

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 National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. 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.

1. Name of Property

Historic name: Diggs, J. Eugene, Residence

Other names/site number: Squire's House; DHR #122-5971

Name of related multiple property listing:

N/A

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

2. Location

Street & number: 2509 E. Virginia Beach Boulevard

City or town: Norfolk State: Virginia County: Independent City

Not For Publication: Vicinity:

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, 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 X meets ___ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

___ national ___ statewide X local

Applicable National Register Criteria:

X A X B ___ C ___ D

<p>_____ Signature of certifying official/Title:</p> <p>_____ State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government</p>	<p>_____ Date</p>
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<p>In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.</p>	
<p>_____ Signature of commenting official:</p> <p><u>Virginia Department of Historic Resources</u></p> <p>_____ Title :</p>	<p>_____ Date</p> <p>_____ State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government</p>

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4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

- entered in the National Register
- determined eligible for the National Register
- determined not eligible for the National Register
- removed from the National Register
- other (explain:) _____

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

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
-

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Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>2</u>	<u>0</u>	buildings
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	sites
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	structures
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	objects
<u>2</u>	<u>0</u>	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

DOMESTIC: single dwelling

DOMESTIC: secondary structure

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

VACANT/NOT IN USE

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7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

LATE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY REVIVALS: Georgian Revival

Materials: (enter categories from instructions.)

Principal exterior materials of the property: CONCRETE, STUCCO, BRICK, WOOD, GLASS

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance and condition of the property. Describe contributing and noncontributing resources if applicable. Begin with a **summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, type, style, method of construction, setting, size, and significant features. Indicate whether the property has historic integrity.)

Summary Paragraph

The J. Eugene Diggs Residence, located at 2509 Virginia Beach Boulevard, is a Georgian Revival house with Craftsman-style influences built between 1919 and 1923. The dwelling was constructed for the preeminent local attorney, John Eugene Diggs. The two-story home is of masonry construction with a stucco finish. The symmetrical façade is characterized by austere Georgian Revival detailing and fenestration as well as a projecting brick bay that serves as an entry vestibule. By and large, its doctrinaire formalism as a bespoke work of domestic architecture may represent not only a reflection of, and pragmatic reaction to, the trying times of black non-acceptance in which the house was conceived, but also, more broadly, a concretization of the fettered aspirations of African Americans of success in the 1920s. Moreover, the commodious center-hall plan of the interior echoes the Colonial Revival-influenced exterior decoration. The interior includes a stacked staircase with turned starter post, square newels and plain balusters; white-painted wood baseboards, windows and door casings; wood flooring; and French doors. A paneled half-wall with columns separates the parlor from the library. The parlor mantel incorporates Classical Revival pilasters on molded plinths and carved swags in the frieze. The property retains its original garage. Situated on its original lot within a neighborhood comprised largely of contemporaneous 20th-century houses that postdate it, the Diggs Residence retains a high degree of physical integrity in terms of setting and location. Additionally, while the dwelling's original entrance porch has been replaced and several side and rear windows are boarded up, the Diggs Residence otherwise retains its original design and much of its historic material, giving it integrity of design, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association.

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Narrative Description

Setting

The J. Eugene Diggs Residence occupies a flat urban parcel along the busy thoroughfare of U.S. Route 58, known as *the* Boulevard—or as old-timers called it, the Gold Coast: in effect, Norfolk's own Strivers' Row. However, at the time of the home's construction, the road was just an unpaved country lane in the farmlands of Norfolk County. The lot is situated in the center of the northern half of the block, midway between two intersecting cross streets (Mapole Avenue and Kenton Avenue), with the house set back roughly 25 feet from the front property line. An original three-car garage still stands in situ at the end of the driveway behind the house. The backyard once was considerably larger, with clay tennis courts occupying some of the space; however, this land was subdivided during the late 1940s and sold for residential development.

Inventor

1. J. Eugene Diggs Residence. 1919-23. Contributing building.
2. Garage. 1919-23. Contributing building.

House: Exterior

The Diggs Residence is a two-story, three-bay Georgian Revival-style house with an overall form similar to an American Foursquare. The interior of the house follows a conventional center-hall floor plan and utilizes restrained and understated ornamental details. The building's stucco exterior and quality brick masonry construction set it apart from most "Banker's Georgian" houses of the 1920s in southeastern Virginia. The load-bearing brick walls are four wythes wide on the first floor and three wythes wide on the second. All lumber used in the structural system is true dimensional. The main two-story block is stuccoed and topped by a steep hipped roof with a flat-top, wherein a barely visible fireplace chimney protrudes. Its raked eaves are wide, with bed-molding and fascia under a V-groove board soffit. An additional chimney, this one for a coal furnace, projects from the back of the house. The roof is covered by architectural asphalt shingles. The original roof, however, was sheathed in interlocking concrete roof tiles: The front façade is essentially symmetrical and originally featured a flat-roof portico with carpenter's Doric, Tuscan columns and a rooftop railing. The Classical Revival frontispiece was replaced in the 1930s or 1940s by a stylized Moderne brick vestibule. A string course encircles the building at the second story. The main house and the sun-porch are atop an expansive, albeit shallow, crawlspace, while a small rear extension is slab-on-grade.

