



United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form

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

1. Name of Property

historic name Johnson, Wilfred X., House

other names/site number _____

2. Location

street & number 206 Tower Avenue NA not for publication

city or town Hartford NA vicinity

state Connecticut code CT county Hartford code 003 zip code 06120

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.)

[Signature] 06/20/94
 Signature of certifying official/Title Date
 Director, Connecticut Historical Commission
 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

7/31/94
 Date of Action

Wilfred X. Johnson House
Name of Property

Hartford, Connecticut
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	
2	0	buildings
		sites
		structures
		objects
2	0	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/secondary structure

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

DOMESTIC/single dwelling/secondary structure

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)

20TH CENTURY REVIVAL/Colonial Revival

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation concrete

walls brick

brownstone

roof slate

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.

Narrative Statement of Significance

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

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

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

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

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

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

ETHNIC HERITAGE

POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT

ARCHITECTURE

Period of Significance

1958 - 1972

Significant Dates

1958

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

Johnson, Wilfred X.

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

unknown

Primary location of additional data:

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

Name of repository:

Wilfred X. Johnson House
Name of Property

Hartford, Connecticut
County and State

10. Geographical Data

Acreege of Property less than one acre

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1 18 69133610 46299110
Zone Easting Northing
2

3
Zone Easting Northing
4

See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

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

Boundary Justification

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

11. Form Prepared By

Reviewed by John Herzan, National Register Coordinator

name/title Jan Cunningham, National Register Consultant

organization Cunningham Associates Ltd. date 11/28/93

street & number 37 Orange Road telephone (203) 347 4072

city or town Middletown state CT zip code 06457

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 Gertrude H. Mero

street & number 206 Tower Avenue telephone (203) 724 4145

city or town Hartford state CT zip code 06120

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**

Wilfred X. Johnson House, Hartford County, Connecticut

Section number 7 Page 1

The Wilfred X. Johnson House is located on the north side of Tower Avenue, a residential street in the North End of Hartford. The immediate neighborhood, the block between Barbour and Hampton streets, consists of houses built in the 1920s in the Colonial Revival and Bungalow styles. At the east end of the block is the Barbour School, and Keney Park and its golf course on the north border the rear of the properties.

The 1928 Johnson House is a substantial brick structure on a level lot, which is elevated above the street. It consists of a main block, which is two stories in height and rectangular in plan (40' x 30'), with small one-story wings extending from the side elevations (Photograph #s 1, 2). Brownstone is utilized for the watertable, window sills, and the exposed portion of the concrete foundation. The slated hipped roof of the main block has broad overhanging eaves with aluminum soffitts and a large shed dormer in its front slope, which is aluminum-sided. The wings also have slate roofs with a course of cement tile along each ridge. Attached at the rear is a modern screen porch with a gable roof (Photograph #3). A small brick garage, which is contemporaneous with the house, is located to the rear at the southeast corner of the lot.

A Federal Revival portico highlights the three-bay facade. It has a gable roof with a cove ceiling, which is supported by square panelled posts. Matching pilasters frame the entrance. A variety of window groupings are displayed. They include the triple sets on either side of the main entrance, a pattern repeated in the fenestration of the wings. Paired windows are found at the second story of the facade, flanking the single window in the center. Most of the windows contain the original six-over-one sash but the triple windows on the facade have the original diamond panes in the upper sash.

The interior is laid out with a center-hall plan. A small interior entry opens into a spacious hallway, which displays a closed string staircase on the east wall (Photograph #4). Its delicate balustrade has slim turned and tapered balusters. The molded bannister terminates in a volute, supported by a small central column surrounded with matching balusters, instead of a single newel post. There are large open doorways into the living room on the east and the dining room on the west. The living room has a painted brick fireplace which projects into the room and has a wooden mantel (Photograph #5). A continuous cove molding at the perimeter of the ceiling in this room is repeated throughout the formal rooms on the first floor. Changes to the interior have included the enlargement of the kitchen at the rear and the opening up of a small room at the rear northeast corner of the main block as an alcove on the north wall of the living room. The consultant did not have access to the second floor.

