

Received
1/30/26
SAW

January 27, 2026

North Carolina Historic Preservation Office
109 E. Jones Street
Raleigh, North Carolina 27601
Attn: Jeffrey S. Smith, National Register Coordinator

Dear Mr. Smith:

We are writing to express our enthusiastic support for the application of the Coker Hills neighborhood in Chapel Hill, NC to be the National Register of Historic Places.

We have lived in Coker Hills for over 40 years, and we know that Coker Hills is a special place, not only for its well-preserved mid-twentieth-century homes and thoughtfully planned streets, but for the role it has played in the life of this community. The neighborhood reflects a period of growth closely connected to the University of North Carolina and the Research Triangle Park. It has long been home to faculty and others who helped shape Chapel Hill's academic and civic character.

What makes Coker Hills particularly deserving of recognition is how much of its original character remains intact. The scale of the homes, the architectural styles, and the mature landscape still convey a strong sense of time and place. It continues to function as a living neighborhood while retaining the qualities that make it historically meaningful.

We believe listing Coker Hills on the National Register would be an important acknowledgment of its contribution to Chapel Hill's history and would encourage thoughtful stewardship going forward. We fully support this nomination and respectfully urge its approval.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

 - Jill Blackburn and Dick Blackburn

Jill Blackburn and Dick Blackburn
405 Lyons Road
Chapel Hill, NC 27514

Received 2/5/2026

CAW



January 28, 2026

Jeffrey Smith
North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office
109 East Jones Street
Raleigh, NC 27601

Dear Mr. Smith,

I give the full enthusiastic and unequivocal support of USModernist for the nomination of the Coker Hills neighborhood in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, to the National Register of Historic Places. As the founder and CEO of the nation's largest nonprofit educational archive dedicated to Modernist residential architecture, and as someone who has spent nearly two decades documenting thousands of Modernist houses across North Carolina, I can state with confidence that Coker Hills represents one of the most significant concentrations of mid-century residential architecture in the South.

North Carolina holds the distinction of having the third largest concentration of Modernist houses in the United States, and the Coker Hills neighborhood stands as a remarkable testament to this heritage. The neighborhood's architectural significance is inseparable from its unique origin story. Dr. William Chambers Coker, the renowned UNC botanist who served as the university's first professor of botany and created the beloved Coker Arboretum, acquired this land with the keen eye of a naturalist. What makes Coker Hills exceptional is not merely the presence of Modernist houses, but rather the remarkable concentration of architect-designed residences that emerged during the 1960s and 1970s, precisely when the NC State School of Design was producing a generation of architects who would transform the built environment of the Piedmont. The neighborhood contains significant works by Arthur Cogswell, who became the youngest architect to receive the FAIA designation and posthumously received the prestigious AIA NC Kamphoefner Prize in 2012. Cogswell's designs in Coker Hills, including the David Hill House on Wood Circle with its distinctive concrete roof and seamless integration with the natural landscape, exemplify the principles

same respect and protection we afford to Colonial, Victorian, and other historic districts.

I have personally walked the streets of Coker Hills and marveled at how the architects who designed these homes achieved a harmonious dialogue between built form and natural setting. The neighborhood demonstrates that Modernism was not merely an aesthetic choice but a philosophical commitment to designing structures that enhance human life while respecting the landscape. The homes nestle into the topography rather than dominating it. Large windows frame views of mature trees. Interior spaces flow seamlessly to outdoor living areas. These are the principles that made North Carolina a powerhouse of Modernist design, and Coker Hills is among their finest expressions.

The residents of Coker Hills have demonstrated their commitment to preserving their neighborhood's character through their active neighborhood association and their successful advocacy for conservation district protections. National Register listing would honor their stewardship and provide a framework for continued preservation.

On behalf of USModernist, our staff, volunteers, and the thousands of architecture enthusiasts who engage with our work each year, I urge the North Carolina National Register Advisory Committee to approve the nomination of Coker Hills to the National Register of Historic Places. This neighborhood represents the best of what mid-century architects achieved when given the freedom to design thoughtfully within a remarkable natural setting. It deserves recognition not only for what it is today, but for what it represents: a living legacy of a transformative moment in American residential design.

Thank you for your consideration of this important nomination.

Kind regards,

George Smart

George Smart HAIA | Executive Director

[USModernist®](#) | [NCModernist®](#)

Host and Executive Producer, [USModernist Radio](#)

A 501C3 Nonprofit Educational Archive for the Documentation, Preservation,
and Promotion of Modernist Architecture

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January 13, 2026

Chapel Hill Historic District Commission

Dear Historic District Commission,

Tonight, you will hear a proposal to place Coker Hills in the National Register of Historic Places. I strongly encourage you not to recommend this listing. With more time, I could make a stronger case for my recommendation, but here are a few things to consider.

