

The Special Character of the Oakwood Historic District

By Matthew Brown for the Society for the Preservation of Historic Oakwood July 2014

The Oakwood Historic District (designated in 1975) was developed primarily between 1870 and 1930, from the woods and fields on the northeastern edge of Raleigh. It was developed incrementally, with streets extended as needed, in contrast to Boylan Heights, which was platted in a single subdivision. Oakwood's streets are in an irregular grid pattern, with blocks of varying lengths. The grid overlays a hilly topography, with two valleys between three gentle ridges. As a result, some streets and lots have a rather steep slopes.

Most of Oakwood's streets were laid out by 1881, but there were only 90 houses at that time, spread throughout the area. Remaining empty areas were subdivided and developed bit-by-bit, often lot-by-lot over the next fifty years. As transportation during these years was generally by walking or by streetcar, most lots are small and narrow, the most common dimensions being 52 feet wide and 105 feet deep. As a result, most houses are set close to the street and close to the lot lines. Lots toward the center of blocks tend to be deeper than those toward the corners.

Streets in Oakwood were originally dirt. Most were paved in Belgian blocks of Raleigh gneiss in 1899-1910. Curbstones of Raleigh gneiss were installed at that time. Gradually all streets were paved in asphalt beginning in c.1920; the last block was paved in c.1988. In most cases, the original curbstones are still visible above the pavement, but have a shorter exposure than they did originally. There are seven alleys in Oakwood, but only three are in regular use, and only one extends for an entire block.

The original public sidewalks were brick or dirt. They were gradually replaced by concrete sidewalks beginning in c.1905. The last replacement of a brick sidewalk by concrete was in c.1967. Brick sidewalks survive in front of four houses. Four blocks in Oakwood still have no sidewalk as of 2014. Most streets have a "verge" or "tree lawn" between the street and public sidewalk. These were originally planted with large shade trees, and most still are. Pell St. is the only street with no verge between the sidewalk and street.

In the early 20th century, street signs were painted on steel-reinforced concrete obelisks. These were replaced by metal signs on poles in the 1960s. The remains of an early street sign survives at the corner of E. Jones and N. East Streets.

The earliest streetlights were gas lights on iron poles. These were replaced in the early 1900s by electric lights hanging by wires over the intersections. These were replaced by electric lights projecting from poles in the 1920s or 1930s. The current "cobrahead" street lights were installed in the late 1960s and 1970s.

Most houses originally had no driveways. Narrow driveways were added gradually over the years. Many of these driveways are shared by adjacent houses. Most driveways were

originally of gravel, salvaged paving stones, or concrete ribbon strips. Most still are, but some have been replaced by solid concrete. Many houses still have no driveways.

Houses that are set higher than the street usually have retaining walls around the front yards. Most of these were built after 1900. The earliest are of stone; some are of salvaged paving stones. Brick retaining walls began to be built in the 1920s, and parged concrete block retaining walls in the 1930s. Unparged concrete block retaining walls were built in the 1950s and 1960s.

Oakwood contains examples of most of the major domestic architectural styles from the late 19th and early 20th century. While some are elaborate textbook examples, most are simplified versions. Most houses built prior to 1892 were in the North Carolina Victorian vernacular style, featuring forms and ornamentation popular in this region. There are 84 examples of this style, built from 1840 to 1902. There are also five examples of the Second Empire style, built from 1874 to 1879, and four examples of the Italianate style, built from 1871 to 1888. The Queen Anne style then swept into Oakwood. There are 104 examples of this style, built from 1892 to 1910. This number is barely eclipsed by the 105 examples of the Neoclassical Revival style, built from 1902 to 1925. After World War I, the Craftsman style became the most popular; there are 67 examples of this style, built from 1919 to 1938. Houses built near the cusp of two major styles often featured elements from both styles.

There are five examples of the Georgian Revival style, built from 1922 to 1929. There are four examples of the Dutch Colonial Revival style, built from 1922 to 1926. There is one example each of the Mediterranean style (1924), the Prairie style (1928) and the English Cottage style (1938). All three are simplified examples. Very few houses were built in the 1930s, and almost none in the early 1940s. After the war and the end of Oakwood's period of significance, the Colonial Revival style prevailed. There are nineteen examples of this style, one built in 1929 and the rest from 1945 to 1966. There are three examples of the Mid-Century Modern style, simplified and modified, built in 1957 and 1959. Only three structures were built in Oakwood from 1960 to 1982: a church hall and two quadruplexes. A new wave of building began in 1985, with 41 houses built between then and 2014, under the guidance of the RHDC.

