

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

### 1. Name of Property

historic name Williamston Commercial Historic District

other names/site number \_\_\_\_\_

### 2. Location

street & number 100 blocks of E. Main, W. Main and S. Smithwick streets, and 200 block of Washington Street N/A  not for publication

city or town Williamston N/A  vicinity

state North Carolina code NC county Martin code 117 zip code 27892

### 3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this  nomination  request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant  nationally  statewide  locally. ( See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

William S. Price SHPO 1-25-95  
Signature of certifying official/Title Date

State of Federal agency and bureau \_\_\_\_\_

In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria. ( See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title Date

State or Federal agency and bureau \_\_\_\_\_

### 4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:	Signature of the Keeper	Date of Action
<input type="checkbox"/> entered in the National Register. <input type="checkbox"/> See continuation sheet.	_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> determined eligible for the National Register <input type="checkbox"/> See continuation sheet.	_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> determined not eligible for the National Register.	_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> removed from the National Register.	_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> other, (explain): _____	_____	_____

Name of Property

County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property (Check as many boxes as apply)

Category of Property (Check only one box)

Number of Resources within Property (Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

- private, public-local, public-State, public-Federal

- building(s), district, site, structure, object

Table with 2 columns: Contributing, Noncontributing. Rows for buildings, sites, structures, objects, Total.

Name of related multiple property listing (Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

N/A

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Current Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

- Commerce/Trade/department store, Commerce/Trade/specialty store, Commerce/Trade/financial institution, Commerce/Trade/professional, Domestic/hotel, Government/city hall, Government/post office, Recreation and Culture/theater

- Commerce/Trade/department store, Commerce/Trade/specialty store, Commerce/Trade/professional, Commerce/Trade/business, Government/city hall, Government/post office, Vacant/Not in Use

7. Description

Architectural Classification (Enter categories from instructions)

Materials (Enter categories from instructions)

- Colonial Revival, Romanesque, Greek Revival

- foundation BRICK, walls BRICK, STONE: limestone, roof METAL: tin, other GLASS

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Williamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, North Carolina

Section number 7 Page 2

---

Architectural Classification, cont.

Italianate  
Moderne  
Art Deco  
International Style

Materials, cont.

walls WEATHERBOARD  
STUCCO  
OTHER

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places  
Continuation SheetWilliamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, North CarolinaSection number 7 Page 3

## Narrative Description

The Williamston Commercial Historic District encompasses the heart of the historic business district in Williamston, a city of 5,503 persons (1990 Census) that is the largest municipality and county seat of Martin County (25,078 people). Located in the northern coastal plain, the county has a strong agrarian heritage that is manifested by many farm-related businesses in or near Williamston. Settled in the 1730s but not incorporated until 1779, Williamston is located on the western bank of the Roanoke River which, though important in the city's development, has little physical presence in the city since it is located 0.8 miles from the center of town and several hundred yards from the nearest dwellings. The city is laid out in an irregular grid plan that increasingly varies as one moves away from the historic core bounded by Main, Watts, Church and Haughton streets. The district is bordered immediately on the northwest by the city's primary late nineteenth and early twentieth century residential neighborhood along Church and Academy streets; on the northeast by a residential area along East Main Street that not only includes the old and present Martin County Courthouse (1886 and 1983, respectively) but the oldest residences in town; on the southeast by the tracks of the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad and abandoned tobacco warehouses, processing plants, and storage facilities; and on the southwest by a cluster of post 1950 commercial development and early twentieth century residential development beyond the 300 block of West Main Street. Early- and mid- twentieth century residential neighborhoods are found within one-quarter mile of the district in all directions.

The business district is composed of parts of seven city blocks and has Main Street as its primary throughfare; in fact, thirty-four of the forty-three resources are located on East or West Main Street (Smithwick Street is the division between East and West), with eight resources on Washington Street and one on South Smithwick Street. All but two of the resources are of brick construction, with the exceptions, the Docton W. Bagley Building at 117 East Main Street (entry 16) and the Biggs Office at 113 East Main Street (entry 18) being frame offices that are the oldest buildings in the district. The repetition of one- and two-story facades yields a pleasant uniformity of height, with only five buildings as tall as three stories. Three of these, the Williamston City Hall and Fire Station at 106 East Main Street (entry 2), the Tar Heel Apartments at 154-156-158-160 West Main Street (entry 14), and the Flatiron Building at 227 Washington Street (entry 41), serve as strong visual anchors at ends of the L-shaped district, with the other two, the (former) People's Bank at 120 West Main Street (entry 8) and the Peele Building at 109 East Main Street (entry 19), providing regular variations in height along Main Street.

The Williamston Commercial Historic District retains a high level of architectural integrity that is remarkable for commercial districts in small farming towns in eastern North Carolina. Although few storefronts

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places  
Continuation SheetWilliamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, North CarolinaSection number 7 Page 4

remain unaltered, many, such as those at Clark's Drug Store at 142-144-146-148 (entry 12), the Commercial Building at 115-117 West Main Street (entry 26), the Proctor Shoppe/Peele's Jewelers at 119-121 West Main Street (entry 27), and the Farmer's Supply Company Building at 223-225 Washington Street (entry 40), retain the traditional configuration of a recessed central entrance flanked by large display windows, but, rendered with modern materials and plate glass. The twelve noncontributing resources are outnumbered almost three-to-one by contributing buildings, and of these twelve, seven are one-story buildings that have minimal street presence. Another, the 1960-1961 City Hall at 106 East Main Street (entry 2), is an especially eloquent example of the continuation of the Art Deco style into the 1960s and its three-story clock tower is an architectural landmark of downtown Williamston; the building is noncontributing solely because of its age. Only three two-story buildings have suffered major alterations. Of the four buildings deemed noncontributing because of age, two, the Williamston City Hall and Fire Station (entry 2) and the Stevens Building (entry 30) were built to replace buildings destroyed by fires (1958 and 1978, respectively); another, the Roses 5 and 10 cent Store #2 (entry 31), was remodeled after a fire in 1981.

The oldest buildings are a pair of rare gable-front frame buildings that display elements of the Greek Revival style. The Docton W. Bagley Building (entry 16), erected ca. 1850 as an office, typifies the pedimented-front building focusing on a stylish Greek Revival sheathed tympanum. The one-bay office has a central entrance with multiple-pane sidelights, all framed by broad, simply fluted pilasters with unadorned corner blocks. The smaller and more simply-detailed nearby Biggs Office (entry 18), also built ca. 1850, retains several sections of beaded weatherboard siding.

The cohesive architectural feature of the Williamston Commercial Historic District is the extensive and varied use of corbeled brickwork on the upper facades of the many one- and two-story brick structures. Such decoration is sometimes quite simple, such as the simple rows of corbeled stretcher bricks atop the Bowen Brothers Building (entry 43), or a similar pattern invigorated with header bricks set on angle adorning the York Building (entry 37). On the latter, corbeled dentils accent the arches of the windows. On other buildings the brickwork is more complex, such as the one-story Central Cafe (entry 13) on which a pierced brick parapet mimics a balustrade of turned members. A simplified version of this is also employed on the three-story Flatiron Building (entry 41) where the parapet is accented by a large recessed panel below. The most popular type of decorative brickwork utilized a cornice of large, icicle-like modillions along with multiple rows of stretcher and header bricks, the latter often set on angle. The Robertson Building (entry 4) is a prime example of this, as are Harrison Brothers and Company Building #1 (entry 9) and the Peele Building (entry 19). The (former) Roanoke/Britt Hotel (entry 3), located adjacent to the Robertson Building, most likely had similar decoration

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places  
Continuation SheetWilliamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, North CarolinaSection number 7 Page 5

before it was stuccoed in the 1920s or 1930s. Other corbeled brickwork of note is on the one-story Biggs Drug Store (entry 24), the oldest brick building in the district on which the parapet has a cleverly-composed arrangement of recessed rectangular panels. Subtle Colonial Revival and Art Deco interest is provided by simple but imaginative panels of decorative brickwork on the facades of Clark's Drug Store (entry 12) and the Farmer's Supply Building (entry 40).

An important unifying element of these buildings that feature corbeled brickwork is the repetition of arched window openings, especially on the upper stories. Arches are particularly prominent on the (former) Bank of Martin County (entry 21), on which a quartet of large round arches enclose the first story entrance and display windows while segmentally-arched windows accentuate the second story. Across the street, a robust three-bay arcade porch gave the small ca. 1908 Romanesque Revival style Wheeler Martin, Sr. Law Office (entry 1) considerable impact before it was obscured during the 1970s by a false mansard parapet. Its design was no doubt patterned after the newly finished 1907-1908 municipal building that stood next door on the site of the present City Hall (entry 2) before it burned in 1958. While other round-arched doors or windows are seen on the York and Flatiron buildings (entries 38 and 41, respectively), both located on Washington Street, segmental arches are seen on the second story of most commercial buildings in Williamston. These arches, accented by archivolt of soldier course bricks or corbled brickwork, almost always surmount flat-headed windows. The regular rhythm formed by these second-story arches is particularly evident on the northwest side of West Main Street, where the (former) Roanoke/Britt Hotel, the Robertson Building, and the Leggett Building (entries 3, 4, and 5, respectively) combine to form a string of eighteen adjacent windows, a pattern that is extended along North Smithwick Street by the nine windows of the (former) Roanoke\Britt Hotel that face that secondary elevation. The fourteen bays that wrap around the two elevations of the Flatiron Building (entry 41) emphatically set the arched tradition of the district as one enters from the south.

A prominent architectural feature of the district is the presence of two large, three-story, stone-veneered, Colonial Revival-style buildings, the (former) People's Bank (entry 8) and Tar Heel Apartments (entry 14), both of which were probably designed by architect Charles Collins Benton of Wilson. The bank has a monumental in antis portico of Ionic columns and Doric pilasters rendered in a conservative manner, with decorative embellishments confined to a modest cartouche in the austere entablature and a simple raised frontispiece at the parapet. The Tar Heel Apartments (entry 14) is the most visually commanding building in the district, standing at the pivotal junction of West Main and Washington streets. It is equally austere in its finish, relying on the cleanly-articulated dressed limestone facade to dominate the streetscape no matter from which direction it is viewed. Its modest decoration includes a parapet with scrolls and a cartouche dated 1920, and elegantly over-scaled lance-shaped

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places  
Continuation SheetWilliamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, North CarolinaSection number 7 Page 6

foliage accents above the corners of the storefront's transom. The 1938 United States Post Office (entry 15) is an exceptionally intact example of the many Colonial Revival style buildings erected by the Works Progress Administration during the Great Depression, being simply detailed with large windows and a glazed octagonal lantern crowning the hipped roof.

Downtown Williamston enjoyed a period of economic rejuvenation during the late-1930s, and buildings erected then reflected modest adaptations of the "modern" Art Deco, Art Moderne, and International styles. Although limited in examples, these three styles provide an aura of architectural sophistication that is all too often lacking in small farm towns. The facade of the 1895 (former) Roanoke/Britt Hotel (entry 3) was stuccoed and remodeled with subtle Art Deco elements and colored encaustic tiles, probably during the mid- or late-1930s, perhaps around the same time as the Van Dyke Furniture Company Building (entry 33) was erected ca. 1934. The latter one-story brick building is noted for the sophisticated mitered brick soldier courses that frame the large display windows, and extend across the transom. The Art Deco style was also chosen in 1940 when the 1929 Colonial Revival Watts Theatre (entry 11) was modernized, creating a streamlined upper facade composed of narrow vertical windows framed with white tiles. The Art Moderne style was selected for the 1941 (former) Branch Bank and Trust Company Building (entry 10), which displays the rounded exterior corners, simple accents, and graduated shapes associated with the style. Although deemed noncontributing solely because of its age, the 1960-1961 Williamston City Hall and Fire Station (entry 2) follows a remarkable design by Charles Collins Benton that employs Art Moderne elements: horizontal emphasis in the windows and brick veneer decoration; a soaring central belltower whose face is divided into a geometric grid; and the sophisticated use of aluminum accents. Like the Art Moderne style, the International style was infrequently employed for commercial buildings in eastern North Carolina during the 1940s, and its use for the ca. 1941 Dr. E. T. Walker Office (entry 35) provides additional architectural variety to the district. The boxy rectangular structure features a broad overhang above the second-story porch that seems to float above the building, corner windows of glass blocks, and the imaginative use of circular shapes for windows, entrance canopy, and entrance steps.

## INVENTORY LIST

Historical information contained in the inventory list is based on material from the Williamston Inventory files at the North Carolina Division of Archives and History; Martin County deeds; Martin County Historical Society, Martin County Heritage (1980); Skewarkian, Main Street Williamston (1985); Sanborn maps: 1896, 1901, 1913, 1921, 1926; and oral history. Entry names refer to the original owner/occupant of the building unless otherwise noted.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places  
Continuation SheetWilliamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, North CarolinaSection number 7 Page 7**Methodology**

Main Street, the primary thoroughfare of the district and the only east-west street in downtown Williamston, is listed first, with properties listed from east to west, first those on the north side of the street and then those on the south side of the street. Then the north-south streets are listed, beginning with South Smithwick Street on the east and ending with Washington Street on the west. These properties are listed from north to south, first those on the east side of the street and then those on the west side of the street. Main Street is roughly oriented along a northeast-southwest axis, with Main and Smithwick streets, respectively, serving as the division between North/South and East/West addresses.

The primary resource on a lot is assigned a number. The district map accompanying the nomination includes all inventory numbers.

**Status**

The letter "C" indicates a contributing building. A property determined to be noncontributing is identified by either "NC-age," indicating a property built after 1945; or "NC-alt," indicating a property that, while more than fifty years old, has been altered to the extent that it has lost its architectural integrity. Unless specified otherwise, each property continues in its original use.

