

The Special Character of the South Person/South Blount Historic District

The South Person/South Blount Historic District is an urban residential area that has been part of an African American neighborhood since at least Reconstruction. The district is situated several blocks southeast of the Capitol, within the boundaries of the original William Christmas plan for Raleigh. Neighboring Shaw University contributed to the area's vitality during the century following the Civil War, as the university made Raleigh a magnet for African Americans free to settle where they pleased. While most streets in the district are predominantly residential, commercial and institutional buildings are also present, including some landmarks of local African American history. S. Blount Street in particular is essentially a commercial corridor within the neighborhood. It is home to the Masonic Temple Building (1907) and the Tupper Memorial Baptist Church (1913), both designated Raleigh Historic Landmarks for their association with African American history. Most surviving residences date to the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, while the district's historic commercial and civic buildings are from the first half of the twentieth century.

The district comprises slightly more than four city blocks. Streets intersect in a clean grid and concrete sidewalks line both sides of each street. Street curbs are either granite or poured concrete. Some blocks historically did not have driveways from the roadway while others feature concrete aprons combined with gravel two-strip driveways. The topography is generally flat, but in some areas, such as at S. Bloodworth and E. Davie Streets, retaining walls of stone, concrete, and brick hold back the earth where houses sit well above the street. Poured concrete steps lead up the grade to dwellings. Throughout the district, buildings adhere to a uniform setback. They stand near the street on deep, narrow parcels and are closely spaced in typical urban fashion. Fences are uncommon, although a few wrought iron fences encircle front yards or vacant parcels and some chain-link fencing is present. While there are many vacant lots today, the neighborhood was historically more densely developed. Fragments of that pattern are particularly evident at the 300 block of E. Cabarrus Street, the 200 block of E. Lenoir Street, and at the south end of S. Blount Street.

Houses are one and two stories and are generally modest. Most stand on brick foundations, have front porches, and historically had weatherboard exteriors. Some original wood exterior cladding has been covered with asbestos, aluminum, or vinyl siding in the second half of the twentieth century. Many dwellings are late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Queen Annes ranging from modest shotgun houses and triple-A cottages to more fully realized, higher-style designs. Though small and simple house types, these neighborhood dwellings were not necessarily without style. A few have sawn exterior trim enlivening facades and porches; good examples include the shotgun house at 514 S. Bloodworth (ca. 1880) and the triple-A cottage at 309 E. Cabarrus Street (ca. 1890). The single-story Dr. Peter Williams House at 223 E. Lenoir Street (ca. 1890) is a larger Queen Anne with more complicated massing, including a turret roof over a corner porch bay. The house also features a decorative frieze and a stained glass lunette window in one of the gables.

The twentieth century brought new architectural styles to the neighborhood. The house at 312 E. Cabarrus Street (ca. 1922) is a good example of the Craftsman style, while 121 E. South Street (1925) is a mix of Craftsman and Colonial Revival styles. More modest vernacular houses show the influence of these styles as well. A few houses are unique surviving examples of their style in the district, including the Neoclassical Revival house at 215 E. Cabarrus Street (ca. 1917) and the large Minimal Traditional house at 215 E. Lenoir Street (ca. 1950). Beginning around the turn of the twenty-first century, a few new houses and a three-story apartment building have been built at scattered locations throughout the district. Two early-twenty-first-century two-story Neo-Queen Anne houses at the 400 block of S. Bloodworth Street have cementitious siding and narrow, tall proportions. The ca. 1995 apartment building at 508 S. Person Street is Neo-Craftsman with a brick exterior.

The Rogers-Bagley-Daniels-Pegues House (ca. 1855) at 125 E. South Street stands within the district and represents the pre-Civil War history of the area. A series of prominent white families owned the Greek Revival-Italianate house before Shaw's dean of theology, Dr. Albert Pegues, became the first African American to own the dwelling in 1919. The house was designated a Raleigh Historic Landmark in 2009 for both its architectural and historical significance.

Churches introduce the Gothic Revival style to the district. The churches have masonry exteriors—two are brick veneers applied in the mid-twentieth century and the third is a concrete-block building with a decorative pebbled finish

to the blocks. Other masonry buildings include the three-story Masonic Temple Building (1907) at 427 S. Blount Street, the largest building in the district. It features a cutaway corner entry, storefronts at the street, and segmental-arched windows. The imposing brick-veneered Tupper Memorial Baptist Church (1913) at 501 S. Blount Street stands across S. Cabarrus Street from the Masonic Temple Building; together, the two buildings telegraph the cultural importance of this stretch of the street to the neighborhood.

Several small commercial buildings along S. Blount Street and scattered throughout the district's residential blocks are extremely simple and date to the 1940s and later. Many are masonry, featuring either concrete-block construction or brick exteriors. An exception to the extreme plainness of the buildings from this period is the Lincoln Theatre (ca. 1940) at 126 E. Cabarrus Street. The building has a brick exterior with stucco at the façade, stepped side parapets, and an Art Deco marquee. The 1950s saw the introduction of the Modernist style with the General Baptist State Convention of North Carolina Building, a flat-roofed, brick-exterior office building with stack-bond door surrounds and metal-sash windows outlined by projecting concrete frames. In 2006, Shaw University built an Early Childhood Development Center at the northwest corner of E. Lenoir and S. Bloodworth Streets. While the brightly painted stucco building could not be mistaken for an historic structure, its massing and setbacks are so in keeping with historic patterns that it stands harmoniously in the district.

The district also includes Stronach's Alley, a remnant of an urban development pattern that has been erased from the city. The alley bisects the block bounded by S. Wilmington, E. Cabarrus, S. Blount, and E. Lenoir Streets. Once lined with small dwellings—mostly shotgun houses—dating from the late nineteenth century, the alley was the center of a mostly residential block that also included a church, a hospital, a movie theater, two missions, and cotton warehouses. None of the houses that fronted Stronach's Alley remain, and few other buildings on the block are still standing. The alley is open to traffic, however, and is paved with much-patched asphalt. Vacant lots and gravel and asphalt parking lots flank the alley today. Another short alley, Regan Lane, extends south from E. Cabarrus Street partway into the block. No dwellings remain on the narrow lots there.

Despite the many lost buildings throughout the South Person/South Blount Historic District, the surviving built environment retains a strong sense of place and history, helping to convey the important and often overlooked African American history of Raleigh.