The most common siding material in Oakwood was, and remains, painted wooden clapboards laid in a shiplap pattern. Most houses are sided in plain clapboards. Fourteen have German siding, and three have clamshell siding. Many houses in the Queen Anne style are partially sided in scalloped clapboards, or wooden shingles in unusual shapes. Many houses in the Craftsman style are partially sided in rectangular wooden shingles, which were originally stained. After World War II, many earlier houses were covered in asbestos shingle siding. This has been removed from most houses, and the original siding restored.

Ten houses are of solid brick. Most of these were originally covered in stucco. Four of them still are. Twenty-two houses are veneered in brick – eleven of them are contributing

structures, and eleven were built later. Two houses are sided in stone. Nine houses are sided in stucco.

The most common roofing material historically was wooden shingles. None of Oakwood's original wooden shingle roofs survive, but there are five reproduction wooden shingle roofs as of 2014. Most roofs that were historically sheathed in wooden shingles are now sheathed in composition shingles. Standing-seam metal was also a popular material throughout the period of significance, and there are 27 such roofs as of 2014, some of them reproductions. In additions, most porch roofs were originally sheathed in standing-seam metal, and many of them still are. Slate shingles became a popular roofing material after 1880. There are 79 slate roofs in Oakwood as of 2014, some of them reproductions.

Every house built during Oakwood's period of significance, with a few exceptions from toward the end of the period, had a front porch, and nearly all still do. None had attached garages, and only a few have been added since 1938. All had one or more brick chimneys, and nearly all still do. All had double-hung windows. A handful of houses also had French windows on the front porch. Most houses had, and still have, partially glazed front doors.

Because of Oakwood's gradual lot-by-lot development and infill, houses of various ages, styles, and sizes tend to be distributed throughout the neighborhood. However, there are certain areas with distinct personalities. The 400 block of Elm St. is known as "Pullentown" and contains seven solid brick houses built by Richard Stanhope Pullen in 1888-89. The block of E. Jones St. between N. East and Elm St. is notable for a number of large homes on relatively large lots. The 400 block of Polk St. is notable for its collection of fine Neoclassical Revival houses. The 600 block of Polk St. is mostly smaller cottages from the late 19th century. The 600 block of N. Boundary St. features a collection of Craftsman bungalows from the 1920s. The long 500 block of Elm St. and the adjoining 500 block of N. Boundary St. have a particularly diverse array of houses dating from 1908 to 2004.

The most distinctive section of Oakwood is the "Oakwood Green" development, consisting of the 500 block of Watauga St. and the adjoining Latham Way, Leonidas Court and a few adjoining lots on N. Boundary St. and Polk St. This land had been occupied by the greenhouses for O'Quinn's, then Fallon's Florists. In 1988 the new streets were platted and the land was subdivided into building lots. These were sold individually, and 21 houses were built here between 1988 and 2001, all under the guidance of the RHDC.

Historically many houses had small sheds and other outbuildings in the back yard. Only three survive from the pre-automobile period. Simple one-car garages began to be built in the 1920s; only 25 survive from prior to 1939. Garages and sheds continue to be added and removed, as they have throughout Oakwood's history.

Oakwood had historically, and still has, a heavy canopy of mostly deciduous trees. Historically many, but not all, front yards were planted in grass with bushes around the house. Gradually much of the grass has been replaced by ornamental plants.

There is one small commercial district within Oakwood, at the corner of N. Bloodworth and E. Lane Streets. Two buildings containing five small storefronts were built between 1901 and 1916, and two small buildings were added in 1947 and 1949. At the corner of E. Lane St. and Linden Ave., a small grocery with attached residence was built in 1908, and is a grocery and grill as of 2014. Another grocery with residence was built at the corner of N. East and N. Boundary Streets in 1921, and is still a business and residence.

Otherwise, Oakwood is historically a residential district. Of the 436 contributing principal structures, 421 were built as single homes, nine as duplexes, one as a triplex, five as businesses, and one as a home for elderly ladies. Of the 74 non-contributing principal structures, 63 were built as single houses, two as triplexes, two as quadruplexes, four as church buildings, and three as businesses. Two empty lots were turned into public parks, in 1976 and 1991.

Oakwood's character is also defined by what it does not contain. There are no buildings of over two stories. There are no attached houses. There are no lots larger than an acre, and only two larger than half an acre.

Most of Oakwood was scheduled to be demolished pursuant to the "State Capital Plan" adopted by the State in 1965. During this time, many older neighborhoods in cities throughout the state were completely or partly demolished, or compromised by incompatible infill and alterations. Oakwood was saved first by its unfashionable location, and second by the fierce resistance of its residents to its demolition. It emerged as the largest intact collection of late 19th and early 20th Century houses in the state.