The symmetrical façade originally featured a flat-roof portico (with rooftop railing) supported by hybrid Doric/Tuscan columns and engaged half-round pilasters. Today, a poured concrete terrace with clay tile decking and brick skirting spans the façade. From the sidewalk, a single step leads up to the dwelling's projecting entry bay. The Georgian Revival entrance was replaced in the 1930s or 1940s by this stylized Moderne brick vestibule, which originally had a doorway with traditional sidelights and transom. The current off-center door and adjacent rectangular single-light window, coupled with vinyl siding infill, indicate that the entry bay was reconfigured since its construction. Above the vestibule there is a window with a single double-hung sash on the second story, while the roof is pierced by a shed dormer with two side-by-side (awning)

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windows. The façade's two outer bays each include a group of three double-hung windows situated side-by-side on the first level; of these, the inner window has four-over-four lights, while the outer two sashes have six-over-six. On the second level of each outer bay are paired six-over-six double-hung windows. The windows have stuccoed cast stone sills.

The east (side) elevation features an enclosed sun-porch that measures 8 feet by 28 feet. It is topped with a semi-flat roof and a wide frieze. Above the porch, the main block's second story has two pairs of windows with six-over-six double-hung sash, symmetrically arranged. The cornice, crown, and frieze of the porch's entablature integrates a host of classical millwork shapes, such as a cove crown, bed-mould, and astragal, attesting to the formal training of the dwelling's architectural designer. A porte cochere originally stood on the west elevation. Although it was demolished during the 1980s, historic photos show its size and detailing were similar to that of the sun-porch. Measuring approximately 17.7 feet by 11.3 feet, the porte cochere was enhanced with three freestanding outer Tuscan columns and two engaged pilasters attached to the main house, framing a side entrance. Atop its entablature and box cornice was a decorative balustrade with ball finials above each railing post.¹ This detail was a typical flourish of the original exterior, historically included above the sun-porch and front portico as well. To the right of the side entry door are two six-over-six double-hung windows (positioned side-by-side), which align with a similar set of windows above; to the left of the side door is another pair of windows in the same arrangement.

The south (rear) elevation includes a small, left-of-center, one-story boiler/mudroom extension with chimney-stack. This rear ell projection's overall dimensions are approximately 10.7 feet by 14 feet; and it has a semi-flat shed roof (with side parapets) engaged into the main block. The wing's most intriguing feature is a cast-iron pass-through for coal. Beside it is a small back door with a segmental-arch head; the entry is currently boarded over. East of the extension, the main block's rear wall has a centered window with a double-hung sash and, to the right, a group of three double-hung sashes on the first story. The second story, from west to east, has a single window with double-hung sash, a small bathroom window, and a pair of windows with double-hung sashes (respectively): The centerline of this upstairs set of side-by-side double-hung windows aligns with that downstairs group of three double-hung sashes.

House: Interior

One enters the house through the Moderne vestibule and an expansive 42-inch wide, seven-foot tall doorway, which welcomes visitors into a broad stair hall featuring a front-facing stacked staircase that stretches from the first to the third floor. The staircase has its original turned starter post, square newels and balusters, and molded railing. Throughout the interior, historic finishes include wood flooring, plaster walls, white-painted wood baseboards, window trim, and door casing. Some of the plaster walls and ceilings have failed in places. The doors in formal public areas have only two panels, whereas those in the kitchen and upstairs rooms have five. Typically, the doors and windows downstairs are trimmed in plain casings and crowned headers with neckbands—while baseboards, although plain, are embellished with Grecian-ogee base caps and

¹ *Miss Vivian Eason In The Snow*, c. 1967, Kodak color photo, 3.5"x3.5", Brooks/McFadden Family Collection, Norfolk, Va.

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quarter-round shoe molding. Those decorative headers, however, are not present upstairs. All doors have cut glass (or crystal) knobs of the sort popular during the 1920s. The finished wood flooring throughout the house consists of golden oak on the first floor and red heart pine on the second and third levels. The ceiling height is 9 feet on the first and second levels.