**Date**

Building dates are largely derived from deed research and Sanborn maps. All of the district is delineated on the earliest Sanborn map (1896) except Washington Street, which does not appear until the 1913 map. For dating purposes, a resource that appears on the 1896 map is indicated as "by 1896," while those Washington Street resources that appear on the 1913 map are indicated as "by 1913." A resource which is not shown by one map but is shown by the next edition is indicated as "1896-1901," or however appropriate. City directories for Williamston do not exist. More precise dates come from deed research or local tradition.

1. **Wheeler Martin, Sr. Law Office** ca. 1908 C  
114 East Main Street

One-story brick office with robust Romanesque Revival 3-bay arcade and bracketed cornice; latter hidden by false mansard roof in the 1970s; brick piers supporting arches are accented with skintled brick bands and terra cotta Corinthian capitals; intact building facade defined by molded wooden pilasters with elongated brackets at transom; interior completely modernized; design probably drawn by Charles Hartge of Raleigh; Martin (1861-1916) was a leading attorney who was active in numerous political, civic, and industrial endeavors; office later occupied by his son, Wheeler Martin, Jr. (1890-1954), and fellow lawyer Clarence W. Griffin.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places  
Continuation SheetWilliamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, North CarolinaSection number 7 Page 8

2. Williamston City Hall and Fire Station 1960-61 NC-age  
106 East Main Street

Handsome 2-story Art Moderne brick building designed by Charles C. Benton of Wilson; focus is 3-story central clock tower with upper story divided by raised aluminum bands into grid-like geometric pattern; window bands and varied textures including polished granite base and channeled brick walls invigorate design as do aluminum accents on both exterior and interior, particularly staircase; building replaced extraordinary 1907-1908 Romanesque Revival building (burned 1958) designed by Charles Hartge of Raleigh.

3. (former) Roanoke/Britt Hotel 1895, 1930s C  
100-102-104 West Main Street

Two-story triple-storefront brick building with 9-bay facade stuccoed and updated with modest Art Deco elements probably during the mid- or late-1930s; unaltered North Smithwick Street elevation retains original segmentally-arched windows and corbeled hoods; original facade cornice most likely similar to those on entries 4 and 9; while storefronts of 100 and 104 have been modernized with replacement windows, 102 retains its original configuration and pair of cast iron fluted pillars crowned with elegant Corinthian capitals that frame street entrance and support closed transom; each storefront interior modernized to varying degrees with 104 retaining simple pressed metal ceiling; common upstairs is divided into numerous small hotel rooms clustered around large central light well; built as hotel and general mercantile store by brothers George W. Blount (1861-1936) and Marion O. Blount; succession of businesses downstairs; second story remained as hotel--known after ca. 1915 as the Britt Hotel and later as the George Reynolds Hotel--until closing in the 1960s.

4. Robertson Building ca. 1902 C  
106-108 West Main Street.

Two-story double-storefront brick building with largely intact exterior, except for 108 storefront and closed transoms; 106 storefront has traditional recessed central entrance flanked by large display windows and framed by cast iron pilasters manufactured by the Chattanooga Roofing and Foundry Co.; trios of segmental arched openings on second story contain replacement sash windows; cornice distinguished by varied corbeled brickwork, including distinctive dentil-like band above windows; both interiors substantially remodeled and modernized; little is known of first owner, Jason A. Robertson; occupied by general store and saloon in 1913; Enterprise Publishing Co., publisher of The Enterprise, town's and county's only newspaper, has occupied 106 since 1927 and 108 since 1982; first printed in 1899, paper was acquired in 1908 by William C. Manning, Sr. (1871-1938), who with son Francis Marion Manning (1903-1982), published paper until the 1970s; remains as offices for newspaper and Martinsborough Publishers, Inc.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places  
Continuation SheetWilliamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, North CarolinaSection number 7 Page 95. **Leggett Building** 1901-1911 C  
110 West Main Street

Two-story single-storefront brick commercial building; while the storefront is a modern replacement, it is bordered by a broad band of carrara glass; original three-bay second story displays imaginative but modest corbeled brickwork illustrating lingering popularity of Italianate Victorian elements; segmental arched windows surmounted by brick dripstones; upper cornice composed of elongated triangular projections which create a handsome sawtooth pattern across the facade; interior modernized; built for successful farmer James Daniel Leggett (1866-1911) after he moved to town before 1907; in addition to being the proprietor of a general mercantile store here, Leggett actively promoted the local tobacco market; later rented as a restaurant; between 1952 and 1972 it was operated as a soda shop by son John Claude Leggett (1902-1972); and is now occupied by offices.

6. **N. S. Peel Building** 1901-1913 NC-alt  
112-114 West Main Street

Two-story double-storefront building has a completely modern facade and storefront; original finish most likely similar to corbeled brickwork on adjacent Leggett Building (entry 5); built for wealthy merchant Noah Staton Peel (1846-1918) in early 1900s and the early, if not first, occupant was Anderson, Crawford and Co., a general mercantile firm, cotton broker, insurance agent, and grain dealer; numerous tenants since; in 1860 site was occupied by the only brick building in town, the general mercantile store of John C. Lamb, which burned in 1883.

7. **Commercial Building** 1901-13 NC-alt  
116 West Main Street

Although this 1-story brick building is shown on the 1913 Sanborn map, its present appearance dates from a thorough remodeling in the 1950s or 1960s; the sign of The Mobley (insurance) Agency, however, is a good example of 1960s advertising signage.

8. **(former) People's Bank** 1917 C  
120 West Main Street

Impressive three-story Colonial Revival brick structure with conservative dressed limestone facade; monumental in antis portico of unfluted Ionic columns and stout unfluted Doric pilasters rise to austere entablature emblazoned with central cartouche; third story has three (now closed) windows and upper cornice accented with oversized modillions and very modest raised frontispiece; probably designed by Charles C. Benton of Wilson; People's Bank incorporated 1917 by leading local merchants and industrialists, with tobacconist and cotton gin owner James Grist Staton (1874-1946) being majority stockholder; Staton also erected entries 14 and 41; bank failed in June 1922 during post World War I depression; sold in

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places  
Continuation SheetWilliamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, North CarolinaSection number 7 Page 10

1925 to investors from Lenoir Co.; occupied in 1935 by Guaranty Bank and Trust Co of Greenville, who bought in 1941, merged with Wachovia Bank and Trust in 1960, and kept branch here until 1969; after then renovated for professional offices.

9. **Harrison Brothers and Company Building #1** ca. 1902 C  
126-128-130-132 West Main Street

Large two-story three-storefront brick building displays the most extensive corbeled brick decoration in downtown Williamston; only the storefront at 132 remains largely intact, including a fine prism glass transom; each identical second story contains trio of one-over-one sash windows with segmentally-arched lintels; topmost cornice consists of multiple bands of brickwork set as dentils, headers set on diagonal, and bottom course of corbeled "icicles"; only interior of 132 is intact, retaining pressed metal ceiling and wooden display cabinets; perhaps built for a Mr. Slade as rental, building is best associated with general mercantile firm of brothers Thaddeus F. Harrison (1874-1929) and Lovette B. Harrison (1876-1938), county natives who began local careers in 1901; in 1917 firm moved to new building, entry 29, across street; stores occupied by a variety of commercial establishments since; second story, #128, shown on Sanborns as being occupied mid 1920s by a club, perhaps the Lotus Club, a private literary and social club organized and incorporated in 1906 by some of Williamston's leading businessmen.

10. **(former) Branch Banking and Trust Company Building** 1941 C  
138 West Main Street

Excellent understated example of the Art Moderne, a style infrequently seen in small eastern North Carolina towns; typified by rounded exterior corners, the story-story brick structure has streamlined cut stone accents: broad plain entrance surround topped by a graduated lintel, simple 12-inch-tall base, tripartite band above the windows, austere caps above the curved and stepped parapet, and distinctive finial inset at center of parapet; original two-story windows were divided with wood mullions and at a later date windows were filled in and covered with lattice-like screen of decorative concrete blocks; in 1930 the Branch Banking and Trust Co. of Wilson acquired the local Farmers and Merchants Bank (entry 32) and was the town's only bank until 1935; Branch Bank moved here in 1941 and remained until 1992 when a new facility was built outside of the district; old office then rehabilitated into professional offices; design attributed to Charles Collins Benton of Wilson, which is the headquarters of Branch Bank and Trust.

11. **Watts Theatre** 1929/1940/ca. 1968 C  
140 West Main Street

Two-story brick theatre with streamlined Art Deco upper facade that was added during 1940 remodeling; original facade had central two-story arched

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places  
Continuation SheetWilliamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, North CarolinaSection number 7 Page 11

window that followed Palladian form; new 1940 facade added asymmetrical composition of wide vertical bands of white tile and corbeled brick, narrow vertical windows, and balancing horizontal bands at upper left; present glass and aluminum first story contains letters C-I-N-E-M-A in diamonds atop signboard, itself a fine example of late 1960s signage; when opened on January 6, 1929 showing Tom Mix in "King Cowboy," Watts Theatre was Martin County's first modern moving picture house with state-of-the-art facilities and equipment; built and operated by James Wiggins "Wigg" Watts, Jr. until 1968; then remodeled and operated until 1981; since closed; the original building was designed by architect Fred A. Bishop, of Richmond, Virginia, who was very experienced in theatre design, having designed at least five in that state since 1924; he also designed the Wilson County, NC Courthouse in 1924; the contractor was the firm of E. F. Taylor of Goldsboro; the source of the ca. 1940 design and work is not known.

12. **Clark's Drug Store** ca. 1929 C  
142-144-146-148 West Main Street

One-story four-storefront brick commercial building finished with modest decorative brickwork; storefronts of slightly varying widths separated by modest pilasters framed by soldier and rowlock brick courses and accented with dripstone-shaped capitals of dressed stone; additional soldier and rowlock brick courses delineate subtle panels above each storefront and accent crenellated stone-capped cornice; inset green tiles further distinguish facade; storefronts modernized; original prism glass in Craftsman pattern remains visible only in #148 transom; original wall cabinets remain only in #148 interior, although all interiors retain excellent pressed metal ceiling with classical motifs such as torches, fleur-de-lis, and anthemions; original occupants included Bailey and Sessions Drug Store in #148, Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company in #146, and Saunders and Fowden Drug Store in #142, both drug stores failing in Depression; building acquired in 1932 by Clark's Drug Store, incorporated that year by Claude Baxter Clark, Sr., and eventually expanding to three stores under son C. B. Clark, Jr. (1912-1970); store #148 occupied by pharmacy of David R. Davis (1905-1981) until early 1990s; entire building remains in Clark family ownership.

13. **Central Cafe** ca. 1929 C  
152 West Main Street

One-story brick commercial building distinguished by reserved Colonial Revival style exterior featuring pierced brick parapet that mimics balustrade of turned members; parapet continues on northeast elevation (right) along alley; replacement metal and glass storefront; interior pressed metal ceiling has reserved Colonial Revival character; building best known for Central Cafe which operated here under different owners from 1936 until 1952; since then occupied by succession of clothing stores; vacant since January 1994.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places  
Continuation SheetWilliamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, North CarolinaSection number 7 Page 1214. **Tar Heel Apartments** 1920 C  
154-156-158-160 West Main Street

The most impressive commercial building in town, this three-story two-store building stand majestically at the pivotal junction of West Main and Washington streets; the austere four-bay facade is faced with dressed limestone; stone parapet is flanked by modest scrolls and crowned by stone cartouche bearing date 1920; second and third stories are simply finished, punctuated with broad (now closed) tripartite windows; storefronts--#154 being unaltered except for closed transom--are surmounted by handsome stone frieze with small cenral cartouche and elongated lance-shaped foliage accents at corners; built as a rental investment, the Tar Heel is the crowning achievement of several impressive buildings erected for agricultural entrepreneur James Grist Staton (1874-1946), including entries 8 and 41; believed to have been designed by Charles C. Benton of Wilson; while 1920 date is inscribed in cartouche, the 1921 Sanborn map has building labeled "To have been 3 story Dep't Store. Construction suspended 1920. Walls 1st floor only"; reason for delay may have been post World War I depression, which forced failuere of the People's Bank (entry 8) in which Staton had invested over \$10,000; construction completed by 1926; numerous occupants included O. C Miller's Dollar Store and Nassef's Department Store; from 1937 until 1952 the Charlotte-based Belk-Tyler Company occupied entire first story with Williamston's finest department store; building was primarily known for the apartments upstairs, which were especially favored by newlyweds and young couples; building bought in 1947 by Jesse S. Whitley, owner of local building supply company and remains in family ownership; apartments vacant since mid 1980s while first story continues as rental space.

15. **United States Post Office** 1938 C  
121 East Main Street

Remarkably unaltered example of one-story brick Colonial Revival style post office erected by the hundreds throughout the nation during the 1930s with assistance from Works Progress Administration; low hip roof is crowned by glazed octagonal lantern topped by weather vane; reserved character embodied by plain stone pilasters at three-bay entrance, plain boxed cornice with stone frieze that encircles building, and simple molded surrounds at six-over-six sash windows; expanded on rear in very compatible manner; interior lobby is equally unaltered, retaining original brass mail boxes, entrance vestibule, heavy Colonial Revival woodwork, granite floors and wainscots, writing desks, and bulletin boards; large WPA mural on southwest depicts historic first flight of Wright Brothers in 1903 at Kill Devil Hills, Currituck County; signed "von Saltza, 1940."

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places  
Continuation SheetWilliamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, North CarolinaSection number 7 Page 1316. **Docton W. Bagley Building** ca. 1850 C  
117 East Main Street

Modestly-scaled one-story one-bay frame building is oldest commercial building in Williamston and an excellent illustration of Greek Revival style in Martin County; broad front pediment has stylish sheathed tympanum and boxed cornices with austere ovolo moldings; tripartite entrance composed of central (replacement) door flanked by original sidelights, all framed by broad fluted surrounds with large unadorned cornerblocks; suggests influence of pattern books of Asher Benjamin; other elements include simple fluted pilasters at front corners, large six-over-six sash windows on side elevations, and secondary entrance on southwest containing two-panel Greek Revival door; original building just two rooms deep; two-room frame extension added on rear after 1926; interior is very simply finished; this was the business office of Docton W. Bagley (1801-1878), who was involved in many aspects of local life; began general mercantile business in 1820 which grew to be one of town's largest; active in politics, education, railroads, and boat lines; residence was on adjacent site now occupied by post office (entry 15); after his death building occupied by a long succession of stores and offices, best remembered as office of Dr. Joseph Hubbard Saunders (d. 1939); rehabilitated in 1971-1972 as offices for Martin County Economic Development Commission; since 1986 as insurance office.

