

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 M.E. Davis House

other names/site number Davis-Dillard House/CH0171

### 2. Location

street & number 200 N. Knox Street

not for publication

city or town Dermott

vicinity

state Arkansas

code

AR

County Chicot

code

017

zip code

71638

### 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 for 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 of certifying official/Title

Date

Arkansas Historic Preservation Program

State or 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

**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 count.)

	Contributing	Noncontributing	
	2	0	buildings
	0	0	Sites
	0	0	structures
	0	0	objects
	2	0	Total

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

"Historic and Architectural Resources Associated with the Ethnic and Racial Minority Settlement of the Arkansas Delta."

**Number of Contributing resources previously listed in the National Register**

N/A

**6. Function or Use**

**Historic Functions**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

DOMESTIC/Multi-family dwelling

**Current Functions**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

WORK IN PROGRESS

**7. Description**

**Architectural Classification**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

LATE 19<sup>TH</sup> AND EARLY 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

AMERICAN MOVEMENTS/Bungalow/Craftsman

**Materials**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation BRICK

walls WOOD: Weatherboard

roof ASPHALT: Composition shingle

other CONCRETE

**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.)

- Criteria A, B, C, D with checkboxes and descriptions.

Criteria Considerations

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

Property is:

- Criteria A-G with checkboxes and descriptions.

Levels of Significance (local, state, national)

LOCAL

Areas of Significance (Enter categories from instructions)

ARCHITECTURE
ETHNIC HERITAGE/BLACK
EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT

Period of Significance

1925-1954

Significant Dates

1925-1954

Significant Person (Complete if Criterion B is marked)

Cultural Affiliation (Complete if Criterion D is marked)

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):

- Documentation checkboxes: preliminary determination, previously listed, National Historic Landmark, Historic American Buildings Survey, Historic American Engineering Record.

Primary location of additional data:

- Location checkboxes: State Historic Preservation Office, Other State Agency, Federal Agency, Local Government, University, Other.

Name of repository:

M.E. Davis House  
Name of Property

Chicot County, Arkansas  
County and State

## 10. Geographical Data

Acres of Property Less than one acre

### UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1	<u>15</u>	<u>644772</u>	<u>3710906</u>	3	<u>                    </u>	<u>                    </u>	<u>                    </u>
	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
2	<u>                    </u>	<u>                    </u>	<u>                    </u>	4	<u>                    </u>	<u>                    </u>	<u>                    </u>

See continuation sheet

### Verbal Boundary Description

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

### Boundary Justification

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

## 11. Form Prepared By

name/title Johnetta Dillard, edited by Sarah Jampole/National Register Historian  
Organization Arkansas Historic Preservation Program date February 28, 2004  
street & number 1500 Tower Building, 323 Center Street telephone 501-324-9874  
city or town Little Rock state AR zip code 72201

### 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 Joy and Johnetta Dillard  
street & number 7649 Crestwicke Crossing Drive telephone 678-545-1455  
city or town Jonesboro state GA zip code 30236

**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 listing. 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 Reduction Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20303.

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## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

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### SUMMARY

Built in 1925 as one of the largest wood frame, two-story homes in Dermott, Arkansas, the M.E. Davis House exemplifies the Craftsman architectural style with its exposed rafter details, wood bracketing, wide eave overhangs, exposed false roof beams and gables. The interior hardwood flooring, paneled walls and downstairs fireplace made the home cozy and fit for its growing family and frequent visitors. The house sits on a continuous red brick foundation, and is surrounded by three porches, including brick and concrete porches across the front and south side of the house. It features a south-side porte-cochere with red brick columns and a rear, screened porch on the west side.

The Davis House is significantly different from the homes in the neighborhood. It is the oldest home for several blocks and by far the largest. In fact, it is one of few two-story residences in town. It was considered distinctive and impressive home when it was built, especially considering that the owner was an African-American businessman in a time when most African-Americans lived in poverty.

