

NORTH CAROLINA STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICE
Office of Archives and History
Department of Natural and Cultural Resources

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

Walton Street Park and Pool

Asheville, Buncombe County BN5664 Listed 12/14/2023
Nomination by Josi Ward, Foreground Consulting, LLC
Photographs by Josi Ward, July 2023 and December 2021



Walton Street Park, street entrance from northwest.



Walton Street Pool and Bathhouse, view from southwest.

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 National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any 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.

1. Name of Property

Historic name: Walton Street Park and Pool

Other names/site number: Riverview Park

Name of related multiple property listing:
N/A

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

2. Location

Street & number: 570 Walton Street

City or town: Asheville State: NC County: Buncombe

Not For Publication: N/A Vicinity: N/A

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,

I hereby certify that this X 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 X meets does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

 national statewide X local

Applicable National Register Criteria:

X A B C D

 Signature of certifying official/Title: <u>State Historic Preservation Officer</u> Date <u>10/30/23</u> <u>North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources</u> State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

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In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of commenting official: **Date**

Title : **State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government**

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:
___ entered in the National Register
___ determined eligible for the National Register
___ determined not eligible for the National Register
___ removed from the National Register
___ other (explain:) _____

Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply.)

- Private:
- Public – Local
- Public – State
- Public – Federal

Category of Property

(Check only **one** box.)

- Building(s)
-

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District

Site

Structure

Object

Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	buildings
<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	sites
<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>	structures
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	objects
<u>3</u>	<u>3</u>	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

RECREATION AND CULTURE/outdoor recreation

RECREATION AND CULTURE/sports facility

LANDSCAPE/park

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Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

RECREATION AND CULTURE/outdoor recreation

RECREATION AND CULTURE/sports facility

LANDSCAPE/park

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

NO STYLE

Materials: (enter categories from instructions.)

Principal exterior materials of the property:

foundation: CONCRETE

walls: CONCRETE

roof: SYNTHETICS/rubber

other: CONCRETE

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Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance and condition of the property. Describe contributing and noncontributing resources if applicable. Begin with a **summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, type, style, method of construction, setting, size, and significant features. Indicate whether the property has historic integrity.)

Summary Paragraph

Situated at the southern end of the historically African American neighborhood known as Southside, Walton Street Park (NC HPO survey site number BN5664) was established by the City of Asheville and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in 1939. The park was founded as a sanctioned recreational space for the city's Black population during the years of Jim Crow segregation. From the year of its opening until the eventual end of segregation in Asheville, Walton Street Park was the sole municipal park available to the Black population in Asheville. First named Riverview Park, the park was intended to serve primarily as a site for a segregated pool, although that feature was not constructed for another decade. Original amenities included a wading pool, tennis and horseshoe courts, and a small playground, all of which are no longer extant on the property. In 1947-1948, a poured-concrete pool and a concrete-block bathhouse were constructed in the southwest corner of the park. A softball diamond was added to the park in the 1950s and an asphalt basketball court in the 1960s.

Walton Street Park retains its integrity of location, setting, feeling, and association. Although the park's athletic fields and playgrounds have evolved consistently over the course of the site's history – mainly in response to constituent request - its one permanent feature—the pool complex—retains the arrangement of features established during the period of significance. The pool and bathhouse are intact and contributing resources in the park. The redesigned basketball courts, walking trail, playground, and picnic pavilion are non-contributing, recent

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additions to the park. The park, pool, and bathhouse retain integrity of location, setting, association, feeling, workmanship, and design. The material integrity of the pool and bathhouse interior have been diminished by years of deferred maintenance, although the bathhouse is well-preserved on the exterior. The park complex retains sufficient integrity to convey significance in the areas of African American Ethnic Heritage, Social History, and Entertainment/Recreation.

Narrative Description

Walton Street Park is located at the southern edge of the Southside neighborhood, a roughly 400-acre district to the south of downtown Asheville. Southside is bounded by Hilliard Avenue to the north; Biltmore Avenue to the east; Oakland Road and Walton Street Park to the south; and the Norfolk Southern Railway lines to the west. The district was not historically an exclusively African American neighborhood, but rather contained white, working-class neighborhoods to the north alongside Black neighborhoods at the south alongside the industrial railroad corridor. Extensive development in the 1920s significantly expanded the housing stock in the neighborhood as well as commercial districts along Depot Street, Ralph Street, Choctaw Street, and McDowell Street. The primarily residential character of Southside today is the result of urban renewal demolition during the 1960s and 1970s.¹

The neighborhood adjacent to the park is a combination of single-family and multi-family units. Along the northern edge of the park, Walton Street and Oakland Road are lined with single-family homes, the majority of which are 1910s and 1920s one- and two-story frame residences,

¹ Acme Preservation Services LLC and Owen & Eastlake LLC, "Asheville African American Heritage Resource Survey," (August 2002), 88-102, www.ncdcr.gov/media/13042/open.

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many with Craftsman details. Infill development from the decades after urban renewal generally mimics the scale and setback of the earlier houses. To the west of the park stand the Erskine-Walton Apartments, two-story multiplex units constructed in 1970 by the Asheville Housing Authority.² Each of the multi-family buildings is surrounded by shared green spaces that were designed to serve as tenant gardens. The architecturally varied, typically four-unit apartment buildings are situated on a wooded hill that slopes steeply south from Oakland Road down to the railroad and French Broad River beyond.

Walton Street Park, 1939

1 Contributing Site

Walton Street Park is a city park bounded by Oakland Road to the north and Depot Street/Walton Street to the west and bordered by woods at its eastern and southern perimeter. The park is situated on a relatively level lot that slopes steeply down at the western and southern edges of the park. The park primarily consists of open green space with a line of hardscaping—containing a parking lot, basketball courts, and the pool and bathhouse—along the western edge of the park. Although the park was originally reported to encompass 5.7 acres, its current lot measures 4.37 acres and has not been officially reduced since the City of Asheville purchased the property in 1938.³ It is unclear where the 5.7-acre measurement originated as no documentation reflecting this larger acreage could be ascertained.

² Housing Authority of the City of Asheville. *What is it All About? . . .* (Asheville: Asheville Housing Authority, 1974).

³ “East Riverside Urban Renewal Area, Project No. N.C. R-48, Amendment No. 6, Amendatory Application for Loan and Grant,” April 1973, Box 48, Folder 14, HACA archives Part 7: East Riverside Project Files (M2007.12-7), Special Collections and University Archives, Ramsey Library at UNC Asheville, Asheville, NC; Deed book 516, page 150, Buncombe County Register of Deeds, Asheville, NC.

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The single vehicular entrance to the park at the northwest corner of the park leads into an asphalt parking lot. To the east of the parking lot stands a wooden gable-roofed picnic pavilion and adjacent playground. Although a playground was among the first amenities to be constructed in the park, it is unlikely that the original playground was located at this current location.⁴ To the east of the playground the sloped green is planted with trees. A circular asphalt walking trail meanders its way from the parking lot, past the playground, along the perimeter of the park, past the pool house, and along the edge of the basketball courts, where it returns to the starting point. The walking trail surrounds a multi-use recreational field. A pair of asphalt basketball courts are located between the parking lot and the pool complex. Abutted by the basketball court to the north, the open green to the east, and the Walton Street cul-de-sac to the west, the pool complex is the cornerstone of the park. A chain-link fence surrounds the pool and encloses the western elevation of the bathhouse.

Walton Street Pool, 1947

1 Contributing Structure

Walton Street Pool is a twentieth-century, rectangular, poured-concrete pool. A concrete apron surrounds the pool and semi-circular concrete steps with a centered metal railing descend from ground level into the north end of the pool. Hand painted signs indicate that the pool ranges from a depth of one foot at the north end to nine feet at the south end. Two metal ladders descend into either side of the deep end of the pool, and the base of a metal diving board is mounted in the center of the southern edge.

⁴ The playground does not appear in its current location in a 1974 aerial photo of Walton Street Park produced by the Housing Authority of the City of Asheville. "HACA NCR048 Walton," 1974, Folder 30: Aerial Photos (South French Broad) n.d., Box 49, HACA archives Part 7: East Riverside Project Files (M2007.12-7), Special Collections and University Archives, Ramsey Library at UNC Asheville, Asheville, NC.

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Walton Street Bathhouse, 1948

1 Contributing Building

The one-story painted concrete-block bathhouse with wood-framed roof and concrete parapet stands to the east of the pool. The flat roof is composed of 2x10 joists and covered with a rubber roof membrane.⁵ A shallow frieze composed of four rows of running-bond brick runs atop all four building elevations. Throughout the building, windows are placed high on the walls above the door openings. On the exterior, window openings all contain expanded metal grates and projecting concrete sills. Windows throughout are metal casement windows with crank handles. Original metal frames and hardware remain intact, but it is difficult to discern the extent of original glazing that remains due to many windows being covered.

The main entrance to the bathhouse on the eastern elevation contains a pair of metal doors that open into the reception area. The doors are capped by a full-width transom that has since been boarded over. Two single-panel metal doors at the far ends of the east elevation provide entrances to storage rooms. Beside the northernmost door, an original concrete block drinking fountain projects from the wall. Eight irregularly spaced windows run the length of the east elevation, all have been covered over from the interior in later renovations.

Two separate single-panel metal doors at the center of the western pool-side elevation of the bathhouse open directly into the gendered changing areas. An elevated concrete platform with metal railing fronts the two doors on the western elevation and descends in a ramp to the south and steps to the north. A third single-panel metal door on the southern end of the elevation

⁵ Mathews Architecture, P.A., "City of Asheville Pool Facility Assessments Walton Street, Malvern Hills and Recreation Park," Presentation prepared for City of Asheville, December 2015, Collection of Mathews Architecture, P.A.

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opens into a storage room and is fronted by a shallow concrete stoop. The eight windows on the west elevation are identical to those found elsewhere on the building; of those, one on each side of the building remains uncovered from the interior. A modern metal drinking fountain standing to the left of the projecting platform is not attached to the wall.

No doors open into the north elevation, which contains two windows of the same type as found elsewhere on the building, as well as a central boarded-over window opening of the same dimension as the transom on the east elevation. On both the north and south elevations, the covered window openings contain three pairs of metal casement windows with crank handles; both ribbon windows remain visible from the interior. A concrete block addition with framed shed roof on the south elevation, built sometime after 1985, contains the filtration and maintenance equipment for the pool.⁶ Single-panel metal doors with floor vents open on the east and west faces of the addition.

The interior of the bathhouse is divided evenly into two changing areas with an entrance lobby at the center. The building has poured concrete floors throughout. The lobby contains a knee-wall dividing the office area from the entrance, and a rear storage room accessed through a single-panel metal door behind. A window between the reception area and back room is covered over with tile but remains visible from the storage room. Built-in wooden shelves line the walls of the storage room.

⁶ SHPO survey materials date the addition to 1971, however it was built sometime after 1985. The addition is clearly not visible in a 1974 aerial photo of the park taken by the Asheville Housing Authority and cannot be discerned in NCDOT aerial photos from 1985. "Walton Street Park (BN05664)," Historic Property Survey Summary, North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office, Raleigh, NC, 2011; "HACA NCR048 Walton," 1974, Folder 30: Aerial Photos (South French Broad) n.d., Box 49, HACA archives Part 7: East Riverside Project Files (M2007.12-7), Special Collections and University Archives, Ramsey Library at UNC Asheville, Asheville, NC; Aerial view of Walton Street Park, NCDOT Historical Aerial Imagery Index, March 25, 1985.

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Square brick piers stand at the center of each changing area and are flanked by block pilasters on the interiors of the east and west walls. The exterior corners of the women's changing room each contain separate service rooms segmented off with block walls that project into the main changing room and are sheathed in tile. A single such service room projects into the northeast corner of the men's changing area. Each of these segmented spaces are accessed from the exterior of the building.⁷ Other permanent interior divisions are few, but include partial-height, L-shaped privacy walls at the reception area entrances, and pairs of partial-height walls framing the shower areas on the west wall. Manufactured metal panels attached to the interior walls enclose changing areas and bathroom stalls. One west-facing window remains uncovered in each changing room; those windows have been infilled with plexiglass but retain their exterior metal grates. In both changing rooms the banded windows on the north and west elevations are boarded over but retain original interior hardware and exterior grates.

The interior has been heavily remodeled, most likely after 1985 when the addition was added to the south of the building. The remodel covered all but two windows in each changing area. Exposed material at the remaining window openings suggests that an additional layer of concrete block sheathed in ceramic tile was laid over the interior walls, covering most of the windows. It is possible but not confirmed that the interior dividing walls around the entrances and showers were built at this time; the dividing walls are also finished in ceramic tile. Paneled drop ceilings throughout the building fall below the heads of all the exposed windows. The interior layer of concrete block and ceramic tile abuts the current ceiling height, suggesting that

⁷ Although the consultant was not provided access to the three service rooms, plans of the building produced by Mathews Architecture in 2015 show that the rooms opening onto the east elevation of the bathhouse both contain single bathrooms, while the room opening onto the west elevation is labelled as "extra pool storage." Mathews Architecture, P.A., "Walton Street Pool Floor Plan Areas of Work – Demo," December 15, 2015, Collection of Mathews Architecture, P.A.

