee Airman in the U.S. Air Force during World War II, he graduated from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College, a historically black college in Greensboro. He belonged to Omega Psi Phi fraternity and continued as an active alumnus. In addition to his career as schoolteacher, principal, and administrator in the state education department, he served as a Wake County Commissioner and on many local and state boards.³⁵

Developer John Winters's company gradually moved into shopping center construction,

apartment development, and property management. In 1961 his city ward elected him to the city council as the first black councilman of the twentieth century. He served in the state Senate from 1974 to 1977. Winters's other positions of leadership included director of the North Carolina Housing Corporation, which encouraged moderate-cost housing; director of the Home Builders Association of Raleigh-Wake County; board member of the North Carolina Utilities Commission; and member of the Board of Governors of the University of North Carolina system. Winters not only improved the built environment of Raleigh for his fellow African Americans but shaped local and state policies in low- and moderate-income housing and land development.³⁶

Biltmore Hills, developed by John Winters and his "front man" Ed K. Richards, one of Raleigh's foremost white developers, is an approximately 132-acre subdivision with long curving streets and cul-de-sacs platted in 1960 on the south side of Rochester Heights. The approximately 216 modest lower-middle-class ranches were not custom-built; lot purchasers made up of artisans and blue-collar workers as well as professionals selected a plan from the builder or else purchased an already constructed house. Most of the ranches have simple traditional forms, but some blocks contain modern asymmetrical front-gable ranches with shallow front porches (Figure 11). Biltmore Hills enabled hundreds of African American families to experience middle-class suburban living in the early 1960s.³⁷

The social homogeneity of these middle-class suburbs was carefully protected by homeowners' associations, by membership in the same social clubs and organizations, and by an active effort to keep out rentals. Many families belonged to Meadowbrook Country Club, built in 1959, which featured a pool and a nine-hole golf course. John Winters built the Meadowbrook clubhouse; George Exum built the pro shop.³⁸ Many of this social class remained active in their college fraternities, especially Omega Psi Phi, and sororities. In these suburbs a number of the houses are still under original ownership; others are now occupied by their children. Care

was taken to maintain owner occupancy in these mid-century black Raleigh subdivisions, where the middle class sought a social separation from lower-class blacks. On several occasions when Madonna Acres houses were foreclosed by the bank, developer John Winters stepped in to buy the properties and resell them to appropriate buyers. For example, in 1966 the Evans family, who lived at 601 Delany Drive, also owned the adjacent house at 605 Delany Drive, which they rented. When the rental house was foreclosed, Winters purchased it and sold it to a new family.³⁹ Second-generation Madonna Acres residents are amused when they contemplate the role reversal between themselves and their parents. While they were growing up, their parents supervised each others' children. Now the grown children who have inherited the home places from their parents look after the remaining, original, elderly residents.

Because of the exclusion of segregation, these postwar black landscapes facilitated activism to a greater degree than comparable white suburbs. The lack of venues for black meetings forced them to assemble in each others' homes for business and professional gatherings to a degree not seen among whites. White organizations met in restaurants or civic buildings that were not available to African Americans. As already mentioned, the doctors and dentists in the Old North State Medical Society, a statewide association for black medical professionals, used Dr. Christopher Hunt's basement in Battery Heights for their meetings. For another example, a group of black leaders known as the "Oval Table Gang" planned their civil rights and desegregation efforts at the kitchen table of Ralph and June Campbell, who lived in a bungalow on the east side of downtown Raleigh. It was there that the decision was made for the couple's son Bill to be the first black child to integrate the Raleigh public schools in 1960.⁴⁰ In Madonna Acres, Harold Webb and J. D. Lewis were next-door neighbors; Clarence Lightner was only a block away. Three doctors and a dentist lived within a block of each other in Battery Heights. High school principals, college professors, state government educational administra-



Figure 10. Rendering of Webb House, 1509 Tierney Circle, Madonna Acres, Raleigh, N.C., by Jerry Miller, designer, 1962.



Figure 11. Houses, 800 block Hadley Road, Biltmore Hills, Raleigh, N.C., 1961. Photograph by author.

tors, and public school teachers lived side by side in these enclaves.

The houses of Battery Heights and Madonna Acres, in particular, possess a progressive upscale character missing from most of the white subdivisions of Raleigh. The clean lines, Roman brick, stone veneer, vertical wood siding, and carports create lively statements of modern taste. Large picture windows integrate interiors with the outdoors. The living areas flow into each other and are often oriented toward the back of the building lot, with rear glass walls overlooking private grass and trees. Few of the original houses have traditional design. During a postwar Raleigh architectural survey conducted by the author a few years ago, a split personality between white and black subdivisions came into focus. A simple typology categorizing the architectural character of the thousands of mid-century

Figure 12. Minimal archetypal ranch in Fairway Acres, Raleigh, N.C., 1955. Photograph by author.

