

NORTH MULBERRY/OREGON STREET NEIGHBORHOOD
113-135 North Mulberry Street, 214-218 Oregon Street,
107-109 Post Office Alley
Georgetown
Scott County
Kentucky

HABS No. KY-215

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Southeast Region
Department of the Interior
Atlanta, Georgia 30303

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

N. MULBERRY/OREGON STREET NEIGHBORHOOD HABS No. KY-215

Location: 113-135 North Mulberry Street, 214-218 Oregon Street and 107-109 Post Office Alley, Georgetown, Kentucky

U.S.G.S. Georgetown 7.5' quadrangle
Universal Transverse Mercator coordinates:
16.712740.4231590

Present Owner: Georgetown Urban Renewal and Community Development Agency

Present Occupants: Vacant

Present Use: None

Significance: The North Mulberry/Oregon Street neighborhood is an example of a late 19th-early 20th century, African-American, working-class residential area in a small city in the Upper South. It is representative of a type of racially segregated neighborhood that developed after the Civil War; however, it is somewhat atypical of such residential developments because it was not built until after 1895 and it consisted mainly of rental properties rather than predominantly owner-occupied houses. Thus its development relates to the repressive political, economic and social climate of the 1890s and early 1900s that severely hampered African-American attempts to acquire, maintain and retain their own property, hold good jobs and function as fully enfranchised citizens in American society.

PART I. PHYSICAL SETTING OF THE N. MULBERRY/OREGON STREET NEIGHBORHOOD.

The N. Mulberry/Oregon Street Neighborhood is located near the central business district of Georgetown, Kentucky in a small urban block to the north of Main Street. Although strategically located near the main downtown area, the land on which the neighborhood developed is of marginal quality, having a major topographic break that limited construction, and dictated, to some extent, the size of the houses built along Oregon Street. The topography may also have adversely affected the drainage of the neighborhood.

PART II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT - POST CIVIL WAR AFRICAN-AMERICAN URBAN NEIGHBORHOODS IN THE UPPER SOUTH.

The N. Mulberry/Oregon Street neighborhood represents a residential development that provided housing for working-class African-Americans around the turn of the 20th century in a small town in the central Bluegrass region of Kentucky. The neighborhood is typical of postbellum residential patterns in Kentucky towns and cities in that, prior to the Civil War, African-Americans, both free and slave, tended to live alongside whites with little residential segregation, and, after the War, specific areas were developed to provide housing for freed slaves and other African-Americans who moved to urban settings from the countryside. Residential segregation resulted in part from prejudicial attitudes but also from physical limitations of available urban land on which houses could be built to service a large influx of new urban dwellers. Thus, many African-American neighborhoods developed on marginal land, or on the outskirts of towns and cities because better quality land or locations closer to the central business district were already occupied.

The N. Mulberry/Oregon Street neighborhood is atypical of postbellum African-American residential housing areas because the urban block on which it is located was not fully developed until 1895-1900, considerably later than many similar neighborhoods that developed almost immediately after the Civil War. Another uncommon aspect of this area is that most of the houses were built for rental purposes and were not owner-occupied.

PART III. SPECIFIC SITE HISTORY AND PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION.

The earliest structures in the area include a duplex owned and occupied by a free African-American woman, Betsey Robinson, from circa 1859 to 1896, a Methodist Episcopal church with an African-American congregation (built around 1861) and possibly a tenement house also rented to African-Americans or used to house African-American servants working for the white family that lived in a larger house on the same lot. These structures represent an

antebellum residential pattern that was largely unsegregated. (Robinson's house was torn down and replaced with other houses, but the church and tenement house still stand. The church is not involved in the proposed demolition project.)

Mrs. Robinson began subdividing her property shortly before her death in 1896, resulting in one house being built by a local African-American builder/carpenter. This house was the only owner-occupied residence in the neighborhood after Mrs. Robinson's death and well into the 20th century. It is also architecturally unique compared to its neighboring houses.

The remaining property was subdivided into several small lots and filled with single or dual occupancy houses (all some form of a shotgun plan). The construction of these houses, which were intended for rental to African-Americans, was authorized by a white businesswoman, Mrs. Cantrill. The architecture of these houses contain significant elements relating to their purpose. The shotgun plan was an efficient use of lots of limited size; virtually all were shed-roofed, an unusual roof treatment in Kentucky, but an inexpensive construction method; and most were intended for at least two families.

The result was a high density urban block, with little yard space, and a high population density relative to available domestic space. The neighborhood was strategically located near the main business district of Georgetown, but, like many similar African-American housing areas, was on marginal ground with some physical limitations for construction. However, house plans were altered to mitigate the effects of topographic breaks and other physical impediments. The residential plan also sought to maximize the number of households that could be contained, thereby maximizing profits to the landlords.