

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

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

Johnson's Drive-In

Siler City, Chatham County, CH0870, Listed 02/05/2025
Nomination by Heather Fearnbach, Fearnbach History Services, Inc.
Photographs by Heather Fearnbach, September, 2023



North Elevation



1960 addition, looking east

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's Drive-In

other names/site number N/A

2. Location

street & number 1520 East Eleventh Street

N/A not for publication

city or town Siler City

N/A vicinity

stat North Carolina

code NC

county Chatham

code 037

zip code 27344

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]
Signature of certifying official/Title State Historic Preservation Officer

Jan 27, 2025
Date

North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources
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

Johnson's Drive-In
Name of Property

Chatham County, NC
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 count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	0	buildings
0	0	sites
0	0	structures
0	0	objects
1	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
N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

COMMERCE: Restaurant

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

COMMERCE: Restaurant

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)

MINIMAL TRADITIONAL

MODERN MOVEMENT

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation BRICK

walls BRICK

roof ASPHALT

ASPHALT

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.)

- Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
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.
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:

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

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

Commerce

Period of Significance

1946-1975

Significant Dates

1946

1960

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Poe, Irvin, builder (1946 and 1960)

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

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
Other State Agency
Federal Agency
Local Government
University
Other

Name of repository:

Johnson's Drive-In

Name of Property

Chatham County, NC

County and State

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 1.5 acres

See Latitude/Longitude coordinates continuation sheet

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1	_____	_____	_____
	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

name/title Heather Fearnbach

organization Fearnbach History Services, Inc.

date 2/1/2024

street & number 3334 Nottingham Road

telephone 336-765-2661

city or town Winston-Salem

state NC

zip code 27104

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 Carolyn Johnson Routh

street & number 1602 East Raleigh Street

telephone 919-427-5851

city or town Siler City

state NC

zip code 27344

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 Reductions Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20303.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 1 Johnson's Drive-In
Chatham County, NC

7. Narrative Description

Setting

Johnson's Drive-In is located one mile east of Siler City's historic downtown commercial district on the south side of US 64, a heavily trafficked four-lane thoroughfare. The highway, the longest in North Carolina, runs east-west for 609 miles, spanning the entire state from Whalebone on Dare County's Outer Banks to the Tennessee border in Cherokee County west of Murphy. The interstate continues to Teec Nos Pos, Arizona.¹

The one-and-one-half-story, gable-roofed, 1946 restaurant with a one-story, flat-roofed, 1960 addition occupies the northwest section of an asymmetrical 0.57-acre parcel bounded by US 64 on the north, East Raleigh Street on the east and south, and the adjacent commercial tract to the west. The lot was originally larger, allowing for parking and curbside service north of the building. However, the tract was reduced in size during the late 1980s by right-of-way acquisition for US 64's widening from two to four lanes. The entire parcel was then paved with asphalt to allow for parking east and south of the restaurant. The southern portion of the lot was previously grass lawn. The parcel is separated from the highway by a fifteen-foot-wide right-of-way strip that includes a concrete-curbed grass median and two asphalt-paved curb-cuts for parking lot egress. The narrow asphalt-paved portion of the parcel north of the building was lined with a large formed-concrete-block barrier after a car veered off US 64 and crashed into the northeast corner of the 1960 façade on October 8, 2021.² The parking lot is also accessible from East Raleigh Street.

Two large vinyl signs with tall square posts topped with ball finials stand at the east and west edges of the parcel north of the building. The signs feature a central cheeseburger motif framed by "Johnson's" and "since 1946." Three identical signs are mounted in the 1946 building gables atop painted plywood covering the windows. The signage, all installed in summer 2019, replaced wood signs hand-painted by Odell Butner of Siler City.³

The surrounding area is primarily commercial, with some residential development including two mid-twentieth-century Ranch houses constructed for the Johnson family and a late-twentieth-century mobile home park south of East Raleigh Street. One-half mile east of Johnson's Drive-In, US 64 intersects US 421, a four-lane divided highway that runs northwest from Fort Fisher in New Hanover County to the Tennessee state line near Vilas in Watagua County. The interstate terminates in Michigan City, Indiana. US 62 and US 421 have been extended and rerouted numerous times since 1932, when the roads first traversed Chatham County.⁴

¹ J. D. Lewis, "US 64," <http://www.vahighways.com/ncannex/route-log/us064.html> (accessed January 2025).

² Claxton Johnson, interview with Heather Fearnbach (hereafter abbreviated HF) at Johnson's Drive-In, September 18, 2023; Daniel and Carolyn Johnson Routh, interview with HF at Johnson's Drive-In, September 18, 2023, and telephone conversations and email correspondence with HF, February 2024.

³ Ibid.

⁴ J. D. Lewis, "US 421," <http://www.vahighways.com/ncannex/route-log/us421.html> (accessed January 2025).

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 2 Johnson's Drive-In
Chatham County, NC

1946 Exterior

Johnson's Drive-In encompasses a one-and-one-half-story, gable-roofed, concrete-masonry-unit building completed in 1946 and a one-story, flat-roofed, 1960 addition. Both were veneered with running-bond red brick in 1960, encapsulating some 1946 windows and doors. The 1946 building features end (east and west) gables as well as a broad north gable, all sheathed with painted weatherboards around paired, double-hung, six-over-six, wood sash covered with painted plywood and Johnson's Drive-In signs. South of the west gable windows, painted plywood also covers the single-leaf wood door with a three-horizontal-panel base and six-pane upper section that originally facilitated second-floor apartment egress. A straight run of wood steps with a railing comprising square newels and balusters and a flat handrail rose on the west wall to the entrance.

Three large aluminum-frame plate-glass windows with rectangular transoms and a single-leaf wood door with a three-horizontal-panel base and six-pane upper section punctuate the 1946 building's north elevation. The façade originally encompassed two doors, each flanked by two large windows, all with rectangular transoms. Brick veneer covers the east door and westernmost window. A wood-frame screen door topped with a painted-plywood panel fills the west door opening. The entrance is no longer functional. Signs detailing the restaurant's history are mounted on the inside face of the window glass. The north and east window openings are covered from the interior with painted plywood. A single-leaf wood door with a three-horizontal-panel base and six-pane upper section remains at the east entrance. The single-leaf aluminum storm door is topped with a painted-plywood panel. Brick veneer covers three single-leaf doors and a single and a pair of double-hung, six-over-six, wood sash on the south elevation. The matching window on the west elevation and a single-leaf, five-horizontal-panel, wood door were encapsulated by the 1960 addition. Both are exposed within the 1946 room and covered with wood paneling in the 1960 corridor.