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service****National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Wilfred X. Johnson House, Hartford County, Connecticut

Section number 8 Page 1

A well-preserved and representative example of early twentieth-century residential architecture, the Wilfred X. Johnson House is primarily significant as the home of a leader of Hartford's black community. Wilfred Xavier Johnson (1920-1972), who lived here from 1966 until his death, had a distinguished political career in Hartford. The first black candidate endorsed by the Democratic party anywhere in the state, Johnson successfully ran for election to the General Assembly in 1958 and served for four terms as Connecticut's first black state representative.

Historical Significance

Wilfred X. Johnson was born in Dawson, Georgia, the son of Eugene and Griselda Johnson. His family came North in 1925 during the first major wave of emigration from the Deep South. Johnson attended school in Hartford and graduated from Weaver High School in 1939. During his high school years he played baseball, fulfilling the promise of the boyhood nickname "Spike" by which he was known for the rest of his life. Johnson also worked after school as a messenger, or "runner" for the Hartford National Bank in downtown Hartford.

After serving as a dental technician in the U.S. Army during World War II, Johnson returned to Hartford expecting to begin a professional career with the Hartford National Bank. Such a choice of career was unheard of for African-Americans at that time. At first the bank was reluctant to offer him a career track position, particularly one that involved direct interaction with the public. It did, however, encourage him to continue as a messenger and later as a clerk in the analysis department while he attended Hillyer College and the American Institute of Banking, both in Hartford. In 1955 Johnson was promoted to teller, the first African-American to hold such a position in the state.

Although Johnson continued as a teller at the bank until his death in 1972, he had other business interests in the city. Between 1949 and 1954, he was in business with his brother Howard. They ran a haberdashery called Johnson's Men's Furnishings at 1930 Main Street. In 1964 Johnson opened a liquor store on Barbour Avenue known as Spike's Spirit Shoppe.

In 1949 Johnson married Gertrude Hayes (now Gertrude Johnson Mero; 1927-), who was born in Denmark, South Carolina. They first lived in the large multi-family house on Barbour Street, where Johnson's parents and other adult members of the family and their children had lived since 1940. By 1960 they all had moved to a three-story house on Cleveland Avenue in the same neighborhood. It was sold in 1966 and Johnson and his wife moved a block north to 206 Tower Avenue, where they raised five children. Johnson's widow, Gertrude Johnson Mero, still lives in the house.

Wilfred Johnson entered politics in 1946 at the grassroots level, campaigning in his neighborhood for Democratic party candidates. At that time most blacks were still solidly Republican, the party of Lincoln. In 1953 he ran

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service****National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Wilfred X. Johnson House, Hartford County, Connecticut

Section number 8 Page 2

unsuccessfully as an independent candidate for city council. Another bid for that office in 1955 also failed. With the encouragement of his political mentor, Judge Boce Barlow, Jr., a prominent black Democrat in Hartford, and William Curry, one of the party bosses, Johnson sought the party's nomination for state representative in 1958 and became the first black in Connecticut's history to be endorsed by the Democratic party. Running in a citywide election, Johnson won handily with the support of an ethnic political coalition composed of Irish-, Italian- and African-Americans. His opponent was another black candidate, the Reverend J. Blanton Shields of Hartford, one of the first two blacks to be endorsed in the state by the Republican party. The other candidate, who also lost a bid for election, was Mrs. Margaret Ashley of Plainville. Johnson, who was reelected for four consecutive terms and served until his defeat in 1968, also served as co-chairman of the third ward in Hartford during this period. As a freshman legislator, he served as acting speaker of the house, an honor rarely accorded a new member of the house, and was also appointed a colonel in the Governor's Footguard. Johnson was the first African-American to hold both of these honorary positions. His promising political career was cut short by his premature death in January 1972 at age 51. In February of that year, the state senate paid him tribute in an official eulogy and leaders of both parties praised him as "a giant in his ideas, beliefs, and feelings for his constituents."¹ Gertrude Johnson Mero was also active in city politics and in 1957 was treasurer of the Young Democrats. She was one of the founders of Project Concern in Hartford. Project Concern, a program undertaken in the early 1970s to alleviate racial imbalance in the state's public schools, involved the busing of a limited number of black inner-city children to suburban schools.²