### ELABORATION

Located at the corner of North Knox and Iowa streets in Dermott, Chicot County, the M.E. Davis House was constructed in 1925 for Matthew Earnest Davis and his wife, Etta Conneliaus. The M.E. Davis house is a two story Craftsman. The weatherboard house still has original windows, doors, and brick chimney. The building rests upon continuous brick foundation and is topped with a gabled roof covered in composition shingles. Craftsman features on the house include decorative bracketing, some of which are being replaced during the house's renovation. Other craftsman features on the house include the prominent brick chimney, exposed rafters and one-story porches supported by columns on piers. There are no similar houses located in the community of Dermott, as it is one of the largest homes in the area and one of the few two-story homes in the town. The house is currently under renovation.

### East Elevation

The east façade of the building fronts Knox Street. The east elevation features a full, one-story shed-roof porch supported by short, square wooden columns which rest on brick piers that extend roughly eight inches above the balustrade. A brick balustrade extends above the porch floor, surrounds the porch, and is topped with concrete slabs, as are the balustrade lining and the concrete stair steps that lead to the porch. The deep porch is open and features concrete/wooden floor and a beaded board ceiling. The front porch has two doors providing separate entrances to a bedroom and the living room. The entrance into the living room faces Knox Street, while the entrance into the bedroom faces Iowa Street. Above is a windowed gable and slopping rooflines. The front entrance is welcoming and relaxing with its oversized porch swing, recently removed for repair. A green and white striped metal awning is present, and is supported by metal rods which are attached to the wooden porch columns. Six double-hung, wood-frame, three-over-one windows fenestrate the east façade. The windows are organized in two vertical sets of three, with one set in the first, southeast bay, and the second set in the third, northeast bay.

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The second story is fenestrated by two double-hung, wood framed, three-over-one windows. These two windows are also covered by the green and white striped metal awning which covers the porch below. Vents in the gabled ends are covered by zig-zag patterned wooden screening.

### South Elevation

The south elevation is composed of four bays, the three right bays of which are gable end with exposed false roof beams with decoratively cut ends. All four bays are fenestrated by a variety of window configurations and three doors, one of which provides access to the kitchen, while the second provides access to the dining room, and the third provides access to the living room. The separate entrances provided access to the different rooms of the house which were used for social occasions and weddings.

On the main story, the far left bay is an enclosed porch which is covered by the same green and white striped metal awning that is seen on the east façade. The next bay is fenestrated by a set of three windows, all of which are wood-framed and double hung. The third bay is defined by the porte-cochere supported by two square brick and stucco columns. It has a porch with three doors and two double-hung wooden windows surrounding the center door. This porte-cochere contains the separate entrances to the kitchen, the dining room and the living room. The far right bay, which is one-story, is dominated by the two story brick chimney and side end of the front porch. Between the chimney and the end of the porch is a small, double-hung, wood-framed, three-over-one window that is covered by the green and white striped metal awning that covers the porch on the front of the house.

The second story of the house is fenestrated by a variety of window configurations. The far left bay contains a single double-hung, wood-framed, three-over-one window that is covered by the green and white awning that covers the enclosed porch below. Decoratively carved rafters are exposed in the large eaves above. The next bay is composed of two bays of windows. The first bay is comprised of three windows which are wood-framed, double-hung, three-over-one windows. The second bay is comprised of a single small, double-hung, wood-framed, three-over-one window. Both windows in this bay are covered by the green and white awning which covers the window and porch in the first bay. Decoratively carved rafters are exposed in the large eaves above. The vent in gabled end in this bay is covered by zig-zag patterned wooden screening. The third bay in the second story of the south elevation is fenestrated by a set of two double-hung, wood-frame, three-over-three windows. The set of windows is covered by the same awning in the previous bay. As in the previous bay, the gable end contains a vent which is covered by zig-zag patterned wooden screening.

### West Elevation

The west, or rear, elevation of the home is dominated by the attached screened-in wooden porch that extends away from the house and covers more than half of this elevation. The one-story porch, which comprises all of the three bays on this façade, is supported by brick columns, with one door leading to what was once the "maid's room" and a second door going to the kitchen. Four concrete steps lead up to the porch. Two thirds

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of the second story gable rests atop the screened in porch. Once again, the porch is covered by metal awning. All of the gable ends on this façade contain vents which are covered by zig-zag patterned wooden screens.