1960 Exterior

The 1960 addition consists of a rectangular wing with an offset northeast entrance vestibule that projects from the 1946 building's west bay. The flat roof extends to a flat metal canopy that wraps around the east, north, and west elevations of the entire building above a concrete sidewalk. Aluminum coping caps the corrugated-metal canopy fascia. Round painted-steel posts support the canopy adjacent to the 1946 section. A single unpainted wood pole supports the west canopy.

The aluminum-frame insulated-glass window assembly that spans the north elevation and the north bays of the east and west elevations was installed after the October 2021 car crash. Painted plywood surmounts the windows, which have slightly projecting header-course sills atop a brick kneewall. The running-bond red-brick planter that wraps around the wall beneath the windows is capped with header course. The northeast corners of the kneewall and planter were also damaged in the crash. Variegated lighter-red brick was used to execute repairs completed in January 2022. The entrance vestibule received a new aluminum-frame single-leaf glass door. The horizontally-sliding east vestibule window and aluminum shelf beneath it were installed in spring

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 3 Johnson's Drive-In
Chatham County, NC

2020 to allow take-out pickup while restaurant dining room service was suspended during the COVID pandemic.

Both single-leaf, wood-frame, glazed doors on the west elevation and the matching south door have aluminum-frame storm doors. Two double-hung, one-over-one, vinyl-sash windows light the kitchen. A chain-link fence with vertical black vinyl interior slats encloses the area adjacent to the south elevation that contains coolers and other restaurant equipment.

1946 Interior

The 1946 building has two primary first-floor rooms with open plans and a three-room second-floor apartment. The east room was the main dining area, while the west room encompassed the restaurant kitchen, counters, convenience store displays, and some dining tables and chairs. More seating was added after the mid-1950s store closure. A wide segmental-arched opening in the central partition wall provides egress between rooms, both of which have rectangular Celotex ceiling tiles, wood cornice molding, and red-painted concrete floors. However, the plastered west room walls are painted white with a light-blue (originally black) base stripe that mimics a baseboard. Historic photographs indicate that the east room initially had the same white-and-black paint scheme. The concrete-masonry-unit walls were painted light blue in the mid-1950s.

A long wood counter with a fluted-aluminum-edged red linoleum top runs east-west at the kitchen's north edge. The counter front is painted light blue with black lines emulating mortar joints between square blocks. A red-painted wood footrest extends the counter's full length. The slightly lower wood counter that spans the east wall's south section is faced with vertical boards painted white with a light-blue base. The metal-edged laminate countertop and several feet of the wall above the counter are also painted light blue.

The 1946 building has functioned as a storage area for restaurant supplies and original equipment and furnishings since 1960. Rudimentary wood shelves line the west room's north and south walls and the east room's north wall. The freestanding blue-painted wood cabinet with three drawers and a door topped with a white porcelain-enameled-steel counter with red edges in the west room served as the meat grinder stand until 2023. Aluminum-frame dining tables with red laminate tops and chairs with red and turquoise vinyl upholstery are stored on the second floor, accessed via an enclosed narrow winding stair at the dining room's southeast corner. A single-leaf wood door with a three-horizontal-panel base and six-pane upper section secures the closet beneath the stair. The men's restroom west of the stair enclosure has a single-leaf wood-panel door. The women's restroom was accessed from the exterior. The entrance is covered with brick veneer.

Two wood steps outside the stair enclosure rise to the entrance and landing where the steps turn and continue in a straight run to the second floor. A single-leaf two-panel wood door with a faceted glass knob secures the entrance. The stair terminates at a narrow landing adjacent to the bathroom door. The wood railing at the stairwell edge comprises a rectangular newel and balusters and a flat handrail.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 4 Johnson's Drive-In
Chatham County, NC

Painted plaster sheathes the second-floor walls with the exception of the west room's light-blue-painted concrete-masonry-unit west wall. Wood cornice molding, flat-board door and window surrounds with butt edges, and baseboards with molded upper edges are intact. Celotex ceiling tiles have been removed, exposing the wood roof beams, rafters, and decking. The central and west rooms have square vinyl-composition-tile floors. Original geometric-patterned linoleum remains in the east room, which has a closet with a single-leaf, two-panel, wood door in the southeast corner. The eave closets adjacent to the east and west rooms' north walls are accessed from the central room via short vertical-board doors. The single-leaf wood bathroom door on the central room's south wall and door between the central and west rooms have five horizontal panels. Faux-tile wainscoting covers the lower two-thirds of the bathroom walls. Original white porcelain fixtures—a wall-mounted sink, toilet, and tub—remain. The freestanding metal stove that heated the second floor remains adjacent to the chimney on the center room's south wall.

1960 Interior

The 1960 addition encompasses a large north room containing dining and cooking areas; a short east corridor that leads to the 1946 building entrance, mechanical closet, restrooms, and the south (rear) door; a projecting entrance vestibule at the room's northeast corner; and a kitchen. The dining room and corridor are distinguished by wood-paneled walls with a lacquered finish, wood cornice molding, wood door surrounds with mitered corners, and flat-panel wood-veneered doors. Small, square, variegated-brown-and-beige mosaic tile covers the floor and rectangular, pink-glazed, ceramic-tile cove base serves as a baseboard. In the restrooms, square, beige-glazed, ceramic-tile wainscoting with rectangular light-brown-glazed bullnose and cove base sheathes the lower half of the walls. Both have white porcelain toilets and wall-mounted sinks. Square Celotex-tile ceilings remain with the exception of the kitchen, which has a painted-plywood ceiling and walls and polished concrete floor.

In the dining area, booths with light-faux-wood-laminate tables and matching green-vinyl-upholstered benches line the north wall beneath the windows. The aluminum-frame swiveling counter stools also have green vinyl upholstery. The green vinyl replaced the original aqua and gold vinyl circa 1985. Wood counters with light-faux-wood-laminate tops and darker faux-wood-laminate fronts run east-west and north-south at the food preparation area's north and east edges. Both have black-vinyl-composition-tile surfaces and extend the counters' full length. The east counter was for order pickup. The linear, exposed-bulb, fluorescent lighting above the east-west counter and wall-mounted elements including the menu board, a clock, a radio are original. Likewise, most of the original stainless-steel equipment in the prep stations and grill lining the south wall remains. The cooler and icemaker beneath the counter flank an original soda fountain. The adjacent kitchen houses an original refrigerator as well as freezers, prep tables, and sinks.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 5 Johnson's Drive-In
Chatham County, NC