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the drop ceiling predated the interior remodel. The lobby is also finished with ceramic tile. The tile in the lobby is pale yellow while the changing areas are mint green. In all rooms, a contrasting band of darker-hued, coved trim tiles runs along the floor. Corners throughout the interiors are finished with curved corner tiles. The L-shaped privacy walls framing both entrances from the reception area contain neither the trim tiles nor the curved corner tiles, suggesting they were added at a later stage.

A concrete slab extending from the front of the bathhouse to the walking trail was added to the site during park renovations in 2023.

Picnic Pavilion, 2000s

1 Non-Contributing Structure

This simple gable-roofed picnic pavilion on square wooden posts stands atop a rectangular concrete slab immediately to the east of the parking lot. The open-air pavilion shades a collection of picnic tables. Four metal barbeque grills are permanently installed at the perimeter of the concrete slab. The park's playground stands to the east of the pavilion.⁸

Basketball Courts, 2023

1 Non-Contributing Site

The City of Asheville installed an asphalt basketball court to the south of the parking lot in 2023 to replace the original court that the city constructed between 1966 and 1971.⁹ The new court is situated slightly to the east of the original court, yet remains situated between the parking

⁸ A second non-historic picnic pavilion formerly stood at the southern edge of the pool but was removed in the spring of 2023.

⁹ The City of Asheville City Demonstration Agency, *The Second Year "Comprehensive City Demonstration Program,"* Report submitted to the Department of Housing and Urban Development (Asheville, NC: City of Asheville, October, 21, 1971), 64; Metropolitan Planning Board, "Open Space and Recreational Areas Plan: Asheville and Buncombe County," (Asheville: Metropolitan Planning Board, June 1971), 10.

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lot and the bathhouse. Reconstruction of the court followed a series of community surveys undertaken by Asheville Parks & Recreation in 2022. The new court has six nets to accommodate more than one game at a time: two each on the northern and southern edges, and a single net on the eastern and western edges.¹⁰ The City plans to apply an acrylic surface to the courts in August 2023.¹¹

Multi-Use Recreational Field, 2023 ***1 Non-Contributing Site***

The large open green space to the east of the pool complex has long been the primary recreational space and greensward of Walton Street Park. In 2023 Asheville Parks & Recreation undertook a renovation of this field by converting a former softball diamond into a multi-use recreational field surrounded by a meandering asphalt walking trail that encircles its perimeter. The change resulted from community surveys in which participants commented that the softball diamond was rarely used, and requested a field that would better accommodate a wider variety of sports and play.¹²

When it was constructed in the 1950s, the softball diamond was the second major amenity added to Walton Street Park following the pool and bathhouse.¹³ The field was originally surrounded by floodlights, which were destroyed by vandals in 1972, and remained unrepaired for decades. The City removed the light posts and perimeter fencing along the western and southern edge of the field during recent renovations, replacing those peripheral elements with a paved walking trail.

¹⁰ “Walton Street Park,” July 26, 2023, ashevilenc.gov/projects/Walton-street-park (accessed July 2023).

¹¹ Alex Cole, City of Asheville Historic Preservation Planner, email correspondence with Josi Ward, July 18, 2023.

¹² African American Heritage Commission, September 8, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_bI6hhhL7bY&ab_channel=CityofAsheville (accessed July 2023).

¹³ “Hill Street Recreation Area for Negroes is Recommended,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, July 15, 1953, 20.

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Integrity Statement

Walton Street Park, which contains the Walton Street Pool, bathhouse, basketball courts, playground, and a multi-use green, retains a moderate level of integrity but an adequate level to convey its historic associations from its period of significance. In its current state, the park effectively communicates its significance as a park and swimming pool constructed for the African American population of Asheville under segregation. The park and its associated buildings retain integrity of location. Its setting is likewise intact, with the only major changes to the park's immediate surrounding taking place in 1970 with the construction of the Erskine-Walton Apartments at the western edge of the park. The association of the park with the African American population of Asheville and specifically with the Southside community remains strong, both due to continued use by neighborhood residents and to the increasing rarity, and thus preciousness, of Black landmarks in Asheville. The pool retains integrity of materials, workmanship, and design, as does the exterior of the bathhouse. A remodel of the interior of the bathhouse that sheathed all interior walls with a layer of concrete block covered with ceramic tile has compromised its integrity of material and design, although those changes are most likely reversible should restoration become a priority.

A series of major renovations to the park's athletic fields in 2023 have negatively impacted its integrity of design. In response to community surveys conducted by Asheville Parks & Recreation in 2022, the City decided to replace the single basketball court with an expanded court that allowed for multiple games. New playground equipment replaced previous equipment on the same site, which the City had installed in the early 2000s. Most significantly, the City

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removed the softball diamond and replaced it with a multi-use recreational field and paved

walking trail. Perimeter fencing and floodlights were removed with the softball diamond.

Although the redesign has changed the use of the recreational field, its former location continues to function as the park's primary open space.

The park retains the feeling of a small neighborhood park due to the preservation of its open space, its assortment of recreational fields, and its connection with its surroundings.

The feeling of the park has been altered by the closing of the pool, which has substantially reduced seasonal use of the park. Yet each of these changes are consistent with the history of the park. In its 84 years of use, the park itself—the open space at the southern edge of Southside—has been the only constant. When the pool was completed in 1947, the park also contained a wading pool, two tennis courts, eight swings, six seesaws, one slide, and two shuffleboard courts.¹⁴ The pool and bathhouse were intended as permanent feature of the park, but none of the other listed amenities remain today, having been replaced by an assortment of recreational spaces constructed in 1953 and periodically updated since. These changes reflect the City's consideration of the park as an evolving resource whose facilities are expected to age and be replaced incrementally. As the recreational areas contained by the park continue to evolve according to the needs of the neighborhood, the park remains an intact site intended to host residents from Southside and the wider Asheville area.

¹⁴ "Riverview: A Community Challenge," *Asheville Citizen-Times*, May 28, 1953, 16.

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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.)

- 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 old or achieving significance within the past 50 years

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Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Ethnic Heritage - Black

Entertainment/Recreation

Social History

Period of Significance

1939-1973

Significant Dates

1939

1947-1948

Significant Person

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Unknown

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Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance, applicable criteria, justification for the period of significance, and any applicable criteria considerations.)

The Walton Street Park and Pool is a locally significant neighborhood park that was constructed with federal funds in 1939 to serve Asheville's African American population during the years of Jim Crow segregation. Today the park comprises a pool dating to 1947; bathhouse from 1948; and an assortment of recreational fields and play areas that were updated in 2023. The park is significant under Criterion A in the areas of Ethnic Heritage-Black; Entertainment-Recreation; and Social History. The park's layers of significance as an African American heritage site, a recreational site, and a social history site are utterly intertwined and interdependent. The park's significance as a recreational site when compared to other contemporary parks in Asheville is entirely informed by its status as a site for Black residents. Likewise, the park's significance as a social gathering space is indivisible from its historic importance as the sole public park serving Asheville's Black population. Even in the years since desegregation, the park remains a cherished Asheville site where longtime residents celebrate the vital role it has long played in the cultural and social life of Asheville's Black population. The Walton Street Park and Pool is one of very few landmarks of Black Asheville that remain standing today. A vestige of a segregated city whose inconvenient location and diminutive scale were both intentional features of its design within a racist system, the park has remained a valued community resource since its construction in 1939. By virtue of its status as the only city park designated to serve the entire African American population of Asheville, the park was unique in its time and remains without comparisons today. A simple building and site whose architectural features are unexceptional and typical of their time, the park and pool have increased in

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significance as so many other artifacts of a segregated Asheville have been demolished.¹⁵ The period of significance for the Walton Street Park and Pool is 1939-1973, a timeframe that encompasses the years in which the park served as a segregated municipal facility, and in which each of the contributing buildings and structures within the park were constructed. As the park has remained continuously in use since its establishment and there is no meaningful end to its period of significance, the period of significance simply ends 50 years from the date of this nomination as no events of exceptional significance have occurred since that time.

Narrative Statement of Significance (Provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance.)

Walton Street Park, originally named Riverview Park, was established in 1939 as a sanctioned recreational space for the city's Black population by the City of Asheville with Works Progress Administration funds. Tucked at the southern end of the historically African American neighborhood known as Southside, and surrounded on all other sides by railroad tracks and undeveloped (at the time) woods, the 4.54-acre park is a quintessential segregated city park. It was conveniently located for those who lived in Southside, but geographically isolated from the main thoroughfares of the city and from established white neighborhoods. Having been founded during the era of Jim Crow segregation, a system designed "to impress on black men and women

¹⁵ Following a city-sponsored survey of Asheville African American Heritage Resources commissioned in 2019, the consultants recommended that only three resources in Asheville were eligible for the North Carolina Study List. Walton Street Park and Pool was the only of the three to be placed on the Study List that year. Acme Preservation Services LLC and Owen & Eastlake LLC, "Asheville African American Heritage Resource Survey," (August 2002), 88-102, www.ncdcr.gov/media/13042/open.

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their political and economic powerlessness and vulnerability—and, most critically, to diminish both their self-esteem and their social aspirations,” the park became a cherished public space, meeting ground, and recreational hub for the Black residents of Asheville.¹⁶ The neighborhood around it changed radically during urban renewal in the 1960s and 1970s, yet the park remained relatively unaltered. Today it stands as a rare vestige of the neighborhood, and era, in which it was produced.

Ethnic Heritage-Black, Entertainment/Recreation, and Social History Contexts

Although Walton Street Pool is often remembered as the first municipal pool to be established for the Black residents of Asheville, it is more accurately remembered as the longest-standing of those facilities. The first pool in the city built for African Americans was the Mountain Street Pool in the East End neighborhood, which was located near the Mountain Street School.¹⁷ Originally named Beaumont School and founded in 1873, Mountain Street School was the first school in Asheville to serve African American children.¹⁸ A municipal pool measuring 50 by 100 feet was added to the school property in 1916, following resident requests to the Board of Commissioners.¹⁹ The city funded an expansion of the other municipal pool in Aston Park, for

¹⁶ Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 219.

¹⁷ The original school building and pool are both identified in the 1917 Sanborn map: Sanborn Map Company, Asheville, Buncombe County, North Carolina, November 1917, Sheet 23; “Commissioners Open the New Paving Bids,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, April 25, 1916, 12; “Negro Social Worker Is Improving Lot of Colored People Here,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, February 18, 1934, 7.

¹⁸ Beaumont School was renamed Mountain Street School in 1890. “New Research Reveals New Information: Asheville’s First Public School for Blacks,” July 7, 2020, Buncombe County Special Collections, <https://specialcollections.buncombecounty.org/2020/07/07/new-research-reveals-new-information/>.

¹⁹ “Building Permits Aggregate \$5,000,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, March 17, 1916, 12.

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white residents, at the same time as they funded the construction of the Mountain Street Pool.²⁰

By 1924, the pool was “one of the most popular recreation points for colored people” in the city, and was already overcrowded.²¹ A decade later, the pool remained a hot spot in town that reportedly had increasing attendance every month and hosted free Red Cross swimming lessons for all interested children.²² The Mountain Street Pool remained in operation until at least 1935, after which point no record of its closing appears in local newspapers.²³

During the 1930s, advocates for the Black community of Asheville succeeded in establishing small playgrounds and recreational opportunities throughout the city in order to curb juvenile delinquency and redirect juveniles toward “constructive pursuits.”²⁴ Several bricks-and-mortar community centers for the African American population, which included the YMI on Eagle Street and the two-story brick building at 93 Valley Street, already served as indoor recreation hubs.²⁵ The first outdoor playgrounds for African American children were located adjacent to segregated schools, such as those on Burton Street, Mountain Street, Livingston Street, and Hill Street.²⁶ Recreational activities in the playgrounds were organized by groups such as the Community Recreation and Social Service League, which was founded in 1933 and housed at 93 Valley Street.²⁷ The Asheville Negro Welfare Council began as a one-man

²⁰ “Commissioners Open the New Paving Bids,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, April 25, 1916, 12.

²¹ “Crowds Overwhelm Capacity of Pools,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, June 24, 1924, 12.

²² “Negro Social Worker is Improving Lot of Colored People Here,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, February 18, 1934, 7; “Free Swimming Lessons Given Kiddies,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, July 24, 1935, 8.

²³ The pool was definitely demolished by 1950. Sanborn Map Company, Asheville, Buncombe County, North Carolina, 1950, Sheet 70.