The second story of the elevation is fenestrated by two sets of windows. The first set, located in the far right of the middle bay, is comprised of two double-hung, wood-framed, three-over-one windows that are covered by the same green and white metal awning that covers the porch below. The second set of windows is located in the far right bay, and is comprised of three windows, the outer two being double-hung, wood-framed, three-over-three. The middle window in the set is double-hung, and wood-frame; however, the bottom pane has been removed to allow for the insertion of a window air conditioning unit. The top sash contains three lights panes as seen in the two adjacent windows. This set of windows is also covered by green and white metal awning.

### North Elevation

The north elevation of the house is adjacent to the freestanding washhouse and the gardens. Eight double-hung, wood-framed, three-over-three windows on the building's first level and five on the top level underneath a gabled-roof can be seen. None of the windows in this façade are covered by the green and white metal awning which covers the windows in the other three facades.

The three bays on the main level of this façade are all fenestrated with pairs of windows. The left and right bays consist of one set of windows each, while the center bay is comprised of two sets of windows. The left set of windows is the same size as the windows in the left and right bays, while the right set of windows is half the height of the other sets. Decorative wooden rafter ends can be seen under the large eaves along the entire roof line on this façade.

The second level of the north elevation contains three sets of windows, all of which are wood-framed, double-hung, three-over-one. In both of the exterior bays, the window openings have been covered, and appear to be historic alterations. The middle, gabled end bay is comprised of three sets of windows, the first and third sets being a single wood-framed, double-hung, three-over-one window, with the middle set comprised of three wood-framed, double-hung, three-over-one windows. As in the level below, decorative wooden rafter ends can be seen under the large eaves along the entire roof line on this façade. Decoratively carved brackets are present in the middle bay as well.

### Outbuilding

The wood frame detached washhouse/garage is rectangular in plan and covered by composition shingles. Covered in weatherboard, the building is Craftsman in style and possesses similar design and detail characteristics as the main house, such as exposed rafter details, wide eave overhangs, exposed false roof beams and gables. The south elevation is fenestrated by a three wood-frame, double-hung, four-over-four windows which are to the right of the door leading into the old washroom. To the left of this door is the open garage. The west elevation is the rear of the building. Exposed rafters are visible under the wide eaves.

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The north elevation is free of any window or door openings. There is a small projection, covered by a shed roof, on this elevation. Once again, exposed rafters are visible under the wide eaves. The east elevation is defined by an entrance, which comprises one of the two bays of the façade. The second bay is comprised of the non-descript projection side. Visible under the eaves are exposed rafters.

### INTEGRITY

The M.E. Davis House, built in 1925, retains all seven elements of integrity—location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association. The freestanding washhouse now serves as storage, yet appears today as it did when built. At its time of construction, the two-story house was built at the edge of the railroad tracks in Dermott, a location that enabled Davis to host the African-American families arriving by trains from the sugar cane plantations of Louisiana to work in the three saw mills in town. The rambling house stands today as it did in 1925 as a wonderful example of a Craftsman style house that exemplifies Davis' role in the community as a successful African-American businessman.



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### SUMMARY

Constructed in 1925, the M.E. Davis House is being nominated to the National Register of Historic Places with **local significance** under **Criterion C** as a wonderful example of a Craftsman style house in Dermott, Chicot County, Arkansas. Because of its association with M.E. Davis, an early 20<sup>th</sup> century business man who was instrumental in helping impoverished African-American families in the Dermott area secure work and their own houses, the building is also eligible for nomination under **Criterion A** for its association with African-American history in Dermott. This nomination is being submitted under the multiple property listing "Historic and Architectural Resources Associated with the Ethnic and Racial Minority Settlement of the Arkansas Delta."

### ELABORATION

The M.E. Davis House has a unique historic and architectural association with the ethnic and racial minority settlement of the Arkansas Delta. It was home to Matthew Ernest Davis (April 5, 1889-January 24, 1954), an early 20<sup>th</sup> century businessman whose compassion for others and business acumen helped rescue impoverished African American families from the despair they faced on Louisiana's sugar cane plantations. With Davis' help, many black families settled in Dermott and took lodging at the spacious Davis House while Davis used his business connections to help them buy their own homes.