Integrity Statement

Johnson's Drive-In possesses the seven qualities of historic integrity—location, setting, feeling, association, design, materials, and workmanship—required for National Register designation. The restaurant maintains integrity of location as it has occupied the same site adjacent to the heavily trafficked US 64 corridor since 1946. Despite burgeoning late-twentieth-century commercial development flanking the thoroughfare and NCDOT right-of-way acquisition during the late 1980s to facilitate US 64's widening from two to four lanes, the restaurant retains its prominent roadside presence, allowing for integrity of setting, feeling, and association. Loss of the north parking area did not affect the restaurant's operation since curbside service had been discontinued in the mid-1970s and ample parking is available east and south of the building. The restaurant displays integrity of design, materials, and workmanship from the period of significance, during which it was enlarged in 1960 to its current configuration. Exterior modifications such as the 1960 application of brick veneer to the 1946 façade and wrap-around canopy installation were undertaken to present a unified, up-to-date appearance. The floor plans, finishes, and built-in elements of each section are intact. The 1946 first floor is characterized by painted plaster and concrete-masonry-unit walls, rectangular Celotex ceiling tiles, wood cornice molding, paneled wood doors, red-painted concrete floors, and painted wood counters in the west room. Painted plaster and concrete-masonry-unit walls; wood cornice molding, door and window surrounds, baseboards, and doors; and linoleum and vinyl-composition-tile floor coverings remain on the second floor. The 1960 dining room and food preparation area features original wood-paneled walls; wood cornice molding, door surrounds, and veneered doors; mosaic-tile floors; Celotex-tile ceilings; counters; booth and counter seating; and stainless steel equipment.

Statement of Archaeological Potential

The North Carolina Historic Preservation Office solicited input regarding the potential for archaeological significance from the Office of State Archaeology (OSA). Kim Urban, Assistant State Archaeologist with OSA provided the following statement:

I have reviewed the National Register of Historic Places nomination form for Johnson's Drive-In. No archaeological sites have been recorded previously at this location, and it is unlikely that subsurface archaeological deposits related to the period of significance remain intact due to disturbance from modifications to the building and surrounding landscape such as the parking lot construction, the widening of US 64, and construction of adjacent commercial structures. As a result, I do not expect that intact archaeological resources associated with the period of significance that can contribute additional information relevant to the property's history would be present. Therefore, I do not recommend a statement of archaeological potential for this project.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 6 Johnson's Drive-In
Chatham County, NC

Section 8. Statement of Significance

The locally significant Johnson's Drive-In in Siler City, North Carolina, epitomizes the proliferation of roadside quick-service restaurants in conjunction with the mid-twentieth-century development of a motorist-focused service industry along newly developed highway corridors, thus meeting National Register Criterion A for commerce. Leonard and Christine Johnson capitalized on the widespread adoption of the automobile as a primary mode of transportation and the early 1940s realignment of the US 64 corridor through Siler City by opening a restaurant and service station one mile east of downtown in 1946. The business included a convenience store as well as two gas pumps northeast of the building. The restaurant is thought to be the first to offer both curbside and indoor dining on US 64 between Asheboro and Raleigh, a distance of approximately seventy-two miles. The building functioned as a three-dimensional billboard, with its proximity to the road, large plate-glass windows, and brightly lit interior allowing motorists to view customers enjoying meals served by the Johnsons, carhops, waitresses. The business evolved in response to trends in roadside restaurant design and operation. While the traditional gable-roofed style of the 1946 building resembled a house, which increased consumer comfort level in the post-World War II era, the Modernist 1960 addition distinguished the restaurant from competitors and brought an urban commercial aesthetic to the small town. Capacity increased to thirty-six people at booths and counter stools in the air-conditioned 1960 dining room, a significant boon to business. Notably, the establishment was not segregated, an anomaly in the Jim Crow South. All seating and facilities were available to Black and white customers, who used the same entrances. Johnson's Drive-In, renowned for burgers topped with Velveeta cheese, slaw, chili, and diced onions, has been a mainstay of the local economy since its opening and is currently the longest-operating business in Siler City. The period of significance begins in 1946 when the first portion of the building was complete and ends in 1975, the approximate date that curbside service was discontinued. Although the restaurant remains in operation, the period after 1975 is not exceptionally significant.

Criterion A Commerce Context and Historical Background

Siler City natives Clyde Leonard Johnson and Evelyn Christine Johnson resided in their hometown southeast of Greensboro in western Chatham County after their October 22, 1939, wedding in Danville, Virginia. Siler City, incorporated in 1887 following the 1884 completion of the Cape Fear and Yadkin Valley Railroad line between Sanford and Greensboro, had grown from a crossroads settlement of 294 people in 1890 to a town with 2,197 residents in 1940, many of whom worked in furniture and textile factories, lumber and grain mills, and meat and poultry processing plants. Leonard, a Continental Life Insurance agent, and Christine, who was employed at Moon's dress shop in nearby Graham before her marriage, began saving money to open a restaurant. The early 1940s realignment of the US 64 corridor through Siler City fueled economic development as some downtown businesses relocated to sites with ample parking close to the highway. However, in 1945 when Leonard and Christine commissioned construction of a small one-and-one-half-story, gable-roofed, masonry building on US 64's south side one mile east of downtown, the area was undeveloped. The Johnsons paid James B. and Sallie Teague one hundred dollars for the land, previously part of their farm. Local carpenter Irvin Poe; Mr. Joyce, a

United States Department of the Interior
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places
Continuation SheetSection number 8 Page 7 Johnson's Drive-In
Chatham County, NC

mason from Pleasant Garden; and their crews completed the structure, which included an upstairs apartment that the Johnsons occupied, in 1946. Borden Brick and Tile Company supplied the long, thin, gray concrete block, which was painted white on the exterior. Liles Plumbing and Heating Company and electrician Henry Harper installed systems.⁵

Johnson's Drive-In, said to be the first restaurant offering both curbside and indoor service on US 64 between Asheboro and Raleigh, opened on July 19, 1946. Leonard and Christine prepared breakfast, lunch, and dinner Tuesday through Sunday. Their son Claxton, born in 1941, assisted as needed, memorizing orders until he could write. Customers could eat in their cars or the dining room. Early employees including Mary Ellison, Faye Teague, Peggy White, and Nancy Pritchard Wilson took orders and delivered curbside meals on metal trays that clamped onto automobile doors. The dining room featured stylish aluminum-frame tables with red laminate tops and chairs with red and turquoise vinyl upholstery purchased in Washington, D. C. with the guidance of Leonard's uncle Royal Johnson. Leonard borrowed his father's truck to pick them up. The business included a convenience store and two gas pumps northeast of the building. Leonard's parents Taylor and Elizabeth Johnson managed the store during the late 1940s.⁶

The Johnsons received daily deliveries of meat, dairy products, vegetables, and loaves of bread they sliced for sandwiches. Angus beef for burgers was ground using a grinder that remains in use. Coble Dairy supplied cheese, milk, and ice cream. Milk and fruit juices were initially the primary beverage options due to post-war soft-drink rationing.⁷

The restaurant's reputation for excellent food and efficient service quickly spread through word-of-mouth, making advertising unnecessary. Notably, the establishment was not segregated, an anomaly in the Jim Crow South. All seating and facilities were available to Black and white customers, who used the same entrances. Traffic increased during football season and events such as the State Fair in Raleigh, resulting in long lines and extended hours. As business burgeoned in the mid-1950s, the Johnsons closed the store to facilitate restaurant growth. They subsequently engaged the same contractors who constructed the 1946 building to erect an addition completed in 1960, as well as a Ranch house just south of the restaurant at 1602 East Raleigh Street.