²⁴ “Julius C. Highe to Direct Negro Recreation Here,” *Asheville Citizen*, April 8, 1937.

²⁵ Patrick Shane Parker, “Appalachian Activists: The Civil Rights Movement in Asheville, NC,” (masters thesis, Appalachian State University, 2016), 27-28.

²⁶ “Play Program is Worked Out for Negro Parks,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, June 15, 1944, 16.

²⁷ “Negro Center of Recreation is Established,” *Asheville Times*, September 20, 1940; “Young Negroes Look to Social Service Unit for Recreation,” *Asheville Times*, November 5, 1943; C. L. Moore, “Community Recreation and Social Service League,” Clippings: Parks & Recreation – Facilities for Black Community (105C), Buncombe County Special Collections, Pack Memorial Library, Asheville, NC.

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operation led by Leander G. Blackus, and focused specifically on establishing public

playgrounds for young Black children.²⁸ In 1934, the Council oversaw the establishment of two additional playgrounds for Black children on Biltmore Avenue and Eagle Street.²⁹ When Blackus was promoted to the State Director of Negro Recreation for the WPA in 1937, he was succeeded by Julius C. High who worked with the Asheville Negro Welfare Council, public schools, and municipal courts to focus specifically on urban parks.³⁰

Despite small successes in establishing neighborhood playgrounds, recreation advocates continued to call for the city to plan a segregated municipal park that was large enough to serve the city's entire African American population. The park would be a central hub, connecting the smaller playgrounds in a larger network of amenities. When the WPA was established in 1935 under President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal plan, the expansive infrastructure and employment agency immediately began funding projects throughout the country, including in Asheville. In its first years, the WPA funded several prominent projects in Asheville, including the Asheville Auditorium and the Asheville-Hendersonville airport.³¹ Seeing an opportunity to secure funding for a much-needed park, the city of Asheville began including plans for an African American park—location to be determined—in their applications for government funds.

Early proposals for WPA funds had limited success. One plan to demolish an old county jail and re-use material for a new auditorium and gym for Black residents was proposed as a federal work relief project in January of 1935, but the city decided against allocating \$41,710 of

²⁸ "Caskey Lauds Work of Negro Welfare Body," *Asheville Times*, October 9, 1936.

²⁹ "Negro Social Worker is Improving Lot of Colored People Here," *Asheville Citizen-Times*, February 18, 1934, 7.

³⁰ "Julius C. High to Direct Negro Recreation here," *Asheville Citizen*, April 8, 1937.

³¹ "\$55,000 In WPA Funds Allotted for Auditorium," *Asheville Citizen-Times*, December 24, 1937, 1; "Much Progress Made on Asheville-Hendersonville Airport Project," *Asheville Citizen-Times*, June 28, 1936, 10.

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\$280,000 WPA funds, arguing that a renovation of the city auditorium was more essential.³²

Two years later, the city purchased a 22-acre tract of Campbell's Woods to be developed as an African American park and playground that would eventually include a pool, community building, and athletic fields.³³ The property was located to the north of the Hill Street School, one of Asheville's oldest Black schools, and had been vacant for years.³⁴ Development halted when a delegation of 50 Montford residents—the neighborhood directly to the north and northeast of the proposed site—protested the park at City Council.³⁵ The white protestors expressed outrage at the threat to their property values and argued that the park was not centrally located to adequately serve the city's Black population.³⁶

Walton Street Park

The defeat of the Campbell's Woods site due to neighbor protest led the city to consider an alternate site, which had already been identified for a segregated park in Asheville. At the beginning of Asheville's expansive growth in the 1920s, the city established the City Planning Commission to build a framework for anticipated rapid development.³⁷ One of the Commission's first actions was to hire the Boston planner and landscape architect John Nolen, by then

³² Negro Recreation Unit Plans Being Prepared," *Asheville Citizen-Times*, January 6, 1935, 22; Think Project is Unlikely to be Carried Out," *Asheville Citizen-Times*, November 1, 1935, 10.

³³ "City will Buy 22-acre Tract for Negro Park," *Asheville Times*, December 1, 1937; "Grocers Protest City's Plans for Curb Market," *Asheville Citizen-Times*, January 14, 1938, 1, 5.

³⁴ Hill Street School was renamed Isaac Dickson in 1991, and demolished in 2014 to be replaced by a modern campus. "Some City Schools May Change Name," *Asheville Citizen-Times*, April 17, 1991, 72; "Big Dig Increasing Costs for New Asheville School," *Asheville Citizen-Times*, June 26, 2014.

³⁵ "Campbell's Woods—Protest Delegation," *Minutes of the Proceedings of the Council* No. 29, 207, City Council Archives, Asheville City Hall, Asheville, NC.

³⁶ "Work to Start on Negro Park this Morning," *Asheville Citizen*, July 22, 1938, 20; "150 Persons Are At Ground-Breaking for Negro Park," *Asheville Citizen*, July 23, 1938, 3.

³⁷ Steven Michael Nickollof, "Urban Renewal in Asheville: A History of Racial Segregation and Black Activism," (masters thesis, Western Carolina University, 2015), 2.

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nationally renowned, to develop a comprehensive plan for the city.³⁸ Nolen's vision was based on several core tenets: the acquisition of public spaces by the city to be developed or set aside as parks; the harnessing of tourism; and the importance of segregation by race. He defended segregation as a mutually beneficial relationship, writing, "It is in most respects a distinct advantage to the negroes to be separated from the white population provided the areas in which they live are suitable in location and character."³⁹ For the park system, Nolen proposed parkways of interconnected linear parks, many stretching along the banks of the French Broad and Swannanoa Rivers, supplemented by local parks and playgrounds located in order to serve their immediate neighborhoods. Among the proposed parks were two for Asheville's Black population: the Victoria Park South Playfield in Southside, and Washington Park to the north of the Hill Street School. As the latter site had just been boycotted, the city turned to the former option. In Nolen's plan, Victoria Park was an extensive thumb of land jutting east from the turn in the French Broad River all the way to Victoria Road.⁴⁰ Although the exact location of Victoria Park did not line up with the eventual Walton Street Park site, the Nolen plan quite likely guided the city toward the less-central location for their segregated park. Being at the southern edge of a predominantly Black neighborhood and surrounded by railroad tracks, the new location had the additional benefit of few white neighbors likely to protest the establishment of the park.

³⁸ Nickollof, "Urban Renewal," 23.

³⁹ John Nolen and Philip W. Foster, *City Planning Report: Asheville, North Carolina* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Square, 1922), 43-44.

⁴⁰ The proposed area for Victoria Park contained most of what is currently the A-B Tech Campus, and wrapped around the south and east of the eventual location of Walton Street Park. "Park System," map, Nolen and Foster, *City Planning Report*.

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Figure 1. Detail of Victoria Park.

Source: "Park System," map, John Nolen and Philip W. Foster, *City Planning Report: Asheville, North Carolina* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Square, 1922)

By January 1938, city officials had publicly identified the new site for their park and pool. The park would be located at the southern edge of the neighborhood known at the time as East Riverside, and today as Southside. When the site was chosen, Southside was already the largest African American neighborhood in the city. Covering 400 acres south of downtown between Biltmore Avenue and the French Broad River, Southside was a sprawling, dense, pedestrian neighborhood that housed Asheville's largest Black business district and nearly half of its Black residents.⁴¹ Local historian Sarah Judson described the neighborhood as one of Asheville's African American communities, "where black citizens could create a life that

⁴¹ Priscilla Ndiaye, "Southside/East Riverside: Lost-In the Name of Progress," *Crossroads: A Publication of the North Carolina Humanities Council* 14.1 (Summer/Fall 2010), 11; Ruth L. Mace, *Inside East Riverside* (Asheville, NC: Redevelopment Commission, 1966); .

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countered the racial inequities spawned by white supremacy.”⁴² Former resident Henry Robinson remembered Southside as “a melting pot of people with varying backgrounds and lifestyles—from the educated to the illiterate. There was no central area of poverty. Pockets of substandard houses and apartments mixed with neatly kept homes and lawns.”⁴³ Describing her childhood home on Walton Street, Jean Boyd remembered, “There was not a yard that was not manicured beautifully. It was a neighborhood that cared for its neighborhood.”⁴⁴ Sanborn maps from 1925 and 1930 show that the neighborhood immediately north of the park was a densely developed neighborhood full of one- and two-story frame houses. To the west of Depot Street, toward the river, empty lots predominated with occasional pockets of residential development.⁴⁵ The area where the park was to be located had been subdivided into residential parcels in 1915, although no buildings had yet been constructed on site.⁴⁶

City Council approved the \$750 purchase of a tract south of Oakland Road in January 1938, based on the agreement that the city would spend \$1,500.60 and the federal government \$18,409.50 to complete construction of the park.⁴⁷ Explaining the location choice, newspapers cited the proximity of the park to the St. Anthony of Padua Parochial School on Walton Street, which was founded by Franciscan friar Father Ronald Scott in 1936 to serve African American

⁴² Sarah Judson, “‘I am a Nasty Branch Kid’: Women’s Memories of Place in the Era of Asheville’s Urban Renewal,” *The North Carolina Historical Review* 91.3: 332.

⁴³ Henry Robinson, “Looking for Answers in Memories of a Southside Boyhood,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, May 25, 1992, 7.

⁴⁴ Jean Boyd, Interview with Karen VanEman, March 13, 2008, Oral History Collections, Special Collections and University Archives, Ramsey Library at UNC Asheville, Asheville, NC.

⁴⁵ Sanborn Map Company, Asheville, Buncombe County, North Carolina, December 1930, Sheet 35; Sanborn Map Company, Asheville, Buncombe County, North Carolina, 1925, Sheet 29.

⁴⁶ “Property of Mrs. Alice T. Connally and Mrs. Mary Connally Coxe,” February 1915, Deed Book 198, Page 24, Buncombe County Register of Deeds, Asheville, NC.

⁴⁷ Deed book 516, page 150, Buncombe County Register of Deeds, Asheville, NC; “Grocers Protest City’s Plans for Curb Market,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, January 14, 1938, 1, 5.

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students in first through eighth grade.⁴⁸ City Manager P. M. Burdette directly cited the Nolen plan for the city in his announcement of the proposed site.⁴⁹ A group of Black taxpayers, represented by Luther Thomas, protested the Walton Street site at the City Council meeting held on January 28, 1938, and delivered petitions disputing the location at the meeting of February 10, 1938. Their complaint that “the proposed site is located too near the Southern Yards and Roundhouse” did not alter plans.⁵⁰ By June, the WPA budget had been finalized to a reduced amount of \$13,439 for the construction of a park that included a pavilion, wading pools, tennis and horseshoe courts, and walking paths, but no swimming pool.⁵¹ 150 people gathered for the ground-breaking ceremony in July 1938.⁵²

At the opening ceremony for Riverview Park, later known as Walton Street Park, the Chairman of the Negro Community Recreation and Social Service League, Dr. Lee Otus Miller, accepted the park and publicly stated his hope that the swimming pool would be added before next summer.⁵³ The promised swimming pool and bathhouse would be much-needed replacements for the recently closed, and historically overcrowded, Mountain Street Pool, but funding had not been secured by the time the park opened in June 1939. Locals began advocating for the completion of the Riverview Pool immediately. The Ministerial Association of Asheville

⁴⁸ “Seek WPA Funds for Developing Negro Park Here,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, January 9, 1938, 5; “Teacher Shortage May Close Parochial School,” *Asheville Citizen*, February 21, 1969, 12; “Efforts Made To Keep Parochial School Open,” *Asheville Citizen*, February 22, 1969, 22.

⁴⁹ “Many Improvements Planned Here with U. S. Relief Funds,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, March 27, 1938, 32.

⁵⁰ “Petitions Protesting Location of Colored Park,” February 10, 1938, *Minutes of the Proceedings of the Council* No. 29, 219, City Council Archives, Asheville City Hall, Asheville, NC.

⁵¹ “\$13,439 to be Spent by WPA on Negro Park,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, June 19, 1938, 22.

⁵² “150 Persons Are At Ground-Breaking for Negro Park,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, July 23, 1938, 3; “Work to Start on Negro Park this Morning,” *Asheville Citizen*, July 22, 1938, 20.

⁵³ Between 1948 and 1954, the two names for the park—Riverview Park and Walton Street Park—were used interchangeably in local papers. “New Negro Park Here is Officially Opened,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, June 4, 1939, 3.