The earliest settlements in the vicinity of Dermott were made in 1826, but most of the land titles date from 1830-1836, when only a few scattered homesteads were present. The town drew its name from Yale-educated physician, Dr. Charles McDermott who secured, through preemption and purchase, the fertile lands in Arkansas that would bear his name.

McDermott was an outspoken secessionist at the outbreak of the Civil War and swore he would never live under the federal flag after the South lost to the North. He was also a scientist and a charter member of the Southern Pacific Railroad Company, who experimented with biplane machines and became the first to discover the principles of modern airplane design, patented by him (No. 133,046) November 12, 1872, as reported in the *Arkansas Democrat*, February 15, 1952. McDermott's town later became a thriving railroad community and the largest town in Chicot County

By the time M.E. Davis, then a Louisiana barber, made his way to Dermott in 1920, Dermott was still a thriving community although segregated on the one hand -- replete with businesses bearing white-only barrier signs, but on the other hand a city of modern commerce and wide streets that welcomed automobiles. There was opportunity here, even for the Negro. There was a black physician in town and many black-owned businesses.

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### Davis History

Born April 5, 1889, in Perryville, Louisiana, a small town near Alexandria, M.E. Davis witnessed the great difficulties Negro families experienced through the South's turbulent racial past, but he had a vision that he could achieve great things. He became a barber and later owned a pressing shop in Glenora, Louisiana, with his young wife Etta Conneliaus (March 28, 1902-January 3, 1979).

Davis arrived in Dermott with his wife, his infant niece and his nephew in 1920 on invitation from Harvey Parnell, a few years before he became Arkansas's 29<sup>th</sup> governor.

Then a legislator, Parnell was a wealthy landowner who lived in Dermott and operated the Winston Plantation in the nearby community of Halley. Dermott was called "a trade center" by the *Arkansas Democrat* and was the largest city in Chicot County at the time.

Parnell was looking for a secretary to help with his business dealings. That Davis was an intelligent, fair-minded black man of mixed race was in his favor. It meant that Davis could serve Parnell in business but also as a liaison with other blacks.

Parnell mentored Davis and taught him real estate. Davis learned to acquire land, and with that knowledge he began to acquire quite a bit of land for himself. Though he only had a fourth grade education, he was always passionate about business - first as a barber in Glenora, Louisiana, and then as the owner of a pressing shop there. He also served two years in World War I.

As Davis bought and developed property, he named it after himself. The first, second, third and fourth Davis Additions of Dermott still bear his name today.

He hired other black agents and taught them how to acquire land -- thus the name of the Blount & Moss land additions of Dermott today, which were named after two black agents who worked under Davis.

Davis was haunted by the memory of people in Louisiana who desperately wanted a better life, a life away from Louisiana's sugar cane plantations. Davis began to make trips to Louisiana offering families a deal they could not refuse. He would convince men to return with him to Dermott, help them get work in one of Dermott's three saw mills. He would then sell them one of his developed lots for \$50, starting them well out in a brand new life. It was the first real opportunity most of the families ever received to realize their dreams of owning their own homes and land.

According to historical accounts and family interviews, Davis convinced enough families to come to Dermott that he needed a larger place to host them until he could get them settled. Thus, he decided to build a two-story home on the edge of the railroad tracks, not far from Dermott's bustling train depot.

When men arrived in Dermott to meet with Davis by train, his wife, Conneliaus, would prepare meals and provide rooms for them upstairs in the large two-story home, while M.E. would discuss business with them. His assistance to these families gave him great respect in the black community. Meanwhile, his real estate business grew.

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M.E. Davis experienced difficult times along with the rest of the city in the late 1920s and 30s. The 1927 flood was the most calamitous. One of Davis' daughters recalls a photo of her father sitting in a boat downtown as water drifted up the town's main street where Davis' office would have been.

Later, the stock market crashed in 1929. Banks closed and many people lost their businesses. Dermott slipped into despair. As if that was not enough, a disastrous fire in October 1935 destroyed Dermott's main hotel and a main portion of the business section during the depth of the Great Depression. Abbott F. Kinney, a journalist in 1952 describing the impact wrote, "People shook their heads and said that Dermott was destined to become a ghost town," but instead, Dermott grew by 17 percent between 1940 and 1950, according to the U.S. Census. M.E. Davis persevered through creative ingenuity.

