A Shared Legacy
for Historic Preservation in North Carolina

A NEW HEADQUARTERS FOR PRESERVATION NORTH CAROLINA
IN RALEIGH’S HISTORICoberlin Village
LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

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For several years, Preservation North Carolina (PNC) has been looking for a new Headquarters Office.

Back in 1997–98, the A.J. Fletcher Foundation and PNC purchased and renovated downtown Raleigh’s most significant historic commercial building, the 1874 Briggs Hardware Building on Fayetteville Street. The building was vacant and in awful condition. Fayetteville Street was even worse: derelict, empty, a disgrace for the Capital City. Together Fletcher and PNC were pioneers, investing money that we might never recoup. But we had faith in our vision, and we succeeded. Fayetteville Street has blossomed. Having completed our “mission” with the Briggs Building, PNC started looking for a new office location.

After we looked at all sorts of possibilities, the opportunity arose to save two endangered landmarks in a historic, but disappearing African-American community on one of Raleigh’s busiest streets and make them PNC’s new headquarters. The idea seemed to take hold. Local preservation and community leaders embraced it. Donors indicated their potential interest. And, without PNC’s involvement, the houses would be lost.

What we didn’t know is that these houses tell much bigger stories than we could have imagined—stories that need to be retold for generations to come. Some truly remarkable people lived in these two modest houses—and in the surrounding community of Oberlin. We look forward to learning more about their extraordinary stories of tenacity, resilience and achievement.

This new Headquarters Office will be our shared legacy for the next generation of historic preservation in North Carolina. Please help us make it a success with your generous support. Thank you.

Myrick Howard
President
Raleigh's Oberlin Village has largely disappeared. Established as a freedman’s community around 1870, Oberlin Village ran about twelve blocks from Hillsborough Street beyond what is now Wade Avenue. By 1880, it had up to 1,000 residents, among them carpenters, brick masons and seamstresses, some of whom had been enslaved by the Cameron, Mordecai, Hinton, and other prominent families. For decades Oberlin was a thriving community with churches, schools, businesses and homes.

The Rev. Plummer T. Hall House and the Graves-Fields House are two of only five Oberlin structures listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Both of these designated Raleigh landmarks are exuberant Victorian houses whose strong street presence belies their modest size.

Built by former slaves, the prominent houses vividly tell remarkable post-Civil War stories where freedmen optimistically embraced the importance of hard work and education as the means to provide a better life for themselves and their children. Despite continued racism, they and their descendants overcame relentless obstacles with remarkable achievements.

Rev. Hall founded Oberlin Baptist Church which has been a source of hope and strength for the community for nearly a century-and-a-half. Several of Willis Graves’ descendants had notable careers, especially as advocates for civil rights. The Fields family, who bought the Graves House after World War II, has long been prominent in Oberlin community.

The Hall and Graves-Fields Houses are now stranded amidst large new apartment buildings, banks and office buildings, and they are threatened by rapid development along Oberlin Road. The Hall House must be moved back on its lot because it encroaches on the right-of-way, and the Graves-Fields House must be moved because its land has been purchased for development. The houses sit about 200 feet apart, on opposite sides of Oberlin Baptist Church.

PNC is purchasing the Hall House lot from the Raleigh Historic Development Commission and will relocate the two houses so that they sit side by side next to the church. The houses will be sited very close to each other, using the 1914 Sanborn maps as a guide for placement.

The rescue of these two houses as Preservation North Carolina’s new Headquarters Office will have significant and inspirational educational value as these stories are told and new information uncovered.

Without PNC’s intervention, these important houses—and many of their stories—would be lost. Preserved, they also will help tell the remarkable story of the village of Oberlin, whose diaspora includes an impressive list of doctors, educators, attorneys, business leaders, and workers of all types.
The builder of the Graves-Fields House, Willis Graves was born around 1856, in either Mississippi or North Carolina, to Viney and Matthew Graves. In 1870, his mother worked as a housekeeper at the School of the Deaf, Dumb and Blind, and in 1871 she bought a substantial lot in Oberlin Village. She would ultimately own several more. Deed research and a notable 1881 NC Supreme Court decision in her favor indicate that Viney, probably a former slave, was a trailblazer for women of color.