⁵ Wade Hampton Hadley Jr., *The Town of Siler City: 1887-1987* (Siler City: Caviness Printing Service, Inc., 1986), 1-5; Claxton Johnson, interview with HF, September 18, 2023; Daniel and Carolyn Johnson Routh, interview with HF, September 18, 2023, and telephone conversations and email correspondence with HF, February 2024; US Census, population schedules, 1930-1950; marriage records; WWII draft registration card; "Miss Christine Johnson is Wed to L. C. Johnson," *Chatham Record* (Pittsboro), December 14, 1939, p. 3; Bob Welch, "Once an Oasis," *Chatham Record*, July 22, 2004, pp. B1 and B14. William Irvin Poe (1921-1993) and his brother Hal Eugene Poe (1922-1959) were both carpenters. "W. Irvin Poe," *Chatham Record*, February 18, 1993, p. 12.

⁶ Claxton Johnson, interview with HF, September 18, 2023; Daniel and Carolyn Johnson Routh, interview with HF, September 18, 2023, and telephone conversations and email correspondence with HF, February 2024. Sidney Taylor Johnson (1878-1957) and Geneva Elizabeth Ray Johnson (1881-1958) owned a farm in Chatham County's Matthews township. US Census, population schedules, 1930-1940; gravemarkers.

⁷ Claxton Johnson, interview with HF, September 18, 2023; Daniel and Carolyn Johnson Routh, interview with HF, September 18, 2023, and telephone conversations and email correspondence with HF, February 2024.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places
Continuation SheetSection number 8 Page 8 Johnson's Drive-In
Chatham County, NC

After they moved into the house and the addition was completed, the original section of the drive-in was used for storage. The air-conditioned restaurant seated thirty-six people at booths and counter stools, a substantial increase from the original dining room. Most cooking and meal assembly was done behind the counter with equipment ranging from the grill to bun warmers. The adjacent kitchen housed refrigerators, freezers, prep tables, and sinks. Leonard bought the equipment from United Restaurant Supply in Greensboro.⁸

The menu, which included eggs scrambled with cheese and ham; burgers, sandwiches, and hot dogs; French fries; beef, chicken, pork, and vegetable plates; chili and stew; apple, chocolate, lemon, and coconut pies; and milkshakes, was simplified by the mid-1960s. The Johnsons continued to operate the restaurant with the aid of a few employees, taking only three two-day trips a year to the mountains or Atlantic Beach on Sundays and Mondays when the restaurant was closed. Claxton, his wife Frances, and their daughter Carolyn, assumed more responsibility as his parents aged. In 1966, the family occupied a newly constructed Ranch house just south of Leonard and Christine's residence. Leonard worked the grill until two days before his death on August 9, 1985. Christine assisted behind the counter and in the kitchen. The restaurant was popular with state legislators, many of whom regularly stopped as they traveled to and from Raleigh. In July 1985, members of the North Carolina General Assembly placed an order for fifty cheeseburgers that were picked up by a courier and delivered to the State Legislative Building in Raleigh.⁹

Breakfast service was discontinued after Leonard's death. Operating hours became Tuesday through Saturday, 10:00 am until 2:00 pm, and, for a short time, Tuesday and Saturday nights. The menu has since comprised hamburgers, cheeseburgers, hot dogs, grilled cheese and lettuce-and-tomato sandwiches, French fries, soft drinks, and sweet tea. Curb service ceased in the mid-1970s. By that time, the carhop staff comprised two teenage boys who worked after school, nights, and weekends. The gas tanks were removed and the parking lot was extended behind the restaurant during the late 1980s in conjunction with US 64 widening. Christine manned the cash register until a few years before her 2007 death.¹⁰

After suspending dining room service in compliance with March 2020 COVID pandemic mandates, the restaurant introduced an online ordering payment platform and accepted credit card payments for the first time. There was no indoor seating; orders were picked up at the newly installed take-out window. Patronage quickly rebounded, with customers placing to-go orders sometimes consumed at parking lot picnics or athletic event tailgating. Claxton retired in January 2021. On October 8th of that year, a car veered off US 64 and crashed into the 1960 façade's northeast corner, killing one person and injuring three people waiting in line. Although

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.; Rod Hackney, "Death of restaurateur," *Greensboro News and Record*, August 18, 1985, pp. C1 and C8.

¹⁰ Claxton Johnson, interview with HF, September 18, 2023; Daniel and Carolyn Johnson Routh, interview with HF, September 18, 2023, and telephone conversations and email correspondence with HF, February 2024; Milburn Gibbs, "50 years of burgers," *Chatham Record*, July 18, 1996, p. B1; Bill Willcox, "Johnson's Top Cheeseburger," *Chatham Record*, April 9, 2015, p. B11.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 9 Johnson's Drive-In
Chatham County, NC

brick kneewall repair and new window installation was complete in January 2022, the dining room remained closed until early August 2023 due to supply scarcity.¹¹

Johnson's Drive-In continues to garner widespread acclaim. Its burgers topped with Velveeta cheese, slaw, chili, and diced onions have been deemed best in North Carolina more than fifty times. Press coverage attracts an international clientele. Claxton continued to visit with patrons until his health declined in late 2023. He died on March 9, 2024. Carolyn, her sons Tristan and Caemon, her husband Daniel, and two female employees currently operate the restaurant. Carolyn and Daniel also tour with their Bluegrass band Nu-Blu, founded in September 2003.¹²

Mid-twentieth-century Quick-Service Restaurants

Roadside quick-service eateries proliferated in the 1920s with the widespread adoption of the automobile as a primary mode of transportation. Small walk-up stands, cafes, coffee shops, and prefabricated diners (often resembling railroad dining cars), in close proximity to major thoroughfares provided fast, inexpensive, convenient food for locals and travelers. Ample parking was imperative. Drive-ins, where parked patrons ordered via a carhopping server and ate on-site from trays mounted to car doors or posts, increased in popularity after World War II. Some establishments featured roller-skating carhops. Many small venues offered only curbside service, but larger enterprises had indoor table, booth, and/or counter seating. During the same period, quick-service restaurants with dining rooms began installing drive-thru windows to expedite to-go order delivery. After Baldwin Park, California, In-N-Out Burger owner Harry Snyder developed an intercom ordering system for the restaurant's first location in 1948, the concept spread quickly through the fast-food industry. By the late 1950s, many drive-ins installed rudimentary intercoms—telephones and speaker boxes—between parking spaces to facilitate more efficient order placement and reduce labor costs. The technology gradually improved.¹³

Fast-food restaurant and service station design serves as a form of brand advertising, in which companies and entrepreneurs seek to create aesthetically appealing, instantly recognizable “packages” from which to market their products. An up-to-date appearance is critical, as anything less might provide competitors with an advantage. Roadside commercial buildings are intended to attract the attention of passing motorists rather than to blend into their surroundings, with distinctive roof lines, forms, sheathing materials, canopies, and signs. Although drive-ins were typically rectangular buildings, some establishments had round, hexagonal, or

¹¹ Claxton Johnson, interview with HF, September 18, 2023; Daniel and Carolyn Johnson Routh, interview with HF, September 18, 2023, and telephone conversations and email correspondence with HF, February 2024.

