Oak Crest Historic District

When first platted in 1923 by J.E. Ellerbe for the brothers John W. Fries, Francis H. Fries, and Henry E. Fries, Oak Crest was advertised as offering spacious country life with the benefit of neighbors. Twenty-seven wooded, multi-acre lots on the north and south sides of Oak-Crest Drive (today’s Polo Road) abutted Reynolda Estate, which lay to the southeast. Friendship Circle, a semi-circular road on the north side of Oak-Crest Drive, provided access to twelve of the lots.

Promotional materials highlighted options: one-acre lots could accommodate large homes, while the largest lots could be turned into small working farms. Only three houses were built in Oak Crest during the 1920s, indicating that the Fries’ original vision never quite took hold. Instead, Oak Crest developed into an early middle-income suburb. The houses are designed in simple versions of styles popular during their decades of construction, including Craftsman, Colonial Revival, Period Cottage, Rustic Revival, Ranch, and Minimal Traditional. Most of the houses are one and one-half stories in height with dormered roofs and walls finished with brick or siding. Many lots include outbuildings such as garages and sheds.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, many of the large original lots were subdivided into smaller parcels, with only one addition of land to the neighborhood. Freds Road, on the northwest, and Rosedale Circle, on the southeast, were laid out in 1926. In 1927, one original lot was subdivided into forty-seven small lots, thirty feet wide on average, facing onto Harmon Avenue. Idlewilde Drive was laid out to the northeast in 1936. Nading’s Addition, which increased the size of Oak Crest, was platted in 1937, adding Crepe Myrtle Circle to the southwest corner of the neighborhood.

The house at 1533 Polo Road, built for Ruth S. and Irvin A. Hudgins in 1925, is the oldest house in Oak Crest. Irvin worked as a civil engineer and accountant for the Winston-Salem Southbound Railroad. Before moving to Oak Crest, the Hudgins lived on South Poplar Street in West Salem. Two of Ruth’s sisters, Claudia Shore Kester and Kathleen Shore Fox, also moved to Oak Crest. Kathleen and her husband, mechanic William Conrad, bought the lot at 1317 Polo Road in 1929 but did not build their house until 1936. Claudia and her husband, John A. Kester, bought fifteen acres along Freds Road between 1932 and 1938. Kester used the land to entertain clients of his businesses - Kester Machinery, Carolina Narrow Fabrics, and Insulating Yarn – going so far as to build a “party house” and rock barbecue pit on the parcel in addition to their own house at 3830 Freds Road, a rental house, and a barn.

Just over one-third of the houses in Oak Crest date from the 1930s, the decade that witnessed the most construction in the neighborhood. The two-story, Colonial Revival Alex-
ander House at 223 Friendship Circle dates to 1934. Frank and Bessie Alexander bought eight acres to use as a small farm, as the Fries brothers had envisioned. Frank held many different jobs, including clerk at Belk-Stevens, salesman for Southeastern Brewing Co., foreman for Crystal Ice & Coal Co., and eventually production manager for the Seven Up Bottling Company on Patterson Avenue. They had vegetable gardens, livestock, woodlands, fields, meadows, and a pond. They remained in their Oak Crest home until 1976.

Neighbors Paul and Marie Davis bought all of the Alexanders’ land except the house lot in several transactions between 1953 and 1967. Paul was the service manager at Central Carolina Motors. The Davises had lived in a garage apartment owned by Ed and Gladys Dunnagan across the street at 222 Friendship Circle for approximately four years prior to the purchase. Mail carrier Ed and beautician Gladys built the apartment as a temporary home in 1946 while their house was constructed. The Davises’ Period Cottage house at 217 Friendship Circle was built in 1954.

During the 1950s and 1960s, Ranch became the predominant style for new construction. The long, low houses are rectangular in shape with low-pitched roofs. Large picture windows and central chimneys are also common. The house at 226 Friendship Circle was built in 1956 for Claude and Frances Mackie. Claude was the credit manager at Wachovia Bank and Trust. Prior to moving to Oak Crest, they lived in Yadkinville, and Frances worked as a pharmacist at City Memorial Hospital. As of 2021, the house remains in the Mackie family.

The most notable structure built during the 1960s in Oak Crest, and the only commercial building, is the College 66 Service Station, or Campus Gas, at 1231 Polo Road. It replaced a grocery store run by Paul Hauser. The striking Phillips 66 gas station design features a gull wing canopy that soars up from the building over the pump island. Architect Clarence Reinhardt conceived of the canopy in 1956. It was refined and developed into a model station for Phillips by Lippincott & Margulies in 1958, when it became known as the Harlequin design. The brightly lit canopy provided safety and attracted nighttime drivers, and the canted station windows reduced glare to let the customers see inside. The Campus Gas sign was designated as a Historic Sign in 2021.

Slightly less than one-quarter of the houses date from the 1940s, although only three were built during World War II because of material shortages. Many of the houses from the 1940s are Minimal Traditional in style, blending traditional shapes and forms with limited ornamentation. The house at 261 Crepe Myrtle Circle built in 1947 for Kate Brinkley blends a cross gable roof and gable dormer with brick sheathing and Tuscan porch columns. Kate, a widow, was a saleswoman at Frank A. Stith, men’s and boys’ clothiers and furnishers at Fourth and Cherry Streets. She had lived with family on Jersey Avenue before moving to Oak Crest. She sold the house to Waldo and Mabel Billings, who lived at 256 Crepe Myrtle Circle, in 1970. Waldo was employed by R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Co.

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