

VLR-6/19/96 r 2HP-12/16/96

NPS Form 10-900  
(Rev. 10-90)

OMB No. 1024-0018

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 any 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 Bill's Diner

other names/site number A Streetcar Named Desire/VDHR File No 187-0014

2. Location

street & number 1 Depot street not for publication

city or town Chatham vicinity \_\_\_\_\_  
state Virginia code VA county Pittsylvania code-143-  
zip code 24531

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this x 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 X locally. ( \_\_\_\_\_ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

[Signature]  
Signature of certifying official

October 24, 1996  
Date

Virginia Department of Historic 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 commenting or other official Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal agency and bureau

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**4. National Park Service Certification**

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I, hereby certify that this 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 Keeper Date  
of Action

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**5. Classification**

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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

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	buildings
<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	sites
<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	structures
<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	objects
<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register  0

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

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6. Function or Use

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Historic Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat: <u>Transportation</u>	Sub: <u>streetcar</u>
<u>Commerce/Trade</u>	<u>restaurant</u>
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Current Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat: <u>Commerce/Trade</u>	Sub: <u>restaurant</u>
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

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7. Description

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Architectural Classification (Enter categories from instructions)

Other

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Materials (Enter categories from instructions)

foundation CONCRETE

roof ASPHALT

walls METAL:steel

other \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

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

See Continuation Sheets

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Bill's Diner  
Town of Chatham, Virginia  
Diners of Virginia  
(Multiple Property Listing)

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Association to Diners of Virginia Multiple Property Document

Bill's Diner is submitted as part of a Multiple Property Listing, Diners of Virginia. The cover document was completed and accepted by the Virginia Department of Historic Resources' State Review Board and Historic Resources Board in 1995. Bill's diner is specifically discussed in the cover document's Statement of Historic Contexts, Section E, page 6.

As a rare surviving example of a converted streetcar restaurant, Bill's Diner fulfills the registration requirements outlined in the cover document's Section F, Associated Property Types. The first paragraph mentions "converted trolley, street car, subway car, or rail car." Bill's Diner also satisfies the Registration Requirement in Section F, part IV (page 17): "Diners to be listed under this document must either be prefabricated, built in a factory and shipped to site, or they must have been constructed with the specific intention to closely resemble the prefabricated form."

Summary Description

Bill's Diner is a streetcar converted for restaurant use. As a streetcar, the vehicle served its transportation life in Reidsville, North Carolina, until 1938.<sup>1</sup> From the late 1930s through the 1950s, most towns and cities in the United States began converting to bus service. Because of this transportation evolution, streetcars were relegated to the scrapper, or for other purposes.

For the budding restaurant entrepreneur, the streetcar had many of the same design and spacial characteristics as the factory-constructed diner. Bill Fretwell of Chatham, Virginia, recognized an opportunity when the streetcars of Reidsville were made available. He brought the single-truck car to Chatham to house his already successful food stand business in 1937.<sup>2</sup>

The streetcar vehicle became a popular competitor to the factory-made Lunch Wagons of the early 20th century. The cross-design of rail vehicles and the mobile restaurants gave birth to the popular descriptive term "diner" for prefabricated diners.

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<sup>1</sup> Interviews were conducted with Bill Fretwell's sons, Dale and Wayne. Dale, and his wife Glinna, discussed Bill Fretwell's life and the history of the diner in a long phone interview, April 3, 1996. (Kenneth) Wayne Fretwell was also consulted. He was interviewed, over the phone, on April 6, 1996. Wayne has written The Fretwell Family history (unpublished, December 1979). A great deal of specific description and history comes directly from these reliable sources. Wayne also has provided historical photographs and took time to draw the interior configuration of the diner as Bill used it in the 1930s and 1960s.

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Wayne Fretwell, The Fretwell Family.

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Fretwell's first operation in Chatham consisted of a wooden-board counter set atop two 50-gallon steel drums with a canvas, tent-like, shelter overhead. The stand, which was in operation by 1935 in depths of the Great Depression stood at a previous site in town before it was moved to the Bolanze Corner, the site that eventually accommodated the diner.<sup>3</sup>

Fretwell purchased the single-truck streetcar from the Duke Power Company of Reidsville.<sup>4</sup> While the specific manufacturer of the vehicle is unknown, the car is similar in appearance to a Brill Company car (Philadelphia).<sup>5</sup>

**Bill's Diner as a Vehicle**

The single-truck car that became Bill's Diner had superseded the Victorian cars that survived from the earlier part of the century. Its survival is testimony to the rugged steel body construction that was common in the 1920s. Most likely a mid-1920s car, Bill's was probably one of the last streetcars to travel the streets of Reidsville before the more mobile bus became the common mode of inner city public transportation.