In 1883 Willis, a brickmason and justice of the peace, married Eleanor Hinton, a teacher born in 1860. They were highly regarded in the Oberlin community. In 1898, Willis Graves spoke at an election rally for Republican candidates in downtown Raleigh just two days before the Wilmington Race Riot; the event that led to an end of suffrage for African Americans.

The Graves’ impressive offspring clearly followed their father’s and grandmother’s quest for justice and their mother’s love of education.

- Son Willis, Jr. became a major Civil Rights attorney in Detroit.
- Son Lemuel attended Cornell University and was the first initiate in Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, the nation’s first and largest African-American fraternity. His son Lem, Jr. was a prominent journalist.
- Son George went to New York where he built showrooms for Helena Rubenstein.
- Daughters Mildred and Christine were both teachers and served as organists at Wilson Temple Methodist Church on Oberlin Road.
- Son Leroy was also a teacher.

We’ve connected with several of the great-grandchildren of Willis and Eleanor Graves from all across the country. All are very excited about the project.

L. to R.: Christine Graves, unknown, and Mildred Graves.
Families with a Tradition of Service

The Halls and Oberlin Baptist Church

Rev. Plummer T. Hall was the first minister of First Baptist Church of Oberlin, later renamed Oberlin Baptist. It was founded in 1880 when two small churches joined together. Churches were among the earliest and most important institutions established by newly freed slaves and remained centers for education, social and cultural opportunity, and civic involvement throughout the 20th century in many African-American communities.

Plummer Hall was born a slave to Joseph and Josephine Hester of Raleigh in 1849. According to family tradition, Rev. Hall built the house as a wedding present for his bride, Delia Mallory, when the couple married in 1877. Deed records indicate that the land was a gift from Delia’s father.

The room attached to the right end of the front porch was Reverend Hall’s pastoral office. Its exterior entrance marks it as his place of business at a time when the church would have been only a sanctuary, with no office space for the pastor.

The Fields and Their Connections

In 1945, the Graves House was purchased by Spurgeon Fields, Sr., and his wife, Jeannette Shepard Fields, who grew up nearby. They moved in with their four children (Mary Elizabeth, Spurgeon, Jr., Letitia, and Jeannette) and served as leaders at neighboring Oberlin Baptist.

For four decades, Spurgeon worked for the News and Observer and served as loyal and constant companion to Josephus Daniels, the newspaper’s publisher and Secretary of the Navy during the Woodrow Wilson administration. Upon Daniels’ death, Spurgeon continued to work with the Daniels family.

Jeannette was a salesperson at the Cameron Village boutique, Virginia Crabtree, and performed other domestic work. Her father’s first cousin was Dr. James E. Shepard, Oberlin native and founder of NC Central University in Durham.

Their daughters went on to become educators in other states. Spurgeon, Jr., (known as “Gabe”) served in the military and became “butler, father figure, brother, confidante and valued member of the family” of Raleigh leaders Trent and Anna Ragland.

The front yard of their home boasted azaleas, pansies, tulips, hydrangeas, and crepe myrtles. The deep backyard served as Spurgeon’s prized garden with fresh tomatoes, corn, melons, and cucumbers that he freely shared. The home, with its charming and hospitable wraparound front porch, became a fixture for holiday celebrations and an annual Labor Day weekend gathering.
The Hall-Graves-Fields project is truly a “legacy” project for PNC. We expect PNC to have its home in these two exceptional Oberlin houses for a long, long time.

Your generous gift will move us much closer to making this project a success. **Thanks to an extraordinary anonymous challenge grant of $500,000, your support will be matched dollar-for-dollar.**

Gifts may be paid over two years and can be set up for monthly, quarterly, or bi-annual payments. Donors of $1,000 or more will be acknowledged on a prominent sign in the Hall House.

As of November 1, 2017, we have commitments of more than $850,000 for this $1,250,000 project!

We shall be most grateful for your support.

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**A Generous Challenge Grant**

**For this Legacy Project**

Over the last 35 years, PNC has moved its headquarters offices four times in order to solve urgent preservation problems. Top L.: The Bretsch House, 1982; bottom L.: the Dr. Z. M. Caveness House, 1986; above: the Bishop’s House, 1992; and opposite: the Briggs Hardware Building, 1998.

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**Another Complex Rescue**

Our ambitious proposal to save these two highly endangered landmarks will solve PNC’s need for a new Headquarters Office and underscore our commitment to diversity in preservation. The significance of these houses will continue to grow as their compelling stories are uncovered and as new construction continues to erode historic Oberlin. Their visibility, once preserved, will help ensure that the story of Oberlin is not forgotten.