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and Buncombe County, led by Dr. C. B. Chapin and two local reverends, argued to City Council in September 1938 that the Black population deserved a pool, and underscored its necessary role in decreasing juvenile delinquency.⁵⁴ W. Norman Watts, director of Community Recreation League, and Dr. Miller, again asked City Council to provide a swimming pool for Walton Street in July 1939, this time promising to raise a substantial portion of the cost.⁵⁵ City Manager Pat Burdette confirmed that Asheville's African American community was putting on "a variety of entertainments" to fundraise for the pool, having understood that the city would not.⁵⁶ Later that year, when the condemned Orange Street school was facing demolition, city officials proposed applying for WPA funds to use the materials for a bathhouse and swimming pool at Walton Street, arguing the salvaged materials could save the city \$2,000-\$3,000.⁵⁷ When the *Asheville Times* published an editorial on August 23, 1941, lamenting the city's neglect of the Riverview Park, it received a grateful response from the Negro Taxpayers League in the following week's paper: "Your statements were true, and it is sad to think of this park being forgotten. But we hope that the powers that be will give this park some consideration in the distribution of the WPA funds. We are in dire need of a place for wholesome recreation, and we trust that those in authority can see as you have seen."⁵⁸

Public pools for the white population of Asheville were already well established when Riverview Park opened. The oldest of these pools opened in Aston Park in 1914 and closed in

⁵⁴ "Normal College in 'Transition' Period, City Council Told," *Asheville Citizen-Times*, September 23, 1938, 7.

⁵⁵ "Ice Cream Ordinance is Passed on Final Reading," *Asheville Citizen-Times*, July 14, 1939, 5.

⁵⁶ "City Manager Reports on Progress for Asheville," *Asheville Citizen-Times*, January 6, 1940, 18.

⁵⁷ "Board to Decide on Disposition of Old School," *Asheville Citizen-Times*, September 6, 1939, 8; "Orange Street Property May Become City Park," *Asheville Citizen-Times*, September 8, 1939, 12.

⁵⁸ "Riverview Park," *Asheville Citizen-Times*, September 7, 1941, 13.

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1939.⁵⁹ The more recently constructed facilities included the Recreation Park Pool on the east side, built in 1925; and Malvern Hills pool on the west side, built in 1936.⁶⁰ These pools were in all respects better outfitted than the 50-by-100-foot Mountain Street Pool had been. The Malvern Hills pool and bathhouse were the centerpieces of Malvern Hills Park, on which construction began in February 1934 and was completed by June 1936. The pool measured roughly 50 by 160 feet and reportedly cost \$35,000.⁶¹ Funding for the Malvern Hills site also came through New Deal funding, with cooperation from the Civil Works Administration, the Emergency Relief Administration, and the WPA. Meanwhile, the pool at the center of Recreation Park reportedly measured 100 by 250 feet and was part of a fully electrified entertainment complex that included Craig Lake, a playground, Ferris wheel, merry-go-round, roller skating rink, dance floor, and zoo.⁶² Recreation Park hosted city-wide events such as “Aquaganza,” a 1942 fundraiser that featured 100 dancers, singers, swimmers, and divers and an outdoor amphitheater that seated 2,000 people.⁶³

Although the wait for pool funding dragged on at Riverview Park, recreational programming began immediately. Recreational programs for the three African American playgrounds in Asheville—Burton Street, Riverview Park, and Hill Street—were managed by the Valley Street Recreation Center and included park-specific activities as well as a softball league,

⁵⁹ “The Swimming Pool,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, August 21, 1914, 4; “Recreation Park Will Open Today for 1939 Season,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, May 27, 1939, 12.

⁶⁰ The city sold Recreation Park Pool in 1956 and rebuilt it in 1970. “Recreation Center Will Open Early in May,” *Asheville Citizen-Times* March 10, 1925; “Council Ratifies Park Pool’s Sale,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, October 25, 1957, 1; “City Council OKs Low Bids on New Pool,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, May 1, 1970, 17; “Swimming Pool in West Asheville is Dedicated,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, June 16, 1936, 6.

⁶¹ “Weaver Park is Likely Site for North End Swimming Pool,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, March 14, 1953, 9.

⁶² “Amusements at Asheville Recreation Park,” ad, *Asheville Citizen-Times*, August 7, 1925, 8; Photograph C607-8, Buncombe County Special Collections, Pack Memorial Library, Asheville, NC.

⁶³ “New Patrons are Named for ‘Aquaganza,’” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, August 23, 1942, 17.

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tennis meets, ping-pong tournaments, horseshoe tournaments, rope jumping contests, and marble contests. Arts and educational programs such as hand-crafts, nature study, drama, and music were also hosted in the parks.⁶⁴ During the 1944 annual report on recreational programming for Black youth that he presented to City Council, C. L. Moore outlined these planned events, and concluded by mentioning that city officials promised that a pool, pavilion, and lights would be added to Riverview Park, “when war conditions and priorities will permit.”⁶⁵

It was not until 1947 that Asheville City Council approved the addition of a pool and bathhouse to Riverview Park, now frequently referred to as Walton Street Park. The \$22,500 budget would also include a fenced enclosure for the pool as well as landscaping to increase the attractiveness of the park.⁶⁶ The pool would measure 40 by 100 feet, making it 1,000 square feet smaller than the reportedly overcrowded Mountain Street Pool had been. Even as the city was moving forward with plans for the Walton Street Pool, Asheville citizens regularly petitioned the City Council for a change of venue. Luther Thomas once again appeared before City Council to dispute the location of a swimming pool so near to the railroad and round house, and to advocate that it be located in the Campbell’s Woods area. Maggie Jones, a representative for African Americans on the east side, requested that the pool be in the vicinity of Mountain Street and Valley Street.⁶⁷ Covering the debate over the pool’s location, the *Asheville Citizen-Times* blamed the delays on the “inability of the Negro community to reach some agreement on the best location for the park and swimming pool.” The locally published African American paper *The Church and Southland Advocate* published an apt rejoinder: “Why is it that no other people are

⁶⁴ “Play Program is Worked out for Negro Parks,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, June 15, 1944, 16.

⁶⁵ “Report is Given on Recreation Among Negroes,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, August 25, 1944, 7.

⁶⁶ “Site on Walton Street Chosen for Negro Pool,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, June 20, 1947, 1.

⁶⁷ “Negro Swimming Pool - Site,” February 13, 1947, *Minutes of the Proceedings of the Council* No. 31, 294-295, City Council Archives, Asheville City Hall, Asheville, NC.

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required to fully agree on a project before they can get it?”⁶⁸ In the end, the City stuck with its plans to locate the pool at Walton Street Park, nestled at the edge of Southside and alongside the Southern Yards railroad tracks.

Walton Street Pool

Construction on the Walton Street Pool began in the summer of 1947 and was finished by fall; the bathhouse was completed the following summer. The complex opened to the public on July 5, 1948, and immediately began drawing unprecedented crowds to the park. Recalling the significance of the pool in his community, Asheville resident Lawrence Gilliam recalled, “That was THE pool and THE bathhouse for Blacks in the city, paid for by City Parks and Recreation.”⁶⁹ The popularity of the pool led to expansion of other park facilities: new picnic tables on the hill to the north of the pool; refurbished tennis courts; new horseshoe courts; and fireplaces beside the picnic area.⁷⁰ When Walton Street Pool opened, it became the third municipal pool in the city, alongside Malvern Hills and Recreation Park. All three were managed under the auspices of the Parks and Playground Department. The pools at Malvern Hills and Walton Street Park were both free for the public, whereas the Recreation Park Pool—the largest of

⁶⁸ “Wholesome Recreation,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, June 21, 1947, 4.

⁶⁹ Lawrence Gilliam, Interview with Karen VanEman, November 8, 2007, Oral History Collections, Special Collections and University Archives, Ramsey Library at UNC Asheville, Asheville, NC.

⁷⁰ “Work Under Way on Navy Armory and Pool Sites,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, July 11, 1947, 15; “Work is Begun on Bathhouse for Park Pool,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, March 9, 1948, 8; “Swimming Pool for Negroes to Open on July 5,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, June 24, 1948, 13.

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them all—charged a small fee for entry.⁷¹ Swimming instruction sponsored by the Red Cross ran

all summer long in all three pools.⁷²



Figure 2. Walton Street Pool House and Pool, 1950s.

Source: Isaiah Rice Photo Collection, Special Collections and University Archives,

Ramsey Library at UNC Asheville, Asheville, NC.

⁷¹ “55,808 Attended City Rec Parks Throughout Summer,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, August 13, 1950, 45.

⁷² “Negro Park Expansion Under Way,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, July 9, 1948, 13; “Final Classes for Swimmers Begin in City,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, August 6, 1952, 9; “Water Safety Courses Open Here Monday,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, June 25, 1955, 7.

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Only five years after Walton Street Pool opened, a group of white and black citizens, endorsed by the *Asheville Citizen*, published an editorial arguing that further work was needed. Walton Street Pool was the only municipal facility available to Asheville's 15,000 Black residents. By 1953, its facilities included one pool, one wading pool, two tennis courts, eight swings, six seesaws, one slide, and two shuffleboard courts. The citizens deemed the pool "adequate," the bathhouse "substantial," and the tennis courts "first-rate." Yet there was still no facility in Asheville—not even Stephens-Lee High School—that provided the Black population access to a football field, a baseball diamond, a running track, trapeze equipment for children, or a lighted outdoor area for nighttime gatherings. The editorial called for the city to allot \$25,000 to regrade the hill above the pool and fill in the low areas beside the pool, allowing for the creation of more playing fields and recreational space. The editorial's rationale began with the familiar theme of juvenile delinquency, but quickly moved to racial equity: "Asheville has the welfare of its Negro population on its mind but not necessarily on its conscience." In conclusion, the authors asserted that improving the one African American park in the city would affirm Asheville's self-conception as a model community when it comes to race.⁷³

City Council reviewed several petitions requesting funds for the expansion of the city's African American recreational facilities, particularly Walton Street Park, during its meeting on June 11, 1953. Petitioners were also requesting that a second municipal park for African Americans be built in West Asheville but were sure to prioritize Walton Street to "give them a good park as a start." The city engineer estimated the grading would cost \$18,000 and the playground another \$7,000. Speakers in support of the allocation included Rev. Neal O'Brien,

⁷³ "Riverview: A Community Challenge," *Asheville Citizen-Times*, May 28, 1953, 16.

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Judge Shelby E. Horton, Jr., Dr. H. K. Harrison, and C. L. Moore. City Manager Weldon Weir

promised to include a \$25,000 improvement for Walton Street Park on the 1953-54 budget.⁷⁴

Although the City Council approved a \$3,600,000 budget for 1953-54, the largest annual budget since the boom years of the 1920s, only \$5,000 was allocated to Walton Street Park.⁷⁵ Augusta

Barnett, Director of the Recreation Department, speculated that the funds would be used to relocate the wading pool; build pathways and steps up the hill area; improve entrance road and parking facilities; fill in an area in front of the swimming pool for spectator seating; build a softball diamond; install permanent benches in tennis courts; install a drinking fountain and street lights.⁷⁶ The extensive list indicates how many improvements were overdue for the park.

Beyond the small improvements, extensive regrading of the kind that would have reclaimed more useful green space in the park was indefinitely postponed.⁷⁷ Despite repeated disappointments, small victories were still celebrated. Asheville resident Lawrence Gilliam proudly recalled the installation of the softball field in the 1950s, "I was on the City Parks and Recreation Advisory Board when [the softball diamond] was built through the Outdoor Recreational Funds. This [was] the only regulation Little League baseball field and regulation softball field in the corporate City limits that [was] lighted."⁷⁸

The city manager turned to several repeated tactics in his defense of the budget decision: he explained lack of attendance as a reason for underfunding (rather than considering that

⁷⁴ "Riverview Park - Additional Facilities Requested," June 11, 1953, *Minutes of the Proceedings of the Council* No. 32, 532, City Council Archives, Asheville City Hall, Asheville, NC; "Group Seeks Negro Park Improvements," *Asheville Citizen-Times*, June 12, 1953, 15.

⁷⁵ "\$3,600,000 Budget Slated for Asheville," *Asheville Citizen-Times*, July 9, 1953, 15.

⁷⁶ "Hill Street Recreation Area for Negroes is Recommended," *Asheville Citizen-Times*, July 15, 1953, 20.

⁷⁷ "Negro Recreational Facilities," *Minutes of the Proceedings of the Council* No. 32, 548, City Council Archives, Asheville City Hall, Asheville, NC.

⁷⁸ Lawrence Gilliam, Interview with Karen VanEman, November 8, 2007, Oral History Collections, Special Collections and University Archives, Ramsey Library at UNC Asheville, Asheville, NC.

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underfunding was discouraging use), and distracted by promising other, different, amenities. In protest against the declined \$25,000 allocation for Walton Street Park, four Black citizens—Harold T. Epps, attorney and chairman of the committee; Ruben J. Dailey, attorney; Mrs. Z. B. Cook and W. R. Saxon—addressed the City Council in August about the “appallingly inadequate” facilities for the African American population. They said Walton Street Pool was “entirely inadequate for the Negro population.” City Manager Weir defended the reduction of funds from \$25,000 to \$5,000 on the grounds that other parks in the city were also denied additional funds. Weir also cited declining attendance at Walton Pool, which Saxon attributed in part to inadequate bus facilities to the site. Weir further pointed to the proposed development of Campbell’s Woods at Hill Street School, which the city was promoting as a city-best recreational field for the Black community, as an explanation for deferred improvements at Walton Street Park.⁷⁹ The implication on the part of city officials that the Black population could only reasonably expect a single example of each urban amenity—whether it be a pool, a city park, or an athletic complex—was used by city officials throughout the history of the park to defend ongoing neglect.