The shape and design of the streetcar had evolved from the narrow-width, horse-drawn wagon-type of car from the mid to late nineteenth century to a rounded-end design that preceded the streamline designs of the Zephyr rail road passenger cars of the 1930s. Rounded at both ends with a generous amount of window area, the single truck streetcar of the 1920s was a commodious and relatively efficient means of travel. The car carried about 15 people.

The sturdy exterior construction of the car's body consists of heavy steel. The steel roof is supported by metal framing covered with wood trim at the window and door openings. The lower wall featured double-thickness of riveted panels. The lower walls, at either end of the car, featured a lamp and a small projecting fender. Running lights were mounted into a frieze strip at the front and rear ends.

The original fenestration consisted of three transom-topped large glass panels at the front end of the car and seven bays of transom-over-large panes on the side walls, for the passengers. When used as a vehicle, there were horizontal protective steel bars across each of the passenger widows for protection. (Some

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<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Wayne Fretwell and Dale Fretwell, interviews and The Fretwell Family.

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Wayne Fretwell, The Fretwell Family.

<sup>5</sup> Francis B. Tosh and Randolph Kean, ed. Danville Power and Traction Company. This source, provided by Steve Law, former owner of Burnett's Diner, shows the numerous streetcars used by Danville's streetcar company. Bill's Diner resembles one of the Brill cars pictured in the study.

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of these bars are still in place and a protective grill is currently used over one of the rear addition windows visible from the street).

There were two entries into this car model. The doors consisted of wooden vertical doors that folded open on a track. The lower door was paneled, while the upper area was glazed with narrow vertical panes. The interior included wooden benches and trim. The ceiling was clad in thin tongue-and-groove panel. The woodwork was originally finished in varnish.

**The Duke Power Company car becomes Bill's Diner**

Further research may reveal how the car was prepared for travel to the new stationary site on Chatham's Main Street, but several facts are obvious. To reduce the tremendous weight of the car, the heavy wheel assemblies were most likely removed before transporting the car. None of the car's under carriage is visible. The car presently sits low to the ground where its frame is probably supported on masonry or wood blocks. Streetcars were powered by overhead electrical lines, and it is likely that the contact frames on the roof top were also removed by the scrapper company before transport.

The streetcar was sited on a narrow and deep lot, at the busy corner of South Main and Depot streets. Locally this 22' by 60 1/2' lot was known as the Bolanze Corner (sometimes spelled Bolanz). This lot is completely surrounded on the north and west ends by a large two-story, early-20th-century building, known for longest period as the Grubbs' Ford Dealership building. The diner was sited at a slight angle to face the intersection. The angle closed off a triangular space on the two-story building side. This triangular rear area was later covered over to create a room for extra seating.

The exterior needed very little alteration for its restaurant conversion. The interior underwent the needed remodeling to accommodate kitchen machinery. Unlike the stools-counter-and-back bar defined space found in most diners, as well as the larger Burnett's Diner just up the street, Fretwell had limited interior seating in his earliest configuration of the restaurant. Seating space was near the entry at the east end of the car. One booth was located in this area, and additional seating was located in the rear triangular room. Originally Fretwell used the streetcar seats in the car seating area. The rear wall of the streetcar originally had three openings to access the rear area.<sup>6</sup>

Fretwell had a tightly planned kitchen space. Since a great deal of the initial business was walk up, or "curb service", about two thirds of the car was outfitted with cold storage and cooking equipment. Starting from the long front wall and moving clockwise, the kitchen featured: a large drink cooler; two steam tables with cash register, cakes, cookies, and chips, as well as the primary burger and hot dog preparation area; the conductor's window served as the curb

<sup>6</sup> The original configuration was carefully sketched by Kenneth Wayne Fretwell (correspondence, April 9, 1996).

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service window. The back wall of the car consisted of a door to the rear at the west end; the primary burners (three) were on a table; a Lance Cookie case divided the burner area from an ice cream freezer. The space included a large red Coke cooler that was used as the primary food cooler. The cooler was strategically placed near the entrance, so the Coca-Cola advertising on the freezer invited soda sales.