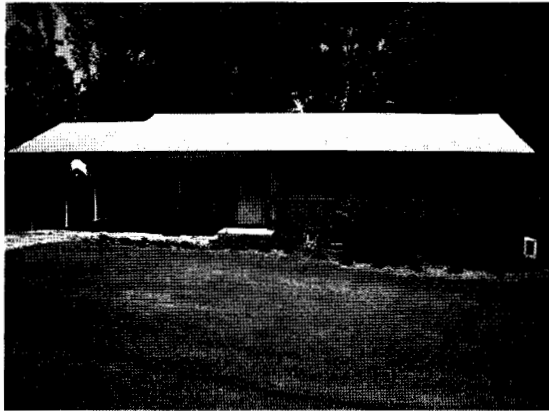


Figure 13. Colonial-style rambler ranch (Clifton Benson House, 109 Lord Ashley Road, Longview Gardens), Raleigh, N.C., circa 1948. Benson owned the largest building supply in Raleigh. Photograph by author.



Figure 14. Modern ranch (Stahl House, 3017 Granville Drive, Country Club Hills), Raleigh, N.C., 1956, Milton Small architect. Photograph by author.

Raleigh ranches built from 1945 to 1965 consists of minimal or rambler forms and archetypal, traditional, or modern design. An *archetypal* ranch conforms to the iconic national form of the building type, with a large-pane picture window in the

living room, a sweep of brick wall beneath high bedroom windows set in vertical wood siding, and a carport (Figure 12). A *traditional* or colonial ranch has red brick walls, Colonial Revival trim, and small-paned sash windows or a multipane picture window (Figure 13). A *modern* ranch is generally architect designed, with post-and-beam framework permitting an open plan, groupings of large windows, transparent eaves, and a sophisticated integration of the house into the site through the use of terraces, porches, and carports (Figure 14).⁴¹

During the fifties the archetypal proto-modern ranch type was common in white suburbs; by the sixties the colonial ranch became the norm. The association of colonial architecture with Anglo-Saxon continuity, and in particular a Southern Colonial style featuring a white-columned portico that commemorated the “golden age” of plantation culture before the Civil War, emerged among Raleigh’s elite at the turn of the twentieth century. In this way Raleigh’s New South power structure asserted its continuity with the Old South following the upheavals of Reconstruction. In residential architecture this style “recreated in modern terms the deferential social relations the antebellum plantation represented.”⁴² The identification of classical and colonial architecture with white moral virtue and the return of stable and hierarchical racial relations, reinforced in the 1930s by the restoration of Williamsburg, Virginia, persisted in Raleigh throughout most of the twentieth century. White homeowners colonialized the ubiquitous ranch with red brick walls, white classical trim, roof dormers, pedimented entrances, and small-paned windows to evoke a colonial heritage. The names of white subdivisions such as Drewry Hills, Oxford Park, and Sherwood Forest evoked a British heritage. Raleigh matrons bought their groceries at the Colonial Stores. Families worshipped in red brick sanctuaries with white steeples that were copies of early American churches. Modern ranches remained rare and exceptional throughout the postwar era. Yet Madonna Acres and Battery Heights are full of custom modern ranches and split levels rendered in vernacular variations

that resulted from collaboration between designers, homeowners, and builders.

Implicit in the physical appearance of these African American modern houses is the presence of the recently established School of Design at North Carolina State College in Raleigh. Since 1948 the architecture school and its young faculty had designed and erected bold Wrightian and International Style houses, schools, and other types of buildings that had attracted attention from a national audience. Architects such as Matthew Nowicki, George Matsumoto, and Milton Small joined the faculty and designed highly visible modern buildings, primarily houses for themselves and other clients in Raleigh. Among the select clientele were a number of Jewish and Greek merchants who had prospered since immigrating to Raleigh earlier in the twentieth century. George Matsumoto designed an International Style house for the Aretakis family at 309 Transylvania Avenue, Raleigh, around 1953. Milton Small designed an elegant Wrightian-modern house for Philip Rothstein at 912 Williamson Drive in 1959. Rothstein's two brothers also built modern houses. These architects did not have black clients, but their public buildings were widely known. Modernism was in the air in the fifties, and African Americans were reading the same magazines, such as *Better Homes and Gardens* and *Good Housekeeping*, and newspapers that whites perused. Prominent local modern landmarks, such as Nowicki's Dorton Arena, reinforced the national popular media's coverage of the new architecture.

Why did black families favor modern design? Jerry Miller, who designed thousands of houses in Raleigh in the sixties, still remembers his consultations with African American clients who brought stacks of pages torn from magazines and newspapers and plan books to his office to show him their dream houses. "They didn't say, 'I don't want what the white people have.' They said, 'I want my house to look different from everybody else.' They did not want colonial; they preferred contemporary."⁴³ By that, Miller meant mid-century modern design. Jerry's own eclectic taste is evident in a series of house plan books

that he published in the 1960s. His philosophy resembled that of mid-century modernist Raleigh architect Lief Valand, not an architectural purist but a professional whose satisfaction derived from pleasing his clients. Jerry states unequivocally that his African American clients' taste was different from that of his white clients.⁴⁴ At a meeting of the Madonna Acres Homeowners Association in 2009, the residents reminisced about the early sixties. Before building in the subdivision, most of them had rented cramped living quarters in apartment complexes. They remembered their yearning to participate in the promise of the suburbs, with modern appliances, up-to-date design, and grassy lawns. One person exultantly summarized the state of mind of the Madonna Acres homeowners: "We'd been shot-gunned. We weren't part of the American dream. We wanted the dream—big and new. Come on, let's go get it ourselves."⁴⁵ Contractor George Exum called the modern designs that he built in Battery Heights "fresh stuff."⁴⁶

Anecdotal evidence from elsewhere in the South tends to confirm a correlation between the black middle class and mid-century modernism. The black postwar subdivision where civil rights activist Medgar Evers lived on the outskirts of Jackson, Mississippi, is full of modern ranches like Evers's own dwelling (Figure 15).