17. **Manning Building** 1950 NC-age  
115 East Main Street

Modern two-story brick office building dominated by large glass facade that exposes interior stair; built as rental property by Asa J. Manning and contains ten offices per floor.

18. **Biggs Office** ca. 1850 C  
113 East Main Street

Small two-bay gable-front antebellum office retains sections of beaded weatherboards on side elevations and austere Greek Revival moldings composed of fillet and cyma recta moldings in the front raking cornice and above the door and windows; only side window retains original six-over-six sash, the others updated in late nineteenth century with two-over-two sash; simple corner boards and louvered vent complete austere little building; enlarged on rear with frame room added between 1913 and 1920 and cement block addition about 1970; little is known of early history; deed research places ownership in the family of Joseph D. Biggs by 1882, remaining in possession of John D. Biggs, Jr. until 1906; the 1896 Sanborn map shows the building as vacant; subsequent occupants included grocery, office, and store; from about 1925 to 1945 it was occupied as justice of the peace office of J. L. Hassell; occupied by a succession of attorneys and insurance agents from 1948 until early 1993, since then it has been vacant.

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Williamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, North Carolina

Section number 7 Page 14

19. **Peele Building** ca. 1902, ca. 1906 C  
109 East Main Street

Three-story two-bay brick building was tallest commercial building on Main Street when enlarged ca. 1906; although storefront has been modernized with relocated door, plate glass, and closed transom, upper stories remain intact; simple segmental arched openings contain two-over-two sash windows; modest cornice of corbeled brick "icicles" crowns the parapet; numerous windows on rear and sides, about half closed with brick; jeweler Herbert D. Peele began business in 1899 in the Docton W. Bagley Building (#16) and within several years moved here to one-story brick building erected ca. 1902; several years later he bought building and added upper stories; his jewelry store was on first floor with upper floors rented to various fraternal, social, and commercial enterprises; Peele lost building to foreclosure in 1930, but jewelry business continued until his retirement in 1934, when the business was taken over by son Edwin and moved to 121 West Main Street (entry 27); since then many occupants, currently as office overflow for adjacent Boyd Agency (entry 20).

20. **Commercial Building** 1901-1913 NC-alt  
107 East Main Street

Simple one-story brick building with modest architectural interest attained by several simple rows of corbeled brickwork across parapet; brickwork on facade may be recent, and storefront is a complete Colonial Revival reconstruction; interior is also entirely modern; perhaps built by J. G. Godard (see entry 21) and occupied in past by a garage, laundry, bakery, bowling alley, liquor store, and insurance companies; now Boyd Insurance and Realty Agency, successor of (Herbert O.) Peele Insurance Agency; Peele was son of adjacent jeweler Herbert D. Peele (entry 19).

21. **(former) Bank of Martin County** 1902 C  
101-103-105 East Main Street

Erected as the first bank in Martin County, this 2-story 3-bay brick building exemplifies the Romanesque style as employed for buildings of modest size but great impact; design (source unknown) dominated by trio of arches with broad brick archivolt across facade, which are echoed by a single arch on the South Smithwick Street (southeast, right) elevation; at the building's corner is a recessed and angled entrance, surmounted by closed transom, that is sheltered by the second story supported by a replacement metal post; the central arch shelters entrances to second story and #105 store; only one of the three arches' fanlights survive, an elegant leaded glass lancet design in lavender and green glass; second-story has one-over-one sash windows with corbeled segmental lintels connected by continuous corbeled label molding, a simple but effective treatment that heightens building's Romanesque appeal; South Smithwick Street elevation is more simply rendered with segmentally-arched doors and windows; #101 (corner) store was original banking offices, noted by mosaic "BANK" in

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Williamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, North Carolina

Section number 7 Page 15

floor of entrance; interior has fine pressed metal ceiling, broad arches between banking rooms, elaborate rear doorway to interior hall with leaded glass fanlight and sidelights; focus is original iron safe, its door flanked by flamboyant twisted iron engaged columns with Corinthian capitals and surmounted by elaborate pedimented hood accented with dentils, floral bos, scrolls, and anthemion antefix; established in 1902 as private bank by merchant Joseph George Godard (1862-1944), later joined by attorney Wheeler Martin, Sr. (entry 1); reorganized as Martin Count Saving and Trust Company in 1917 adding merchants John D. Biggs, R. S. Harrison, and John E. Pope as stockholders; bank failed in 1923 and building sold in 1927 to attorneys Robert L. Coburn (1895-1973), Burrous A. Critcher, Sr. (1880-1960), and Elbert S. Peel (1894-1976), who kept separate legal offices here throughout careers; remains in ownership of Critcher and Peel heirs.

22. **Commercial Building** ca. 1895 NC-alt  
101-103 West Main Street

Remodeleld one-story two-store building has plainness of upper facade relieved only by simple recessed panels and a minimal corbeled cornice; both storefronts modified, #101 more than #103, the latter retaining paneled aprons below display windows and large chamfered posts flanking recessed entrance; earliest known occupants in 1896 were a general store in #101 and a saloon in #103; among many successors were Alpha Cleaners in #101 from about 1940 until 1942, and in #103 Otto Willard's shoe store from 1931 until the 1980s.

23. **Commercial Building** ca. 1895 NC-alt  
105 West Main Street

Altered one-story brick store has completely modern facade of plate glass windows and composite panels above; first known occupant in 1896 was a liquor and grocery store, remained grocery until after 1913; remodeleld into present form about 1960s.

24. **Biggs Drug Store** ca. 1879 C  
107-109 West Main Street

Probably the oldest brick building in downtown Williamston, this one-story brick building displays imaginative decorative brickwork in upper facade; divided into three rectangular panels, each with four inverted corners, and each panel then enclosing a raised central panel that echoes its shape; the positive/negative and solid/void motif is as skillful as it is simple; cornice at parapet embellished by corbeled brick modillions that heighten building's simple Italianate character; storefront, which was divided into two narrow stores after 1946, has been completely modernized; brick addition erected on rear between 1901 and 1913 where water damage here has led to partial collapse of roof; built for Samuel Romulus Biggs, Sr. (1849-1909), who began S. R. Biggs Drug Company in 1879 and before 1905 added an undertaking business; very active in politics, serving as town treasurer

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Williamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, North Carolina

Section number 7 Page 16

for many years; sons Warren H. Biggs (1881-1916), S. R. "Rome" Biggs, Jr. (1883-1958), and John William "Jack" Biggs (1887-1962) continued business until 1935 when drug store closed; successful funeral business moved in 1937 to 300 block of West Main Street where it remains; many occupants since but currently vacant.

25. **Margolis Building** 1901-1913 C  
111-113 West Main Street

Large two-story five-bay brick building contains two stores; although both storefronts and central door to upper floor have been completely modernized, the second story and parapet remains unaltered; one-over-one sash windows have modest segmental arches of corbeled brick; parapet divided by five shallow pilasters with cornice composed of corbeled brick rows punctuated with elongated brick pendants; the result is modest, simple, and effective; building is completely freestanding, with small windows placed high on the side walls providing additional natural light inside; both interiors modernized; building was possibly built as investment property by Julius S. Peel; occupied by several tenants, including clothing store of (Abe) Adler and (Simon) Rutenburg; leased in 1919 and purchased in 1932 by brothers and clothiers Frank Jonah Margolis (1898-1982) and Irving M. Margolis; for a while the brothers and their families resided upstairs, and later the space was used for offices and dances and finally storage for the firm; store closed in 1972, since when the building has been occupied by a variety of businesses.

26. **Commercial Building** by 1896, 1901-1913 C  
115-117 West Main Street

Modestly finished one-story two-store brick building shows evidence of considerable rebuilding, perhaps between 1901 and 1913 when Sanborns show significant changes on property; while #115 now has single plate glass window, rest of storefront is largely unaltered, retaining paired central entrances framed by plain cast iron columns, unfortunately without foundry marks; cornice consists solely of rows of simple corbeled brickwork; northeast (left) side elevation displays a variety of brick colors, indicating the considerable rebuilding or repairs that occurred in past; occupants in 1896 were liquor and grocery store in #115 and general store in #117; grocery in #115 from 1921 until 1970s; #117 divided into two smaller spaces in late 1930s or 1940s; its occupants included barbershop of Luther Modlin from 1947 until 1980s.

27. **Proctor Shoppe/Peele's Jewelers** 1896-1901 C  
119-121 West Main Street

Small one-story brick building divided between 1901 and 1913 into two narrow stores; focus is fine metal cornice comprised of molded architrave, shaped modillions, and raised-panel frieze embellished with Victorian floral and foliate motifs; large metal capitals crown building's flanking

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places  
Continuation SheetWilliamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, North CarolinaSection number 7 Page 17

brick pilasters; both storefronts modernized but retain traditional recessed entry with flanking display cases; storefront of #121 displays notable streamlined Art Deco character with display panels boxed with fluted aluminum strips and walls sheathed with mirror-like green panels, which were probably added after 1934 for jewelry store of Edwin "Flip" Peele, the son and successor of Herbert D. Peele (entry 19), which operated here until 1980s, now vacant; #119 store occupied in 1910s and 1920s by barber; acquired in 1933 by attorney Burrous A. Critcher, Sr. and operated as dress store by his wife, Ozella (Proctor) Critcher (1892-1979), and her sister, Cora Proctor; still in family operation.

28. **Roses 5 and 10 cent Store #1** 1928 C  
123 West Main Street

Large two-story two-bay brick building retains unaltered second story enlivened by modest decorative brickwork; recessed panel--perhaps intended for a frontispiece of some kind--and simple corbeled brickwork accent stepped parapet; large second story windows almost completely hidden behind shutters; southwest (right) elevation features six-pane windows placed high so as to discourage burglars yet provide light inside; storefront and interior completely modernized; first known occupant was Roses 5 and 10 cent Store which remained until 1950 (see #31); since then a succession of clothing stores and remodeled in 1979 by Wise Fashions; site of small gable-front frame law office of James E. Moore (1841-1898) and later Harry W. Stubbs, which was moved to rear of lot and eventually demolished.

29. **Harrison Brothers and Company Building #2** 1917 NC-alt  
125-127 West Main Street

Only remnants of the fine Colonial Revival facade on this 2-story brick building visible are the ends of the stone quoins which once framed the building; probably designed by Charles C. Benton of Wilson, the building when completed was considered the finest mercantile facility in town; focus was a trio of large arches on second story framed with brick archivolt, the central arch rising above the parapet; a series of alterations culminated in 1983 with a metal screen that completely obscures the second story and a modern glass and metal storefront; brothers Thaddeus F. Harrison (1874-1929) and Lovette B. Harrison (1876-1938) began local mercantile careers in 1901, occupying building across street (entry 9) from 1902 until 1917; closed in 1941 after which a succession of department, clothing, and discount stores have operated here; building remains in Harrison family ownership.

30. **Stevens Building** ca. 1988 NC-age  
129-131 West Main Street

Recent one-story brick building with rounded ends and recessed center; built to replace a ca. 1915 grocery which burned in 1978; occupied by several businesses.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places  
Continuation SheetWilliamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, North CarolinaSection number 7 Page 18

31. **Roses 5 and 10 cent Store #2** 1950s NC-age  
133-135 West Main Street

Modern one-story brick commercial building with plain facade unrelieved by any decorative brickwork; large plate glass windows; built as rental by Jesse S. Whitley, owner of building supply company, for Roses store which relocated from entry 28; rebuilt in 1981 after severe fire; however, a roofless portion remains at rear; now occupied by Super 10 discount store.

32. **(former) Farmers and Merchants Bank** ca. 1905 NC-alt  
139 West Main Street

Large two-story brick building; so thoroughly remodeled in 1948 and altered ca. 1970 that nothing of the original building remains; bank was an especially exuberant example of the Neo-Classical Revival as suited for a new financial institution in a prosperous little town; had full-width pediment supported by engaged Ionic columns with arched windows on first story, splendid wrought iron balcony on second, and foliate motifs in tympanum; bank incorporated in 1905 under leadership of lumberman Dennis D. Biggs; only bank in town to survive the double blow of post World War I downturn and the Great Depression, being acquired in 1930 by Branch Banking and Trust Company of Wilson and remaining here until moving to new building (entry 10) in 1941; this building then remodeled for VICCAR movie theatre; remodeled again ca. 1970 with present false facade by Cato's, a women's clothing chain.

33. **Van Dyke Furniture Company Building** ca. 1934 C  
141 West Main Street

Handsome 1-story brick building displays subtle Art Deco elements in clever use of brick; brick soldier course that enframes broad display windows is mitered at corners and continues across transom (now closed); vertically-laid stretcher bond continues flanking pilasters and rises to traditional boxed cornice that spans entire width of building; original storefront has deeply set entrance between plate glass windows, creating ample and necessary display areas; company incorporated 1933 by Van Dyke family of Greenville, one of whom, daughter Inez, was wife of town native Garland G. Woolard; firm known from 1939 until closing in the 1960s as the Woolard Furniture Company; now clothing store.