A great deal of Bill's business was initially walk-up service, but the opportunity to bring more customers inside spurred the building of additional space from the rear of the car to the west, eventually filling out most of the vacant area of the small lot. The addition survives as a prominent feature of the present diner. Built as early as the 1950s, the additions evolved into the 1960s.

Bill's son, Dale Fretwell, remembers that the area immediately to the rear of the car was used for additional dining area, while the concrete block area to the west of the car was originally used to seat Blacks.<sup>7</sup> By the 1960s a pool table was installed in the larger back room and a pinball machine increased recreational activities in the small triangular shaped rear room.

Later Evolution of the Interior

The diner was sold out of the Fretwell family to Walter Whittle, in 1982. After more than 40 years of hard use, the building continued to provide viable restaurant space. Whittle reworked the interior to feature a booth area in the car section of the diner. The triangular rear space to the rear of the car became the primary kitchen area. Presently the dining space in the car consists of four table and booths units. Food is ordered and delivered through a pass-through window from the kitchen. Walter Whittle still maintains the rear rooms, once used as a pool hall, as additional eating space, so the small restaurant can actually accommodate 60 patrons.<sup>8</sup>

Most of the intact exterior displays either streetcar features or historical alterations. One of the windows still includes its safety bars. The roof was covered over with a simple frame gable and clad at the ends in novelty siding (c. 1945).

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<sup>7</sup> Kenneth Wayne Fretwell, phone interview, April 6, 1996.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Whittle, interviews at the diner, August 30 & 31, 1995.

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Statement of Significance

Bill's Diner, one of two streetcar-converted diners, in the town of Chatham, Virginia, is a rare surviving architectural form, statewide, as well as nationally. The diner is being nominated under criterion C for its architectural rarity. Because, the occurrence of streetcar diners was more centered around the events of the Great Depression, and the use of streetcars for other than vehicular purposes marked the end of an era in transportation, the diner is also nominated under criterion A, for its relation to the broad pattern of transportation and commercial history.

Bill's Diner was run by William Lewis Fretwell of Chatham. His business predates, the nearby, Burnett's Diner, possibly by as much as several years. Fretwell began his business with a simple hot dog stand, an establishment which reputedly sold the first commercially-produced hot dogs in Chatham. Fretwell eventually bought a single-truck streetcar in Reidsville, North Carolina (some miles south on Route 29). Bill's lucrative operation influenced Henry, Frank and Jessie Burnett to buy the retired double-truck, Thomas Company Car, from the Danville Power and Traction Company sometime between 1938 and 1943.<sup>9</sup>

By the Great Depression, the streetcar vehicle had become a popular competitor to factory-made Lunch Wagons of the early 20th century. By the 1930s, many converted streetcar restaurants dotted the American urban landscape. Both prefabricated diners, which by the 1930s were called diners more often than Lunch Cars, and streetcars usually bore the label "diner."<sup>10</sup>

The great numbers of operating streetcars, which were replaced between 1930 and 1950 by buses, created a ready-made building for the streetcar diner business. Occasionally old rail cars were also converted as was the case of the Virginia Diner in Wakefield, which was a retired Sussex, Surry and Southampton Railroad paymasters car, possibly dating as early as the 1860s. Until several years ago, a streetcar diner stood at Floyd, the county seat of Floyd County; and one of the more unusual streetcar constructions survives in New Kent County: two single-truck cars joined, side by side, are used as a hunting cabin.

The Great Depression inspired an economic resourcefulness that has not been rivaled by any other period in this century. Streetcar diners were a common site on the main streets of small towns and cities. While Burnett's and Bill's diners survive as the last example in Virginia, Charlottesville had two streetcar diners on its University Corner, an area made famous by its relationship to the University of Virginia. It is safe to claim that finding two operating streetcar diners in one small town is extremely rare. These are the last two in Virginia.

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<sup>9</sup> Kenneth Wayne Fretwell, The Fretwell Family and interviews; Henry Burnett, Jr., interview, August 30, 1995.

<sup>10</sup> Richard J.S. Gutman. American Diner, 1979 edition.

