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United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form

RECEIVED

AUG 04 1993

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

1. Name of Property

historic name Bontemps, Arna Wendell, House

other names/site number _____

2. Location

street & number 1327 Third Street N/A not for publication

city or town Alexandria N/A vicinity

state Louisiana code LA county Rapides code 079 zip code 71301

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

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

Gerri Hobdy

July 22, 1993

Signature of certifying official/Title Gerri Hobdy, Date
LA SHPO, Dept of Culture, Recreation and Tourism
State of Federal agency and bureau

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

Signature of certifying official/Title _____ Date _____

State or Federal agency and bureau _____

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

- entered in the National Register. See continuation sheet.
- determined eligible for the National Register See continuation sheet.
- determined not eligible for the National Register.
- removed from the National Register.
- other, (explain): _____

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

Patrick Anderson

9/13/93

Bontemps, Arna Wendell, House
Name of Property

Rapides Parish, LA
County and State

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)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

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

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

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

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

DOMESTIC/single dwelling

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION & CULTURE/museum

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)

Queen Anne Revival

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation brick

walls weatherboard

roof metal

other _____

Narrative Description

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

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

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

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

Criteria Considerations

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

Property is:

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

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

literature

Period of Significance

1902-1906

Significant Dates

N/A

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

Bontemps, Arna Wendell

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

unknown

Narrative Statement of Significance

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

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

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

Previous documentation on file (NPS): N/A

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

Primary location of additional data:

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

Name of repository:

Bontemps, Arna Wendell, House
Name of Property

Rapides Parish, LA
County and State

10. Geographical Data

Acreege of Property less than one acre

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1

1	5
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5	5	3	0	2	0
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3	4	6	3	8	4	0
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3

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See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

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

Lot 3, Square 14, City of Alexandria

Boundary Justification Boundaries follow property lines of lot where house is located. Because (Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.) this is a moved house, there is no historic setting to recognize.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title National Register Staff

organization Division of Historic Preservation date May 1993

street & number P. O. Box 44247 telephone (504) 342-8160

city or town Baton Rouge state Louisiana zip code 70804

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

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

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

Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

Additional items

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

Property Owner

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

name Arna Bontemps Foundation, Inc., Ms. Gwendolyn Y. Elmore, President

[(318) 449-5000, work number

street & number P. O. Box 533 telephone Gwen Elmore, President]

city or town Alexandria state Louisiana zip code 71309

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

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Bontemps, Arna Wendell, House, Alexandria, Rapides Parish, LA

Section number 7 Page 1

The Arna Bontemps House (c.1900) is a simple one story frame Queen Anne Revival cottage located on a corner lot in a late nineteenth/early twentieth century residential neighborhood on the edge of downtown Alexandria. Although it has been moved a short distance and has received various alterations, the house retains its National Register eligibility as the childhood home of African-American writer Arna Wendell Bontemps.

The Bontemps House was originally located on the corner of Ninth and Winn six blocks from the present location. In the shadow of Interstate 49 construction, the long abandoned and deteriorated house was donated to the Arna Bontemps Foundation on condition it be removed due to anticipated redevelopment of the lot. The move and subsequent renovation occurred in 1991. The house was dedicated in November 1992 as the Arna Bontemps African American Museum and Cultural Center.

The facade features a polygonal bay with an Eastlake porch to the side. The original posts, which were rotted at the bottom, were removed and very similar ones used. The present balustrade was installed to meet life safety codes, and simple brackets were added to the posts. As part of the move, the roof structure was completely removed and rebuilt. A shed roof rear addition was removed, and the house was expanded roughly nine feet across the rear, continuing the character of the original.

The original portion of the house has a central hall with two rooms on each side. There are two front doors, one opening into the central hall and one opening into the room with the polygonal bay. One original mantel survives, while the other fireplace was removed to make room for a closet. (The mantel is in storage.) The surviving Greek Revival-looking mantel gives every indication of being a good deal older than the house.