¹² Ibid.; Josh Chapin, “1 dead, 3 injured,” *ABC 11 News*, October 8, 2021.

¹³ John A. Jackle and Keith A. Sculle, *Fast Food* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 36, 40, 54-57.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 10 Johnson's Drive-In
Chatham County, NC

octagonal forms. Deep eaves and long canopies sheltered customers. Rooftop and pole signs were brightly illuminated, often with integral neon.¹⁴

From the late 1940s through the 1970s, quick-service restaurants tended to incorporate elements of the Modernist style, reflecting the era's progressive thinking and optimism in the use of new materials, construction techniques, and spatial arrangements. Structures display sleek lines, smooth facades, and the aluminum-framed plate-glass windows, doors, and curtain walls that characterize the modern design aesthetic. Storefronts featured asymmetrical entrances, angled or cantilevered display windows and side walls, flat-roofed canopies, and neon or aluminum-lettered signage in an effort to project an up-to-date image that would appeal to consumers. Materials including structural and spandrel glass, glass block, porcelain-enameled steel, anodized aluminum, natural and cast stone, wood, cast concrete, and long, thin Roman brick were used to embellish facades throughout the nation during this period.¹⁵

Mid-twentieth-century Quick-Service Restaurants in North Carolina

Myriad entrepreneurs operated popular roadside fast-food restaurants, many of them drive-ins, throughout North Carolina during the mid-twentieth century. Blue Mist Bar-B-Q, which opened in 1948 at 3409 Highway 64 East in Asheboro, was the second drive-in after Johnson's on the thoroughfare between Raleigh and Charlotte. The restaurant owned by the Cox family and distinguished by twenty-four-hour service closed on July 7, 2013, and was demolished to facilitate construction of a Dollar General store. Johnson's Drive-In, one of four Siler City restaurants offering curbside service in 1959, was the only establishment offering dinner service. Walter B. Andrews managed Brownie Lu Drive-In at 919 North Second Avenue, which served breakfast and lunch until 2022. Lambert's Drive-In at 504 South Chatham Avenue, owned by Edward L. Lambert, was open until early afternoon. The restaurant closed following his 1965 death and is no longer extant. Plackard C. and Ruby P. Adcock ran Michael's Drive-In, a lunch venue on the first floor of the two-story, gable-roofed, white-painted brick building at 112 East Fifth Street. The building was subsequently modified to serve as a residence.¹⁶

Single-location restaurants competed with quick-service franchises that proliferated during the period. McDonald's, founded in 1940 in California, spread rapidly throughout the nation. North Carolina's first location of the chain at 1101 Summit Avenue in Greensboro opened on September 30, 1959. Early fast-food franchises originating in North Carolina include What-A-Burger and Hardee's. Concord friends C. W. Bost, whose family owned a popular diner, and E. L. Bost opened the first What-A-Burger drive-in in 1956 at 1510

¹⁴ John A. Jackle and Keith A. Sculle, *The Gas Station in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 47, 150; Jackle and Sculle, *Fast Food*, 55-56.

¹⁵ Carol J. Dyson, "How to Work with Storefronts of the Mid-Twentieth Century," presentation for the National Main Streets Conference, Philadelphia, April 2, 2008, <http://www.illinois-history.gov/ps/midcentury.htm>.

¹⁶ Charles W. Miller, *Miller's Siler City, N.C., City Directory, 1959-1960* (Asheville, Southern Directory Company, 1959), 49, 111, 143, 190; "E. Leon Lambert," *Durham Morning Herald*, October 7, 1965, p. 2.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 11 Johnson's Drive-In
Chatham County, NC

North Cannon Boulevard in Kannapolis. The replacement restaurant erected at that location in 1972 remains in operation along with the 1964 What-A-Burger #10 at 926 South Main Street in the city. Six of the approximately twelve What-A-Burger drive-ins that comprised the chain are extant, most in Mooresville, Concord, and the surrounding area north of Charlotte. In addition to burgers, the restaurants offer hot dogs, chicken wings, barbecue, fish sandwiches, French fries, onion rings, tater rounds, cookies, milkshakes, and soft drinks.¹⁷

Martin County native Wilbur Hardee, inspired by the success of McDonald's, opened the first Hardee's restaurant on September 3, 1960, on Fourteenth Street near East Carolina University in Greenville. The building featured a drive-thru window. The first Hardee's drive-in, located at 321 North Church Street in Rocky Mount, began serving customers in May 1961. Both restaurants have been demolished. After the company's ownership changed in 1961, Hardee's restaurant franchise owners opened thousands of locations in the United States and internationally, specializing in charbroiled burgers, breaded chicken, biscuits, French fries, hash rounds, apple turnovers, and ice cream shakes.¹⁸

The number of mid-twentieth-century drive-in restaurants throughout North Carolina is steadily dwindling. Only a few have been documented in statewide architectural surveys, most recently conducted. Extant examples, like Johnson's Drive-In, display distinctive characteristics of roadside building design. Two intact 1959 restaurants in Charlotte, South 21 Drive-In #2 at 3101 East Independence Boulevard (North Carolina Study List 2001) and Bar-B-Q King at 2900 Wilkinson Boulevard (DOE 2006) possess potential for National Register listing. South 21 Drive-In is characterized by variegated taupe brick walls laid in running and stack bond and aluminum-frame curtain walls with painted spandrels. The flat roof extends to a long flat-roofed canopy with painted round steel posts that shelters a double row of parking spaces. Customers order via intercom from double-sided menu boards mounted on steel posts between the covered parking spaces as well as the uncovered spaces in the lot. The flat-roofed Bar-B-Q King features aluminum-frame plate-glass windows atop blonde-brick veneered kneewalls and painted spandrels. Two long flat-roofed canopies with round steel posts extend from the restaurant above double rows of parking spaces.