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Nationally, streetcar diners are extremely rare. The total surviving examples number under 20.<sup>11</sup>

Southside Virginia is famous for its tobacco industry, and Pittsylvania County, one of the primary tobacco-producing areas since the late eighteenth century, benefits from its relationship to the Southside industrial center of Danville. While the Great Depression caused disruption of all aspects of the American economy, the popularity of tobacco products continued to grow in the pre-World War II years. Chatham was the courthouse town for a county with a vibrant agricultural economy.

Courthouse days weren't the only periods when the town came to life. According to the Fretwell and Burnett families, weekends were boom business days.<sup>12</sup> Day laborers, many of which were African American, had one opportunity each week to come into town to shop and take care of business. Chatham's streets were filled with farmers, farm workers, and Hargrave Military Academy cadets on Saturdays. The demand for affordable and quick meals was obvious to Bill Fretwell and the Burnett brothers.

Fretwell had grown up in and around Chatham. Bill's father, George Lynn Fretwell sold Singer Sewing machines from a horse-drawn cart early this century. George Fretwell died at an early age forcing Bill to quit school. In the depth of the Depression, Bill sold fruit at a stand, delivered mail, and even manufactured homemade beer for bottled sales. A fateful trip to Norfolk brought him into contact with a Mrs. McKay (of Massachusetts). She persuaded Bill to go into the hot dog business.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> There is no exhaustive survey known of these buildings, although several diner historians, Daniel Zilka, director of the American Diner Museum, and Richard Gutman, author of American Diner, have guessed that the total number is probably less than twenty, nationally. There may have been a substantially higher number of streetcar diners in the South due to the distance, and higher cost of sending a factory-made diner over the more primitive highway networks. Artist John Baeder has depicted other vehicles used as diners, such as converted trailer homes and buses. Many of these conversions existed in the South.

<sup>12</sup> Kenneth Wayne Fretwell, Dale and Glinna Fretwell, and Henry Burnett, Jr. recall that weekends were peak periods.

<sup>13</sup> Most of the personal account of Bill's life comes from Kenneth Wayne Fretwell's The Fretwell Family.

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Bill constructed a tent-covered stand with board-on-barrel counter for his first establishment, which reputedly sold the first hot dogs in Chatham.<sup>14</sup> Mrs. McKay came by the famous Bill's Diner chili recipe from a Greek restaurateur.

In 1937, Bill replaced the tent stand with the streetcar. To celebrate the delivery of the streetcar, Bill bought two quarts of moonshine and shared it with the men who helped position the new diner in its angled position.

Bill continued to work as the assistant manager at the local A&P, while he leased the Diner to his brothers, George and Jimmy, as well as to Buford Campbell. When the diner operation became more lucrative, Bill quit his \$18/week job at the grocery store.

Bill's Diner was one of the first restaurants in Chatham to serve beer and wine in Chatham, which accounted for a large part of the diner's earnings. When Chatham outlawed wine and beer sales in town, Bill purchased an old building outside the town limits near the train depot. Anticipating Bill's plans, the town limits were subsequently moved beyond his new parcel.

During the years of segregation, Blacks were initially served at the conductor's window at the west end of the car. Later the rear addition served as a separate serving space for African American customers. Whites sat in the car area and the rear triangular space separated from the Black area by thin plywood walls.

Fretwell ran a diverse establishment. In the late years of the Depression, the diner included several slot machines that brought in an additional \$50 a day. The small triangular space that now serves as a kitchen was later converted into an eating area with a pinball machine. When the diner was expanded in the 1950s, several pool tables were installed in the rear. The pool hall was serenaded by a large jukebox. Occasionally rowdy customers got into fights. Bill had a hidden light switch to darken the nearly windowless back room, a quick method that made hostilities cease immediately.

Bill's Diner was a successful business for over 40 years. Sons, Dale, Ronnie, and Wayne, all worked in the diner. As youngsters they earned 50 cents a day. As an ambitious entrepreneur, Bill ran a printing shop across the street from the diner and also set up his brother Ralph in diner business in Reidsville, North Carolina. While these businesses were not entirely successful, Bill's Diner remained a stable business through the 40 years of his management.

Bill died at the age of seventy one in 1983. The diner was sold to Walter Whittle for \$15,000. Whittle has run the business for nearly 13 years. Of the 15 Virginia-based diners in operation in 1995, Whittle's business is the only African American-owned and operated diner in the state. Whittle renamed the

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<sup>14</sup> The photograph of Bill, included with this nomination was taken in the doorway of his simple canvas-covered stand, c. 1935. This is from the Kenneth Wayne Fretwell photograph collection.