To the right (west) of the hall is a sizable dining room; to the left (east) is a 15-foot-by-30-foot living room that extends the depth of the first story. The living room features a Colonial Revival beamed ceiling. A series of three flush-mount light fixtures with crystal pendants are situated on the ceiling. On the room's western wall is a fireplace with a delicate Adamesque mantel with ornamental composition work. Next to the mantel is a paneled knee wall with two round columns that separates the main space from a small library, which once housed J. Eugene Diggs's collection of rare books. (The contents of his library were donated to Booker T. Washington High School [Norfolk], and now form the nucleus of its rare book collection.) The library also provides a secondary portal to the kitchen. On the living room's east wall, a pair of double French doors dressed with brass cremone bolts leads to the sun-porch, notable for its bead-board ceiling

The kitchen is located toward the rear of the first story. Renovated during the 1960s, it no longer has historic finishes. The kitchen is accessed from the library, the dining room on the west front half of the first story, the rear mudroom, and/or the west-side entry.

Four large bedrooms of roughly equal dimensions, each with a nine-foot ceiling, are located upstairs. All have large closets. The dwelling's only full bathroom is at the top of the staircase landing in the middle of the rear side of the residence. Remodeled during the 1970s, the bathroom no longer has any historic fixtures and fittings.

The third story features two unfinished rooms and a small trunk room that creates the front shed dormer. These third-floor rooms are arranged, like those on the second floor, around a finished center hall, exhibiting the same symmetrical ordering that characterizes the house as a whole. Note, conversely, that the trim is simplified on this floor—consisting of plain baseboards with base-caps, yet merely of flat boards elsewhere.

The dwelling's original heating system was a coal-fired water boiler heating system. Cast-iron radiators (oft enameled gold) remain throughout the house. The system's expansion tank was located on the third-floor, whereas the boiler was located in the first-floor mudroom.

Constructed in one of the only middle-class areas in the city in which a person of color and means was permitted to build due to restrictive racial covenants, the house's astute architectural restraint and superior quality of construction set it apart as an early 20th-century dwelling built for a prominent African-American attorney.

Garage Description

The garage was constructed in 1921, one year after the main house. It remains largely intact. Located in the rear yard, it is of solid masonry construction with a low-pitched hip roof. The outside dimensions measure approximately 20.25 feet by 25.75 feet. The exterior walls are made of salmon brick laid two wythes wide and faced with a generous layer of stucco. The north façade

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retains three original vehicular sliding doors with lower V-groove board panels and 12-light upper glazing on each door. Of note is the fact that the garage can serve three cars, a rare luxury for African Americans in Virginia in the 1920s. A small window is on each side wall. The interior is one large uninterrupted space for three automobiles. The main features inside are the exposed brick walls and open-rafter ceiling.

Integrity Analysis

The J. Eugene Diggs Residence today has integrity of location as both buildings on the property remain in their original locations. The property's integrity of setting changed over the course of the twentieth century, first, as a portion of the original rear yard, which once included clay tennis courts, was sold during the late 1940s and subdivided for single-family residential development, and second, as the vicinity transitioned from being relatively undeveloped to a dense urban neighborhood with a major thoroughfare (Virginia Beach Boulevard/U.S. 58) along the north (front) of the property and today's Norfolk State University, founded in 1935, located a short distance to the south (rear). Much of this transition began during J. Eugene Diggs's lifetime, and continued at an accelerating rate after his death in 1959.

Today, the house is in stable condition. It is structurally sound and water-tight. Over the decades, it has undergone few changes that have adversely affected its integrity of design, materials, and workmanship. The most noticeable change occurred to the façade's original portico, which was replaced during the 1930s or 1940s. The differing materials and style used for the new vestibule has detracted somewhat from the dwelling's integrity of design, but the alteration did occur during the property's period of significance. During the 1940s, the sun-porch was enclosed to create additional living space, a modification that occurred commonly for such spaces as lifestyles changed during the mid- to late twentieth century. During the 1980s, physical deterioration forced the removal of the porte cochere. But for renovations in the 1960s to the kitchen and 1970s to the bathroom, the interior spaces have been left largely untouched. Some of the interior plaster has failed and there is peeling paint on wood trim and mantels. Overall, these spaces remain largely as they were used by J. Eugene Diggs during his lengthy legal career. Consequently, the dwelling has excellent integrity of materials and workmanship. Also little altered, the garage retains integrity of design, materials, and workmanship. As a whole, the property has excellent integrity of association with the productive career of J. Eugene Diggs and with important events in the history of African American civil rights in Norfolk from the 1920s through the late 1950s. The integrity of the historic fabric, of location and setting, and documented association with Diggs's career contribute to the property's integrity of feeling as the home of a quietly prosperous professional working during the early to mid-twentieth century. The property's location in a historically segregated area of Norfolk also contributes to its integrity of association and feeling as a representative part of an early African-American middle class neighborhood in Virginia.

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8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

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

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

Criteria Considerations

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

- A. Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes
- B. Removed from its original location
- C. A birthplace or grave
- D. A cemetery
- E. A reconstructed building, object, or structure
- F. A commemorative property
- G. Less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

SOCIAL HISTORY

LAW

ETHNIC HERITAGE: African American

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Period of Significance

1919–1959

Significant Dates

N/A

Significant Person

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

Diggs, John Eugene, Esq.

