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Wake Co., NCSummary

The Mordecai Place Historic District is locally significant under Criterion A for significance in the history of community development, and under Criterion C for significance in the history of architecture. The name Mordecai Place commemorates the location of the early-twentieth-century residential development on the former plantation lands of the Mordecai family whose late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century plantation house (NR 1970) stands within the southern quadrant of the historic district. Planned and developed in two stages, Mordecai Place joins numerous other early Raleigh subdivisions platted on former plantations that circled North Carolina's capital. The first stage of development dates from 1916, and was commenced on land south of the Mordecai House by Claude Denson who sold subdivided building lots. The major stage of development was launched north of the house in 1922 by local real estate developers Dan and Frank Allen who optioned some eighty-nine acres of land from Miss Martha Mordecai subject to a carefully-defined purchase agreement. Among Miss Mordecai's stipulations were that the acreage be subdivided and platted within sixty days of the purchase agreement; that the neighborhood name reflect its Mordecai Plantation roots; that Mordecai Avenue be extended; and that she receive a total of \$85,000 within three years of the purchase date. The neighborhood plat was recorded September 11, 1922, and the small lots on the modified-grid-streets were quickly filled with a variety of houses that reflected the popular residential building styles of the day, together with a few examples of architect-designed houses. The solid Colonial Revival-style houses south of the Mordecai House were designed by James S. Salter; while the imposing Neo-Classical Revival House at 1101 Old Wake Forest Road was designed by the firm of Rose and Linthicum for banker John Boushall. The overall architectural fabric of the neighborhood reflects the middle-class taste that defined the character of the suburbs that burgeoned across the state during the years between the two world wars. Mordecai Place examples include the Tudor Revival house at 1309 Mordecai Drive; the Dutch Colonial Revival-style Hester House at 1426 Mordecai Drive; the ubiquitous bungalow at 1216 Courland Drive; and the late 1930s examples of Minimal Traditional houses at 301

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and 309 Poplar Street. Taken as a whole, Mordecai Place, with its heavily-shaded streets of representative popular house styles, represents its 1916-1947 period of significance and the era during which North Carolina's capitol became a twentieth-century city that included such similar suburbs as 1907 Glenwood (NR 1982), 1907 Boylan Heights (NR 1983), 1914 Cameron Park, 1920 Hayes Barton, and 1922 Roanoke Park. The major period of significance for the Mordecai Place Historic District is 1916 through 1947, an era that encompasses the initial 1916 platting of the plantation lands, through the National Register fifty-year cut-off. The secondary period of significance, 1788 and 1824, represents the initial building date of the Mordecai Plantation House, and the date of its significant Greek Revival addition. Mordecai House was individually listed in the National Register in 1970 for local significance in the history of architecture.

Historical Background and Community Development Context:

The Mordecai Plantation was established in the late eighteenth century, with the plantation house located at the advantage of the drinking water supply provided by the spring. Still it maintains a short distance west and north of the town

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site [Mordecai NR nomination]. The Mordecai family played a prominent role in the development of the city of Raleigh, and were particularly noted in the legal profession. Located just northeast of downtown Raleigh, which was surveyed and planned in 1792 as the state capital, the acreage around the Mordecai Plantation remained farm land until the late nineteenth century. Family members lived in the plantation house on steadily diminishing acreage until 1970, when the house and the residual surrounding city block were sold to the city of Raleigh for use as an historical park [Mordecai House survey file, Survey and Planning Branch, State Historic Preservation Office].

The death of Henry Mordecai in 1875 led to a partitioning of the family's vast acreage and the subsequent development of several of Raleigh's earliest east side suburban neighborhoods. Oakwood (NR, 1974), located northeast of the 1792 city limits, was laid out on an orthogonal grid that continued the original city plan. The small urban lots were quickly filled with popular Victorian-era styles occupied by white, middle-class professionals and tradesmen. South Park, Battery Heights, and College Park were likewise continuations of the original city grid and densely developed to house African-American tradesmen. As streetcar routes expanded into north and west Raleigh, suburbs were developed on land that had been the antebellum plantation lands of other prominent Raleigh families, and on the grounds of the North Carolina State Fair. These neighborhoods included Glenwood and Boylan Heights, developed in 1907; Cameron Park, platted in 1914; Hayes-Barton begun in 1920; and Roanoke Park and Mordecai, both initiated in 1922 [Early Twentieth-Century Suburbs in North Carolina; Wake County Plat Maps 1920, p. 110 and Wake County Deed Book 427, pp. 551-554].