Other architecturally intact and operational drive-in restaurants include Char-Grill at 618 Hillsborough Street in Raleigh. The flat-roofed painted-concrete-block building constructed in 1959 has aluminum-frame plate-glass windows above painted spandrels and is distinguished by a concave-panel roof with deep eaves supported by slender square posts. The flat-roofed 1964 What-A-Burger #10 at 926 South Main Street in Kannapolis has blonde-brick walls, replacement plate-glass windows, and a distinctive zig-zag canopy with a corrugated-metal roof supported by Y-shaped tapered painted-steel posts. Aluminum-frame double-sided menu boards and

¹⁷ Hugh Fisher, "What-A-Milestone," *Salisbury Post*, January 11, 2015; Kathleen Purvis, "The Wonderful World of What-A-Burger," *Our State*, August 2020.

¹⁸ Thomas J. Farnham, "Hardee's Restaurants," William S. Powell, ed., *Encyclopedia of North Carolina* (University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, NC 2006), 550-551; Jerry Bledsoe, "The Story of Hardee's," *Our State*, January 2011.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 12 Johnson's Drive-In
Chatham County, NC

aluminum trays extend from the posts. The 1965 What-A-Burger #11 at 210 South Main Street in Mooresville and 1972 What-A-Burger at 1510 North Cannon Boulevard in Kannapolis are almost identical.¹⁹

The 1960 remodeling and expansion of Johnson's Drive-In was imperative to maintain relevance in the face of quick-service franchise competition. The building functioned as three-dimensional billboard, with its proximity to the road, large plate-glass windows, and brightly lit interior allowing motorists to view customers enjoying meals served by the Johnsons, carhops, waitresses. The business evolved in response to trends in roadside restaurant design and operation. While the traditional gable-roofed style of the 1946 building resembled a house, which increased consumer comfort level in the post-World War II era, the Modernist 1960 addition distinguished the restaurant from competitors and brought an urban commercial aesthetic to the small town. The 1946 dining room was small and there was never a canopy sheltering the outdoor service area, where carhops delivered meals curbside on metal trays that clamped onto automobile doors. Capacity increased to thirty-six people at booths and counter stools in the air-conditioned 1960 dining room, a significant boon to business. Notably, the establishment was not segregated, an anomaly in the Jim Crow South. All seating and facilities were available to Black and white customers, who used the same entrances.²⁰ During the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, fast-food purveyors built numerous restaurants adjacent to US 64 in close proximity to Johnson's Drive-In. Franchises offering burgers include Sonic Drive-In, McDonald's, and Burger King. Johnson's Drive-In's excellent food and efficient service has allowed it to remain viable despite the competition.

¹⁹ Hugh Fisher, "What-A-Milestone," *Salisbury Post*, January 11, 2015; Kathleen Purvis, "The Wonderful World of What-A-Burger," *Our State Magazine*, August 2020.

²⁰ Claxton Johnson, interview with HF, September 18, 2023; Daniel and Carolyn Johnson Routh, interview with HF, September 18, 2023, and telephone conversations and email correspondence with HF, February 2024.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 9 Page 13 Johnson's Drive-In
Chatham County, NC

Section 9. Bibliography

ABC 11 News

Chatham Record (Pittsboro)

Durham Morning Herald

Dyson, Carol J. "How to Work with Storefronts of the Mid-Twentieth Century," presentation for the National Main Streets Conference, Philadelphia, April 2, 2008, <http://www.illinois-history.gov/ps/midcentury.htm>.

Greensboro News and Record

Hadley, Wade Hampton Jr. *The Town of Siler City: 1887-1987*. Siler City: Caviness Printing Service, Inc., 1986.

Jackle, John A., and Keith A. Sculle. *Fast Food*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.

_____. *The Gas Station in America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994.

Johnson, Claxton, interview with Heather Fearnbach at Johnson's Drive-In, September 18, 2023.

Lewis, J. D. "US 421," <http://www.vahighways.com/ncannex/route-log/us421.html> (accessed January 2025).

_____. "US 64," <http://www.vahighways.com/ncannex/route-log/us064.html> (accessed January 2025).

Miller, Charles W. *Miller's Siler City, N.C., City Directory, 1959-1960*. Asheville, Southern Directory Company, 1959.

Our State

Powell, William S. ed. *Encyclopedia of North Carolina*. University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, NC, 2006.

Routh, Carolyn and Daniel. Interview with Heather Fearnbach at Johnson's Drive-In, September 18, 2023, and telephone conversations and email correspondence with Heather Fearnbach, February 2024.

Salisbury Post

US Census, population schedules, 1930-1950.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 10 Page 14 Johnson's Drive-In
Chatham County, NC

Section 10. Geographical Data

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Latitude: 35.733007 Longitude: -79.441932

Verbal Boundary Description

The National Register boundary encompasses 0.57-acre Chatham County tax parcel as indicated by the heavy line on the enclosed map. Scale: one inch equals approximately sixty feet

Boundary Justification

The nominated tract encompassed the residual acreage historically associated with the restaurant. Despite burgeoning late-twentieth-century commercial development flanking the thoroughfare and NCDOT right-of-way acquisition during the late 1980s to facilitate US 64's widening from two to four lanes, the restaurant retains its prominent roadside presence.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number Photos Page 15 Johnson's Drive-In
Chatham County, NC

Additional Documentation: Historic Images

The following historic images are from the collection of Claxton Johnson and Carolyn and Daniel Routh.



Johnson's Diner, north elevation, 1954

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number Photos Page 16

Johnson's Drive-In
Chatham County, NC



**Leonard Johnson at west storefront (above) and
in restaurant, looking east from west room (below), in the late 1940s**



United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number Photos Page 17

Johnson's Drive-In
Chatham County, NC



Looking east north of building (above) and southeast elevation (below) in the early 1950s



United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number Photos Page 18

Johnson's Drive-In
Chatham County, NC

Current Photographs

All photographs by Heather Fearnbach, Fearnbach History Services, Inc., 3334 Nottingham Road, Winston-Salem, NC, on September 18, 2023. Digital images located at the North Carolina SHPO.