As the city continued to defer maintenance and improvement of the Walton Street Park and Pool, Black activists in Asheville began to request that the city make other segregated facilities available to both races. Citing the ground-breaking example of the Municipal Golf Course being made available to Black golfers two days a week, Harold T. Epps petitioned the City Council to open various “play spots” in the city, including Recreation Park Pool and Malvern Hills Pool, to the Black population. In discussing the petition, City Council underscored

⁷⁹ “Four Negroes Appear Before City Council,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, August 14, 1953, 9.

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its existing policy forbidding African Americans to use Recreation Park and Malvern Hills Park, as well as the swimming pools. Yet Council minutes also included explicit mention of the October hearings of the United States Supreme Court, regarding *Brown vs. Board of Education*, and suggested postponing any decision until after the final rulings had been made.⁸⁰

The City of Asheville strategically postponed the desegregation of its pools, even after the Supreme Court decisions on *Brown vs. Board of Education* were made in 1954 and 1955. As in many cities in the country, metaphors of racial contamination became literal where pools were concerned, and whites expressed fears based on “racist ideas of unclean bodies.”⁸¹ When costly repairs needed for Recreation Park Pool threatened to close the pool for the summer of 1956, the *Asheville Citizen-Times* alluded to the threat of desegregation in its coverage: “If [Recreation Park Pool] is shut down, it would appear to solve at least that facet of the city’s problem in meeting a Supreme Court edict banning racial segregation at public parks and recreation facilities.”⁸² Recreation Park Pool closed that summer. The *Asheville Citizen-Times* again directly addressed the motivation for closure, writing that it was “a step taken recently to avoid any possible racial clash and because of extensive repairs needed.”⁸³ A new pool at Recreation Park was not built until 1970.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ “Request,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, August 6, 1954, 12; “Recreation Park - Request for Use by Negroes,” July 29, 1954, *Minutes of the Proceedings of the Council* No. 33, 133, City Council Archives, Asheville City Hall, Asheville, NC.

⁸¹ Victoria W. Wolcott, *Race, Riots, and Roller Coasters: The Struggle Over Segregated Recreation in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 95-96; Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 83.

⁸² “Cost Estimate Awaited on Pool Repairs,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, March 24, 1956, 9.

⁸³ “No More Free Swimming?” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, May 16, 1956, 11.

⁸⁴ “Recreation Park - Swimming Pool - Repairs,” April 5, 1956, *Minutes of the Proceedings of the Council* No. 33, 288, City Council Archives, Asheville City Hall, Asheville, NC; “City Council OKs Low Bids on New Pool,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, May 1, 1970, 17.

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With Recreation Park Pool closed, Malvern Hills Pools and Walton Street Pools were the two remaining city pools. After 1956, segregation of the two city pools was maintained through precedent rather than policy. The city's parks and pools were no longer explicitly associated with respective races in official communications, yet city budgets maintained a hierarchy. For budget year 1961-1962, for example, Walton Street Park's overall budget was \$19,409; Malvern Hills Park's was \$25,909; and Recreation Park's was \$40,270.⁸⁵ Programs such as the water safety training and swim lessons offered by the Buncombe County Red Cross Chapter continued to be offered separately to white and Black children at Malvern Hills and Walton Street respectively.⁸⁶ Race-based programs such as the Negro Mid-Summer Recreation Tennis tournament continued to be held proudly at Walton Street Park.⁸⁷ During this period the two pools were managed "equally," open the same hours and charging the same daily use fees.⁸⁸

As in other parts of the South, desegregation in Asheville took place incrementally, and frequently as the result of direct action. State parks in the south began desegregating between 1955 and 1963, the vast majority without any legal action needed.⁸⁹ School desegregation was more complex, and thus more gradual. Asheville began planning to desegregate its schools in 1959, following a court case in Yancey County in which Black students had petitioned for the desegregation of their public schools. Black students in Asheville led by James Ferguson initially organized in 1959 to convince the School Board not to integrate, but rather to construct a larger

⁸⁵ Community Research Associates, Inc., "Prelude to Planning in Buncombe County, North Carolina," (New York: Community Research Associates, Inc., October 1963), 374-6, Buncombe County Special Collections, Pack Memorial Library, Asheville, NC.

⁸⁶ "Water Safety Courses Open Here Monday," *Asheville Citizen-Times*, June 25, 1955, 7.

⁸⁷ "Finals Set Today," *Asheville Citizen-Times*, August 14, 1957, 15.

⁸⁸ "Pools at Two Parks to be Opened Friday," *Asheville Citizen-Times*, June 7, 1956, 17.

⁸⁹ William E. O'Brien, *Landscapes of Exclusion: State Parks and Jim Crow in the American South* (Amherst, MA: Library of American Landscape History, 2022), 144-145.

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high school to replace Stephens-Lee High School.⁹⁰ Ferguson's school group became the Asheville Student Committee on Racial Equality (ASCORE), and were responsible for organizing a sit-in campaign that successfully, and largely peacefully, led to the desegregation of dozens of downtown businesses.⁹¹ Following the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, desegregation and resistant violence both increased. Asheville's School Board began by integrating the lower grades, then proceeded to shutter Stephens-Lee High School in 1965, sending Black adolescents to South French Broad High School.⁹² Asheville High School was not desegregated until 1969, a move that was met with violent protests.⁹³

Urban Renewal

Alongside the massive social changes taking place in Asheville during the 1960s, unprecedented physical transformations began as well. During the 1960s and 1970s, Southside—then called East Riverside—became the site of Asheville's second urban renewal project and ultimately the largest urban renewal project in the southeast.⁹⁴ The East Riverside Urban Renewal Project contained 420 acres to the east of the French Broad River and south of downtown. The neighborhood was bounded by Hillard Avenue to the north; Coxe Avenue and Southside Avenue to the east; Oakland Road and Walton Street Park to the south; and the Southern Railway, Depot Street, and Clingman Avenue to the west.⁹⁵ East Riverside was the

⁹⁰ Parker, "Appalachian Activists," 54-60.

⁹¹ Parker, "Appalachian Activists," 61-66, 77; Sarah Judson, "Nasty Branch Kid," 342.

⁹² Sarah Judson, "Nasty Branch Kid," 344.

⁹³ Parker, "Appalachian Activists," 91-92.

⁹⁴ Ndiaye, "Southside/East Riverside," 11.

⁹⁵ "Survey and Planning Application, East Riverside, Asheville, North Carolina," August 21, 1964, Box 48, Folder 12, HACA archives Part 7: East Riverside Project Files (M2007.12-7), Special Collections and University Archives, Ramsey Library at UNC Asheville, Asheville, NC; "Exhibit A: Boundary Description East Riverside Urban Renewal Area, Project No. N. C. R-48, Asheville, North Carolina," undated, Box 48, Folder 9, HACA

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second large-scale renewal project that the Asheville Redevelopment Commission (ARC)

undertook, the first being the smaller Civic Redevelopment Project in 1963 that aimed to revitalize downtown and increase tourist accommodations by clearing 128 structures.⁹⁶ For both projects, the ARC worked cooperatively with the Asheville Housing Authority (AHA), which had been organized in 1940 with a focus on public housing development.⁹⁷ The Urban Renewal Plan for the East Riverside Project published in December 1965 focused primarily on the clearance or improvement of substandard housing—the city estimated that half of Asheville’s dilapidated housing stood in East Riverside—and secondarily on upgrading neighborhood amenities including parks, improving unsafe traffic conditions, and upgrading water and sewer lines.⁹⁸ In addition to extensive demolition, the project radically transformed the landscape of the neighborhood and included the regrading of Livingston and Depot Streets; the extension of Livingston Street to meet Depot Street; the removal of the southern portion of Southside Avenue; and the elimination of Herrman, Beech, Black, Tiernan, and Nelson Streets.⁹⁹

Walton Street Park was curiously omitted from most official planning documents produced in the lead-up to the East Riverside Urban Renewal Project, despite repeated references to the importance of public parks for community cohesion and childhood safety. Ruth Mace’s *Inside East Riverside*, a diagnostic survey of the neighborhood funded by the Redevelopment Commission in 1966, indicated (incorrectly) that the southern boundary of the redevelopment

archives Part 7: East Riverside Project Files (M2007.12-7), Special Collections and University Archives, Ramsey Library at UNC Asheville, Asheville, NC.

⁹⁶ The Asheville Redevelopment Commission (ARC) was established in 1958 to coordinate with the Asheville Housing Authority (AHA) on urban renewal projects. Nickollof, “Urban Renewal,” 18, 46-54.

⁹⁷ Sarah Judson, “Nasty Branch Kid,” 328-9; Nickollof, “Urban Renewal,” 46.

⁹⁸ “Redevelopment Plan East Riverside Urban Renewal Area Project No. N.C. R-48,” December 1954, 2-3, Box 48, Folder 1, HACA archives Part 7: East Riverside Project Files (M2007.12-7), Special Collections and University Archives, Ramsey Library at UNC Asheville, Asheville, NC; Nickollof, “Urban Renewal,” 59.

⁹⁹ Rodney Brooks, “East Riverside,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, July 2, 1978, 47.

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area was Oakland Road, just north of the park. Mace's report focused on the need for playgrounds to get school-aged children and teenagers off of the streets, yet did not directly name Walton Street Park in either its prose or its maps.¹⁰⁰ Also in 1966, an informational booklet titled "East Riverside Asheville, NC," produced by Eric Hill Associates, Inc., did not mention Walton Street Park in its prose, nor include it on the neighborhood map, despite its call for such amenities: "East Riverside is lacking in community facilities. Those that do exist do not adequately serve the neighborhood residents. There is a need for parks and playgrounds in which children can play. The school sites are limited and do not provide enough space for athletic facilities and recreational use."¹⁰¹

A final document produced in 1966 by the firm Barbour-Cooper & Associates, Inc., provides a partial explanation for the repeated oversight of Walton Street Park from official documents. The neighborhood analysis of the Asheville Metropolitan Area broke the city into 36 separate Study Areas, and evaluated the environmental and social blight conditions in each district. The report labeled the land to the south of Oakland Road, which included Walton Street Park, as "Study Area 12," a region of "vacant land and industrial activities." The park is not mentioned, except to say "About six acres in the northwest is included in the Asheville Redevelopment Commission's current East Riverside Redevelopment Project."¹⁰² Because the park was included in the East Riverside Redevelopment Project, it was held under the auspices of the federal government and thus frequently excluded from city planning studies commissioned

¹⁰⁰ Mace, *Inside East Riverside*, 11, 16, 41, 54-60.

¹⁰¹ Eric Hill Associates, Inc., "East Riverside Asheville, NC," [ca. 1966], Buncombe County Special Collections, Pack Memorial Library, Asheville, NC.

¹⁰² Redevelopment recommendations in the report exclude two districts in Asheville – East Riverside Redevelopment Project and the Civic Redevelopment Project – from their advice because urban renewal programs for those districts were already well underway. Sterling S. Winans, "Park and Recreation Development: City of Asheville North Carolina," (Report submitted to City Council of Asheville, August 1966), 164.

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during the 1960s and into the 1970s.¹⁰³ This had the unfortunate effect of keeping the park invisible to federal agents and planners who knew the neighborhood primarily through these published surveys.

Within urban renewal literature, Walton Park and Pool were also frequently overlooked in order to draw attention to the new parks that redevelopment promised to bring to the neighborhood. Planners at the time recommended 10 acres of park space per 1,000 residents, which would have required roughly 53 acres of park space in East Riverside. Existing park space included Aston Park at 10.3 acres; Murray Park at 2.5 acres; and Walton Park at 5.7 acres. (Walton Park's lot today measures 4.37 acres and has not been reduced in area since the initial purchase of the property in February 1938. It is unclear where the measurement of 5.7 acres originated.)¹⁰⁴ The 18.5 total acres of park space left East Riverside with a deficit of 34.5 acres of park space.¹⁰⁵ The ARC met its desired proportion of park space by expanding Murray Park by 8.5 acres and disposing of 24.8 acres of previously developed parcels along the "Nasty Branch," south of present-day Choctaw and Ralph Streets. These creekside lots stood in flood zones that were deemed unacceptable for redevelopment. According to research conducted by Priscilla Ndiaye Robinson into the redevelopment of Southside, more than 50 businesses listed in the 1963 City Directory were displaced in the transformation of Choctaw and Depot Streets into

¹⁰³ When the city produced an updated neighborhood analysis and renewal program in 1973 and 1974, the entire East Riverside Redevelopment Project (Study Area 4) was excluded from evaluation and denoted as such: "Publicly Owned Areas – No Action Projected." Metropolitan Planning Board, "Phase II – Asheville Rehabilitation and Renewal Program and Neighborhood Analysis," (Asheville, NC: Metropolitan Planning Board, June 1974), 6.