PNC will relocate and renovate the two houses and add space for a conference room, restrooms, workroom, and storage. The combined square footage of the two modest houses is an ideal size. With only a slight increase in net square footage, PNC will have more offices and space not currently available for interns, volunteers, and part-time employees.

PNC plans to place its offices in the Graves-Fields House and utilize the Hall House as a more public space for gatherings and meetings, filling its walls with historic photographs and panels that tell the stories of Oberlin, the three families who occupied the houses, and PNC’s own statewide preservation work. The project will also reinforce grassroots efforts to save other Oberlin survivors, including the historic cemetery.

Visibility will be exceptional on this major thoroughfare. A new roundabout is planned in front of the houses. Across the street, former mayor Smedes York is sponsoring a new art installation entitled “Oberlin Rising” by noted sculptor Thomas Sayre.

The total project budget is $1.25 million. Land and site-related costs account for more than one-third of the budget. The 0.37 acre lot alone is assessed for $601,640; we are acquiring it for substantially less. Our investment will be in line with market values for Oberlin Road properties in the area.

During this campaign, we will also seek to build PNC’s Headquarters Endowment at the North Carolina Community Foundation, so there will be annual funding for maintenance.
More About the Graves Family

Willis (Bill) Graves, Jr., Noted Civil Rights Attorney

Born in 1890, Bill Graves grew up in Oberlin. He attended Saint Augustine's Normal School and Collegiate Institute for high school, as did his siblings and many other Oberlin residents. Until 1924, Raleigh had no high school for African-American students. To comply with the “separate but equal” doctrine of *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, the city paid for black students to attend Saint Augustine's.

Bill received his undergraduate degree from Shaw University and a law degree from Howard University School of Law in 1919. He moved to Detroit for the opportunities of a growing black population, but he quickly discovered the city’s racially based problems in housing. He and his law partner, Francis Dent, became the point men in the fight against racially restrictive covenants in Detroit.

As counsel for the Detroit NAACP, Bill Graves worked with some of the nation’s most renowned civil rights attorneys, such as Clarence Darrow (best known for his role in the Tennessee “Scopes Monkey Trial”) and Thurgood Marshall (the first African American to serve on the US Supreme Court). Bill participated with a group of prominent attorneys at gatherings in New York and Washington to develop a national strategy for civil rights litigation.

From trial court to the Michigan Supreme Court, Graves and Dent defended an African-American couple, Orsell and Minnie McGhee, who had been sued by a white neighbor for buying a home that was subject to racially restrictive covenants. The case was joined with a similar case from Missouri and taken to the US Supreme Court with Thurgood Marshall as the lead defense attorney. Three justices recused themselves from the case, presumably because they owned homes subject to such covenants. The resulting decision in *Shelley vs. Kramer* made such covenants unenforceable and is regarded as a landmark civil rights victory. After the case, people of color could legally “live anywhere.”

Bill Graves and his wife Irene, who had no children, were both well known in Detroit’s African-American community, serving as leaders on numerous boards and charities.

World-famous 1948 headline for a Pittsburgh Courier article written by Lem Graves Jr. about the landmark US Supreme Court case for which his uncle Bill was an attorney.

Lemuel Eugene Graves, Pioneer Educator and Businessman

Lemuel Graves was born in 1885 or 1887 in Oberlin. Like his younger brother, he attended Saint Augustine’s Normal School and Shaw University. In 1906 he entered Cornell University, where he received a B.S. in Agriculture in 1910.

While at Cornell, Lemuel was the first student to be initiated into Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, the first Greek Letter fraternity for African-American men, during its First Annual Banquet. He was a speaker at the second annual banquet, discussing “What Does College Mean?” The next year he was elected to the fraternity’s first Board of Trustees. One can’t help but marvel at this son of former slaves taking a leadership role at an Ivy League school.

After Cornell, Lemuel did graduate work at Columbia University. For five years, he taught as a Professor of Botany and Agricultural Chemistry at Florida A&M University. By 1920, he was married to Louise Martin and resided with her and their three children in Raleigh. For the next decade, he worked in real estate and insurance, having started his own company. He held leadership positions in several organizations, including the Negro Business League, Negro Welfare Chest, and Raleigh Emancipation Society, and served on the board of Saint Augustine’s.