34. **(former) Atlantic Hotel** 1905-1910 C  
143-145 West Main Street

Large two-story three-bay by fourteen-bay brick building prominently situated at corner of West Main and Washington streets; although all the segmentally-arched windows--double on the facade--have been closed with brick, the repetition of arched openings and simple corbeled brick lintels and sills remain, as do modest cornices along both street elevations; storefront and first story interior modernized; second story interior is largely unaltered, with seven hotel rooms on each side of center hall;

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places  
Continuation SheetWilliamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, North CarolinaSection number 7 Page 19

beaded board wainscots and simple Colonial Revival surrounds with transoms over doors; main stair to second story survives in small secondary entrance at rear of Washington Street elevation; when erected, this was the first large building those traveling by train came to when approaching downtown from old passenger station to southwest; this strategic location made it a favorite of salesmen and travelers; hotel closed in 1940s after which it was apartments for a short period and has been used for storage for over 40 years; first occupant of retail stores unknown, Sanborn shows office and barber in 1913; occupied by Eagles 5 and 10 cent store for many years; shoe store since 1980.

35. **Dr. E. T. Walker Office** ca. 1941 C  
105 South Smithwick Street

Two-story masonry building is exceptional example of the International style, a "modern" style rarely seen in eastern North Carolina before World War II; boxy rectangular building has broad flat second-story overhang that seems to float above an originally unenclosed second-story porch; notable use of glass blocks for corner windows and sophisticated use of circular shapes at the entrance--including a semi-circular cantilievered roof over concentric semi-circular shaped steps--provide stylish flourish to building, one of the finest examples of its style in eastern North Carolina; Walker practiced in Williamston seven years, buying lot in October 1941 and selling it in 1946; since then occupied by professional offices with Dell-Mar's Beauty Shoppe in small cement block wing on rear southeast (left).

36. **Commercial Building** ca. 1940 C  
203 Washington Street

Simple brick building typical of modestly finished commercial structures erected in early 1940s; enlivened solely by brick soldier course lintels above altered double storefronts; obtuse angle of wall where the southeast (right) elevation abuts a side alley; along alley is post World War II cement block addition with covered area for vehicle; currently occupied by Marco Hi Fi.

37. **Commercial Building** by 1913, 1950s NC-alt  
207-209-211-213 Washington Street

Although the oldest building on Washington Street, this one-story four-store brick building has been completely altered with new brick walls, modern storefronts, and metal awning across entire facade; in fact, #207 was demolished and completely rebuilt in 1950s; past occupants include P. P. Peel's soda fountain in #209, Farmer's Supply Company in #211, and Gold Star Grocery in #213.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places  
Continuation SheetWilliamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, North CarolinaSection number 7 Page 2038. **York Building** ca. 1919 C  
215 Washington Street

Brick two-story three-bay building features modest parapet cornice with header bricks set on diagonal; below cornice is a pair of diminutive round-arched louvered vents with arched drip molds accented with corbeled bricks set as dentils and stone sills; second story has three (now boarded up) windows of varying widths and heights, the left one being as large as others combined; each is finished with sill and drip molds as above; between the tiers of windows is a faded painted sign: YORK'S GARAGE; erected as rental property for Dr. Hugh B. York (1882-1929), whose father-in-law, George W. Brooks, was co-owner of the Roanoke/Britt Hotel (entry 3) in 1895; first occupied by York's Overland automobile dealership with repair facilities at rear; remained as rental property in York family ownership until 1945; bought in 1957 by Heilig-Meyers Company who maintained furniture store here until the 1980s.

39. **Martin Supply Company Building** 1921-1926 C  
217 Washington Street

Large two-story brick building with focus of design being trio of large, now closed, arched windows in center of second story, with the middle window being slightly larger and taller; rest of upper facade is simply detailed with modest corbeled brick cap and recessed frontispiece; storefront thoroughly modernized; neighbor Dr. H. B. York deeded half interest in party wall of adjacent building (entry 38) in 1919 to Roy T. Griffin (entry 40) and B. F. Perry, although construction not started by September 1921; first occupant unknown; acquired in 1940 by Martin Supply Company, a general mercantile and farm supply company formed that year by brothers Simon Claude (1885-1975) and George Cleophus Griffin (1892-1958), who bought out Bowen Brothers, which had been located here for several years (entry 43); they were first cousins and good friends of owners of adjacent Farmer's Supply Company (entry 40); remains in operation under family management.

40. **Farmer's Supply Company Building** 1934 C  
223-225 Washington Street

Two-story three-bay brick building has plain second story relieved by subtle but imaginative decorative brickwork; building framed by tall brick pilasters, each course composed of seven header bricks framed by stretcher brick; pilasters rise to carry cornice of soldier course and tiers of corbeled stretcher courses; Craftsman three-over-three sash windows on second story have 3-pane transoms; double storefronts, though modernized, have traditional recessed central doors flanked by display cases that are sheathed on the interior with diagonally-laid beaded siding; interior retains numerous wooden cabinets along walls as well as counters with heavily-molded panels; original walls are sheathed with diagonally-laid beaded siding; firm formed in 1924 by brothers Roy Theron Griffin (1891-

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Williamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, North Carolina

Section number 7 Page 21

1961) and Williams Orlando "Landy" Griffin (1895-1975), occupying store at 211 Washington Street (entry 37) until building this structure; were then joined by brothers Thomas Christopher Griffin (1890-1978) and James Edwin Griffin (1902-1979); recently renamed Griffin Farmer Supply Company, the firm remains in family ownership and management.

41. **Flatiron Building** ca. 1917 C  
227 Washington Street

Named because of its shape, this large three-story five-bay brick building is the most impressive building on Washington Street, serving as a visual terminus for Williamston's second most important commercial street; the 65-foot-wide facade, punctuated by segmentally-arched windows with corbeled archivolt lintels, tapers to a blind rear elevation just ten feet wide; a clipped southeast corner at the intersection of Washington and Railroad streets accentuates the building's unusual shape and provides a transition to a more simply detailed Railroad Street elevation; while the facade is crowned by a brick parapet in a pierced balustrade-like pattern, the undecorated Railroad Street parapet steps down in height toward the rear; the corner entrance has a round-arched fanlight invigorated by a drip stone of dentil-like corbeled brick; all the windows have been boarded and the storefront has been modernized with floor to ceiling plate glass; this was one of several buildings (entries 8 and 14) erected as investments by agricultural entrepreneur James Grist Staton (1874-1946); building's early occupants known only from Sanborns: 1921-an auto, truck, and farm implement dealer on first floor, a printing firm on second, and an office in the first floor corner; in 1926 the entire building is labeled "Store" with an office in the corner; from about 1935 until about 1990 the building was occupied by the Williamston Hardware Company, which was incorporated in 1935 by C. P. Whedbee of Williamston, W. F. Whedbee of Ahoskie, and W. G. Summers of Norfolk; Staton sold building in 1944, and in 1959 it was acquired by Irvin C. Griffin, a partner in the nearby Martin Supply Company (entry 39); his heirs retain ownership.

42. **Peel-Roanoke Chevrolet Building** 1928 C  
204-206 Washington Street

One-story brick building is typical of simply-detailed showrooms erected in 1920s; tall tile-capped parapet unites large plate glass windows surmounted by handsome multi-pane transoms of prism glass; also of note is simple recessed brick panel above transom and multi-stepped parapet on rear elevation; erected by Peel Motor Company to replace an smaller building built here between 1913 and 1921; newspaper accounts of the proposed building, which noted that the building would have a "whole front of plate glass," stated that the new building will be such that a second story could be added at a later date if desired; the Peel Motor Company was organized about 1927 by Luther Peel, S. Collins, and H. T. Roberson and sold in 1933 to the firm's bookkeeper, John Henry Edwards (1903-1971); in late 1933 he,

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places  
Continuation SheetWilliamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, North CarolinaSection number 7 Page 22

Simon Claude Griffin, Sr. (entry 39), and J. Eason Lilley incorporated the Roanoke Chevrolet Company; it remained here until moving ca. 1954 to a new facility outside of the district, where it remains in family ownership; since 1954 the old showroom has been occupied by a succession of businesses.

43. **Bowen Brothers Building** 1921-1926 C  
208-210 Washington Street

Five-sided two-story brick commercial building is simply detailed; 3-bay facade is divided into two stores by simply detailed broad brick pilasters; plain corbeled brick cornices; pair of two-over-two sash windows above #208 have segmentally-arched lintels, while single window above #210 has flat-headed metal sash; both storefronts and interiors have been modernized; Bowen Brothers, a farmer's supply company, was formed in early 1920s by James D. Bowen (1877-1966) and John M. Bowen (1879-1931); after John's death, company remained here for several years before moving across street to 317 Washington (entry 39), finally selling business to newly organized Martin Supply Company in 1940; building since maintained by heirs as rental property.

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B removed from its original location.
- C a birthplace or grave.
- D a cemetery.
- E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F a commemorative property.
- G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

COMMERCE  
COMMUNITY PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT  
ARCHITECTURE

Period of Significance

ca. 1850 to 1945

Significant Dates

ca. 1850

1882

1900

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Benton, Charles Collins

Bishop, Fred A.

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository:

\_\_\_\_\_

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Williamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, North Carolina

Section number 8 Page 2

---

Significant Dates, cont.

1901  
1922  
1928

Architect/Builder, cont.

Hartge, Charles  
U. S. Treasury  
Taylor, E. F.

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Williamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, North Carolina

Section number 8 Page 3

---

## 8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

### Summary

The Williamston Commercial Historic District is typical of downtown business sections in many nineteenth- and early-twentieth century small, rural, trading centers throughout eastern North Carolina. Such commercial districts reflect the economic, political, industrial, transportation, and commercial forces that have shaped, and continue to shape, these towns and villages. The Williamston Commercial Historic District consists of a principal avenue—Main Street—and two cross streets that are significant but subordinate in importance. While the most important structure in Williamston, the old Martin County Courthouse (1885) stands just outside of the district and was placed on the National Register in 1979 as part of a thematic nomination of the state's courthouses, the Williamston Commercial Historic District contains all of the important pre-1945 architecturally intact commercial structures in town, including both surviving antebellum commercial buildings, the town hall, and all the banks, mercantile houses, department stores, movie theatres, and attorney's offices and is being nominated under the Commerce and Community Planning and Development contexts. Williamston was first settled as a trading center along the Roanoke River in the 1730s, became the seat of newly-created Martin County in 1774, and was incorporated in 1779. During its 215-year history, the city and its residents have witnessed the rise, success, and decline of river and rail systems of transportation and profound changes in the commercial and agricultural traditions of the area. While the Williamston Commercial Historic District does contain two important antebellum offices, it primarily reflects the city's ambitious commercial re-development that was spurred by the arrival of the railroad in 1882 and the rapid expansion of peanut and tobacco culture between 1890 and 1920. A strong sense of shared community is evident in the Williamston Commercial Historic District's forty-three resources, of which thirty-one (seventy-two percent) are contributing. The district is composed primarily of two- and three-story brick buildings, many invigorated with decorative brickwork, which line Main and Washington streets. While small in area and number of resources, the district contain important examples of the Greek Revival, Italianate, Romanesque, Colonial Revival, Art Deco, Art Moderne, and International styles, a remarkable breadth of architectural fashion for such a little town. Buildings such as the ca. 1850 Docton W. Bagley Building, the 1902 (former) Bank of Martin County, the 1917 (former) People's Bank, the ca. 1917 Flatiron Building, and the 1920 Tar Heel Apartments, are indicative of the district's eligibility for nomination under the Architecture context. Although the Williamston Commercial Historic District is no longer home to large department stores and competes with nearby shopping centers, it remains largely occupied by a broad range of commercial, professional, and governmental establishments that supply

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places  
Continuation SheetWilliamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, North CarolinaSection number 8 Page 4

specialized shopping and service needs of patrons from throughout Martin County. The district's period of significance, ca. 1850 to 1944, starts with the construction date of the Docton W. Bagley Building (entry 16), the oldest commercial building in town, and includes all resources at least fifty years old.

**Historical Background and Commerce and Community Planning and Development contexts**Settlement and early history

The first English settlers of the Williamston vicinity during the 1730s recognized the importance and advantages of locating along the broad Roanoke River, building their settlement near the ruins of "Squhawky," a Tuscarora Indian village. Growth in the village, which was named Tar Landing, was slow, but was fed by an increasing flow of settlers southward and eastward from more heavily populated sections of Virginia and the Albemarle region of North Carolina. By 1774, when Martin County was created by the General Assembly, the settlement had become the section's principal shipping point for products from the forest and farm, and so was named the county seat and a courthouse erected on stilts by the river. Situated in an area prone to seasonal flooding, within several years the fledgling business section began a gradual migration westward toward and up the so called "river hill," now the 300 and 400 blocks of East Main Street. Shortly thereafter, the courthouse was relocated as well. In 1779, when the town of Williamston was established by the General Assembly, the original town boundaries did not extend to the river, suggesting that this relocation was well underway. A post office was established in 1793. By the end of the decade, with a new courthouse, a relocated business district, a post office, and a population of 248, Williamston was poised to enter the new century as the largest and most important town between Plymouth, twenty miles east near the mouth of the Roanoke River, and Tarboro, about thirty miles west (Manning and Booker 1977, 3-5, 60-61, 65, 85; 1979, 21, 163-165).

Antebellum development: 1800 to 1860

Williamston became firmly established during the first decades of the nineteenth century and the small trading town and seat of local government was little different in its struggles for prosperity and advancement than several dozen similar towns throughout the state. The livelihood of its residents was dependent on trade along the Roanoke River, which extends from what is now Roanoke, Virginia, to its mouth into the Albemarle Sound east of Plymouth. The river traversed the fertile fields and dense forests of southside Virginia and the northern coastal plain of North Carolina. Throughout the nineteenth century, it served not only as a highway for passengers, but also as the region's major artery for the shipment of farm

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places  
Continuation SheetWilliamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, North CarolinaSection number 8 Page 5

and forest products to markets along the east coast. The town wharves, while not as busy as those in the larger Roanoke River towns of Plymouth and Weldon, were competitive with other river towns such as Jamesville (incorporated 1785) and Hamilton (incorporated in 1804) for the Martin County market (Manning and Booker, 1977, 103-108, 122-131; Brazeal, et al. 1979, 9-12). The improvement of navigation on the river was a continuing concern for Williamston merchants and citizens throughout the antebellum period, and in 1812 leading citizens in counties along the river incorporated the Roanoke Navigation Company to promote and control trade along this important inland route. A period of rising prosperity for Roanoke River towns began with the completion in 1823 of a short canal around the falls at Weldon in Halifax County and the 1828 enlargement of the Dismal Swamp Canal in Camden County and Virginia. The construction of these waterways facilitated the linkage of regional farmers and merchants, via the Roanoke River and Albemarle Sound, to the Pasquotank River port of Elizabeth City and then through the canal to the bustling Virginia cities of Norfolk and Portsmouth. In addition, the increased profitability and use of steamboats ushered in a period of heightened activity along the Roanoke River, and the citizens and merchants of Williamston were determined to gain their share of the river commerce (Manning and Booker 1979, 2-3; Black 1991, 2-3; Glass 1076; Butchko 1989, 133 134, 135, 137-138).