¹⁰⁴ Deed book 516, page 150, Buncombe County Register of Deeds, Asheville, NC.

¹⁰⁵ "East Riverside Urban Renewal Area, Project No. N.C. R-48, Amendment No. 6, Ammendatory Application for Loan and Grant," April 1973, Box 48, Folder 14, HACA archives Part 7: East Riverside Project Files (M2007.12-7), Special Collections and University Archives, Ramsey Library at UNC Asheville, Asheville, NC.

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parkland.¹⁰⁶ Promotional literature for the park space spun the loss of a commercial district as a benefit to the neighborhood: “All stores and businesses will be removed from the flooded section of the neighborhood. This area will then be landscaped and converted to a pleasant, attractive park.”¹⁰⁷ The AHA’s urban renewal director Larry Holt was pleased with the removal of the “commercial area that split the neighborhood.”¹⁰⁸ Reflecting on the loss of the city’s premier Black business district, Reverend Wesley Grant attempted to quantify the destruction: “In the East Riverside area, we have lost more than 1,100 homes, six beauty parlors, five barber shops, five filling stations, fourteen grocery stores, three laundromats, eight apartment houses, seven churches, three shoe shops, two cabinet shops, two auto body shops, one hotel, five funeral homes, one hospital, and three doctor’s offices.”¹⁰⁹ His eulogy made the subtle argument that the business district had centered, not split, the neighborhood.

Literature on the East Riverside Urban Renewal Project estimated that 676 Black families, 305 of them who had owned their homes, would be relocated by the program and that at least 50 businesses would be displaced.¹¹⁰ In the end, 757 of 1275 structures in East Riverside were demolished.¹¹¹ A third of the cleared land went to the AHA for public housing; a third to the city for streets and park expansion; and a third for private market resale.¹¹² The AHA planned 625 low-rent apartment units throughout East Riverside to re-house displaced residents.

¹⁰⁶ The loss of businesses as a result of urban renewal in Asheville is systematically tracked and mapped in the Community Remapping section of the Urban Renewal Impact project: <https://urbanrenewalimpact.org/>.

¹⁰⁷ Eric Hill Associates, Inc., “East Riverside.”

¹⁰⁸ Rodney Brooks, “East Riverside,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, July 2, 1978, 47; Henry Robinson, “Giant Earth Movers Giving East Riverside Terrain a New Look,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, August 24, 1975, 51.

¹⁰⁹ Ndiaye, “Southside/East Riverside,” 11.

¹¹⁰ “East Riverside N.C. R-48,” undated fact sheet, Box 48, Folder 5, HACA archives Part 7: East Riverside Project Files (M2007.12-7), Special Collections and University Archives, Ramsey Library at UNC Asheville, Asheville, NC.

¹¹¹ Rodney Brooks, “East Riverside,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, July 2, 1978, 47.

¹¹² “Dailey Fears Exodus Will Harm Purpose of Riverside Project,” *Asheville Citizen*, February 21, 1967,

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The Erskine-Walton Apartments, completed in 1970, were multiplex units surrounded by green space that provided 174 new units in the neighborhood surrounding Walton Street Park.¹¹³

Density of the privately redeveloped residential areas was diminished by encouraging homeowners to purchase adjacent lots as “garden lots,” with the promise that they would not redevelop them.¹¹⁴ According to the terms set out by the AHA, the project was a success: housing stock was improved; sewers and roads upgraded; and density decreased to standards more common in suburban subdivisions.

The effect of urban renewal on the social fabric of African Americans in Asheville remains much harder to apprehend than the physical transformation. Despite early warnings that demolition and reconstruction would not improve residents’ lives without additional policies that addressed systemic poverty, the ARC focused overwhelmingly on material and infrastructural solutions.¹¹⁵ Throughout the planning and demolition, East Riverside residents challenged the paternalistic approach of ARC, AHA, and City Council, which treated the Black population as “passive beneficiaries,” of urban improvements.¹¹⁶ Studies of the project since the 1970s have documented experiences of alienation from the planning processes: “Residents did not feel that they were full and equal participants,” in the urban renewal planning process. Between urban renewal and desegregation, the ability of residents to patronize black-owned businesses, or to establish their own, disappeared almost entirely.¹¹⁷ Furthermore, the desegregation of Asheville

¹¹³ HACA, *What is it All About?*

¹¹⁴ Contracts for Sale of Land, Disposal Parcels No. 129 and No. 133, Box 85, Folder 6 and 9, HACA archives Part 7: East Riverside Project Files (M2007.12-7), Special Collections and University Archives, Ramsey Library at UNC Asheville, Asheville, NC.

¹¹⁵ Nickollof, “Urban Renewal,” 73; Community Research Associates, Inc., “Prelude to Planning in Buncombe County, North Carolina,” (October 1963).

¹¹⁶ Nickollof, “Urban Renewal,” 98.

¹¹⁷ J. Rosie Tighe and Timothy J. Opelt, “Collective Memory and Planning: The Continuing Legacy of Urban Renewal in Asheville, NC,” *Journal of Planning History* (November 4, 2014): 11-16.

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schools in 1972 led to the compounded loss of schools that had been cornerstones of community and family life in the city. And the disruption of generational social networks by forced relocation, what Dr. Mindy Fullilove named “root shock,” had long-lasting effects on residents at both individual and communal levels.¹¹⁸ Journalist Henry Robinson articulated the loss of his Southside neighborhood as the loss of “our place of shelter from the harsh realities of a racist society.”¹¹⁹ Throughout the Jim Crow era, the Black neighborhoods in Asheville had allowed residents to live their lives without being forced to confront segregation on a daily basis, and to participate in a local economy that countered the inequities of white supremacy.¹²⁰ The simultaneous forces of urban renewal and desegregation disrupted almost all of the physical and institutional foundations of Black life in Asheville.

Amidst the radical change happening around it, Walton Park and Pool remained a constant in the neighborhood. Residents of the surviving housing and newly established public housing alike gathered, took swimming lessons, and played sports at the park. Former resident Priscilla Ndiaye Robinson recalled a neighborhood in which kids enjoyed significant independence and had the freedom to walk to and from the park, overseen by the watchful eyes of neighbors.¹²¹ Historian Sarah Judson recalls the same “parenting by neighbors” taking place in Southside, writing that, “adults in the neighborhood valued children and monitored them closely, reinforcing the moral code of the community.”¹²² Robinson also remembered the park remaining

¹¹⁸ Sarah M. Judson, “Twilight of a Neighborhood,” *Crossroads: A Publication of the North Carolina Humanities Council* 14.1 (Summer/Fall 2010), 1; Judson, “Nasty Branch Kid,” 349; Nickollof, “Urban Renewal,” 71.

¹¹⁹ Henry Robinson, “Looking for Answers in Memories of a Southside Boyhood,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, May 25, 1992, 7.

¹²⁰ Sarah Judson, “Nasty Branch Kid,” 332; Priscilla Ndiaye Robinson, interview with Josi Ward, February 16, 2022.

¹²¹ Priscilla Ndiaye Robinson, interview with Josi Ward, February 16, 2022.

¹²² Sarah Judson, “Nasty Branch Kid,” 337.

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a hub of Black community life even after desegregation began, recalling that when the county

fair would be set up in the park every summer, it drew residents from Black neighborhoods all

over the city: Stumptown, Burton Street, East End, Southside, Shiloh.¹²³



Figure 3. Aerial view of Walton Street Park, 1974.

Source: HACA NCR-48 Walton, Box 49, Folder 30: Aerial Photos (South French Broad) n.d., HACA archives

Part 7: East Riverside Project Files (M2007.12-7), Special Collections and University Archives,

Ramsey Library at UNC Asheville, Asheville, NC.

Another constant during the years of urban renewal was the repeated and urgent call for park improvements that were rarely met. In the early years of the East Riverside Urban Renewal Project, small improvements were made to the park. The city installed an asphalt basketball court

¹²³ Priscilla Ndiaye Robinson, interview with Josi Ward, February 16, 2022.

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immediately to the north of the pool sometime between 1966 and 1971.¹²⁴ City Council also

approved necessary repairs for Walton Pool at their April 1970 meeting, which funded the resurfacing of the pool and installation of a new filtration system.¹²⁵ At that same meeting, the City Council approved the allocation of \$102,707 to build a new 150 by 171 foot pool at Recreation Park.¹²⁶ Planners continued to call for improvements to Walton Street Park. A 1971 study of Asheville's open space and recreational areas included the addition of five to ten acres to Walton Street Park in its ten priorities to be completed by 1976.¹²⁷ Expansion of the park was never funded.

Maintenance of the Walton Park and Pool since the 1970s has continued to be inconsistent and insufficient. The bathhouse and pool were significantly damaged in the spring of 1972: all the bathhouse windows were shattered; 10 toilets were smashed with a sledgehammer; valves and copper pipe and all 12 shower heads were stolen. Vandals also knocked out all the floodlights in the park. The total damage came to \$7,000 and caused a delay in the opening of the pool that summer.¹²⁸ By 1974, the pool remained in bad enough shape that the Model Cities Task Force called it a danger to children in the area, and recommended that the Parks and Recreation Advisory Board not open the pool for the summer unless improvements were made.¹²⁹ The Chairman of the Parks and Recreation Advisory Board, William Peyton, admitted that with

¹²⁴ The City of Asheville City Demonstration Agency, *The Second Year*, 64; Metropolitan Planning Board, "Open Space and Recreational Areas Plan," 10.

¹²⁵ "Malvern Hills and Walton Street Swimming Pools - Renovation," April 30, 1970, *Minutes of the Proceedings of the Council* No. 37, 68, City Council Archives, Asheville City Hall, Asheville, NC; "Vandals Wreck Park's Bathhouse," *Asheville Times*, May 2, 1972.

¹²⁶ "City Council OKs Low Bids on New Pool," *Asheville Citizen-Times*, May 1, 1970, 17.

¹²⁷ Metropolitan Planning Board, "Open Space and Recreational Areas Plan," 41, map 3.

¹²⁸ "Vandals Wreck Park's Bathhouse," *Asheville Times*, May 2, 1972.

¹²⁹ The Model Cities Task Force was an arm of President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, whose grants for housing rehabilitation, neighborhood improvement, and economic development were managed locally through the AHA. Sarah Judson, "Nasty Branch Kid," 328-9.

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regard to Walton Street Park, “we have been long on promises and short of improvements.”

Cracks were developing in the pool, the bathhouse was not yet repaired, mud from the ballfield was flooding the pool, and the lights had not yet been replaced. In the meantime, no funds were being provided to bus children to other city pools.¹³⁰

Small upgrades took place in the years that followed the vandalization, typically in tandem with improvements made at the other municipal pools. City Council approved coin-operated lockers for all three pools in December 1974; playground equipment for West Asheville and Walton Street Parks in May 1975; lawn maintenance equipment was approved for Malvern Hills Park and Walton Street Park in 1980; and the paving of parking lots at Walton Street Park and Kenilworth Park in February 1982.¹³¹ According to aerial photos of the park, the tennis area in the northeast of the park had been removed and re-graded by 1985.¹³² Despite these incremental expenditures, the city never addressed the extensive repairs that had been called for since the Model Cities Task Force raised its objections in 1974.

Recent History

In 1986, Councilwoman Wilhelmina Bratton renewed a campaign to draw attention to the diminished state of Walton Street Park and Pool. She invited her fellow council members to a “bring your own bag” lunch on July 8, 1986, to see first-hand the poor condition of the Walton

¹³⁰ “Assistance Asked for Walton Park,” *Asheville Citizen*, May 9, 1974.

¹³¹ “Bids - Coin-Operated Lockers for Malvern Hill, Walton Street, and Recreation Park Pools,” *Minutes of the Proceedings of the Council* No. 40, 94, City Council Archives, Asheville City Hall, Asheville, NC; “Bids - Playground Equipment for Riverside and West Asheville Parks,” *Minutes of the Proceedings of the Council* No. 40, 245-246, City Council Archives, Asheville City Hall, Asheville, NC; “Approval of the Consent Agenda,” *Minutes of the Proceedings of the Council* No. 47-A, 91-92, City Council Archives, Asheville City Hall, Asheville, NC; “Resolution No. 82-20,” *Minutes of the Proceedings of the Council* No. 48, 387-388, City Council Archives, Asheville City Hall, Asheville, NC.

¹³² Aerial view of Walton Street Park, NCDOT Historical Aerial Imagery Index, March 25, 1985.