During the stock market crash, Davis lost every cent of money he had in the banks. Had it not been for his land-holdings, which were not leveraged, he would have had nothing. He would later use the value of his land to start the Davis Church Burial Association and Davis Funeral Home in 1935.

In fact, M.E. Davis and P.K. Miller of Pine Bluff were the first black men in Southeast Arkansas to start burial associations, insurance programs that in Davis' case, afforded Chicot County's poor blacks the ability to bury their dead in dignity. Funeral rituals and rites are traditionally very important to African Americans, so having a "proper" funeral meant the world to these families. It was something they were willing to pay for no matter how bad the country was doing economically.

Davis concentrated recruitment through black churches. The church burial funeral business spawned jobs for black insurance agents and the program prospered.

Largely due to contributions by men like M.E. Davis, several early African American families in Dermott were able to live a promising life.

Through the years, the two-story house at 200 N. Knox Street, nicknamed "The Big House," stood as a symbol of community service and pride. Its heyday came during a time in Dermott's history when the town thrived and races found a balance, allowing them to work together in harmony.

The town of Dermott soon embraced the Davis family.

The December 24, 1925, edition of the *Dermott Times*, wrote in its "Among Colored People" section: "Mrs. M.E. Davis is spending the holidays with relatives and friends at Alexandria, La." -- what an honor it must have been to be so embraced by the local society news.

After seeing three daughters born in the house and having lived the luxury of being able to send them out-of-state to private schools at Palmer Institute and Fisk University, two of the best private schools for privileged black children, M.E. Davis died in 1954 of a heart attack. His wife helped rear her grandchildren in the home until her death in 1979.

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### STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Constructed in 1925, the M.E. Davis House is being nominated to the National Register of Historic Places with **local significance** under **Criterion C** as a wonderful example of a Craftsman style house in Dermott, Chicot County, Arkansas. Because of its association with M.E. Davis, an early 20<sup>th</sup> century business man who was instrumental in helping impoverished African-American families in the Dermott area secure work and their own houses, the building is also eligible for nomination under **Criterion A** for its association with African-American history in Dermott. This nomination is being submitted under the multiple property listing "Historic and Architectural Resources Associated with the Ethnic and Racial Minority Settlement of the Arkansas Delta."

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### BIBLIOGRAPHY

#### Books

The Governors of Arkansas. "Harvey Parnell Biography." The University of Arkansas Press. Copyright 1981 by the Board of Trustees of the University of Arkansas.

#### Interviews

Oral history as told by *Davis, Etta Conneliaus*. Now deceased wife of M.E. Davis.

*Davis-Strickland, Matthew Mae*. Daughter of M.E. Davis, operator of Davis-Strickland Funeral Home, former operator of Davis Funeral Home. Provided oral history, reference materials, photos.

*Dillard, John W.* Caretaker of the Davis House and husband of the late Maude Etta Davis Dillard (daughter to M.E. Davis). Also operator of Dillard's Funeral Home, an off-shoot of Davis Funeral Home, and a former embalmer for Davis Funeral Home. Provided historical detail about black businesses in Dermott and early family settlements as well as oral family history.

*Dillard, Joy R.* Granddaughter to M.E. Davis. Provided oral history accounts, photos.

#### Periodicals

*The Arkansas Democrat*. "125 Years of History Woven into a Short Story," Abbott F. Kinney. Feb. 17, 1952.

*The Dermott News*. "Among Colored People." Dec. 24, 1925.

*The Dermott News*. Feb. 4, 1926.

#### Other

Arkansas Historic Commission, newspaper clippings showing information on Chicot County and the Dermott flood.

Family photos of Davis House

U.S. Census Bureau. Fourteenth Census of the United States. 1920 - Populations.

Various Property Tax Records. Chicot County Courthouse.

M.E. Davis House  
Name of Property

Chicot County, Arkansas  
County and State

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### VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

Hollands Addition and Estate  
S/D of Parcel 16  
Lots 1, 2, 3 and S 30 Ft of Lot 6

### BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION

The boundary includes all land historically associated with the M.E. Davis House.