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Attributed to Johnson, Harvey N.

Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance, applicable criteria, justification for the period of significance, and any applicable criteria considerations.)

The J. Eugene Diggs Residence, also historically called the “Squire’s House,” is an architect-designed Georgian Revival house constructed between 1919 and 1923 for esteemed African-American attorney J. Eugene Diggs. Constructed during a tenuous period in American history, defined by the fragile nature of black civil rights in the South, the home’s lasting construction and prominent location along the main street of a major East Coast city make it a well-known and recognizable landmark for both local residents as well as visitors from across the region and beyond. Mr. Diggs’s legal career often focused on achieving social justice for people of color throughout Norfolk and the Hampton Roads area during the Jim Crow era. In essence, he served as a driving force for African-American activism in the region from the 1920s through late 1950s. Such efforts were not without considerable risk in a period plagued by racial terror, and Diggs’s work unfortunately drew retaliation, including the burning of a cross on his lawn. Further, beginning in the 1920s, the J.E. Diggs Residence served for decades as a “safe place” to stay for eminent black individuals and activists who traveled to southern Virginia. Historical figures such as Thurgood Marshall and Carter G. Woodson stayed at the Diggs Residence while visiting the region during what would prove to be pivotal stages or events in their respective careers, with the house ultimately accommodating a remarkable number of acclaimed African-American artists, politicians, and public figures up until Diggs’s death in 1959. Notably, the design for the house is attributed to Harvey N. Johnson, an early professionally-trained black architect whose office in Norfolk produced designs for a number of African-American houses and churches in the area as

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well as for the Crispus Attucks Theatre (DHR ID#122-0074; NRHP 1982), a legendary landmark located within the city's predominantly black Huntersville district. Given its importance as a sort of "safe house," and as a locus of civil rights activism in Norfolk during the first half of the 20th century, the Diggs Residence is locally significant under Criterion A in the area of Social History. In addition, given J. Eugene Diggs's integral legal contributions to desegregation efforts and other civil rights activism in southeastern Virginia, the house is also locally significant under Criterion B in the areas of Law and Ethnic Heritage: African American. The period of significance begins in 1919 with the construction of the Diggs Residence and ends with Diggs's death in 1959, encompassing the house's continual role in African-American history and civil rights activism in Norfolk from the 1920s into the mid-20th century.

Narrative Statement of Significance (Provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance.)

If one happened to be a renowned African American, visiting Norfolk in the early 20th century, in all likelihood one stayed at 2509 Virginia Beach Boulevard (the J. Eugene Diggs Residence)—a *safe place* and kind of *sanctuary* that provided travelers like the black intelligentsia, a sense of peace during the Jim Crow era of segregation.² The house was constructed between 1919 and 1923 for J. Eugene Diggs, among Norfolk's first prominent black attorneys; and it is attributed to an early black architect, Harvey Johnson. Many notable African Americans visited the house during crucial periods in the arc of their professional careers. Like several of those guests, Diggs, too, was involved in the fight for social justice during the Jim Crow era. What is more, according to a 2008 oral-history interview of Attorney W.T. Mason, who grew up in the community in the 1920s, "[Lawyer Diggs] had the prettiest house in the neighborhood."³

John Eugene Diggs was born on September 7, 1883, in rural Mathews County, Virginia. He attended Norfolk Mission College, before graduating from Howard University Law School on May 26, 1902. Five years later in 1907, he married Aileen Jones of Norfolk.⁴ To this union was born one daughter, Aileen. Later in life he married Elsie Quetrell James, a schoolteacher in the Norfolk City schools. Both wives predeceased him.⁵ Diggs played an instrumental role in the desegregation of southern Virginia's public beaches and desegregation of its public schools. For example, he spearheaded African-American activism in the late 1920s and early 1930s in order to open up whites-only beaches, such as Buckroe, for black patrons. It was around this time, circa 1934, that his outspoken activism led to a cross being burned on his front lawn.⁶

² Charleszine "Terry" Nelson, Senior Special Collection and Community Resource Manager at Blair-Caldwell African-American Research Library, interview by author, September 17, 2019.

³ William T. Mason, Jr., interview by Cassandra Newby, March 5, 2008.

⁴ His daughter, Aileen Diggs, married Thomas Young, a graduate of Ohio State Law School. His niece, T. Ione Diggs [a 1948 graduate of Howard's School of Law], was an early black female attorney. And another niece, Ruby H. Diggs, was the first black female graduate of Brooklyn Law School of St. Lawrence University.

