Bowen Park

Bowen Park is one of the first post-World War II tract subdivisions in Winston-Salem that was developed specifically for African American home buyers. The first lots in Bowen Park were surveyed in 1945 and marketed by The J.W. Ferrell Co. Additional lots were surveyed and sold in 1946. The Ferrell brothers’ construction company, Economy Homes, Inc., built and sold speculative houses on many of the lots in the 1940s. Cloister Homes developed and sold lots in the eastern section of Bowen Park beginning in 1958. Deeds required that all houses must occupy two or more lots; be set back from the street at least thirty-five feet; and cost $2,500 or more.

Most of the houses built by Economy and Cloister Homes during the 1940s and 1950s are simple, one-story brick ranch houses with three bedrooms and a single bathroom. Entry doors are flanked by windows, with a large picture window indicating the location of a living room and smaller windows lighting bedrooms. Gable roofs have ridgelines parallel to the street, and simple stoops are constructed of brick and concrete. Paved driveways lead to the sides of many houses. Many of the homes have been altered and personalized over the decades, with the addition of metal awnings, covered front porches, shutters, or decorative cladding.

An unusual custom house stands out from those built by Economy and Cloister Homes. It was built for Henry and Thelma Hairston at the southwest corner of East 22nd Street and Douglas Hill Drive in 1959. Henry was a janitor at Western Electric.

The buff brick house with red brick accents has a large hexagonal section at the north end with a multi-sided, brick fireplace at its center. The kitchen, dining area, and living room are located radially around the fireplace.

Employment in major Winston-Salem industries made home ownership possible for many residents of Bowen Park. The major employer was R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co., with over sixty households home to at least one Reynolds employee between 1949 and 1960. Employees included factory workers, stemmers, casers, elevator operators, chauffeurs, inspectors, a mail handler, machine operators, a construction worker, maids, janitors, and a cashier in the company cafeteria. The health care sector employed multiple people as well. Residents included a naturopath physician, nurses aides at Kate Bitting Reynolds Memorial Hospital, and a porter and maid at NC Baptist Hospital. Several Fourteenth Street School teachers and an instructor at Winston-Salem Teachers College lived in Bowen Park. Local and federal government also provided employment, including the City Department of Public Works, the US Postal Service, the Veterans Administration, and the military.

Many of the people who moved to Bowen Park in the 1940s stayed in the neighborhood for the majority of their adulthoods. Waldo and Marjorie Lester bought lots at the northwest corner of East 23rd and Manchester Streets in
1947. Waldo moved to Winston-Salem in his teens, graduating from Atkins High School. He served in the Army Air Corps and Air Force for over twenty-five years, fighting in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. After he retired from the military, Waldo earned a degree in social work from NC A&T University. He and Marjorie raised six children in Bowen Park. James and Evelyn Wright bought a home on Bowen Boulevard in 1947. James worked for Western Electric, as did several other neighborhood men during the 1950s and 1960s. He was also a veteran, who had served in the US Army. The Wrights had seven children and fostered twelve others.

Three churches are located among the homes in Bowen Park. In 1959, construction of US Highway 52 threatened the People’s Choice AME Zion Church building in Columbia Heights, and it was moved to East 25th Street. The frame building, built in 1892, served as the first classroom building for the Slater Industrial Academy, which became Winston-Salem Teachers College and later Winston-Salem State University. The building is now clad in brick, but the stained glass is original. From 1962 to 1991, St. Stephen Baptist Church worshipped in the Colonial Revival brick church at the northwest corner of Bowen Boulevard and Manchester Street. New Institutional Christian Center Church bought the building in 2004. Temple Holiness Church of God, founded by Bowen Park resident Vethilla James, began to worship in a new church at the southeast corner of Machine and East 22nd Streets about 1962. The simple brick church has arched stained glass windows and a tall wooden steeple.

Carl and Florrie Russell, owners of Russell’s Funeral Home, purchased twenty-two lots in Bowen Park in November 1945, selecting lots in several different blocks. Three lots on the southeast corner of East 23rd and Machine Streets became the site of the Russell family home in 1947. The two-story, International Style house with steel casement corner windows, smooth stucco walls, and decorative concrete block screening below a shallow hipped roof is distinctive and stands out from the ranch houses. While living in Bowen Park during the 1960s, Carl was elected to Winston-Salem’s Board of Alderman, serving as Mayor Pro Tempore for a time. He unsuccessfully ran for Mayor in 1977, losing the primary runoff for the Democratic nomination to Wayne Corpening.

Educators Victor Johnson, Jr., and his wife, Dr. Constance Johnson, moved to Bowen Park in the 1960s. Both are Winston-Salem natives; Vic played football for Atkins High School and Winston-Salem State University. In 1960 while a student at WSSU, he participated in the sit-ins that resulted in the integration of downtown lunch counters. He taught in the local school system before serving as an administrator and eventually being elected to the school board. He also founded the Vic Johnson Jr. Golf Clinic and was awarded the Order of the Long Leaf Pine. Constance earned a Ph.D. and worked a professor of education at Winston-Salem State University.

This information is also available at the Forsyth County Historic Resources Commission web site: www.ForsythCountyHRC.org