Background History and Architectural Significance

Farmland north of Hartford's urban core had been subdivided for housing after the Civil War. Served by the horse railway and later streetcars, it became known as the North End. As Hartford began to expand geographically in the early 1900s to accommodate rapid population growth, the last undeveloped areas on the fringe of the city were laid out for residential use. Houses here on Tower Avenue bordering Keney Park were originally built for members of a skilled working class, who commuted to jobs in the factories on the east side of the North End or in downtown Hartford. Today primarily a black community, the North End contains historic black institutions as well as modern, large-scale public housing projects. Most of the historic residential development in the rest of the North End consists of multi-family or row housing; there are few single-family detached homes such as the Johnson House.

Because of its integrity and craftsmanship, the Johnson House is a fine representative example of the type of custom-designed modest houses built on the outskirts of Hartford for the middle class in the early twentieth century. In contrast to most of the other streetcar neighborhoods in Hartford where there is a general similarity of scale and design, Tower Avenue displays a

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

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Wilfred X. Johnson House, Hartford County, Connecticut

Section number 8 Page 3

variety of styles and materials, indicating that the houses were not part of a large development but were individually constructed. A few are brick like the Johnson House but most are wood-frame buildings. Many of the original single-family houses here have been converted to multi-family use.

Very few houses in this general neighborhood (north of Cleveland Avenue to Keney Park and bordered on the east by North Main Street) have retained all of their original architectural features or have been so well maintained. In addition to its fine well-preserved Federal Revival portico, the Johnson House still has its original slate roof and window sash, including the diamond-paned windows of the facade. The brickwork has survived in good condition and has never had to be repointed, an indicator of the high level of craftsmanship on the house. The interior finishes also remain in place. As was typical for these more suburban houses, much care was lavished on the public spaces, especially the main staircase, but the rest of the detailing is quite simple and limited to edge moldings on the door and window surrounds and the cove moldings at the ceiling.

1. *Hartford Courant*, February 27, 1972.

2. *Minority Students and Staff Report* (Hartford: State of Connecticut Board of Education, 1989), p. vii. Only 770 black students in Hartford participated in 1989.

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

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Wilfred X. Johnson House, Hartford County, Connecticut

Section number 9/10 Page 1

9. Major Bibliographical References

Hartford City Directories, 1928-1968.
Hartford Courant, 1952, 1958, 1972.
Hartford Times, 1972.
Mero, Gertrude J. Interview, November 6, 1993.

10. Geographical Data

Verbal Boundary Description:

The nominated property is described in the Hartford Land Records in Book 1066, Page 19, being the same property shown on the Hartford Tax Assessor's Map 626, as Block 1, Lot 9.

Boundary Justification:

The property described above encompasses the buildings and land historically associated with the Wilfred X. Johnson House during its period of significance.

**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: 94000765

Date Listed: / / 94

Johnson, Wilfred X., House
Property Name

Hartford
County

CT
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.


Signature of the Keeper

7/31/94
Date of Action

=====
Amended Items in Nomination:

8. Statement of Significance: Period of Significance

The documented period of significance for the property is 1966-1972 which reflects Johnson's exceptional significance while residing in this house.

This information was confirmed with John Herzan, National Register Coordinator, CTSHPO, by telephone.

DISTRIBUTION:

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