⁵ Mrs. Rowena McFadden, the Diggses's next-door neighbor, remembered being in their living room for a small social gathering when Mrs. Elsie Diggs suddenly collapsed and died of an apparent heart attack. (Rowena T. McFadden [retired schoolteacher and J.C. Brooks & Co. heiress], interview by author, May 12, 2005: For more on McFadden, see, e.g.: [1] "Student art contest draws some winners," *The Virginian-Pilot*, April 7, 1986, pages D1 to D2; and [2] Robert Trotter "Energy, urgency evident in Student Gallery exhibit," *The Virginian-Pilot*, April 13, 1986, page G10.)

⁶ Alexander Leidholdt, *Editor for Justice, The Life of Louis I. Jaffe* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2002), 350–355.

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For many years Diggs maintained a law office in downtown Norfolk on Bank Street. In 1954, he was appointed Commissioner in Chancery for Norfolk Circuit Court, as well as the Court of Law and Chancery of Norfolk. Beginning in 1940, he served on a three-person advisory committee of the Norfolk Redevelopment & Housing Authority. He was also a member of the Hiawatha Club, Aeolian Club, Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, and First United Presbyterian Church in Norfolk, where he taught adult Bible class.⁷ According to Diggs, “A balanced life, an equitable distribution of time, energy and means, a fellowship with the great, the good and wise of all times, enduring peace and increasing wisdom—all these flow from divine worship.”⁸

Diggs’s entire career was devoted to pleading cases on behalf of African Americans, many of whom hailed from the city’s slums.⁹ Among his legal victories are the following cases: In 1937, he was engaged to assist Commonwealth Attorney Robert McMurrin in the controversial prosecution of John B. Owney, a white naval yard worker, for the rape of Viola Jones, a black woman.¹⁰ The legal team obtained a conviction, a rarity as crimes perpetrated against African American women by white men were rarely successfully prosecuted.¹¹ In 1942, he obtained an acquittal for black sailor James Williams, who was accused of murder. Diggs argued that the defendant was merely doing his duty by keeping the peace.¹² The judge agreed. In 1945, he effectively represented Henry Harold Rodman, a black man who had been court-martialed for check forgery, and yet was subsequently prosecuted for the same crime as a civilian. Diggs brought attention to the fact that the defendant was already punished for the alleged offense, and contended that to do so again would represent double jeopardy, which is a violation of the U.S. Constitution.¹³ The court concurred. In 1950, he represented Annie King Bess, the black victim of a violent attack, who was accused of murdering her attacker, Glenn Tillman, a longshoreman: She was found not guilty.¹⁴

In addition to criminal cases, Diggs’s involvement in Norfolk’s early civil rights movement included creating opportunities for other African Americans to enter the legal profession as well as taking on cases that would improve the lives of African Americans in Norfolk. In 1917, Bertha Louise Douglass began working in Diggs’s office as a stenographer. Over the seven years, she took legal courses by correspondence and read law under Diggs’s direction. She passed the bar exam in 1924, becoming the second African American woman (after Lavinia Fleming Poe of Newport News) to practice law in Virginia. She joined Diggs’s law firm and, during the 1930s, was elected president of the Norfolk County Bar Association, served two terms as Virginia vice-president of the National Women Lawyers Association, and sat on the Executive

⁷ “J. Eugene Diggs, Noted Atty., Dead: Dean of Norfolk Lawyers Victim of Heart Attack,” *Norfolk Journal & Guide*, September 5, 1959.

⁸ J. Eugene Diggs, “A Call to Worship,” *Norfolk Virginian-Pilot*, November 15, 1953.

⁹ “Slum Project,” *Norfolk Virginian-Pilot*, November 30, 1949, page 23.

¹⁰ “Ministers Will Assist Mrs. V. Jones in Case: Atty. J. Eugene Diggs Added to Staff Prosecution,” *The Norfolk Journal & Guide*, June 12, 1939, page A15.

¹¹ Michaele Katherine Smith, “*You Can't Say 'No' to a Soldier*”: *Sexual Violence in the United States during World War II* (Williamsburg: College of William and Mary, 2013, paper 1539623622; <https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-ynb8-6077>), p. 23, 33, 70-73, 75.

¹² “Negro Officer Acquitted In Murder Trial,” *Norfolk Virginian-Pilot*, July 24, 1942.

¹³ “Double Jeopardy Rule Applied in Court Martial Case,” *Norfolk Virginian-Pilot*, March 2, 1945, pg. 16.

¹⁴ “Annie King Bess Found Not Guilty of Tillman Murder,” *Norfolk Virginian-Pilot*, November 22, 1950, pg. 8.