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restaurant, "A Streetcar Named Desire." A large sign bearing this name sits prominently on the roof ridge.

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**Bibliography**

Note: This is a partial list that includes general context sources, as well as sources that specifically relate to Bill's Diner. For a more completed Virginia diner bibliography consult Section I, Major Bibliographic References, in Diners of Virginia multiple property document.

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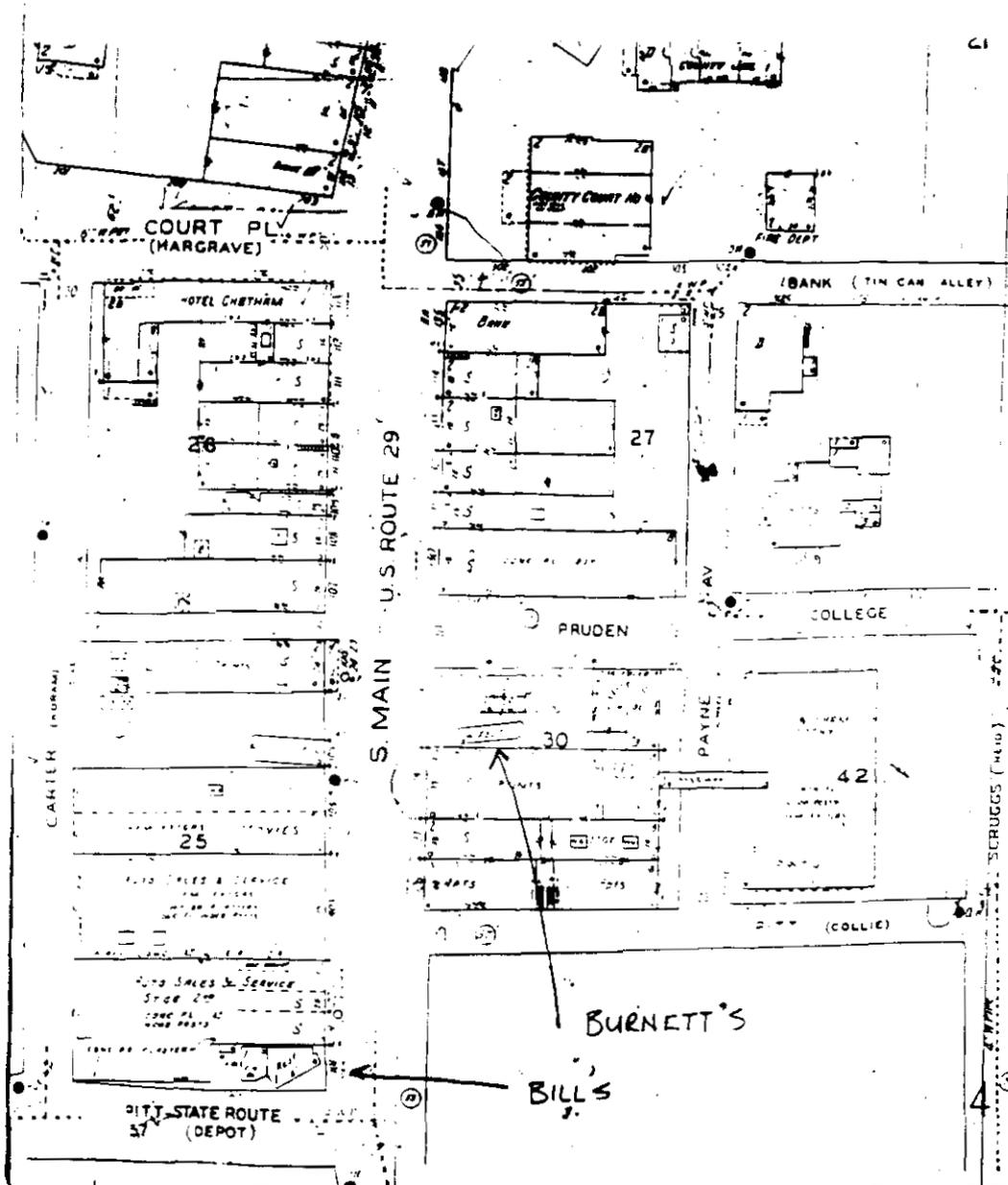