The earliest development near the early nineteenth-century Mordecai plantation house occurred in 1894 when William and James Williamson purchased land adjacent to the newly created Seaboard Air Line Railroad track corridor that ran in a northeasterly direction about one-quarter mile to the north of the house. The Williamsons constructed the Pilot Mill, located a few blocks west of the Mordecai House and just two blocks north of the Raleigh city limits that had been expanded after an annexation in 1881. The site was prime for industrial use because of convenient rail transportation and the availability of electricity. The mill village erected north and west of the mill along the railroad tracks included housing for about 300 families, and a frame Baptist church where school

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was conducted until 1924, when a brick school building was constructed [Ross, "Raleigh Architectural Survey: Final Report"]. The mill housing was razed in 1981, but the mill, the c. 1917 church (#2) and school (#1) survive on the western edge of the district on North Blount Street.

In 1915 the Mordecai Curtilage was mapped and recorded in the Wake County Register of Deeds Office [1915 Maps, p. 45]. With the homestead and outbuildings defined and protected, Martha (Patty) Mordecai began selling substantial tracts of the farmland which still surrounded the family home. In 1916 she sold a D-shaped tract south of the house bounded by No. Blount Street, between E. Franklin and Pine streets to Claude Denson. He developed houses on at least seven of the lots [Wake County Deed Book 307, p. 141]. Three substantial brick houses from that development survive (#s 129, 130 and 131) on Mordecai Street and now anchor the southern edge of the historic district. In April, 1917 she sold the Pilot Baptist Church trustees a lot on No. Blount Street. It is not clear whether this building replaced an earlier church associated with the Pilot Mills.

In 1922 local real estate developers Dan and Frank Allen incorporated Mordecai Place, Inc. and purchased 88.6 acres north of the Mordecai House. This purchase exempted the church lot and almost all of the lots along the west side of Wake Forest Road between Poplar and Sycamore streets, and some along Hinton Street (now known as Courtland), presumably because they were already sold or reserved. Most of these were single or double lots, but M.T. Dortch had purchased twenty-four lots and Mrs. H.H. Nowell had bought five lots. [Wake County Deed Book 427, pp. 551-554].

The purchase contract specified that the Allens were to have the property subdivided and platted within sixty days and that Martha Mordecai was to receive \$85,000 for the tract in installments due in total within three years. It also specifies that the neighborhood "be named 'Mordecai Place' or in some other way that will perpetuate the name 'Mordecai', and Mordecai Avenue shall be extended. . . and such extension be named 'Mordecai Avenue'" [Wake Co. Deed Book 427, p. 551-554]. It goes on to specify that none of the lots except those bordering the railroad would be sold for factory or industrial, store, or hospital or sanitarium use. The contract also sets aside about eighteen acres bounded on the east by Blount Street, along the railway, to be sold for the "occupancy by Negroes or by factories." With this lengthy and detailed document, Martha Mordecai shaped the subdivision that the Allens would

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construct.

Martha Mordecai's name fills several pages of the Wake County Deed Indexes and all of the deeds and contracts are quite specific about how her family acreage could be used, and most contain a prohibition against Negro residents, a common restriction of the time.

Daniel Allen's obituary in the December 17, 1929 Raleigh News and Observer records that he was "Raleigh's largest real estate dealer" and called him the "...very heart and soul of the realty business in the capital. He had invested more money, paid more taxes, extended more uncertain sections and constructed more handsome houses than anybody who lived in the capital. He never lost his head when all about him were going wild over fictitious wealth in New York."

Allen was a native of Raleigh and a graduate of North Carolina State University, where a campus road is named for him. "He put hundreds of thousands into Cameron Park, Wilmot, Mordecai Heights, Fairmont and other suburban sections and more than any man in Raleigh he is responsible for the growth of the capital." [Raleigh News and Observer, December 17, 1929]. The newspaper obituary continues saying that "Raleigh overbuilt but Mr. Allen lost no sleep over it. When Raleigh stopped going north, east, west and south, Mr. Allen turned his mind to the interior waiting for the comeback of his old business." A letter to the Editor of the News and Observer on the fifteenth anniversary of the passing "of one of Raleigh's foremost citizens" notes that he was responsible for several of the town's landmark skyscrapers including the Raleigh Building and the Lawyers' Building [Raleigh News and Observer, December 15, 1944].

The Mordecais, like other local large land owners, sold their plantation acreage to developers who were marketing to the rising middle class who could afford to build suburban homes due to the development of good roads and transportation systems, economical building methods, and increased availability of home mortgages. The streets in the Mordecai Place Historic District were platted by 1922 according to a City Planning and Zoning Department map drawn that year [Map of Raleigh. "Buildings Erected Since 1914" drawn by Jefferson Grinnald, Consulting Engineers, Baltimore]. The modified grid streets, designed to compliment the topography, were named after the Mordecai family and after the types of trees found on the plantation. The most prestigious lots were those located within a one-block radius of the Mordecai House, along Mordecai Drive and Old Wake Forest Road and some fine brick Colonial Revival style homes