1. North elevation

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number Photos Page 19

Johnson's Drive-In
Chatham County, NC



2. Northeast oblique (above) and 3. Southwest oblique (below)



United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number Photos Page 20

Johnson's Drive-In
Chatham County, NC



4. Northwest oblique (above) and 5. 1946 restaurant, west room, looking west (below)



United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number Photos Page 21

Johnson's Drive-In
Chatham County, NC



6. 1946 Restaurant, west room, looking east (above) and 7. East room, looking east (below)



United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number Photos Page 22

Johnson's Drive-In
Chatham County, NC



8. 1946 second floor, east room, looking east (above) and 9. West room, looking west (below)



United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number Photos Page 23

Johnson's Drive-In
Chatham County, NC

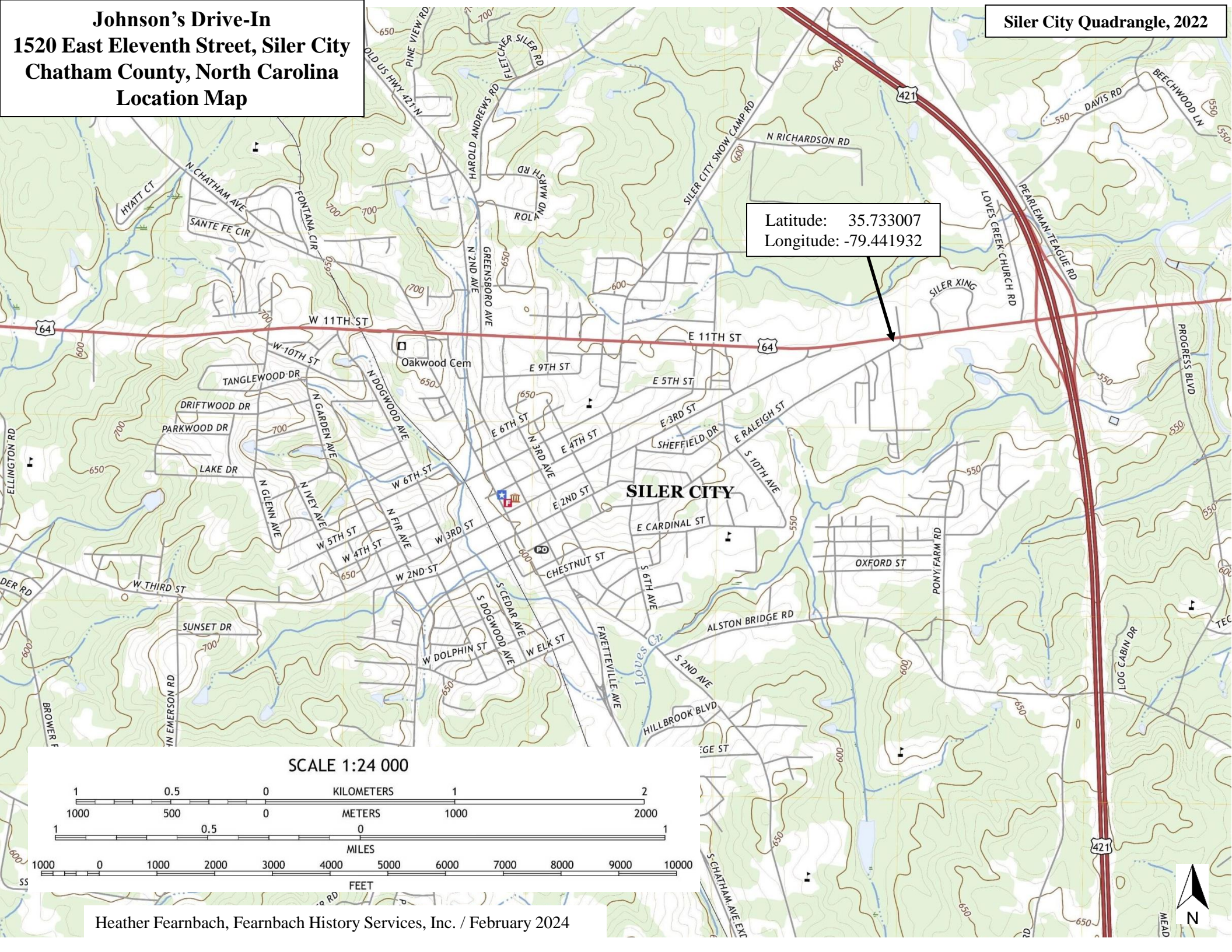


10. 1960 addition, looking east (above) and 11. Looking west (below)

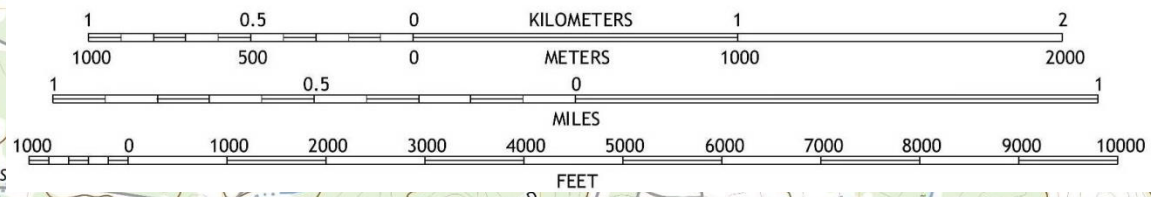


Johnson's Drive-In
1520 East Eleventh Street, Siler City
Chatham County, North Carolina
Location Map

Latitude: 35.733007
Longitude: -79.441932



SCALE 1:24 000



Johnson's Drive-In
1520 East Eleventh Street, Siler City
Chatham County, North Carolina
National Register Boundary Map
and Photograph Key



Latitude: 35.733007
Longitude: -79.441932

National Register
Boundary
Chatham County
tax parcel #14333

East Eleventh Street (US Highway 64)