For reasons unknown, the Roanoke Navigation Company was unable to keep up with local transportation needs and it eventually faded from sight. Its demise was probably hastened by the formation in 1832 of the Portsmouth and Weldon Railroad, which, after its completion to Weldon by December 1836, siphoned off much of the Virginia trade along the upper Roanoke River. Local shipping needs were met by several companies which operated steamboats and other vessels on the Roanoke during the remainder of the antebellum period. Chief among these was the Roanoke Steamboat Company, that was organized in 1856 and which included among its founders Asa Biggs, Joseph J. Martin, and merchant Docton W. Bagley (office, entry 16). The company quickly purchased the steamer Liberty and began construction of a wharf in Williamston below the county wharf, along with all necessary "houses and sheds," and began to improve the road from the wharf to "high ground" (Manning and Booker, Vol. 2, 7). Unfortunately, the Liberty burned while docked in Plymouth in April 1857, ending the company's promising but brief presence on the Roanoke River. Two months after the fire, the Roanoke Steam Navigation Company was organized in Plymouth with merchant and preacher Cushing B. Hassell, merchant Docton W. Bagley (office, entry 16), and farmer F. W. Moore, all of Williamston; and Hamilton merchant L. L. Clements among those elected directors. Though the company's steamer John Styles operated at a remarkable profit at first, long term success was not forthcoming. Both the company, which reorganized in 1859, and the steamer fade from the records after the start of the Civil War (Manning and Booker 1979, 3-11).

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places  
Continuation SheetWilliamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, North CarolinaSection number 8 Page 6

Overland travel during the early nineteenth century and antebellum period was laborious, and the stage coach route from Williamston to Tarboro was the first to be improved in the area, this not taking place until the 1830s. Proposals to connect Williamston to the Bertie County seat of Windsor by means of crossing the swamps on the east side of the Roanoke River were unsuccessful, the Williamston and Windsor Turnpike Road in 1833 and another turnpike in 1848. The Roanoke River that separated Williamston from its Bertie neighbors would not be spanned by a bridge until 1922. An 1852 attempt to build a plank road between Jamesville and Tarboro, had it been successful, would have surely connected Williamston to those two towns. But it was not to be, and Williamston continued to rely on the Roanoke River for the majority of its transportation needs (Manning and Booker 1979, 22-23).

Williamston's status as the seat of county government brought it both prestige and activity. As county residents came to town to record legal documents, attend court in various capacities, partake in elections and military musters, and take part in a variety of political, social, and educational functions, Williamston merchants met their needs for accommodations and supplies (Manning and Booker, Vol. 1, 64, 72). Among the town's earliest general merchants were Reuben Ross and Joseph Biggs, both of whom started in the first decade of the nineteenth century. Ross did not meet with success, and left Williamston after several years. Biggs (d. 1844) operated a store until his death, being joined in the 1820s by his son Joseph D. Biggs. Docton W. Bagley (1801-1878), whose store stands at 107 East Main Street (entry 16), and Cushing Biggs Hassell (1809-1880), were two of the most successful merchants in town after the 1830s. The latter's diary provides a detailed look into a mercantile career that dealt with not only traditional household and farm goods, but naval stores and even included brief investments in a turpentine distillery and silk production; the latter was a failure costing him at least \$500. Like many general merchants of his day, Hassell made trips north to acquire merchandise, with the results of one such trip trumpeted by a local advertisement "C. B. HASSELL'S Goods Have Arrived! / HAVE ARRIVED!! / HAVE ARRIVED!! / Come one, Come All! / He'd like to have you Call" (Williamston Mercury, May 18, 1859). (Hassell's residence, the city's grandest Greek Revival structure, originally stood in the district at what is now 138-148 West Main Street (entries 10, 11, and 12); it was moved ca. 1925 to the rear of its lot and turned around to face West Church Street, where it remains today.) Joshua F. Pinner opened a general store at the northeast corner of Main and Smithwick streets about 1840 and built up a successful business, advertising extensively in the local papers. He sold the business in 1857 to his partner William Henry Carstarphen (ca. 1820-1894), a native of Nansemond County (now Suffolk), Virginia who had joined Pinner in the early 1850s; the Carstarphen family operated the store until 1930 (Manning and Booker 1979, 175-184; Democratic Banner, especially Oct 16, 1856, and Williamston Mercury).

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places  
Continuation SheetWilliamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, North CarolinaSection number 8 Page 7

The 1850 Census provides the earliest thorough documentation of Williamston's commercial and business activity. Among the population of 268--an increase of just twenty over fifty years-- there were seven merchants, five lawyers, and three physicians. Other residents provided the types of services that would be in demand in a small village: shoemaker, clerk (two), coach maker (two), tailor, and innkeeper. Two coopers and one millwright supplied wares for the area's limited industrial activity. The county's agrarian focus is underscored by the fact that the most prevalent occupation of Williamston residents in 1850 was that of farmer, with seventeen farm households being enumerated (1850 Martin County Census).

Ten years later, the 1860 Census indicated that the relatively prosperous agricultural economy of Martin County had had a mixed effect on Williamston. The population stood at 246, a decline of twenty-two persons in a decade, and the forty-four recorded dwellings were two less than in 1850. While the number of lawyers (five, one of whom, Asa Biggs, was a United States Judge), physicians (three), and merchants (six) were little changed from ten years earlier, the fact that Biggs and merchants Bagley and Hassell were the only members of these professions who had been in town since 1850 indicates a remarkable turnover for such a small town. One of the 1850 merchants, A. Cohn, a thirty-year-old native of Germany, signaled his intention to "leave this place" in 1857 by offering for sale his business and residence consisting of "a Store House, Ware House, Dwelling and all necessary out Houses . . . all entirely new" (Democratic Banner, May 7, 1857). A similar turnover was seen in other trades and crafts, with only shoemaker J. J. Wilson, tailor Alfred Jordan, and coachmaker Stanley Duggan having also been listed in the 1850 census. The 1860 merchants in Williamston included three seamstresses, two coachmakers, two shoemakers, and one each [black]smith, tailor, harnessmaker, miller, liquor dealer, and tavern keeper. There were also three clerks and two unspecified shopkeepers/tradesmen. The biggest occupational change during these ten years was an almost threefold decrease in the number of farmers (six) residing in town. There was also a significant decrease in the number of building tradesmen in town. In 1850 Williamston was home to five carpenters and one each brickmason, brickmaker, and cabinetmaker; ten years later there were only three carpenters. Noticeably absent are the two coopers from ten years before, suggesting the demise or relocation of whatever fishing or naval stores industries had existed before, and thus apparently leaving the town wholly without any sort of industrial output intended for trade outside of the immediate vicinity (1850 and 1860 Censuses).

Civil War and Recovery: 1860 to 1880

The Civil War effected major changes to the economy and lives of Williamston residents but, fortunately, brought little physical destruction or damage. Even though the town was of local economic and political

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places  
Continuation SheetWilliamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, North CarolinaSection number 8 Page 8

significance, its strategic value was less important than others on the Roanoke River. The end of hostilities in 1865 found Williamston businesses struggling to recover. The earliest look at the town comes from the March 17, 1866 issue of the Williamston Expositor, a newspaper begun just two weeks earlier. Local advertisements included those of physician R. S. Halsey, attorney Abner S. Williams, and merchants Alexander Jackson, Wilson G. Lamb, and the firm of Ray and Gurganus. Other advertisers were from Plymouth (1), Baltimore (3), and Norfolk (32). The number of ads from Norfolk reaffirms that city as the major trading partner of local merchants and citizens (Williamston Expositor, March 17, 1866). The next year, the first Branson's Business Directory provides a more complete listing of local business activity: three physicians, five lawyers, eight general merchants, and one each boarding house and hotel (Branson 1867-1868, 70). Subsequent Branson editions in 1869, 1872, and 1877-1878 record a gradual improvement among the professions, with five physicians and three attorneys in 1877-1878, and a marked increase in the numbers and specialization among the merchants (Branson 1869, 94-95; Branson 1872, 137-139; Branson 1877-1878, 186-188).

Transportation remained a major concern to local merchants, farmers, and residents. Like before, the most reliable route was the Roanoke River, and while documentation is limited, a number of steamers plied the river during this period, including the Orient and Sadie A. McCall, the last having been put into service on December 2, 1875 carrying freight and passengers between Williamston and Edenton via Plymouth (Manning and Booker 1979, 5, 16). On March 29, 1878 the Roanoke River Transportation Company was organized in Hamilton by firms and individuals from throughout Martin County. Shortly thereafter, the steamer Rotary was purchased to run between the county and Norfolk. Among the Williamston investors were merchants John D. Biggs (office, entry 18), Cushing Biggs Hassell, H. D. Roberson and Son, Samuel R. Biggs (store, entry 24), and Noah S. Godard. Lumberman Dennis Simmons was elected the first president. The company, which added the steamer Astoria to its fleet in October 1878, enjoyed considerable success until November 20, 1879, when their warehouse at Edwards Ferry (near the Martin-Halifax border) burned, wrecking the young company. In 1880 the company sold all its steamers and barges to the Baltimore, Norfolk, and Roanoke River Transportation Company and went out of existence (Manning and Booker 1979, 11-13).

As did the rest of eastern North Carolina following the war, Williamston leaders recognized the growing importance of the railroad and quickly sought to connect the town to an existing line. Such sentiments had been expressed in the county before, but nothing became of the Tarborough-Hamilton Railroad that had been chartered by the General Assembly in 1831. Other ventures and dreams were proposed, all coming to naught as well. Even the Williamston and Tarboro Railroad Company, which was backed by some of the leading businessmen in Martin and Edgecombe counties when it was chartered by the state in February 1861, fell victim

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places  
Continuation SheetWilliamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, North CarolinaSection number 8 Page 9

to the upheavals of Civil War, and twenty-two years elapsed before a railroad connected the seats of these neighboring counties. Among the Williamston residents appointed commissioners by the state legislature in 1861 were lawyer and federal judge Asa Biggs; merchants Docton W. Bagley (office, entry 16), Cushing Biggs Hassell, John R. Lanier, and John C. Lamb; and physician Levi Smith Yates. After the war, additional capital enabled a preliminary route to be laid out in 1868 and construction progress was rapid, particularly on the Tarboro end. However, the company soon encountered financial problems, and by May 30, 1872 had gone into bankruptcy, bringing the Williamston and Tarboro Railroad to an end. Hopes for a Williamston railroad link were revived in December 1873 with the incorporation of the Seaboard and Raleigh Railway Company. In February 1878, the railway proposed that if investors along the proposed line would buy \$50,000 in bonds, the company would find outside capital for the remaining approximately \$150,000 required. Construction on the line resumed in late 1879, but proceeded slowly until early 1882, when activity accelerated, leading to a grand opening of the railroad in the fall of 1882 (Manning and Booker 1979, 47-61).

During the late 1870s, the improving prospects of a railroad connection to Williamston proved a great impetus for the town's advancement. While the 1877-1878 Branson business directory inflates the town's population to 830, the 1880 Census records 482 residents and provides a detailed tabulation of Williamston's commercial and business areas. The town's five attorneys, two physicians, twelve merchants, sixteen store clerks, four salesmen, and two bookkeepers were kept busy supplying goods and services to residents of the town and nearby farms. A variety of tradesmen—including five carpenters, one carpenter's apprentice, two blacksmiths, two milliners, and one each shoemaker, tailor, barber, butcher, and mattress maker—provided for the material comforts and stylishness of the citizenry. Furthermore, the presence of forty-five year-old photographer John A. Duggan indicates that the town was prospering sufficiently to afford some residents the luxury of having photographic portraits and scenes made (Branson 1878-1878, 186; 1880 Census).

Industrial development during the post war period of 1865 to 1880, while still limited in number and size, reached a peak heretofore unseen in Williamston. Lumber remained the mainstay of local industry, and by 1869 Franklin Alexander Rhodes (1831-1887) had begun operation of the Rhodes and Brother steam saw mill for the manufacture of shingles in or near the town. This firm was joined in the late 1870s by the saw mill of John Watts, which in 1879-1880 employed twelve hands and manufactured 960,000 board feet of lumber worth \$7,000. Several water-powered grist mills operated near Williamston as well. The labor pool for these mills most likely came from the fifty-two persons--thirty-two black men, nine black women, and ten white men--whose occupations in 1880 were given as laborers (Branson

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places  
Continuation SheetWilliamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, North CarolinaSection number 8 Page 10

1869, 94; Branson 1872, 138; Branson 1877-1878, 188; 1880 Census, Schedules of Population and Manufactures; Manning and Booker 1979, 166-169, 190, 192).