After the depression hit, Lemuel and his family moved to Harlem, taking his widowed father with them. Lemuel continued to work in real estate. There, at the height of the Harlem Renaissance, the family lived in a luxury apartment across from Morningside Park, and attended St. Phillips Episcopal Church. Parishioners at St. Phillips included Langston Hughes, Thurgood Marshall, and W.E.B. DuBois.

In 1941, Lemuel was listed in Who's Who in Colored America. He loved to travel, was a sharp dresser and fond of cigars, and wrote poetry. He died in 1957.

More About the Graves Family

Lem Graves, Jr., Noted Journalist

Lem (Gene) Graves, Jr. was born in Florida and spent his youth in Raleigh. He too attended Saint Augustine’s College (by 1934, no longer a prep school) and was an Alpha. He first worked for local African-American newspapers in Raleigh and Norfolk, where he rose through the ranks to editor. In 1940, he married Theora Weaver of Winton, a teacher.

In 1943-44, Gene saw action as an accredited war correspondent in the Italian, North African, and European theaters of World War II. In early 1945, he was sent again by his paper to the Italian war zone until the end of the war. After the war, he became the Washington correspondent for the Pittsburgh Courier, the nation’s largest black American weekly with a circulation of 250,000. There he wrote about legislation, court cases, and executive actions related to African Americans, especially black soldiers who returned from military service to face continued segregation.

In 1950, Graves took a leave of absence from the Courier when he was appointed deputy chief of the news and writing section of the Economic Cooperation Administration, which oversaw the Marshall Plan for rebuilding Europe. In an interview for the Courier from his office off the Champs Elysees, he recalled how friends had to talk him into taking a job with the labor information division of ECA. “Now I know I’m part of a historical experiment in economic diplomacy.” Graves enjoyed life in Paris, especially the freedom which was accorded him as a black man: “People have a right to like or dislike whom they choose. It’s when prejudice is institutionalized by law and custom to deprive a group of us rights that I get mad. In Paris there’s little like that to get mad at.”

The Courier interview ended with: “When Sir. Graves finishes his work In Europe and returns to the Courier staff, his main object will be, he says, to write stories, which will bring to the Negro in America every opportunity, responsibility, right and privilege which goes with American citizenship.”

Indicative of his national stature, in 1953 Jet Magazine wrote: “Lemuel Graves’ very talented daughter, Theora (everyone calls her Bunny), is studying ballet in Paris with a Russian princess.” Eight years later, Jet announced the engagement of Bunny to Horace Webb.

After spending a decade in Paris, Gene left journalism to work for the United States Information Agency, and in the early 1960s he was appointed by President Kennedy to head Voice of America in Latin America. He died unexpectedly in Uruguay where he was stationed.
The Great Depression landed the first major blow to Oberlin. Many African-American residents lost their homes to foreclosure, and frequently their properties were purchased by white businessmen who were consolidating property in the area. Since the late 1940s, Cameron Village Shopping Center, the Wade Avenue/Oberlin Road interchange, urban renewal, public housing, and new development have obliterated Oberlin Village. Out of several hundred Oberlin structures, fewer than 50 remain.

This 1949 aerial photograph below shows development in process for Cameron Village Shopping Center to the east of the homes in Oberlin. One block of houses remains in the photo on the east side of Oberlin Road, and the west side of the road is still fully residential. In the photo to its right, that site and the one across the street are now occupied by two large apartment buildings and a McDonalds.

What Happened to Oberlin?

Nearby new development on Oberlin Road—to the north (above) and to the south (below) of PNC’s new Headquarters. The arrow in the photo to the left points toward Oberlin Road at the intersection of Clark Road. The arrow in the photo below points down Oberlin from the same intersection. The large apartment buildings are where there were Oberlin Village houses in 1949.
The Site Plan for the New Headquarters

Please consider making a planned gift for PNC’s Headquarters Office Endowment at the North Carolina Community Foundation. This endowment will provide annual funding for the future upkeep of PNC’s Headquarters on Oberlin Road.

Your support for Preservation North Carolina through planned giving, such as your will or a beneficiary designation for your IRA, will help us preserve places that matter for generations to come.

Let us know if we can help you through the process.

Where There’s a Will, There’s a Way...