East Raleigh Street

Center Drive

1960

1946

14333

14229

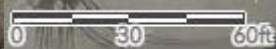
1516

14321

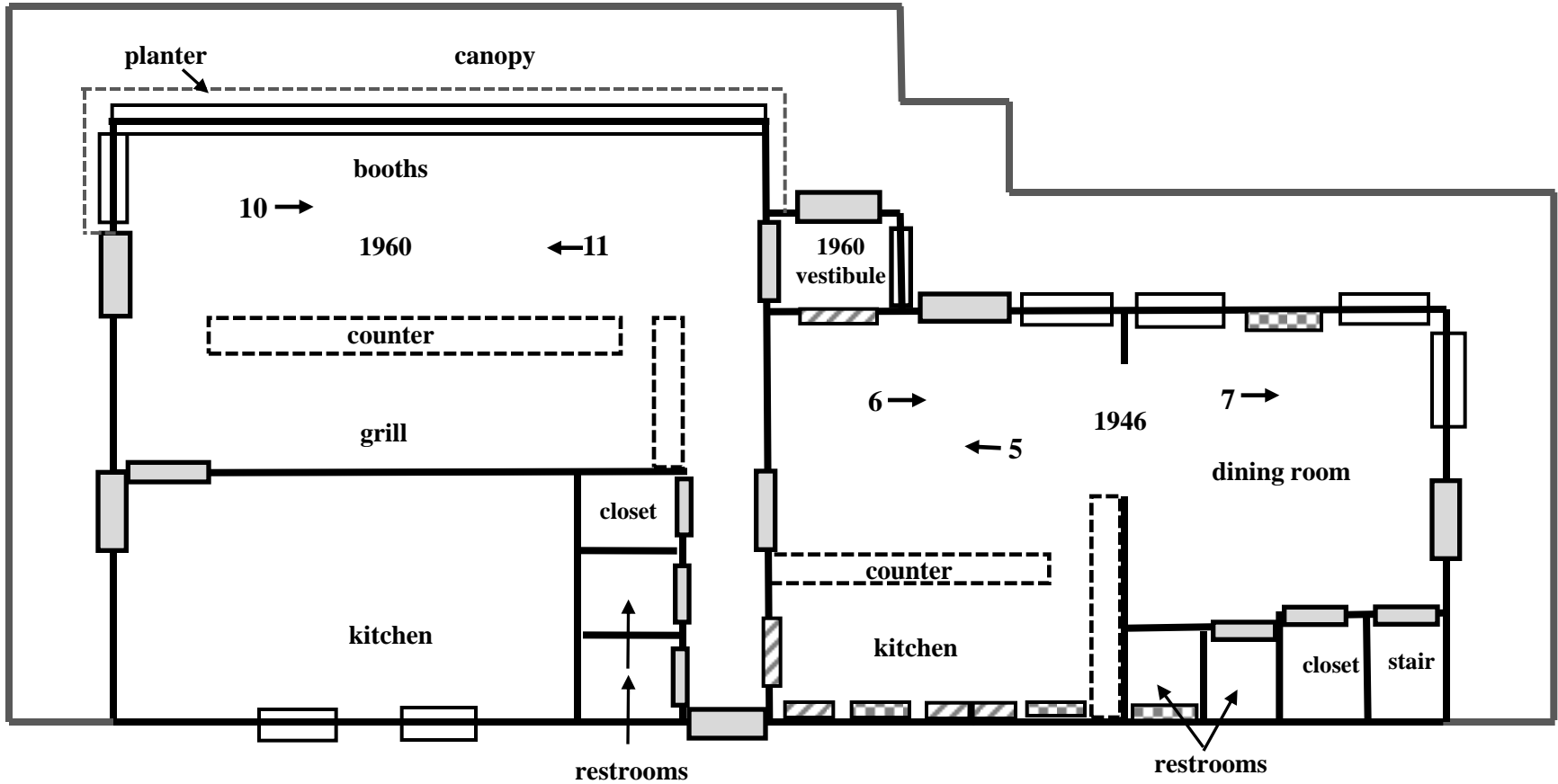
61375





92078

1602



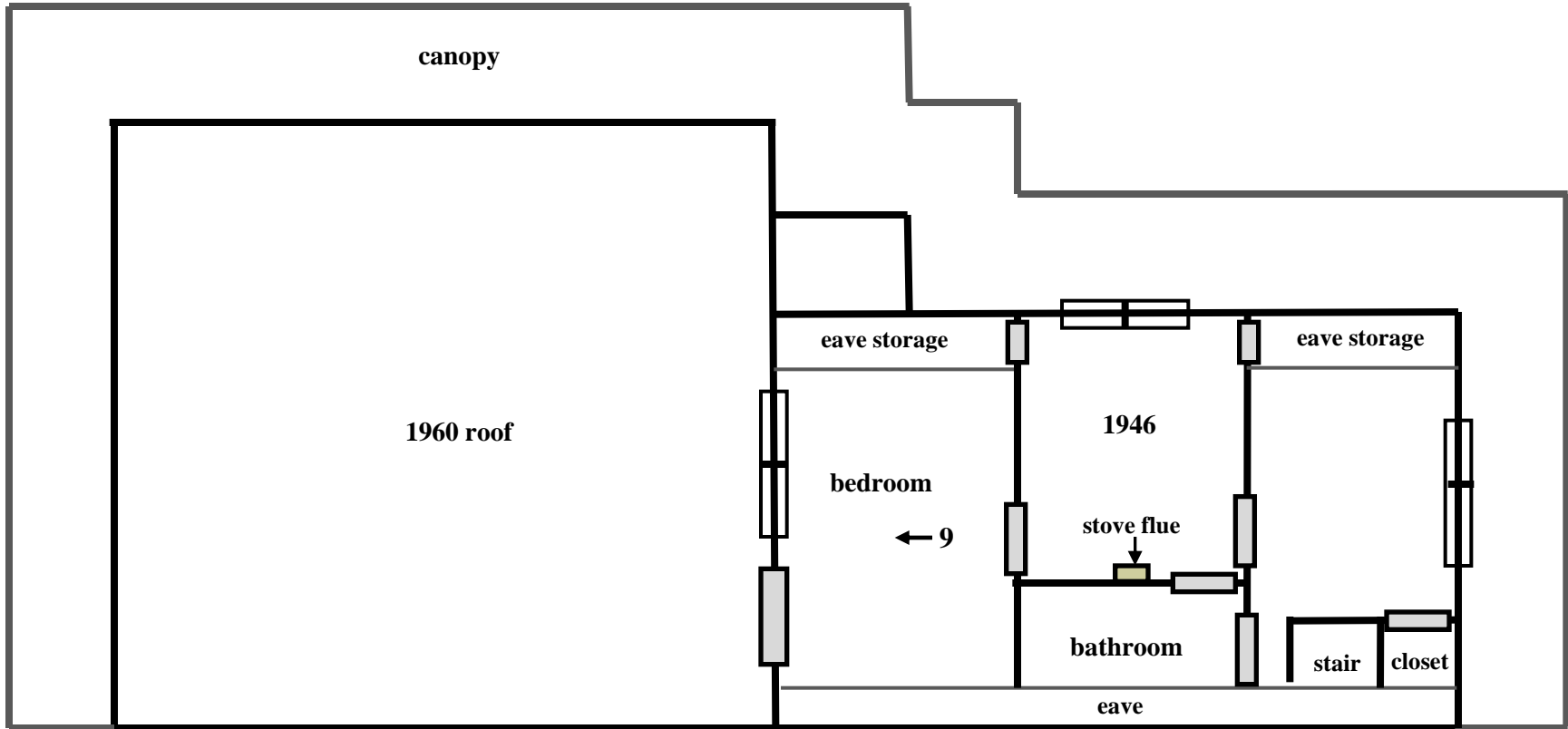
Johnson's Drive-In
1520 East Eleventh Street, Siler City
Chatham County, North Carolina
First Floor Plan and Photograph Key



-  Door
-  Window
-  Encapsulated Window
-  Encapsulated Door



Johnson's Drive-In
1520 East Eleventh Street, Siler City
Chatham County, North Carolina
Second Floor Plan and Photograph Key



-  Door
-  Window

All second-story doors and windows are intact but covered with plywood from the exterior