Return to Prosperity: 1881 to 1929

The completion of the Seaboard and Raleigh Railway in October 1882 (the name being changed in 1883 to Albemarle and Raleigh Railroad, again in 1894 with its consolidation into the Wilmington and Weldon, and still again in 1900 after merger into the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad) radically changed the prospects of Williamston. Two months before completion it was reported that "Williamston has caught the mania and several buildings are in process of erection," adding, rather matter-of-factly, "with two exceptions, the first time in twenty years" (Tarboro Southerner, August 3, 1882). Oddly, there was no grand local celebration on October 17, 1882 when the first train traversed the entire route from Tarboro to Williamston. The Tarboro newspaper, in a manner that was considerably reserved, simply stated "DONE" two days later, and the confidence it expressed for the future applied to Williamston as well as Tarboro:

DONE—Tarboro and Williamston are now united by iron rails. The first train ran through Tuesday at midday. Let us rejoice. Cheap freights will no longer be a hope[;] they are a reality. Cotton will not cost more than \$1.50 per bale from this place to Norfolk. The fish and oyster country are open to us. A vast field is opened up to our merchants for a wholesale trade.

(Tarboro Southerner, October 19, 1882)

The Williamston freight warehouse and main depot were at first located at the river wharf to make easier connections with river steamers; the ticket office was located on the west side of Smithwick Street at the railroad crossing. They were later relocated to new buildings on the southeastern side of the track between what is now Haughton and Elm streets; these new buildings are shown there on the 1913 Sanborn map that was the first to cover any section of town besides Main Street. Their location southwest of the downtown area not only proved advantageous to merchants, but encouraged subsequent commercial and industrial expansion in that area. With the completion of an extension to Plymouth via Jamesville in 1889, and another extension from Parmalee through Hassell and Oak City to Weldon in 1890, all sections of Martin County were connected by rail to Williamston, enabling increasing numbers of county residents to come to the county seat on a regular basis to transact business, shop, and sell farm produce (Manning and Booker 1979, 61-87, esp. 61-70, 72, 86-87).

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places  
Continuation SheetWilliamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, North CarolinaSection number 8 Page 11

The railroad's presence and importance in Williamston, however, remained neither constant nor unchallenged. The almost fifty-year period between the arrival of the first railroad train in 1882 and the start of the Great Depression in 1929 witnessed at first the growth and then the slow decline of river transportation. The connection of Williamston by train to the fertile fields of Martin, Edgecombe, and Pitt counties brought considerable produce and freight through the town wharves for shipment to Norfolk markets and a number of steamship companies made regular scheduled stops in Williamston during this period. These companies included the Baltimore, Roanoke, and Norfolk Steamship Company (the successor of the Roanoke River Transportation Company) which made regular runs to Jamesville, Edenton, Norfolk, and Baltimore until the early 1890s, and the Roanoke and Tar River Steamboat Company, which had been incorporated in Williamston in 1891 by lumberman Dennis Simmons, his nephew Daniel D. Simmons, and T. H. Tilghman of Grimesland (Pitt County). It operated at least until the second decade of the twentieth century. The Norfolk Southern Railroad Company operated a succession of steamers on the river from about 1880 until 1917. And lastly, the Norfolk, Baltimore, and Carolina Boat Line out of Norfolk began twice-weekly service in 1923 between eastern North Carolina ports and Norfolk, Baltimore, and Philadelphia until World War II (Branson 1884, 439; 1890, 428; 1896, 399; Manning and Booker 1979, 18-19, 189-190; Incorporation Book 1, p. 3; News and Observer 1905, 376; 1910, 304; 1915, 302)

Gradual improvement was made to the roads and paths that connected Williamston merchants to the outlying sections of Martin County during the late nineteenth century. Major improvement, however, did not come about until the early twentieth century when the increasing popularity of the automobile made passable roads and bridges necessary. In 1911 the town's residents joined others in Williamston Township to become the first township in the county to vote for a bond issue for road improvement. Although the town commissioners issued \$25,000 in bonds for street improvements in 1919, it was not until the end of 1923 that Main, Washington, and Haughton streets—the heart of the commercial district—were graded and paved. In the interim, the newspaper had occasion to sarcastically relate the rescue of a sow from Main Street in front of the Atlantic Hotel (entry 34): "Life in a small town is just one funny thing after another, and while some 'get in the swim at the big mill,' others can only make it to a mud wallow in the middle of the street" (Manning and Booker 1979, 23-25; Manning and Booker 1977, 94).

The major road achievement of the early twentieth century was the completion and opening in September 1922 of the long-desired bridge spanning the Roanoke River at Williamston. This was the first bridge to ever cross the river there and provided quick and efficient travel between Martin and Bertie counties, neighbors which had heretofore been separated by the river. While the residents of Williamston and Windsor, the Bertie County seat, were not strangers to each other, commercial and social

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places  
Continuation SheetSection number 8 Page 12Williamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, North Carolina

interaction had been severely limited by the river and its broad swamps. Work on the bridge began in 1919 by the Boyle-Roberson Construction Company of Washington, D. C. and when completed at a cost of \$330,000, it was the biggest job undertaken to date by the State Highway Commission (The Enterprise, August 24, 29, September 5, 8, November 24, 1922). The economic importance of the bridge was illustrated six weeks after its opening when the newspaper noted that "Much cotton, as well as other farm crops" were coming into the town from Bertie County (The Enterprise, October 13, 1922).

In 1928 a controversy swirled in Williamston regarding the proposed opening of two new cross streets in the commercial district, one leading northwesterly from Main Street and the other southeasterly. Though neither were ever built, the issue caused the newspaper to underscore the importance of good streets to the town's economic future:

## New Streets Badly Needed

The trend of every age has been to widen and build more streets, because it has been discovered that the life of trade depends upon the opportunities of the people to reach the trading places. . . .

. . . [but today we] find that people can't come to town because there is no place for their cars. In the old days, the horses were carried to the back lots and tied. Now the horses and back lots are both gone, and there is no place to put the automobiles except in the street.

It is therefore, up to the town to do two things; furnish streets to drive in and furnish streets to park in. No town has a right to invite a neighbor to trade with it without furnishing him a place to put his car while in town. A convenient and safe place for a gentleman and lady to park while trading is a part of the stock in trade of any town.

The Enterprise, April 20, 1928

The rising dominance of local travel by the automobile in Williamston and Martin County is illustrated by the formation of automobile dealerships and the decline of the railroad. When the S. R. Biggs Iron and Motor Company was incorporated in 1913 as the county's first automobile dealership, it included among its purposes not only the buying, selling, and repair of automobiles, but the manufacture of harrows, carts, and wagons. Dealerships that opened in Williamston during the 1910s and 1920s included not only Buick (S. R. Biggs in 1913), Ford (Martin County Agency, J. W. Green in 1914) and Chevrolet (Peel Motor Company in 1927), but also Metz (Herbert D. Peele ca. 1915), Overland (Dr. H. B. York in 1916), and

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places  
Continuation SheetWilliamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, North CarolinaSection number 8 Page 13

Star and Durrant (W. L. Stalls ca. 1924). Several early dealership buildings survive, most notably the handsome ca. 1919 York Building (entry 38) and the 1928 Peel-Roanoke Chevrolet Building (entry 42). In addition, in 1926 there were at least seven filling and repair stations in town, none of which survive today (Manning and Booker 1979, 36-37; Incorporation Book 1, 212; 2, 142; Sanborn maps 1913, 1921, 1926). In the late 1920s a proposal by the Atlantic Coast Line to discontinue two of the passenger trains connecting the town to Plymouth and Tarboro met spirited, but unsuccessful, opposition. Not even a counterproposal to continue service until Highway 90, now US 64, was completed could forestall the railroad's decision (The Enterprise, January 13, February 21, 24, 28, March 2, 1928). The announcement in December 1927 of a new bus line to Norfolk was further indication of the growing importance of the motor car and bus for passenger transportation (The Enterprise December 20, 1927).

Perhaps the most far-reaching modification in the life of Williamston and Martin County during the late nineteenth century occurred in agriculture, the lifeblood of the county since settlement. The introduction of peanuts and tobacco into the county occurred during the 1880s and 1890s, respectively, and their almost immediate success challenged and eventually surpassed cotton and corn as the primary crops of the area. In 1928, Martin was the only county in the state to claim three million-dollar crops, being ranked second in peanuts, seventh in tobacco, and thirty-fourth in cotton (Manning and Booker 1997, 98, 109, 112; The Enterprise April 20, 1928). Exactly when the first cotton gin was erected in Williamston is uncertain. In 1902 the Williamston Ginning and Milling Company was incorporated by William J. Whitaker, William H. Harrell, and James Grist Staton (entries 8, 14, and 41) and dissolved in 1910, after which it continued as the J. G. Staton Cotton Gin until after 1926 (Branson 1884, 438; 1890, 428; Sanborn maps, 1913, 1921, 1926; Incorporation Book 1, p. 63, 170; Manning and Booker 1979, 108-109). Peanut cultivation did not become widespread until the first decade of the twentieth century when mechanical pickers came into general use. The Virginia-Carolina Peanut Company, incorporated in 1907 by banker Joseph G. Godard (bank, entry 21), cotton gin owner James G. Staton (entries 8, 14, and 41), and merchant Eli Gurganus, among others, erected the county's first cleaning, storage, and marketing facility, but this mill was destroyed by fire in 1912. In 1915 the Roanoke Pea Nut [sic] Company was incorporated and a four-story building was erected on Reese Street; it burned during its first year of operation. It was not until the Columbian Peanut Company completed a modern peanut mill in 1930 that a permanent facility operated in town; it was renamed the Williamston Peanut Company in 1940 and continues in operation today (Manning and Booker 1979, 98-106; Incorporation Book 1, 133, 227; Book 2, 31; The Enterprise, October 18, 1907).

It was flue-cured tobacco, the "golden weed," which made the most profound change on the economy of Williamston and Martin County. Tobacco, though a cash crop during the colonial period, was absent in the Martin

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Williamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, North Carolina

Section number 8 Page 14

---

County landscape until the 1890s. In 1900, the census report of 1,996 acres being raised the previous year heralded the start of a revolution in the county's agrarian traditions, and within thirty years tobacco acreage surpassed that of cotton and peanuts. During the early decades, eager local farmers encouraged experienced tobacco men from the established tobacco belt in the piedmont counties along the North Carolina Virginia border to relocate in Martin County. Chief among these was Roger Samuel Critcher (1856-1957), who came to Williamston from his native Granville County in 1898 at the request of James Grist Staton. Other tobacconists from older tobacco areas were William Thomas Meadows (1865-1936), who migrated from Granville County about 1903, and James Edwin King (1895-1953), who arrived in Williamston from Caswell County in the late 1920s (Manning and Booker 1979, 111-112, 114-116, 121-122; Critcher 1980, 154).

The establishment of tobacco auction houses made Williamston a center of the expanding tobacco industry in eastern North Carolina. The first was the Martin County Tobacco Warehouse Company, incorporated in 1901 by merchants Noah Staton Peel (store, entry 6), Eli Gurganus, Slade Anderson (store, entry 6), and George W. and Marion O. Blount (store, entry 3); banker Joseph H. Godard (bank, entry 21), and lumberman Dennis S. Biggs. The Martin County Tobacco Company had two 80'-by-180' frame warehouses, the Roanoke and the Dixie, erected near the railroad at the intersection of Washington and Haughton Streets (just outside of the Williamston Commercial Historic District) in time for the opening of the first local tobacco sale on August 6, 1902. Three years later, in 1905, the Farmer's Warehouse was begun by Gurganus, Godard, and Staton. During the 1910s and 1920s, additional warehouse companies formed, expanding Williamston's ability to market ever greater quantities of flue-cured tobacco: Brick Warehouse Company in 1917, the Roanoke Tobacco Warehouse Company in 1918, the New Brick Warehouse in 1928, and the Martin County Warehouse Company in 1929 (Incorporation Book 1, pp. 41, 24, 262; Book 2, pp. 5, 150, 165). Commodious frame, and later brick, warehouses made the Haughton Street vicinity hum with activity during the late summer-autumn auction season. Only one, the 1930 Planters Warehouse on South Haughton Street, remains today (Manning and Booker 1979, 121-126; Sanborn maps 1931, 1921, 1926).

Other farm-related industries were established in Williamston during the early twentieth century. These included a prize house, or prizery, in 1902 by the American Tobacco Company to grade, stem, moisten, redry, and then pack the tobacco for shipment to domestic and foreign markets. A steam redrying plant was built the next year by Meadows and Staton, was replaced by a larger facility built for F. W. Graves and Company, and considerably enlarged and modernized after 1925 by W. I. Skinner and Company of Greenville (Manning and Booker 1979, 128-129; Sanborn maps 1913, 1921, 1926). J. L. Woolard and Son enjoyed success in the manufacturer of tobacco flues, wagons, and cultivators for a brief period between ca. 1907 and 1913. Woolard's factory, located in what is now the parking lot behind

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Williamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, North Carolina

Section number 8 Page 15

---

the R and C Cafe (entry 37) on Washington Street, was occupied by 1913 by S. R. Biggs Iron and Motor Company, which was incorporated that year to manufacture and sell tobacco flues in addition to a variety of farm implements and wagons (Manning and Booker 1979, 128-129; Sanborn maps 1913, 1921, 1926; Incorporation Book 1, p. 212). The largest farm-related industry in Williamston was the Standard Fertilizer Company, incorporated in July 1927 by Baltimore interests. A large plant was in operation along the river by December and business was so quick that the factory was enlarged within a year (Incorporation Book 2, 130; The Enterprise, January 3, 6, 9; April 20).