The following additional changes occurred as part of the recent renovation of the house:

- (1) The original windows (four over four) were virtually all gone. They were replaced with one over ones.
- (2) One of the front doors was missing. The remaining one was moved to an interior location, and two matching salvaged doors were used on the front.
- (3) Most of the present interior doors are salvaged replacements, and the door and window surrounds replicate the originals.
- (4) The originally wallpapered walls were sheetrocked.

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Bontemps, Arna Wendell, House, Alexandria, Rapides Parish, LA

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(5) A handicap access ramp was installed at the rear.

Assessment of Integrity

Despite the changes and replacement of architectural fabric, the house would be immediately recognizable to Arna Bontemps, which is the litmus test for eligibility under Criterion B.

In terms of the move, it should be noted that the new location is not inappropriate. The house has been moved from one corner lot to another in a late nineteenth/early twentieth century residential neighborhood on the edge of downtown Alexandria. It also should be stressed that Bontemps would not recognize the old location today. Because of I-49 construction, the housing stock has been greatly depleted, and there is an elevated freeway practically in the Bontemps back yard. The enclosed photo shows the house's original location as it appears today. The houses immediately around it have been demolished.

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**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Bontemps, Arna Wendell, House, Alexandria, Rapides Parish, LA

Section number 8 Page 1

The Arna Wendell Bontemps House is of national significance in the area of literature because it was the home of one of the most productive and versatile African-American writers of the twentieth century. Bontemps lived in the house from his birth in 1902 until 1906, when his family moved to California. Although a childhood home rather than one associated with Bontemps' productive life, the house is eligible for the Register because, according to scholars, the author's works were influenced greatly by this early, formative period. Also, the home was especially important to Bontemps, as evidenced by his words and actions and the reminiscences of his family. Finally, it could well be argued that Bontemps' childhood home is the most appropriate surviving resource to represent him.

Although far from a household word, Arna Bontemps' name is well known to scholars and students of African-American literature. Hence this nomination will provide only a summation of his life and career. Bontemps was born in 1902 to a middle class Alexandria family. His father was a brickmason, his mother a teacher. As Bontemps later wrote: "Mine had not been a varmint-infested childhood so often the hallmark of Negro American autobiography. My parents and grandparents had been well-fed, well-clothed, and well-housed. . . ."

Bontemps' seemingly idyllic childhood in Central Louisiana, as described in his autobiographical essay "Why I Returned," ended when he was four. Because of a racial slur directed at his father, and more importantly, its larger implications, the family moved to California. Bontemps writes that the decision his father made as he walked home after the incident "changed everything for all of us."

After receiving his bachelor's degree in California in 1923, Bontemps accepted a teaching position at the Harlem Academy in New York, where he remained until 1931. There he became part of a reawakening in black culture known as the Harlem Renaissance. In 1924, his poetry first appeared in Crisis magazine, the NAACP periodical edited by Dr. W. E. B. DuBois, and three years later, he was awarded the publication's Poetry Prize. He also won the Alexander Pushkin Poetry Prize in 1926 and '27. His first novel, God Sends Sunday, was published in 1931. From 1931 to 1934, Bontemps taught in Huntsville, Alabama and from '35 to '37 in Chicago. Upon completion of his master's degree in library science from the University of Chicago in 1943, he became head librarian at Fisk University in Nashville, a position he held until 1965. The eight years remaining in his life were spent as a professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle and Yale, and finally as writer-in-residence at Fisk. He died at his Nashville home June 4, 1973.

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Continuation Sheet**

Bontemps, Arna Wendell, House, Alexandria, Rapides Parish, LA

Section number 8 Page 2

Bontemps is known for the volume of his work and his versatility. He is the author of twenty-five books, including novels, children's books, biographies, histories, and collections of poems, and a handful of plays, some in collaboration with Countee Cullen. In addition, he served as editor or co-editor of various anthologies (for example, with Langston Hughes, The Poetry of the Negro).