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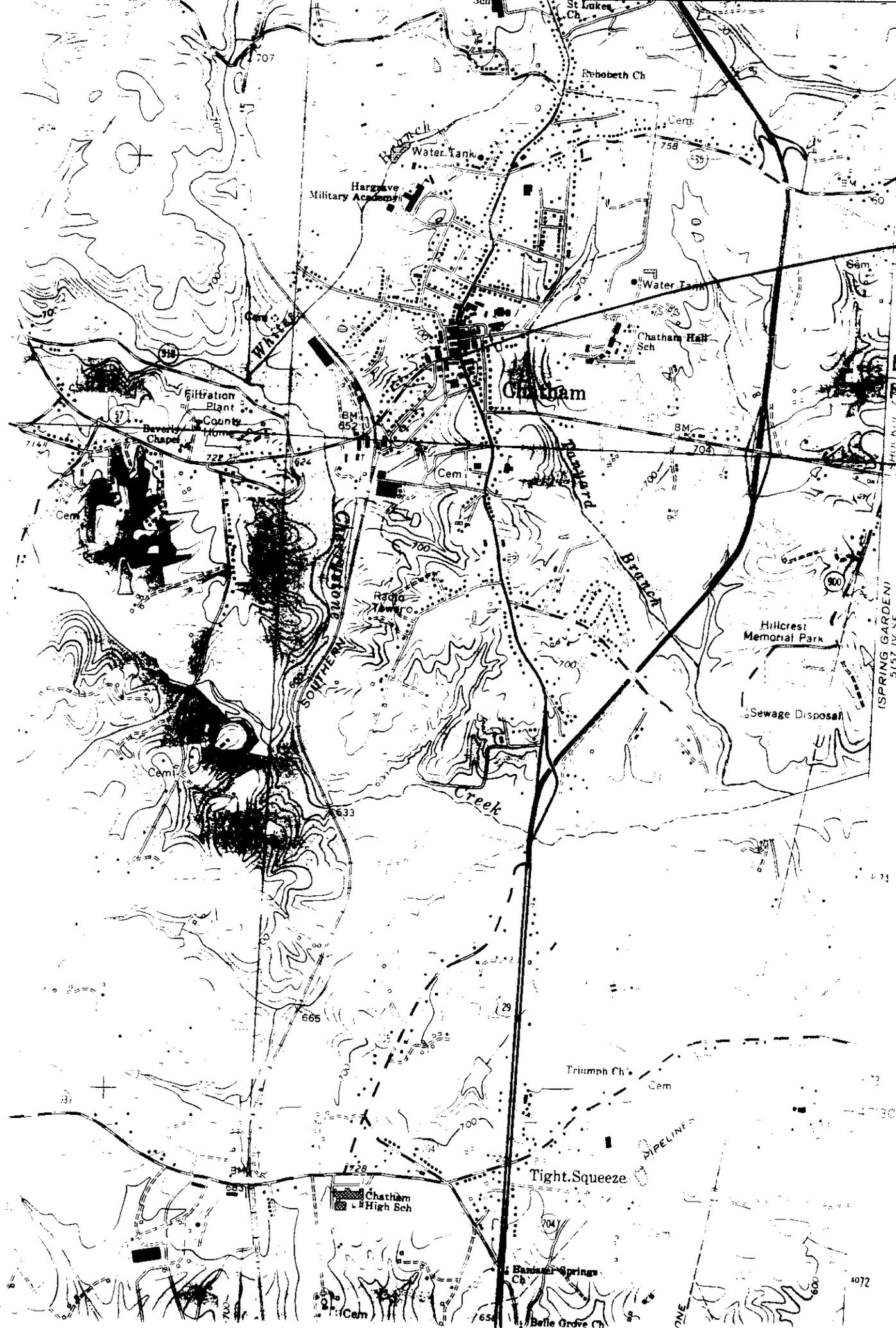
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Sanborn Fire Insurance Company map, originally from September 1926, amended through February 1947. The map shows both streetcar diners. Bill's Diner has an addition by this period ("cin. bl.") and the toilets were accessed by exiting the diner and walking to a separate cinder block building, behind the addition. Note that Burnett's did not have a rear kitchen addition at this period.





BILL'S  
CHATHAM  
PITTSYLVAN  
VIRGINIA  
UTM REF

E 17 642  
N 17 4076

(SPRING GARDEN)  
5157 IV SE