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Street Park and Pool. Mayor W. Louis Bisette, Jr. asked the City Manager to investigate these conditions, and encouraged council to attend.¹³³ It was not until four years later in February 1990 that City Council approved funding to complete renovations to the Walton Street Pool.¹³⁴ It is most likely that this round of funding led to the construction of a shed-roof addition on the south elevation of the bathhouse.¹³⁵ It is also likely, although unconfirmed, that this renovation included the refinishing of the bathhouse interior with the porcelain tiles that remain on site today. By 1996, trees had been planted along the bank on the north side of the park where the tennis courts had once stood.¹³⁶

Since 2010, the deterioration of Walton Street Pool has again become a focus of journalists and city activists. Responding to rumors that the city planned to demolish the pool, representatives of the Southside neighborhood published a plea in *The Urban News* to preserve the pool. They wrote, “The only people who will be emotionally disheartened and affected by the destruction of Walton Pool is the black community, a community that continues to be underrepresented, silenced, and squeezed out of what we consider to be our history. Soon there will be nothing of that history that we can share with the current and next generation of black children.”¹³⁷ More than 800 residents of Southside signed a petition to “Save Walton Street

¹³³ “Councilman Bratton - Walton Street Pool,” July 1, 1986, *Minutes of the Proceedings of the Council* No. 54, 121, City Council Archives, Asheville City Hall, Asheville, NC.

¹³⁴ “Ordinance No. 1828 - Budget Amendment for Walton Street Pool Improvements,” February 20, 1990, *Minutes of the Proceedings of the Council* No. 57, 338, City Council Archives, Asheville City Hall, Asheville, NC.

¹³⁵ SHPO survey materials date the addition to 1971, however it was built sometime after 1985. The addition is clearly not visible in a 1974 aerial photo of the park taken by the Asheville Housing Authority, and cannot be discerned in NCDOT aerial photos from 1985. “Walton Street Park (BN05664),” Historic Property Survey Summary, North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office, Raleigh, NC, 2011; “HACA NCR048 Walton,” 1974, Folder 30: Aerial Photos (South French Broad) n.d., Box 49, HACA archives Part 7: East Riverside Project Files (M2007.12-7), Special Collections and University Archives, Ramsey Library at UNC Asheville, Asheville, NC; Aerial view of Walton Street Park, NCDOT Historical Aerial Imagery Index, March 25, 1985.

¹³⁶ Aerial view of Walton Street Park, NCDOT Historical Aerial Imagery Index, January 21, 1996.

¹³⁷ “History of Walton Street Pool,” December 12, 2010, <https://theurbannews.com/our-town/2010/history-of-walton-street-pool/> (accessed January 2022).

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Park/Pool” in 2015.¹³⁸ “For the [Southside] neighborhood, the fate of the pool is largely tied to the fate of Southside,” said Robert Hardy, president of the Southside Organization: “This is the last bastion of gentrification and it starts by taking away this pool.” Director of Parks for the city Roderick Simmons explained to *The Asheville Citizen-Times* that between 2011 and 2015, Walton had the lowest expenses and lowest revenue of the three city pools, but emphatically denied that the city planned to shut down the pool.¹³⁹

An evaluation of the city pools conducted by Aquatics H2O and Mathews Architecture in 2016 concluded that both Malvern Hills Pool and Walton Street Pool had reached the end of their life.¹⁴⁰ The consultants estimated that Malvern Hills Pool would cost up to \$2,362,873 million to repair and recommended replacement rather than restoration. They estimated that Walton Street Pool would cost as much as \$1,359,482 million to repair and recommended replacement rather than restoration.¹⁴¹ Responding to the consultant’s findings, Simmons admitted the city was considering replacing the Walton Street Pool with a new facility at the Dr. Wesley Grant Sr. Center: “It is more accessible. There is more available land, which means the pool could potentially be bigger, depending on the community’s wants and needs.”¹⁴² Walton Street Pool has been closed to the public since the summer of 2021, and Asheville has announced plans to

¹³⁸ “Save Walton Street Park/Pool,” 2015, <https://www.change.org/p/asheville-city-council-save-walton-street-park-pool?redirect=false> (accessed March 2021).

¹³⁹ “What’s the Fate of Asheville’s Pools?” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, October 13, 2015, A1; “Public Pools Can no Longer be Neglected,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, October 19, 2015, A6.

¹⁴⁰ The *Asheville Citizen-Times* summation of the report was full of basic misinformation, reporting that Malvern Hills Pool was built 94 years ago (rather than 81) and Walton Street Pool was built 77 years old (rather than 69). Beth Walton, “Report: City Pools would Cost Millions to Repair,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, January 30, 2017, A4.

¹⁴¹ Mathews Architecture, P.A., “City of Asheville Pool Facility Assessments Walton Street, Malvern Hills and Recreation Park,” Presentation prepared for City of Asheville, December 2015, Collection of Mathews Architecture, P.A.

¹⁴² “Walton Street Pool’s Future up in the Air,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, January 30, 2017, A1-A4.

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replace it with a 3,275 square foot pool at the Dr. Wesley Grant Sr. Center.¹⁴³ As planned, the

new pool will be 725 square feet smaller than the Walton Street Pool. The city has announced no plans to close or replace Malvern Hills Pool.

In response to the community pleas and anger at the closing of the pool, in 2022 the Asheville Parks & Recreation Department conducted a series of community outreach events and distributed surveys citywide requesting suggestions for the renewal of Walton Street Park's other amenities. Respondents requested that the under-utilized softball diamond be replaced with a multi-use recreational field; that the basketball courts be re-oriented; and that a walking trail be constructed.¹⁴⁴ Construction began in May 2023 and has resulted in a newly reprogrammed assortment of open spaces surrounding the pool complex. The changes are consistent within the long history of the park, which was designed to be, and remains, an adaptive and evolving site.

Although Walton Street Park stood alone within the city as a large-scale outdoor recreational hub for African Americans, there are several sites that played a comparable role in the city's African American history. Perhaps its closest historic comparison was the building at 93 Valley Street, a two-story brick building that was renovated in 1940 with WPA funds to serve as the Valley Street Recreation Center. The Center served as the indoor hub of Black recreation planning through the 1940s and 1950s, organizing events that took place at Walton Street Park. It was demolished during the 1970s urban renewal of the East End neighborhood.¹⁴⁵ Mountain

¹⁴³ "Asheville Enters into \$6.7 Million Contract for Grant Center Expansion, Plans Include Pool," *Asheville Citizen-Times*, January 18, 2022.

¹⁴⁴ "Walton Street Park," July 26, 2023, ashevillenc.gov/projects/Walton-street-park (accessed July 2023).

¹⁴⁵ "Negro Center of Recreation is Established," *Asheville Times*, September 20, 1940; Andrea Clark "Twilight of a Neighborhood: Asheville's East End," <https://specialcollections.buncombecounty.org/online-photo-exhibits/twilight-of-a-neighborhood-ashevilles-east-end-circa-1970>; Harlan Joel Gradin, "About 'Twilight of a Neighborhood: Asheville's East End, 1970,'" *Crossroads: A Publication of the North Carolina Humanities Council* 14.1 (Summer/Fall 2010), 4.

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Street School, the first school for Black students in Asheville that also served as the site of the first pool for the Black population, was demolished and replaced by a modern building in the mid-1960s following the Brown vs. Board of Education decision in 1954.¹⁴⁶ Stephens-Lee High School faced a similar fate; all but the gymnasium building were demolished in 1975, following the closing of the school to all students in 1965.¹⁴⁷ Hill Street School (renamed Isaac Dickson in Elementary in 1991), which was the site of one of Asheville's longest-standing African American schools and playgrounds, survived urban renewal but was recently razed to make space for a new complex.¹⁴⁸ Each of these since-demolished sites served as predecessors and complements to Walton Street Park and Pool, although none compared in significance to its singular role in the city's history.

¹⁴⁶ Willie Cameron, Jr., "What Ever Happened to Asheville's African American Community?" February 13, 2014, theurbannews.com/opinion/2014/what-ever-happened-to-ashevilles-african-american-community/.

¹⁴⁷ "Stephens-Lee High School Joins City's Old History," *Asheville Citizen-Times*, April 20, 1975, 34.

¹⁴⁸ "Some City Schools May Change Name," *Asheville Citizen-Times*, April 17, 1991, 72; "'Big Dig' Increasing Costs for New Asheville School," *Asheville Citizen-Times*, June 26, 2014.

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NCDOT Historical Aerial Imagery Index
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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 # _____
- recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # _____

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University: UNC Asheville
- Other

Name of repository: Buncombe County Special Collections, Pack Memorial Library, Asheville, NC; Special Collections and University Archives, Ramsey Library at UNC Asheville, Asheville, NC

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): BN5664

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 4.37

Use either the UTM system or latitude/longitude coordinates

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: _____

(enter coordinates to 6 decimal places)

1. Latitude: 35.573777 Longitude: -82.561276

Or

UTM References

Datum (indicated on USGS map):

NAD 1927 or NAD 1983

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- | | | |
|----------|-----------|-----------|
| 1. Zone: | Easting: | Northing: |
| 2. Zone: | Easting: | Northing: |
| 3. Zone: | Easting: | Northing: |
| 4. Zone: | Easting : | Northing: |

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

The entire park, concrete pool, and bathhouse are included in the designation. The boundary of the Walton Street Park and Pool includes the full extent of the 4.37-acre lot (PIN 9648-12-2845-00000) containing the pool, bathhouse, and recreational areas.

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

The National Register boundary for the Walton Street Park and Pool encompasses the concentration of historic resources and structures that are historically associated with and contribute to the site's significance in the areas of Ethnic Heritage-Black, Entertainment/Recreation, and Social History. Although select primary sources estimate that the park originally measured 5.7 acres, the current 4.37-acre lot has not been officially altered since the city purchased the lot in 1938.¹⁴⁹ Because no documentation has been found to clarify the source of the 5.7 acre estimate, nor in what directions the larger park might have extended beyond the current parcel, the boundary of the original lot was chosen as the most reliable limit of the historic park.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title: Josi Ward
organization: Foreground Consulting, LLC
street & number: 70 Woodfin Place, Suite 326C
city or town: Asheville state: NC zip code: 28801
e-mail: josiward@gmail.com
telephone: 828-575-6523
date: July 26, 2023

Additional Documentation

¹⁴⁹ Deed book 516, page 150, Buncombe County Register of Deeds, Asheville, NC.

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Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A **USGS map** or equivalent (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
- **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.
- **Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO, TPO, or FPO for any additional items.)

Photographs

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels (minimum), 3000x2000 preferred, at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map. Each photograph must be numbered and that number must correspond to the photograph number on the photo log. For simplicity, the name of the photographer, photo date, etc. may be listed once on the photograph log and doesn't need to be labeled on every photograph.

Photo Log

Name of Property: Walton Street Park and Pool

City or Vicinity: Asheville

County: Buncombe

State: NC

Photographer: Josi Ward

Date Photographed: 4/7/2021, 12/17/2021, 7/25/23

Description of Photograph(s) and number, include description of view indicating direction of camera:

1. Walton Street Park, street entrance from northwest, 7/25/23.
2. Walton Street Bathhouse, view from north, 7/25/23.
3. Walton Street Park, walking trail and bathhouse, view from southeast, 7/25/23.
4. Walton Street Pool and Bathhouse, view from southwest, 12/17/21.
5. Walton Street Pool, view from south, 12/17/21.
6. Walton Street Bathhouse, entrance lobby, 12/17/21.
7. Walton Street Bathhouse, women's room interior, 12/17/21.
8. Walton Street Bathhouse, men's room interior, 12/17/21.
9. Walton Street Park, basketball court and pool complex, view from northwest, 7/25/23.
10. Walton Street Park, walking trail and recreational field, view from northeast, 7/25/23.
11. Walton Street Park, picnic pavilion and playground, view from west, 7/25/23.