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Committee of the Old Dominion Bar Association. In 1949, Douglass opened a law office with Diggs's niece, Thelma Ione Diggs.¹⁵

During the mid-1930s, Diggs joined the legal team that argued for raising teacher pay for African American public school teachers in Norfolk. Speaking formally to City officials on behalf of black schoolteachers, he reminded them of the inadequate salary that "Negro" teachers were paid, and said, "And I tell you...that is not enough for them to live on."¹⁶ He went on to say that these educators dealt with issues that white teachers did not, such as having to give parental instruction too.¹⁷ He further noted the irony of the city's black street cleaners being paid more than its black schoolteachers.¹⁸ Aline E. Black, a science teacher in Norfolk city schools since 1924, agreed to act as a plaintiff in a lawsuit against the city. She was fired in retribution, but another African American teacher, Melvin O. Alston, stepped up to take her place. In 1939, Thurgood Marshall, then a lawyer with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) acted as lead counsel after the case proceeded from the local court system to the state and federal systems (and while in Norfolk, he stayed at Diggs's house). Arguing that separate pay schedules for white teachers versus African American teachers violated the U.S. Constitution's Fourteenth Amendment, the legal team took the case, *Alston v. Norfolk*, all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, which upheld an appellate court's ruling that the Fourteenth Amendment indeed applied to teacher salaries.¹⁹

In 1941, Diggs joined with other African American lawyers across Virginia to organize the Old Dominion Bar Association. The ODBA's activities included providing continuing education opportunities, tracking major issues in a fast-changing legal environment, assisting both service members and civilian workers with demobilization after World War II ended, and advising on legal cases impinging on civil rights.²⁰ The ODBA remains a robust organization today.

During the early 1950s, while "representing the Broadway and Manhattan cabs, [Diggs] asked that they be granted 20 permits so that Negroes can be served better."²¹

On top of that, Attorney Diggs's service to the community also was extensive and consequently resulted in a number of distinguished appointments. Beginning in 1940, Diggs served on a three-person task force of black Norfolks (the Negro Advisory Committee) appointed by the City's housing authority. They were charged with helping to improve the long-term residential conditions of African Americans in Norfolk.²² In 1949, Diggs was elected to the Board of Directors of the Norfolk Community Chest, a philanthropic organization that raised money for

¹⁵ Cassandra L. Newby-Alexander, "Bertha Louise Douglass (1895-1980)," Dictionary of Virginia Biography, Library of Virginia, 2015, http://www.lva.virginia.gov/public/dvb/bio.asp?b=Douglas_Bertha_Louise.

¹⁶ "Teachers Ask Restoration Of Full Pay," *Norfolk Virginian-Pilot*, November 20, 1936, Part 1—page 18.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Part 1—pg. 18.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Part 1—pg. 18.

¹⁹ "Supreme Court Refuses Review Of Equal Teachers' Salary Decision: Favorable Circuit Court Ruling Is Affirmed," *The Norfolk Journal & Guide*, November 2, 1940, page 1.

²⁰ Old Dominion Bar Association, "The Early Years: 1940-1950," ODBA – History, <http://www.olddominionbarassociation.com/history>.

²¹ "Cabs," *Norfolk Virginian-Pilot*, March 21, 1950, page twenty-two.

²² "J. Eugene Diggs, Noted Atty., Dead: Dean of Norfolk Lawyers Victim of Heart Attack," *Norfolk Journal & Guide*, September 5, 1959.

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good causes, such as the American Heart Association.²³ That same year, Diggs was named by Mayor Pretlow Darden to be the official representative of the City of Norfolk at the inaugural ceremonies of Hampton Institute's eighth president, Alonzo G. Moran, the first black president of the Institute.²⁴ In 1951, Diggs's public service was recognized when the City named Diggs Park, a new 400-unit public housing project near South Norfolk, in his honor.

Throughout the storied history of the house, J.E. Diggs and his wives (Aileen Jones and Elsie James, respectively) played host to an astonishing number of highly influential African Americans during the first half of the 20th century. While on speaking tours for the Book Lovers Club and promoting Negro Achievement Week, Dr. Carter G. Woodson, founding father of Black History Month, frequently stayed overnight, as well.²⁵ Other overnight guests included the poet Langston Hughes, a friend of the family who often spent Christmas holidays at the Diggs house, not to mention tenor Roland Hayes and contralto Marian Anderson who also stayed occasionally.²⁶ In addition, the famed sociologist and co-founder of the NAACP, W.E.B. Du Bois, was a houseguest in June 1945;²⁷ he came to Norfolk to give the commencement address at the Norfolk Division of Virginia State College.²⁸ Other noted guests include prominent attorneys J. Thomas Hewin and Leon A. Ranson, New York councilman Benjamin Davis, and prolific early black thespian Paul Robeson to name a few.²⁹ Furthermore, Virginia Governor Colgate Darden (former Chancellor of the College of William & Mary and President of the University of Virginia, for whom the Darden School of Business is named) visited the Diggs's residence to review papers establishing a campus for what is now known as Norfolk State University (then called Norfolk Division of Virginia State College) on the city's Municipal Golf Course located behind the house.³⁰