1. The application does not persuasively make the case that Coker Hills is distinct in any way from other neighborhoods built in Chapel Hill in the same period, when thousands of homes were built in our community. An argument to make Coker Hills a historic district is effectively indistinguishable from naming all of Chapel Hill a historic district, which would effectively diminish the underlying purpose of the national register of historic places.
2. NC Modernist, the state's leading advocate for modernist homes, the architectural style common when Coker Hills was developed, lists 43 homes of architectural significance in Chapel Hill. Of those, only two (1500 Michaux Road and 401 North Elliott Road) are in the proposed historic district. Rather than protecting a district with many homes that are of no architectural distinction, Chapel Hill should consider nominating individual homes to the National Register, which would recognize homes that are truly distinctive.
3. Nominating a building, or an entire neighborhood, to the National Register is an expression of a community's values. For example, at the same February meeting where Coker Hills is being considered by the state's National Register Advisory Committee, Carrboro is nominating the Toney and Nellie Strayhorn home, which was built in 1887 and has been continuously occupied by the Strayhorn family since that time. This nomination will recognize an African American family who has lived in Carrboro for generations. Meanwhile, the Coker Hill nomination includes properties that barely meet the minimum criteria for the historic register and, furthermore, recognizes a neighborhood that was built in the era of exclusionary zoning. I have examined the H. R. Totten Papers in the Southern Historical Collection, which documents the creation of Coker Hills and other properties owned by the Coker family, whose wealth came in part from the enslavement of African Americans. There is clear evidence in the archives that racially exclusive covenants were placed on properties sold by the Coker family and their agents. While Coker Hills itself was developed after racial covenants were ruled illegal by the Supreme Court (in 1948), all the other elements of the company's restrictive covenants, like a minimum lot size and a ban on multi-family housing, were retained.

I fully expect this nomination to be recommended by the Historic District Commission. But I strongly encourage you to include this letter in the package of materials sent to the state, and I hope they consider the consequences of nominating neighborhoods like this to the National Register. A neighborhood is defined by its people, not its landscape or its architecture.

Nominating individual homes, not neighborhoods, is a more sustainable way to ensure that we protect our cultural heritage.

All the best,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Martin Johnson', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Martin Johnson

Received
2/5/2024
SAW

Nell D. Joslin
2607 Royster Street
Raleigh, NC 27608-1527
January 28, 2026
nelljoslin@gmail.com

North Carolina Historic Preservation Office
109 E. Jones Street
Raleigh, North Carolina 27601
Attn: Jeffrey S. Smith
National Register Coordinator

Re: Support for Coker Hills National Registry nomination

Dear Mr. Smith:

I am writing to express my enthusiastic support for nomination of the Coker Hills Historic District in Chapel Hill, North Carolina to the National Register of Historic Places. The neighborhood maintains high historic integrity through its original development, including workmanship and materials. It also has a unique relationship to the original land features of the Chapel Hill area and preserves part of North Carolina's natural history.

My mother, Mary Coker Joslin, was the niece of William C. Coker, the original owner of the land that now makes up Coker Hills. You can find out more about her in the following blogpost from the State Archives of North Carolina, gleaned from the William and Mary Coker Joslin papers held therein: <https://ncarchives.wpcomstaging.com/2018/04/18/highlights-from-the-william-and-mary-coker-joslin-papers/#more-8054>

Mary Joslin also chronicled Coker's many contributions in her book, *Essays on William Chambers Coker, Passionate Botanist*, published in 2004 by the UNC Library and the Botanical Garden Foundation.

A visionary botany professor and developer of the UNC Coker Arboretum, William C. Coker (1872-1953) purchased the 65-acre parcel of land in 1908 for its natural beauty and flora. When the property was subdivided in the 1960s, great care was taken to make sure that the homes were harmoniously placed within the landscape, reflecting the organic architecture philosophy of those such as Frank Lloyd Wright. **Amid rapid and extensive growth in North Carolina, Coker Hills has become not only unique, but ever more precious. It holds pieces of history and natural history that can never be replicated.**

Letter to Jeffrey S. Smith, page 2, January 28, 2026

Coker Hills is in every sense worthy of preservation for its significance in American history, architecture and culture.

In her book, *Historic Coker Hills: A Botanists' Neighborhood in Chapel Hill*, Jill Ridky-Blackburn includes the following comment by Mary Coker Joslin: "Coker Hills is a treasure in Chapel Hill, an area of unusual beauty. ... I hope it can be preserved for the future."

Please do not hesitate to contact me if I can provide any additional info in support of this nomination.

With my thanks,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Nell D. Joslin".

Nell D. Joslin
(919)345-2296

A copy of this letter has also been emailed to Jeffrey S. Smith at jeff.smith@dncr.nc.gov