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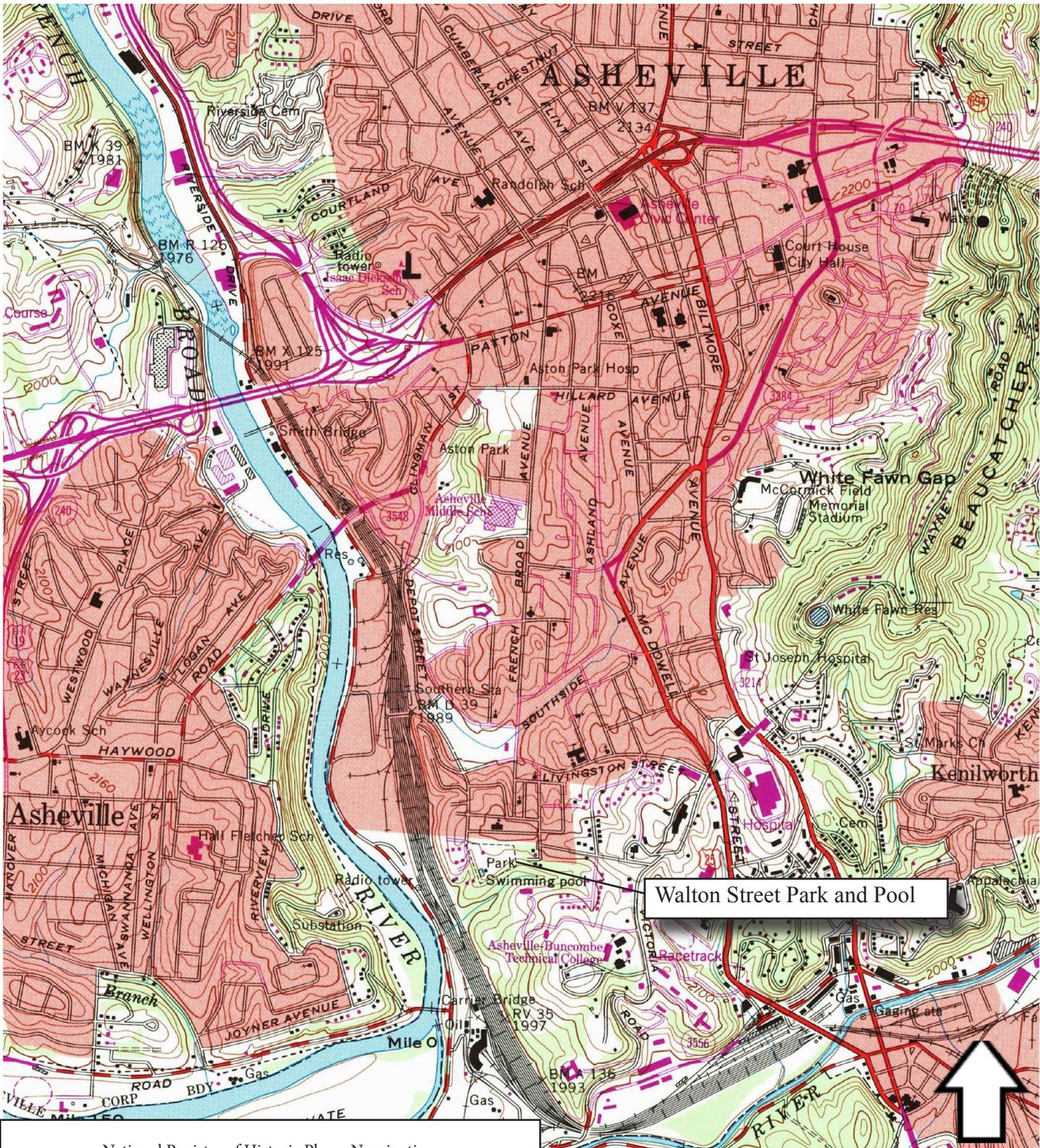
Buncombe County, NC
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et seq.). We may not conduct or sponsor and you are not required to respond to a collection of information unless it displays a currently valid OMB control number.

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for each response using this form is estimated to be between the Tier 1 and Tier 4 levels with the estimate of the time for each tier as follows:

- Tier 1 – 60-100 hours
- Tier 2 – 120 hours
- Tier 3 – 230 hours
- Tier 4 – 280 hours

The above estimates include time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and preparing and transmitting nominations. Send comments regarding these estimates or any other aspect of the requirement(s) to the Service Information Collection Clearance Officer, National Park Service, 1201 Oakridge Drive Fort Collins, CO 80525.

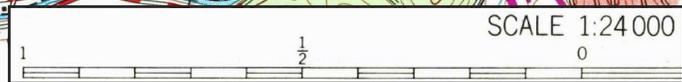


National Register of Historic Places Nomination

Walton Street Park and Pool

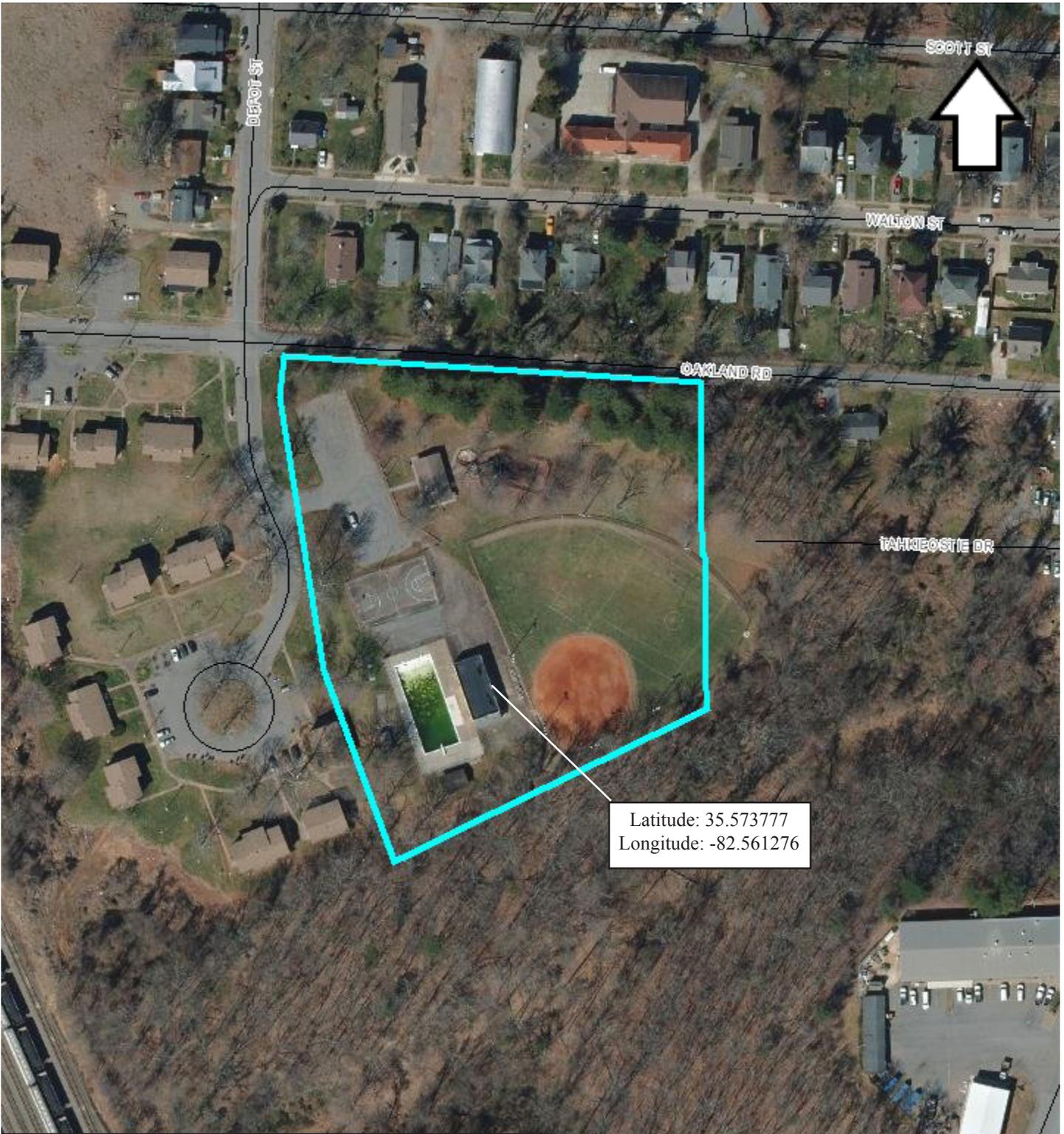
570 Walton Street, Asheville
 Buncombe County, North Carolina

Location Map



Base map: Asheville, North Carolina
 USGS topographic quadrangle map, 1991
 Scale 1:24,000

Map created by Josi Ward/Foreground Consulting, July 2023



National Register of Historic Places Nomination

Walton Street Park and Pool

570 Walton Street, Asheville
Buncombe County, North Carolina

National Register Boundary Map
PIN 9648-12-2845-00000

National Register boundary

Base map: Buncombe County GIS, 2019 aerial view*
*aerial image does not reflect 2023 changes to site

Map created by Josi Ward/Foreground Consulting, July 2023



National Register of Historic Places Nomination

Walton Street Park and Pool

570 Walton Street, Asheville
 Buncombe County, North Carolina

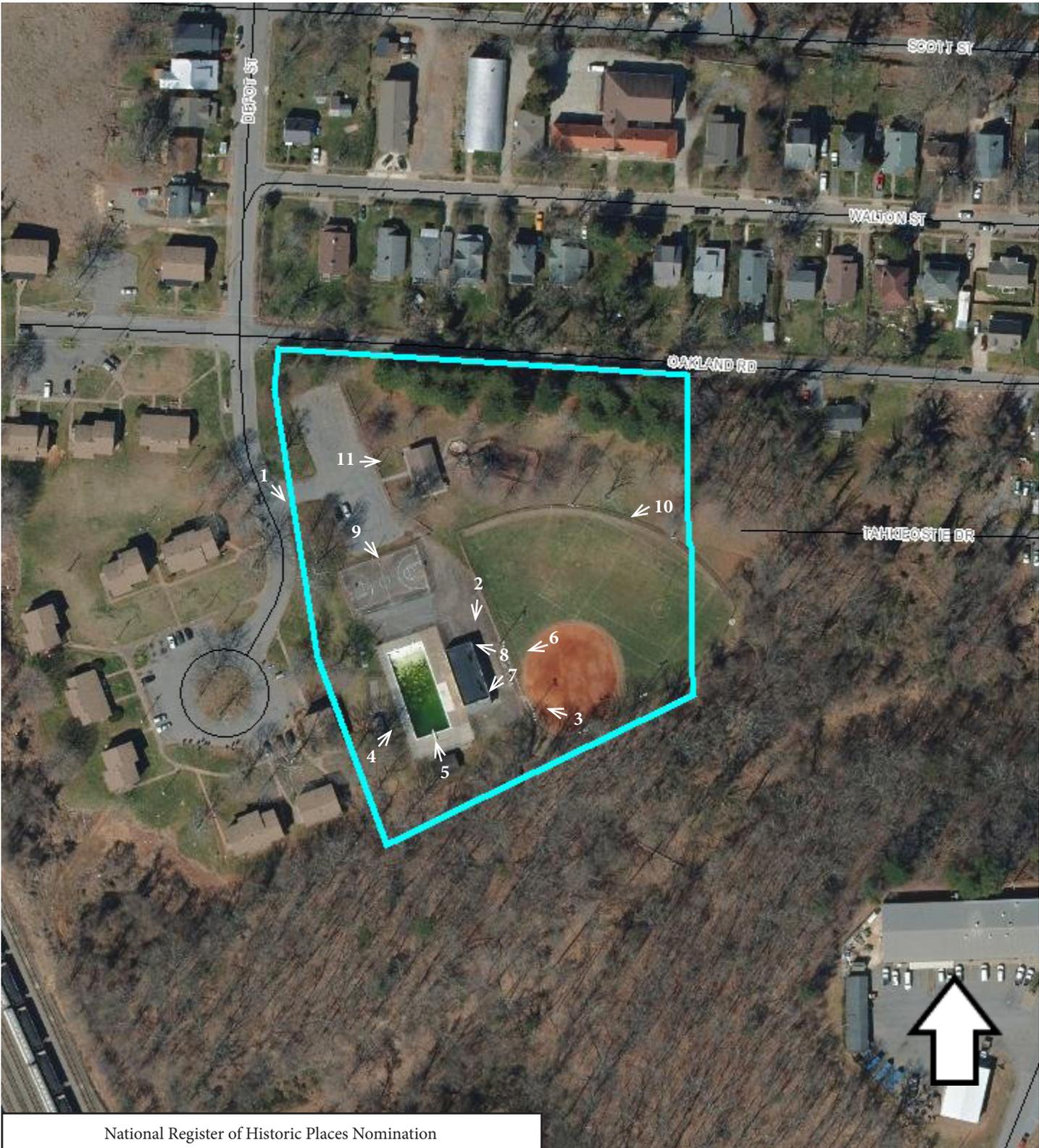
National Register Site Plan

- C-B Contributing Building
- C-S Contributing Site
- C-St Contributing Structure
- NC-S Non-contributing Site
- NC-St Non-contributing Structure

National Register boundary

Base map: Buncombe County GIS, 2019 aerial view*
 *aerial image does not reflect 2023 changes to site

Map created by Josi Ward/Foreground Consulting, July 2023



National Register of Historic Places Nomination

Walton Street Park and Pool

570 Walton Street, Asheville
 Buncombe County, North Carolina

National Register Photograph Key

1 ➔ Photo number and direction of view

Base map: Buncombe County GIS, 2019 aerial view*
 *aerial image does not reflect 2023 changes to site

Map created by Josi Ward/Foreground Consulting, July 2023