Coan-Gray House

Local Historic Landmark #144
1121 Arbor Road, Winston-Salem
Construction Date: 1928
Landmark Designation Date: December 5, 2022

In 1926 George W. Coan Jr., Morris Plan Industrial Bank president, purchased the lot at 1121 Arbor Road in the newly formed suburb of Reynolda Park from Lola Johnston, the mother of Katharine Reynolds’ second husband J. Edward Johnston. Coan Jr. was a clerk at Reynolds Tobacco Company until 1915, the year his father and the company secretary retired. Coan Jr. incorporated the Winston-Salem branch of the Morris Plan Company in 1917 with his father and other local businessmen. The institution provided loans payable on a monthly basis, a service that was not yet available at commercial banks. Coan Jr. rose from the position of secretary-treasurer to president in 1925.

The Coans selected Charles Barton Keen’s Philadelphia-based firm to design the Georgian Revival-style house. Fogle Brothers began work in late July 1927 and completed the dwelling in late April 1928 at a cost of $45,013. The Coan-Gray House is distinguished by its scale, sophisticated execution, and setting. The exterior displays elements often specified by Keen’s firm: red brick and white weatherboarded and painted-brick walls, a green Ludowici-Celadon tile roof, molded cornices, gabled dormers, multipane double-hung and casement wood windows and French doors, and operable louvered wood shutters. Distinctive elements include the pedimented wood entrance surround surmounted by a round-arched window embellished with keystone and impost blocks and the full-height rear porch supported by square posts. On the interior, the reception hall, dining room, and living room are embellished with classical cornices, door and window surrounds, and mantels. The sizeable lot provides an estate-like setting.

Coan Jr. was elected Winston-Salem’s mayor in 1929 and was reelected in 1932. Between 1932 and 1935, his administration secured North Carolina Emergency Relief Administration funding for Winston-Salem projects including repairing city streets and highways; construction of water and sewer plants, City Hall, the armory, the library, sidewalks, water and sewer lines, and additions to City Hospital; building a road from the airport to the city limits; maintaining and improving schools and parks; making mattresses; canning fruit and vegetables; cutting wood and lumber; and preserving trees. Coan Jr. was North Carolina’s director of relief for the newly created federal Works Progress Administration from 1935-1939.

Coan Jr. sold the house to Elizabeth and Bowman Gray Jr. in 1941. Gray Jr. worked at RJRTC from 1930 until 1967. After his graduation from the University of North Carolina, he began marketing RJRTC products in 1930 and rose quickly, becoming assistant sales manager in 1939 and vice president in 1949. He later went on to serve as president, chief executive officer, and chairman of the board.
In 1950, the Grays sold the house to Yvonne and James A. Gray Jr., Bowman’s cousin. James was a business and civic leader and philanthropist. He was publisher of the Winston-Salem Journal and Twin City Sentinel and advocated for historic preservation initiatives including the restoration of Old Salem. He died from a heart attack on October 29, 1952.

James’ uncle Gordon Gray and his wife Jane purchased the property on December 31, 1952. Gordon had briefly practiced law in New York and Winston-Salem before assuming leadership of Piedmont Publishing Company. He had served in the state senate, the U. S. Army as a private during WWII, and as Secretary of the Army. He was appointed University of North Carolina’s president in 1950. He went on to serve as a national security advisor to President Eisenhower and later as a member of the Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, establishing his primary residence in Washington, DC. He leased the house beginning in 1958.

In 1969, the house was conveyed to Katherine and Bowman Gray III, who had been leasing it since 1966. The Grays, then living in Paris, sold the house to Frances McDonald and Stuart Ficklen Vaughn at the end of 1970.

Winston-Salem native Stuart Vaughn, an investment broker in his hometown and New York City, was a founding partner of First Securities, Inc., which became Wheat First Securities.

Anne and W. Andrew Copenhaver bought the house from the Vaughns in 2004. Andy Copenhaver was an attorney with Womble Carlyle Sandridge and Rice. In 2015, the landscape was documented for inclusion in the Garden Club of America Collection in the Smithsonian Institution’s Archives of American Gardens. Anne Copenhaver, widowed in 2017, sold the property to Arthur Jay Everette and Christopher Brian Speas in 2021. The men executed a meticulous restoration, retaining all original character-defining features.

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