In addition to extensive professional and community work, J. Eugene Diggs, with each of his wives, Aileen Jones and Elsie Quetrell James, enjoyed rich social lives. Early in the home's history, it became a gathering place for the black elite: be it debutante receptions, club meetings, or lawn parties—events hosted by Mr. and Mrs. Diggs were frequently covered in the society pages of the local and national black press. In fact, the Diggs compound included private (clay) tennis courts in its expansive rear yard. Diggs had them built so that not only could his family have a place to play tennis, but so that other blacks, who were restricted from public courts, would also have a place to call their own. In 1927, his tennis courts became the location of the first Tidewater Open Tennis Championships—as well as the third-annual Southeastern Tennis Tournament.³¹ Early players were Howard Z. Plummer of Suffolk, the John McGriffs of

²³ "Chest Doubles Its Allocation To Heart Fund," *Norfolk Virginian-Pilot*, April 13, 1949, page three.

²⁴ "Diggs Appointed To Hampton Rites," *Norfolk Virginian-Pilot*, September 23, 1949, page three.

²⁵ Leslie Brown and Anne Valk, *Living With Jim Crow: African-American Women and Memories of the Segregated South* (New York, N.Y.: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002), 133–136.

²⁶ Gary Reugsegger, "Bill Abrams and Celestyne Diggs Porter Turns 100," *The Downtowner*, February 2012.

²⁷ Danielle Kovacs, Curator of the W.E.B. Du Bois Papers at U. Mass. Amherst, interview by author, Sept. 17, 2019.

²⁸ "Graduates Hear W.E.B. Du Bois," *The Norfolk Journal & Guide*, June 16, 1945, page 10, column 4. Founded in 1935, the college first was named the Norfolk Unit of Virginia Union University. In 1942, the school became the independent Norfolk Polytechnic College, but two years later became a part of Virginia State College. The Norfolk Division of Virginia State College began offering bachelor's degrees in 1956. It separated from Virginia State College in 1969, thereby becoming Norfolk State College. A decade later, it became Norfolk State University.

²⁹ Celestyne Porter, interview by author, Spring/Summer 1990.

³⁰ Gary Reugsegger, "The Dardens And The Battens: Crossing Paths With Greatness," *The Downtowner*, June 2017.

³¹ Celestyne Porter, interview by author, Spring/Summer 1990.

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Portsmouth (a father and son duo), and J. Eugene Diggs, himself.”³² The sport of tennis played a crucial role as a leisure pastime for the early black bourgeoisie. In Diggs’s lifetime, although as professionals, blacks could afford to participate in events frequented by their white upper-middle-class counterparts, they were not allowed. They had to create their own leisure activities from scratch: one being tennis tournaments—which in turn drew crowds of like-minded African Americans from around the country, according to Arthur A. Carrington, Jr., author of *Black Tennis: An Archival Collection, 1890–1962*.³³ Mr. Diggs co-hosted these tennis events, because he had a court of his own to put to use.³⁴ During the Tidewater Open, Diggs would shuttle jovial fans (and players) back and forth from his facility to the Tidewater Tennis Club’s courts on nearby Goff Street.³⁵ Mrs. Diggs, together with her next-door neighbor (Mrs. Anna McNorton Brooks McFadden), held a garden fête on the grounds behind their homes, to celebrate the start of the Southeastern Tennis Tournament in 1927.³⁶ The adjacent homes of J. Eugene Diggs and the Brooks/McFadden family also provided overnight accommodations: one for male players, one for females.³⁷ Diggs’s courts remained active through the 1940s. The land was eventually sold and developed into residential lots for single-family houses.

Sadly, on a clear day in August 1959, as he arrived home and emerged from his chauffeured car, John Eugene Diggs, 75—the gentleman from rural Mathews County (Virginia), known affectionately as “the Squire” because of his accomplished legal career—collapsed on the sidewalk in front of his beloved home on the Boulevard.³⁸ His heart had stopped. Though family members rushed to his aid, he died moments later.³⁹ The City had lost its country squire.⁴⁰ Following his death in the summer of ’59, the longtime family home was sold to two well-respected black educators: first, James Bell, who first served as Chair of Norfolk State College’s Health and Physical Education Department (and later as acting president of California State Polytechnic University in Pomona); and subsequently, Dr. George William Clements Brown, co-founder of Norfolk State University and namesake of the University’s main building.⁴¹ After the G.W.C. Browns’s ownership, however, from 1990-2014, the house fell into severe disrepair and was used as a rooming house for transients before ultimately facing the threat of demolition.⁴² Thankfully, in 2015 it was acquired and stabilized by Urban Preservation LLC, with the aim of restoring the house. On behalf of Urban Preservation, the author of this document, architectural-designer Kenneth Bryant, has worked tirelessly to save this old house for future generations.