Changes in transportation, agriculture, and industry brought to Williamston a variety of new commercial and mercantile establishments that catered not only to the town's growing population but the ever widening sphere of farmers, traders, and shoppers attracted to the bustling little town. General stores, the mercantile mainstay of the nineteenth century, continued into the new century, led by such stalwart firms as Blount and Brother (entry 3), organized in 1895 by George W. and Marion O. Blount of Pitt County; Anderson, Crawford and Company (entry 6), which started in mid 1890s as J. W. Anderson and Brother and later also became cotton brokers and grain dealers; and Harrison Brothers and Company (entries 9 and 29), begun in 1901 by Martin County natives Thaddeus F. and Lovette B. Harrison (Branson 1896, 399). Gradually, these general stores gave way to establishments that specialized in single lines: drugs were supplied by Clark's Drug Store (entry 12); ready-made clothing was found at Margolis Brothers (entry 25); jewelry was purchased from Herbert D. Peele (entry 19) and his son Edwin Peele (entry 27); shoes were fitted at Otto Willard's Shoe Store (entry 22); and furniture could be acquired at Van Dyke Furniture Company (entry 33). Department stores, a new concept for Williamston in the 1920s, were up-to-date versions of the old general store that became popular with the construction of large commercial buildings such as the Tar Heel Apartments (entry 14), a three-story commercial building erected for James Grist Staton that has always been known by the name of the apartments on the upper floors. Occupants of the first floor commercial spaces included Nassef's Department Store, and Belk-Tyler, the latter from 1937 until 1952. Dime stores were a fixture of downtowns throughout the nation during the early- and mid-twentieth century, including O. C. Miller's Dollar Store (entry 14), Eagles 5 and 10 (entry 34), and Roses 5 and 10 (entries 28 and 31).

Further commercial growth was evident during the 1910s when the construction of handsome brick buildings and stores began along Washington Street in an expansion of the older West Main Street commercial district. Washington Street served to link the established commercial district to the tobacco warehouses, cotton gins, and related industries clustered along South Haughton Street near the railroad. It became a center for general supply and mercantile stores that catered to farmers, such as Martin Supply Company (entry 39) and Bowen Brothers (entry 43), both erected between 1921

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Williamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, North Carolina

Section number 8 Page 16

---

and 1926, and the Farmer's Supply Company (entry 40), established in 1924 at 211 Washington Street (entry 37) and building their new structure in 1934. A farm implement dealer was located in 1921 in the Flatiron Building (entry 41), which had been erected ca. 1917 by entrepreneur and industrialist James Grist Staton. Furthermore, Washington Street served as an entrance into the town's heart for businessmen and other travelers disembarking at the railroad's passenger station. Thus, Mr. Hadley, the proprietor of the Atlantic Hotel (entry 34), made a wise choice when he selected the intersection of Main and Washington streets as the site of his new hotel during the first decade of the twentieth century. And it was not surprising that Staton, who did more than perhaps anyone else in transforming Williamston into a thriving twentieth-century trading and farm center, in 1920 chose a site at the same intersection for his crowning commercial building, the Tar Heel Apartments (entry 14) (Sanborn maps 1896, 1901, 1913, 1921, 1926).

The establishment of financial institutions during the early part of the new century enabled Williamston residents to invest their earnings locally. The first was the Bank of Martin County, opened as a private bank in 1900 by wealthy farmer and merchant Joseph G. Godard in a handsome building erected at 101-103-105 East Main Street (entry 21); when it reorganized in 1917 as the Martin County Savings and Trust Company, Godard was joined by merchants John D. Biggs (entry 18), R. S. Harrison, and John E. Pope as stockholders (Incorporation Book 1, p. 244). Other banks followed, with the Farmers and Merchants Bank (1905) and The Peoples Bank (1917) each erecting handsome facilities on Main Street (entries 32 and 8, respectively) (Incorporation Book 1, pp. 91, 96, 167, 248). The financial upheaval of the early 1920s forced the relatively new Farmers Bank to close on June 29, 1922, and the Martin County Savings and Trust Company followed on February 28, 1925, both after days of heavy withdrawals (Manning and Booker 1979, 310-313; The Enterprise, June 30, 1922). In 1930 the Farmers and Merchants Bank (entry 32) was acquired by the Branch Banking and Trust Company of Wilson and, under new name, remained the only bank in Williamston throughout the Depression. A new building (entry 10) was constructed in 1941 nearly across the street from the old bank, and the bank maintained an office there until 1992.

Downtown Williamston was the location for many professional offices. Because of its proximity to the County Courthouse, City Hall (entry 2), and business and industrial concerns, it was especially suited for attorneys. While the locations of law offices prior to the 1890s cannot be stated with accuracy, most local attorneys most likely maintained offices in or near downtown. The office erected about 1908 for Wheeler Martin, Sr. (entry 1) was advantageously located adjacent to the recently-completed City Hall, while the former bank building (entry 21) shared by attorneys Robert L. Coburn, Burrous A. Critcher, Sr., and Elbert S. Peel, Sr. was situated nearby. Physicians also chose downtown locations for their offices. Thus when Dr. E. T. Walker built his modern medical facility ca. 1941 (entry

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places  
Continuation SheetSection number 8 Page 17Williamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, North Carolina

35), its location 150 feet southeast of Main Street proved advantageous. Earlier, Dr. Joseph Hubbard Saunders (d. 1939) had been a longtime occupant of the Docton W. Bagley Building (entry 16). Furthermore, leading physicians such as Dr. James Slade Rhodes, Sr. (1881-1954) maintained practices in downtown buildings which are not included in the district because of alteration or demolition.

A significant addition to the commercial appeal of downtown Williamston was the location of theatres and entertainment houses. While the time and site of the first hall, or opera house in town is unknown, a Masonic lodge had been founded by 1826 and most likely was the setting, along with the county courthouse, for the various traveling shows and lectures which passed through town; both structures were outside of the district, as was the "Lodge Rm" in the second story of the Pinner-Carstarphen Store (demolished 1930) at the northeast corner of Main and Smithwick streets. With the completion in 1908 of an impressive City Hall (burned 1958) on the site of the present municipal building (entry 2), Williamston had its first known opera house upstairs (Manning and Booker 1977, 232; Sanborn maps 1896, 1901). When moving pictures were introduced into town in 1908 at the Masonic Hall, the newspaper advised an apparently skeptical public that the scheduled film was "Strictly moral and refined but teeming with instructive amusement and bubbling over with pure, wholesome, innocent mirth. . . . The sorrows and joys of life portrayed with truth, fidelity and startling exactness" (The Enterprise, January 24, 1908). Moving pictures were also shown in the City Hall opera house, which became known as the Strand Theatre (Sanborn maps 1913, 1921, 1926; Skewarkian 1985, 40-43). With the construction in 1928 of the Watts Theatre (entry 11), Martin County had its first modern moving picture house. The 700-seat facility, "modern in every respect," opened on January 6, 1929 with King Cowboy starring Tom Mix (The Enterprise, March 3, May 1, 25, 1928). A modern facility such as the Watts was just what town and county residents would need during the coming decade as they, like the nation, used moving pictures to temporarily escape a shattered economy and the specter of war.

Depression and World War: 1930 to 1945

During the Depression and World War II, downtown continued as the political and commercial center of Williamston and much of Martin County. New construction was limited by economic realities, with buildings such as the ca. 1934 Van Dyke Furniture Company (entry 33) and the aforementioned 1934 Farmer's Supply Company (entry 40), 1941 (former) Branch Banking and Trust Company Building (entry 10), and ca. 1941 Dr. E. T. Walker Office (entry 35) adding to the mercantile and professional services offered to the public. In addition, the 1895 (former) Roanoke/Britt Hotel (entry 3) was renovated during the mid- or late-1930s. In 1940, the Watts Theatre (entry 11) was modernized with an Art Deco facade, and soon thereafter the (former) Farmer's and Merchants Bank (entry 32) was considerably remodeled

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Williamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, North Carolina

Section number 8 Page 18

---

into the VICCAR Theatre. Thus, downtown Williamston had the only movie theatres in the county, and these two buildings, located across West Main Street from each other, became a magnet for the county's citizens, especially the teenagers, who associated downtown Williamston as a mecca for entertainment and activity (Skewarkian 1985, 20-21). A new United States Post Office (entry 15) was constructed at the district's eastern end with the assistance of the Works Progress Administration, providing the primary local representative of the federal government with a modern facility conveniently located between the City Hall and County Courthouse.

## Downtown Williamston after 1945

Since 1945, the Williamston Commercial Historic District has maintained its position as the city's primary concentration of commercial, professional, and governmental activities. Agriculture remains the economic focus, although its direct impact within the district was lessened during the early 1960s when, in the period of just three years between 1959 and 1961, all of the tobacco warehouse companies in the historic tobacco center just southwest of the district relocated to modern facilities along US 64. Yet, farm supply companies such as Martin Supply and Farmer's, now Griffin's Farmer, Supply (entries 39 and 40, respectively) continue in operation along Washington Street. Even though the last bank left the district in 1992, two large bank buildings have been constructed just west of the district since the 1970s that provide strong stability to the downtown area. Both major bank buildings within the district, the (former) People's Bank (entry 8) and the nearby (former) Branch Banking and Trust Company Building (entry 10), were renovated into professional offices after being vacated in 1969 and 1992, respectively. Fires have been especially damaging to the district since the 1950s, destroying three buildings (entries 2, 30, and 31), with the first two being replaced with modern structures and the latter extensively remodeled. The most significant of these is the 1960-1961 Williamston City Hall and Fire Station (entry 106), an impressive Art Moderne building whose three-story tower serves as a local visual landmark. Despite the construction in the early 1990s of a large shopping center on the US 64-Bypass that contains major department and discount stores such as Belks and Wal-Mart, the buildings of the Williamston Commercial Historic District remains more than eighty-percent occupied by businesses that continue to attract shoppers and clients into downtown Williamston.

## Architectural Context

The buildings in the Williamston Commercial Historic District represent the broad range of architectural fashion typical of commercial buildings in eastern North Carolina during the mid- and late-nineteenth century and the early-twentieth century. Whether of modest size and simple

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Williamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, North Carolina

Section number 8 Page 19

---

decoration or of imposing nature, these resources reflect the building traditions and styles of their day in addition to the economic stature of their owners. The architectural character of downtown Williamston was in all likelihood little different from that of neighboring cities of comparable size during much of its period of growth during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. What distinguishes Williamston is that, after a period of robust expansion from the 1880s until World War II, the city and its commercial district has grown very little. Because growth was largely directed to outlying streets and highways, developmental pressures did not result in the demolition of historic buildings in order to erect larger modern ones; the 1950 Manning Building (entry 17) is the major exception. In addition, the availability of adequate parking areas behind the buildings on both sides of Main Street lessened the need to demolish buildings in order to provide parking. Thus, unlike most comparable cities in eastern North Carolina, Williamston's Commercial Historic District is largely uncompromised by intrusive parking lots or new construction; the three local examples of the latter are the results of fires in 1958, 1978, and 1981.

Of particular importance and number are buildings on which the primary decoration of the facade is supplied by corbeled brickwork in the form of raised panels, dentils, headers set on diagonal, and rows of imaginative "icicle" pendants. Early examples include the one-story ca. 1879 Biggs Drug Store (entry 24) and the two-story ca. 1902 Harrison Brothers and Company Building #1 (entry 9), the latter being perhaps the most decorative and intact local example of this genre. Later twentieth century examples of simple brick commercial buildings, such as the 1928 Peel-Roanoke Chevrolet Building (entry 42), the ca. 1929 Clark's Drug Store (entry 12), and the 1934 Farmer's Supply Company Building (entry 40), are enlivened by panels of subtle brickwork outlined with brick headers. Such simply detailed late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century brick structures are the most prevalent commercial building type in small towns throughout eastern North Carolina, and Williamston's twenty examples (almost two-thirds of the total contributing resources) represent as broad a range of decorative brickwork as one will find.

The only antebellum buildings, the ca. 1850 Docton W. Bagley Building and Biggs Office (entries 16 and 18, respectively), are important regional examples of modest commercial structures erected in wood. Together, the two gable-front buildings provide a rare look at frame commercial buildings before the Civil War. They are among less than a dozen such buildings known to survive in eastern North Carolina, and are doubly significant because of their proximity to each other and that each remains in commercial use on its original site, criteria that few, if any, of the other known examples meet.

Other buildings erected during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century reflect the progression of architectural styles seen throughout the state: Italianate, Romanesque, Colonial Revival, Art Deco, Art Moderne, and

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Williamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, North Carolina

Section number 8 Page 20

---

International. Victorian and Romanesque buildings are characterized by the utilization of corbeled brickwork to supply the majority of the decoration. The most visually prominent buildings are those erected in the Colonial Revival style, with two, the stone-veneered 1917 (former) People's Bank (entry 8) and the 1920 Tar Heel Apartments (entry 14), being as elegantly composed as any building of their size and period in the region. Though now altered, the nearby 1917 Harrison Brothers and Company Building #2 (entry 29) was originally equally grand in its design, and the three buildings imparted a measure of stylishness to downtown Williamston that placed it on an architectural equality with neighboring towns and cities.

When an economic recovery of the area's principal agricultural crops enabled some Williamston businesses to build larger and more modern facilities during the mid- and late-1930s, owners selected designs from the currently fashionable Art Deco, Art Moderne, and International styles rather than reverting to traditional or time-honored Colonial Revival forms. Thus, the visual character of downtown Williamston is considerably enlivened by distinguished, if modestly-scaled, buildings such as the ca. 1934 Art Deco Van Dyke Furniture Company Building (entry 33), the sophisticated 1941 Art Moderne (former) Branch Banking and Trust Company Building (entry 10), and the distinctive ca. 1941 International style Dr. E. T. Walker Office (entry 35). Additionally, two significant buildings, the 1895 (former) Roanoke/Britt Hotel (entry 3) and the 1929 Watts Theatre (entry 11) were remodeled during this brief period of architectural activity into the Art Deco style. While many small cities in eastern North Carolina may have one or two representatives of these styles, it is indeed unusual for Williamston to have five significant examples. These buildings of "modern" design account for almost one-sixth of the total of contributing resources in the district, an unusually high proportion for North Carolina. Furthermore, the impressively-scaled and detailed 1960-1961 Art Moderne Williamston City Hall and Fire Station (entry 2) is noncontributing in status only because it falls outside of the fifty-year-threshold of eligibility.

