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Resource Identifier: Old North Davis Historic District

Recorded By: Carol Roland, Ph.D.

D4. Description:

The Old North Davis is a residential district located northwest of the Downtown Commercial area of the City of Davis. It is within the boundaries of the Downtown Historic Conservation District and is one of four distinct neighborhoods recognized within the Conservation District overlay. It encompasses the tier of blocks that runs from B Street through F Street between 5th and 6th Streets. This tier of blocks was officially platted and added to the city in 1871. It also includes the tier of blocks from B to G Street between 6th and 7th Streets that was platted as the Bowers Addition to the Town of Davisville in 1913. The Bowers addition occupies approximately twenty acres, and was subdivided into one-hundred lots.¹ Together, the blocks between 5th and 6th and the Bowers Addition which now consists of 281 lots which were developed between 1910 and the 1950s, with the peak construction period in the 1920s and 30s with resultant visually cohesive appearance to the neighborhood.

The area is predominantly residential, with two churches, the former St. James Catholic Church, now the Newman Center, on the corner of 5th and C Streets, and the Church of Christ Scientist at the corner of 6th and D Streets. The Newman Center is housed in a Romanesque Revival historic building that contributes to the district. The Christian Science building is that replaces an earlier, Prairie Style building that was remodeled in the 1980s beyond recognition. The block between 5th and 6th/B and C Streets is occupied by the former Davis Intermediate School, now the School Administration Building. The school was constructed in 1949. A small number of residences in the 600 block of G Street have been converted to commercial use.

Old North Davis consists of ten double loaded blocks. Organized on a grid, there are six north-south, lettered (G-B), streets, and three east-west, numbered (5th -7th) streets. There is a slight variation in the grid pattern in the 600 block of B Street which curves to the east, and in the alignment of the 500 and 600 block tiers. The 600 tier of blocks are bisected by central service alleys. Alleys allowed the placement of garages at the rear of lots and provided access without having to cut and pave driveways from the street. Within the Bowers Addition garages appear to have been rather uniformly sited at or near the rear property line. In the 500 tier of blocks, where alleys were absent and lots were slightly deeper (120 ft as opposed to 112 _ ft in Bowers), accommodation to the automobile assumed a different form, with garages set back from the house, although not always fully to the rear of the lot. It was not unusual for garages to have been added a few years after the construction of the house when the family acquired its first automobile.

At the time it was developed, North Davis was on the periphery of the existing town and created a middle-ground between the more densely settled residential section of the downtown and the rural environment of the county. Bowers Addition was an early “suburban” addition to the older central town. Although suburbs of the 1910s and 20s were often organized around curvilinear streets, their development within the framework of the traditional grid was not unusual.² The developers, the Bowers Group and AR Pedder, of the Mount Diablo Realty Company, graded and paved the streets, installed drainage, laid gutters and curbs and sidewalks. The streets are separated from the sidewalks by parking strips which the developer planted with trees as a tract amenity, and which are now within the city’s jurisdiction.

There is one surviving Victorian residence that pre-dates the active residential development of the Old North Davis area. This is the Haussler home constructed in 1896 by John Haussler, a German immigrant who started a ranching operation in Davis. The house is located at 503 5th Street. Active development of homes on a pattern of side-by-side lots did not begin until 1913. The Enterprise announced the completion of the first house in Bowers Addition in July of that year.³ The earliest houses were on D Street, three of which were completed in the first year of development. The Sanborn Insurance Map, 1921, the first that includes the north area, shows thirty-seven buildings in the ten block area, with the largest concentration in the Bowers Addition. Houses in the Bowers Addition are set on uniform lots with a twenty-five foot setback. This placement from the property line was part of the controls placed on owners by the subdivision covenants. Although the 500 block tier did not carry the subdivision restrictions, it appears to have mirrored the physical arrangements established in the prestigious Bowers development, observing uniform setbacks as well. Although there are some fenced front yards, fences are low and the street presents an uninterrupted visual flow from one end to the other.

The entire neighborhood is heavily landscaped with mature shade trees arching over the streets. One of the chief promotional tools of the developer of Bowers Addition was the promise to plant street trees. Pedder planted out 300 Black Acacias in 1913.

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A 1946 aerial photo shows a uniform tree canopy over the area. Other 1940s photos of individual houses also display maturing trees. Over the years residents have added to these original street plantings with a wide variety of species. Front yards are landscaped and well maintained, showing a strong preference for foundation plantings, although there are a number of “new landscape” gardens where lawn has been removed and flowers and shrubs planted over the entire front portion of the lot.

Architectural styles reflect housing types popular in the periods in which the area was developed. Those constructed in the 1910s and 1920s can generally be classified as Craftsman or California bungalows with moderately pitched roofs, large, visually prominent covered porches supported on heavy posts or piers. Houses constructed in the late 1920s and 1930s exhibit a preference for the Period Revival styles that came into prominence after World War I. Of the many types of revivals, by far the most popular types in Old North Davis are American Colonial and English Cottages, with a smaller, but noticeable number of Mediterranean revivals.

By the mid-1940s substantial build-out had been achieved with only a small number of remaining in-fill lots scattered through the area. Houses are relatively modest with only a few larger residences. Modern day intrusions in the form of later construction or variant building types are minimal with virtually all of the housing (75%) constructed in the historic period (1910-1953). Alterations have been minimal, Old North having been spared the large additions and major remodels that have affected many subdivisions of historic small homes.

General Characteristics: Old North retains important defining elements including its street layout, original sidewalks (some stamped with the date of installation). It presents a distinctive area with broad avenues that are virtually unchanged, a mature tree canopy, retention of original lot size and layout, and continuity of land use since its inception the district retains a quiet, restful atmosphere with neat houses and gardens.

Unifying Features: The Craftsman Bungalow and English and Colonial Revival styles dominate in Old North with 52% of houses exhibiting elements of these styles. Although most of the residences are modest representatives of their style types, they are excellent examples of middle and working class housing of the period, reflecting the architectural preferences of ordinary people with limited means. Favored building materials include various forms of wooden lapped siding, particularly the narrow novelty form which appears with considerable frequency, as well as stucco and brick. These materials are used interchangeably in both bungalow and revival buildings. This mixture of materials across styles provides a visual continuity that tends to unify residences built in different decades. Scale and massing also are unifying characteristics with the majority of houses being one or one and one-half story. Although varying in pitch, front and side gable roof treatments predominate and are elements shared by both the bungalow and revival houses, creating a visual rhythm in which roof lines are a prominent element.

Similar lot size, setbacks and siting, along with the high tree canopy along the curb strip further unify the neighborhood.

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END NOTES

¹ *Davis Enterprise*, April 25, 1913, p. 1

² Ames, David. Draft Context and Guidelines for Evaluating America's Historic Suburbs for the National Register of Historic Places. (Washington D.C.: National Park Service, US Department of the Interior, 1998), p. 37.

³ *Ibid.* July 12, 1913, p. 1