Figure 15. Home where civil rights activist Medgar Evers was assassinated in 1963, 2332 Margaret Walker Alexander Drive, Jackson, Mississippi. Photograph by Jennifer Baughn.



Evers chose the same ranch design as some of his neighbors but omitted the center front door for security purposes. The main entrance is off the carport. In spite of his precaution, Evers was assassinated in 1963 as he stepped out of his car under the carport.⁴⁷ Collier Heights, an exclusive black subdivision of modern split-level houses in suburban Atlanta, was home to a number of local civil rights leaders in the fifties and sixties (Figure 16). In 1963 Collier Heights was the setting of an infamous barricade built by the city to separate it from an adjacent white subdivision in order to prevent alleged incidences of “block-busting,” efforts by realtors to sell homes to black customers.⁴⁸ In a study of the African American settlement of Langston, Oklahoma, architectural historian Jeff Hardwick found the Colonial Revival style conspicuously absent, implying a strong decision not to use the style that was a symbol of slavery, instead selecting hopeful, progressive styles.⁴⁹ A black schoolteacher who moved into a modern house in a suburb on Long Island in the sixties explained why her husband, an accountant, wanted to live there: “He wanted a house with push buttons and a garage you drive into. . . . He considers himself a successful black professional. Along with that image and a successful self-esteem, there has to be this life style that justifies a reason for going to work every day. It has to have a certain look. That look is a green manicured lawn and a modern house.”⁵⁰

Can the choice of modern design, which facilitated a modern lifestyle, by Raleigh’s postwar

black middle class, be considered as a statement of resistance to the white status quo? One African American historian recently asserted that blacks would admire and desire to possess or emulate certain styles associated with wealth or mobility and to reject styles that evoke a certain type of past or exclusion. They would not be comfortable living in a subdivision with a name that romanticizes the term “plantation.”⁵¹ Perhaps it is possible to look anew at the political and cultural symbolism of mid-century modernism in light of its adoption by African Americans and other minorities. For these groups the traditional status quo represented oppression. Modern design was a new beginning, without the associative values of Colonialism and other Revival styles. The pioneering modern architects of the 1920s saw modern forms as the end of style or as the absence of style, as a rejection of the past. Modern form expressed its function, with no applied historicist iconography. When viewed in the context of white-dominant traditional design in postwar Raleigh, the answer seems to be that the city’s middle-class African Americans deliberately chose modernism for their private residential lifestyle as their realization of the American dream. So too, Greek and Jewish families in Raleigh expressed their dreams of self-determination and achievement through modern design. In Battery Heights and Madonna Acres, African Americans embraced the architecture of the future, even if they were still behind segregation’s walls. It was from these progressive, “separate but equal” housing enclaves that they planned civil rights demonstrations and from which they emerged to march and engage in the struggle for the integration of public facilities, the integration of the Raleigh school system in 1960, and the integration of Raleigh restaurants during the sit-in movement of 1960, and to participate in the 1963 March on Washington where Martin Luther King crystallized the movement with his speech, “I Have a Dream.” Today these suburbs remain architecturally fresh and racially segregated. The housing color line still holds in old Raleigh, although the outer layers of suburbs are integrated. The racial progress achieved by

Figure 16. Midcentury modern split-level house, 2924 Larchmont Drive, Collier Heights, Atlanta, Georgia. The exclusive planned African American suburb was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 2009. Photograph by James R. Lockhart, courtesy of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources.



the civil rights movement is mirrored in the subdivisions built by these Raleigh pioneers.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Margaret Ruth Little, a native of North Carolina, has an MA from Brown University and a PhD from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in art history and folklore. She has worked for the Rhode Island Historic Preservation Office, the North Carolina Historic Preservation Office, and has taught at various universities and colleges since the 1970s. Since 1990 she has operated Longleaf Historic Resources, a cultural resources consulting firm. Her principal areas of interest are the vernacular architecture and decorative arts of the Upper South. She is author of *Sticks and Stones: Three Centuries of North Carolina Gravemarkers* (1998); *Coastal Plain and Fancy: The Architectural History of Lenoir County and Kinston, North Carolina* (1998); *The Town and Gown Architecture of Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1795–1975* (2006); and *Carolina Cottage: A Personal History of the Piazza House* (2010). She is currently conducting a comprehensive historic architecture inventory of Carteret County, on the coast of North Carolina.

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