The architects and builders of few buildings in the district are known. Chief among these is architect Charles Collins Benton (1887-1960) of Wilson, who during a long and distinguished career produced designs for hundreds of buildings throughout eastern North Carolina. He was best known for his affinity to the Colonial Revival style, as exhibited by masterful designs of the 1917 (former) People's Bank (entry 8), the 1920 Tar Heel Apartments (entry 14), and the now-altered 1917 Harrison Brothers and Company Building #2 (entry 29). His expertise was not limited to that style, as illustrated by exuberant Art Moderne designs for the Williamston City Hall and Fire Station (entry 2) and the (former) Branch Banking and Trust Company Building (entry 10), the latter being attributed to him. Benton also designed a number of Williamston residences, including several for downtown merchants, and the impressive 1916 Church of the Advent Episcopal Church. Benton's collection of attributed designs in Williamston

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Williamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, North Carolina

Section number 8 Page 21

---

is succeeded in number and importance only by those in his hometown and in nearby Greenville and Rocky Mount, all cities of much larger size. The imput of only one other architect in the district is known, that of Fred A. Bishop of Richmond, Virginia, who designed the Watts Theatre in 1928 (entry 11). Bishop was a well-known theatre architect in Virginia, and the local newspaper noted that "the architect has just completed plans for a \$400,000 theatre [probably the Byrd] in Richmond, and his experience in that field assures the town an up-to-date theatre" (The Enterprise, May 1, 1928). He is probably best known in eastern North Carolina for his design of the Wilson County Courthouse in 1924. It is likely, but not proven, that Charles Hartge of Raleigh supplied the plans for the Wheeler Martin, Sr. Law Office (entry 1). He had designed the adjacent 1907-1908 Williamston City Hall (burned 1958) and the two Romanesque Revival buildings shared similar attributes, particularly the trio of arches that dominated the facade of each and the reliance on boldly-scaled classical ornament. The only contractor known to have worked in the district is E. F. Taylor of Goldsboro, who built Watts Theatre (entry 11) in 1928-29.

Williamston shares with with many towns and cities in eastern North Carolina an architectural heritage in which modestly-decorated brick buildings are interspersed with large structures erected in the popular styles. The Williamston Commercial Historic District has resisted the desire for widespread modernizations during the late twentieth century in an attempt to compete with outlying shopping centers. Because of this high level of architectural integrity, the district is an exceptional illustration of the growth and evolution of building forms and styles that occurred throughout the region in the period between the Civil War and the end of World War II.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Williamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, North Carolina

Section number 9 Page 1

---

9. Major Bibliographical References

- Black, Allison H. "The Historic Resources of Weldon, North Carolina." Raleigh: Survey and Planning Branch, N. C. Division of Archives and History, 1991.
- Branson, Rev. Levi, ed. The North Carolina Business Directory, Raleigh: L. Branson, Publisher, 1872, 1878.
- Branson, Levi, ed. Branson's North Carolina Business Directory. Raleigh: Levi Branson, Publisher, 1867-68, 1869, 1884, 1890, 1896, 1897.
- Brazeal, Ceilia Stokes, Joe Mobley, David W. Parham, Mary M. Shoemaker, and H. McKelden Smith, III. The Historic Architecture of Hamilton, North Carolina. Hamilton, N. C.: The Historic Hamilton Commission, Inc., 1979.
- Butchko, Thomas R. On The Shores Of The Pasquotank: The Architectural Heritage of Elizabeth City and Pasquotank County, North Carolina. Elizabeth City, N. C.: The Museum of the Albemarle, 1989.
- Cheney, John L., Jr., ed. North Carolina Government, 1585-1979. Raleigh: North Carolina Department of the Secretary of State, 1981.
- Critcher, Morton. "Critcher Beginnings" in Martin County Heritage. Williamston, N. C.: The Martin County Historical Society, 1980.
- Democratic Banner. Williamston, N. C.: May 7, September 4, 11, October 16, 23, 1856.
- Glass, Brent. "Nomination to the National Register of Historic Places for the Roanoke Canal." Raleigh: North Carolina Division of Archives and History, 1976.
- Manning, Francis M. and Booker, W. H. Martin County History-Volume 1. Williamston, N. C.: Enterprise Publishing Company, 1977.
- Martin County History-Volume 2. Williamston, N. C.: Enterprise Publishing Company, 1979.
- Religion and Education in Martin County, 1774-1974. Williamston, N. C.: Enterprise Publishing Company, 1974.
- Martin County Historical Society. Martin County Heritage. Williamston, N. C.: The Martin County Historical Society, 1980.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Williamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, North Carolina

Section number 9 Page 2

---

Martin County Record of Deeds. Williamston, N. C.: Martin County Office of the Register of Deeds, Martin County Courthouse.

Martin County Incorporation Records. Williamston, N. C.: Martin County Office of the Register of Deeds, Martin County Courthouse.

News and Observer. The North Carolina Yearbook and Business Directory. Raleigh: The News and Observer, 1905, 1910, 1915, 1922, 1925.

"Sanborn Maps for Williamston, N. C." New York: Sanborn-Perris Map Company, 1896, 1901.

"Sanborn Maps for Williamston, N. C." New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1913, 1921, 1926.

Skewarkian Junior Historian Club. Main Street Williamston. Williamston, N. C.: Williamston Junior High School, 1985.

Tarboro Southerner. Tarboro, N. C., August 3, October 19, 26, 1882.  
United States Census of Martin County, 1850, 1860, 1880.

Williamston Mercury. Williamston, N. C. , April 5, 20, 27, May 11, 18, June 15, July 16, 20, 1859.

Williamston Commercial Historic District  
Name of Property

Martin County, NC  
County and State

**10. Geographical Data**

Acreage of Property approx. 11.5 acres

**UTM References**

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1	18	3114200	3969600
Zone	Easting	Northing	
2	18	3114460	3969880

3	18	3114540	3969580
Zone	Easting	Northing	
4	18	3114260	3969320

See continuation sheet

**Verbal Boundary Description**

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

**Boundary Justification**

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

**11. Form Prepared By**

name/title Tom Butchko, Consulting Architectural Historian

organization \_\_\_\_\_ date September 30, 1994

street & number Post Office Box 206 telephone (919) 335-7916

city or town Elizabeth City state NC zip code 27907-0206

**Additional Documentation**

Submit the following items with the completed form:

**Continuation Sheets**

**Maps**

A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A Sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

**Photographs**

Representative black and white photographs of the property.

**Additional items**

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

**Property Owner**

(Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.)

name \_\_\_\_\_

street & number \_\_\_\_\_ telephone \_\_\_\_\_

city or town \_\_\_\_\_ state \_\_\_\_\_ zip code \_\_\_\_\_

**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37137, Washington, DC 20513.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**

Williamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, North Carolina

Section number 10 Page 2

---

**Verbal Bounday Description**

The boundaries of the Williamston Commercial Historic District are delineated by the heavy line on the accompanying 1 inch=100 feet-scale map labeled Exhibit A.

**Boundary Justification**

The boundaries of the Williamston Commercial Historic District were drawn to encompass the largest concentration of resources in the downtown area that date from ca. 1850 to 1945 and retain integrity of form, materials, setting, feeling, and association.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Williamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, North Carolina

Section number photo Page 1

---

Photograph Identification

Williamston Commercial Historic District  
Information applies to all photographs.

Photographer: Thomas R. Butchko, October 1994

Original negative at: State Historic Preservation Office  
Survey and Planning Branch

1. West Main Street, northwest side looking west; with buildings, from right to left, being numbers 8, 9, 10, 11, (12 and 13 behind trees) and 14 at far left.
2. West Main Street, northwest side looking west; with buildings, from right to left, being numbers 1, 2, 3, and 4; building 19 is the tall structure in shadow on far left.
3. West Main Street, southeast side looking east; with buildings, from right to left, being numbers 18, 17, 16, and 15; the house and church at the far left are not in the district.
4. West Main Street, northwest side looking west; with buildings, from right to left, being numbers 3, 4, (5 and 6 behind trees), 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 14 (three-story) at end of street.
5. West Main Street, southeast side looking east; with buildings, from right to left, being numbers 25, 24, 23, 22, 21, and 19 (three-story) at far left.
6. West Main Street, looking east; with buildings, on left (northwest) side of street, from left to right, being numbers 14, 13, 12, 11, 10, and 9 (building on far left is not in district), and on right (southeast) side of street at intersection with Washington street, being number 34.
7. Washington Street, west side looking northwest; with buildings, on left (west) side of street, from left to right, being numbers 43 and 42; and on right (east) side of street (in shadow), from right to left, being numbers 37 ("Restaurant" sign) and 34; building 14 is the three-story structure facing down Washington Street from West Main Street.
8. Washington Street, east side looking north; with buildings, from right to left, being numbers 41, 40, 39, 38, 37, 36, and 34 (partially obscured by tree) at far left.

# Williamston Commercial Historic District,

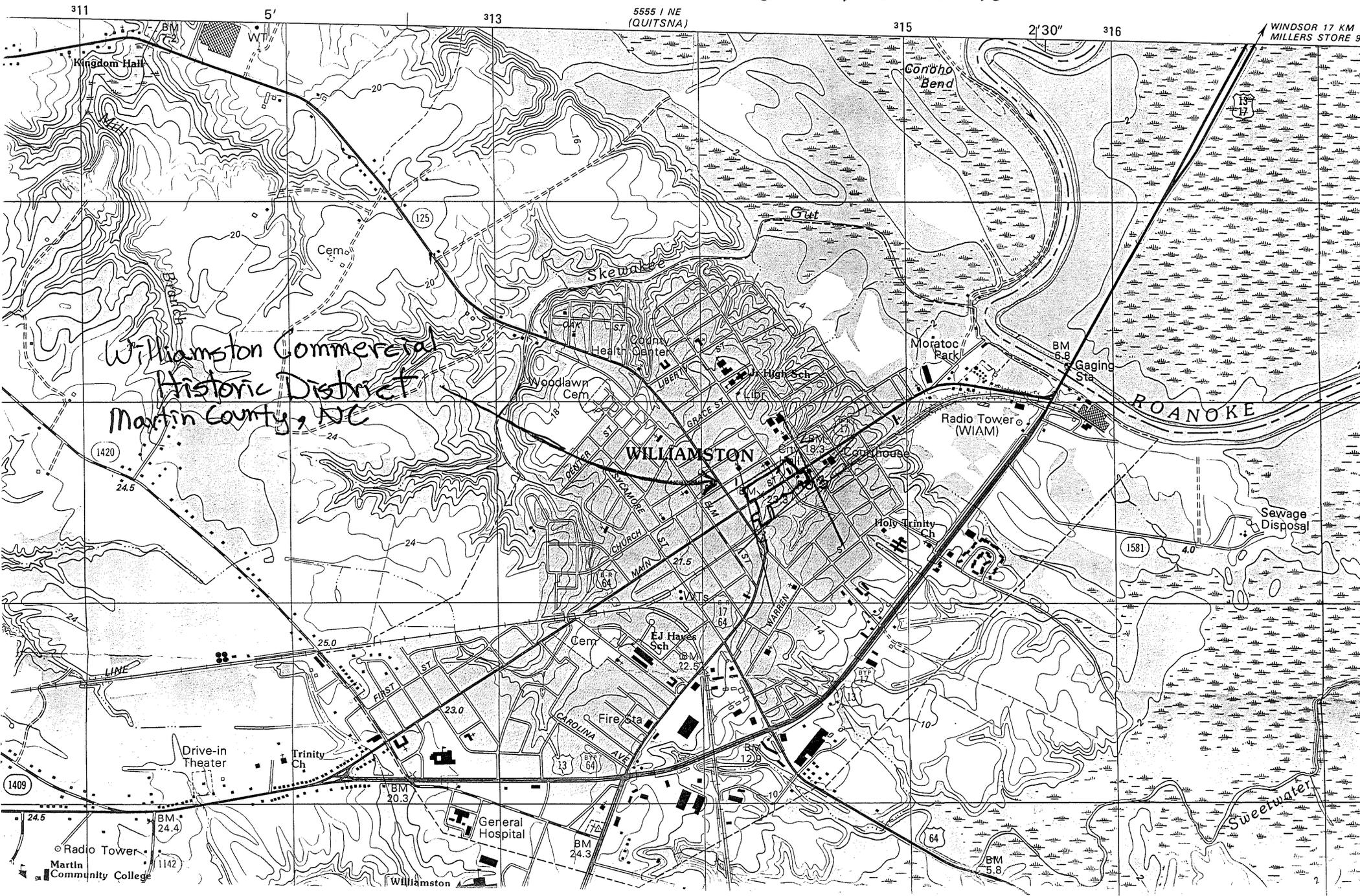
Martin County, NC zone 18

① E 314200 N 3969600

③ E 314540 N 3969580

② E 314460 N 3969880

④ E 314260 N 3969320



Williamston Commercial  
Historic District  
Martin County, NC

WILLIAMSTON

ROANOKE

Sweetwater





TOWN OF WILLIAMSTON

WEST CHURCH ST.

SMITHWICK ST.

PARK ST.

N. HAUGHTON ST.  
W. MAIN ST.

S. HAUGHTON ST.

WASHINGTON ST.

RAILROAD ST.

TRADE ST.  
COMMERCE ST.

HARRISON ST.

9953  
(1.0 AC)  
WILLIAMSTON  
MEMORIAL  
BAPTIST  
CHURCH

4334  
WILLIAMSTON  
LION'S  
CLUB

Parking in rear of

MID TOWN LN.

PARKING LOT

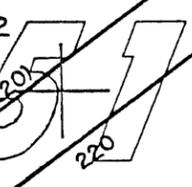
PARKING LOT

PARKING LOT

PARKING LOT

LANE

PARKING LOT



6

7

8

1

5

4

3

14

13

11

10

9

29

27

26

25

23

22

21

16

17

34

33

32

31

30

28

24

20

19

18

17

42

43

37

38

39

40

41

0096

1904

1998

0942

0882

309

1712

5378  
(1.1 AC)

7102

7091

8925

6849

6866

7832

5779

6778

5725

4747

4780

4023

4221

4562

4519

5656

6711

7705

8802

5906

6906

3947

4851

1817

9953

(1.0 AC)

WILLIAMSTON  
MEMORIAL  
BAPTIST  
CHURCH

WI  
Wil