Although Bontemps was quite young when he left Alexandria, he had definite memories of his childhood in the house under consideration, as affectionately recalled in his autobiographical essay "Why I Returned." His precocious childhood memories were reenforced and augmented by stories from relatives who also migrated to California from Central Louisiana. According to Bontemps, they were forever talking about things "back home."

By definition, a writer's work has elements of the autobiographical in it, and scholars note that this is particularly true of Bontemps, with Central Louisiana figuring prominently. According to Professor Charles L. James, who is presently working on a biography of the author, Central Louisiana represents "the central matrix" for his "fictive imagination." "It was the place of precocious childhood memory, the focal point of return when he spoke and wrote wistfully of his Southern past." Phyllis R. Klotman, Professor of Afro-American Studies at Indiana University, emphasizes how important a writer's early experiences are to later works. She writes: "Bontemps' writing especially is rooted to the past, to Alexandria his home, to Louisiana, and to the South." After visiting Alexandria for a Bontemps symposium, Professor Klotman noted: "The vivid descriptions of place in the short stories I first taught in the '70s assumed a reality for me that they had never had before."

It is clear that the house was special to Bontemps. As has been mentioned, he wrote fondly of his Alexandria childhood in his autobiographical essay, referring specifically to the house. By that time, 1965, he had been back to see it because he mentioned that the last time he visited Louisiana the house in which he was born was freshly painted. His son, Arna Alexander Bontemps, notes that to his father "back home" always meant the house in Alexandria. The week before he died he had made arrangements to go home again to complete research he was doing for his autobiography and to take his sons to, in his words, "have another look at their grandparents' stomping ground."

Bontemps' widow and biographer Charles L. James feel unequivocally that the author's childhood home in Alexandria should be the resource to represent him in the National Register of Historic Places. According to them, the only other surviving building with any compelling association is his home in Nashville,

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Bontemps, Arna Wendell, House, Alexandria, Rapides Parish, LA

Section number 8 Page 3

which is non-historic (late '50s). In endorsing the National Register effort for her husband's childhood home, Mrs. Bontemps stated: "It's his roots. He started there; it's the place he wrote about." She continued that "no place should hold precedence over that place."

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**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Bontemps, Arna Wendell, House, Alexandria, Rapides Parish, LA

Section number 9 Page 1

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bontemps, Arna. "Why I Returned." The Old South. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1973. This autobiographical essay first appeared in Harper's Magazine in April 1965.

Bontemps, Arna. Letter to Irving Ward-Steinman, March 14, 1973.

Bontemps, Arna Alexander. Letter to Gwen Elmore, President, Arna Bontemps Foundation, Inc., June 6, 1989.

Conveyance Records, Rapides Parish Courthouse.

James, Charles L. Letter to Gwen Elmore, President, Arna Bontemps Foundation, Inc., August 31, 1992. A professor at Swarthmore College, James is presently writing a biography of Bontemps.

James, Charles L. Phone interviews with National Register staff, various dates in 1992 and 1993.

Jones, Kirkland. Arna Bontemps entry in Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 51, Gale Research Company, 1987.

Klotman, Phyllis. Letter to Gwen Elmore, President, Arna Bontemps Foundation, Inc., October 7, 1992. Ms. Klotman is a professor of Afro-American Studies at Indiana University.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section number _____ Page _____

SUPPLEMENTARY LISTING RECORD

NRIS Reference Number: 93000886

Date Listed: 9/13/93

Bontemps, Arna Wendell House
Property Name

Rapides
County

LA
State

N/A
Multiple Name

This property is listed in the National Register of Historic Places in accordance with the attached nomination documentation subject to the following exceptions, exclusions, or amendments, notwithstanding the National Park Service certification included in the nomination documentation.

For Patrick Andrus
Signature of the Keeper

9/28/93
Date of Action

=====
Amended Items in Nomination:

Significance:

Ethnic Heritage--African American is added as an area of significance.

[This amendment will not be considered an error on the part of the SHPO for purposes of State Performance Review.]

This information was confirmed with Donna Fricker of the Louisiana SHPO.

DISTRIBUTION:

- National Register property file
- Nominating Authority (without nomination attachment)