³² Celestynne Porter, interview by author, circa 1991–92.

³³ Arthur A. Carrington, Jr., interview by author, June 4, 2019.

³⁴ Arthur A. Carrington, Jr., interview by author, June 4, 2019.

³⁵ P. Bernard Young, Jr., “Few Sidelights From Norfolk’s Biggest and Best Net Tourney,” *The Norfolk Journal & Guide*, July 16, 1927, page 5.

³⁶ P. Bernard Young, Jr., “Southeastern Tennis Tourney Here Opens In A Blaze Of Glory,” *The Norfolk Journal & Guide*, August 13, 1927, page 1.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pg. 1.

³⁸ Rowena T. McFadden, interview by author, May 12, 2005.

³⁹ “J. Eugene Diggs, Noted Atty., Dead: Dean of Norfolk Lawyers Victim of Heart Attack,” *Norfolk Journal & Guide*, September 5, 1959.

⁴⁰ Lin Holloway, “Looking On In Norfolk,” *The Norfolk Journal & Guide*, September 5, 1959, page A15.

⁴¹ Ms. Eunice Eason and Mrs. Vivian Eason Burke, the Bells’ former next-door neighbors, remember the close-knit bond that Dr. Bell, his wife and three young children shared with their family, the Brooks/McFaddens of 2515 Virginia Beach Boulevard, during the 1960s. (Eunice E. Eason, interview by author, May 12, 2019.)

⁴² Interview with a member of the neighborhood civic league, March 13, 2019.

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Image of the J. Eugene Diggs Residence, circa 1927, Norfolk, Virginia,
Courtesy of Norfolk Public Library and the Brooks/McFadden Family Collection

Acknowledgements

I must express my sincere gratitude for those who assisted and supported my effort to nominate and renovate the Diggs house, in particular: Nelson Armstrong, Director of Alumni Relations at Dartmouth College; Norfolk Councilman Paul Riddick; Mrs. Rev. Dr. Marvin Levett Duke, Sr.; Joel Andre; Robyn Thomas; Robbin Favaloro; Carrie Copenhaver; and the late Robert Hagans. For their Sunday sermons, I wish to thank my vicars, Fr. Joseph Green and Fr. Harold Cobb of Grace Episcopal Church in Norfolk. And for their sage advice, I would like to thank my uncles, Dr. Ernest A. Holmes and Alvin Linwood Eason, and of course—my Mum. Finally, I want to mention my deep appreciation for Marc Wagner, James Hare, Lena McDonald and Julie Langan of the Virginia Department of Historic Resources for their help in making this nomination better.

—Kenneth Bryant

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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 # _____
- recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # _____

Primary location of additional data:

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

Name of repository: The Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): DHR ID#122-5971

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 0.2 acres

Use either the UTM system or latitude/longitude coordinates

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: _____
(enter coordinates to 6 decimal places)

- | | |
|------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Latitude: 36.851863 | Longitude: -76.260411 |
| 2. Latitude: | Longitude: |
| 3. Latitude: | Longitude: |
| 4. Latitude: | Longitude: |

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Or
UTM References

Datum (indicated on USGS map):

NAD 1927 or NAD 1983

- | | | |
|----------|-----------|-----------|
| 1. Zone: | Easting: | Northing: |
| 2. Zone: | Easting: | Northing: |
| 3. Zone: | Easting: | Northing: |
| 4. Zone: | Easting : | Northing: |

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

The property's historic boundary is coterminous with its current tax parcels, recorded by the City of Norfolk as described as GPIN 1437871349 and 1437871323. The true and correct historic boundary is shown on the attached Location Map, Sketch Map/Photo Key, and Tax Parcel Map.

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

The historic boundary includes the house and garage, thus encompassing all known historic resources and what remains of the property's historic setting since the original lot was subdivided during the late 1940s.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title: K.G.H. Bryant, M.Arch., Adj. Professor of Architecture at Hampton University
organization: Kenneth G. Hodges Bryant, Architectural Designer
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city or town: Norfolk state: Virginia zip code: 23514
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telephone: 212-290-5300
date: February 28, 2018

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Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A **USGS map** or equivalent (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
- **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.
- **Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO, TPO, or FPO for any additional items.)

Photographs

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels (minimum), 3000x2000 preferred, at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map. Each photograph must be numbered and that number must correspond to the photograph number on the photo log. For simplicity, the name of the photographer, photo date, etc. may be listed once on the photograph log and doesn't need to be labeled on every photograph.

Photo Log

Information common to all photographs

Name of Property: Squire's House—The J. Eugene Diggs Residence

City or Vicinity: Norfolk

County: Norfolk City County

State: Virginia

Photographer: Kenneth Bryant, M. Arch.

Date Photographed: 2018

Specific information:

Photograph 1 of 12

VA_NorfolkCityCounty_SquiresHouse_0001

House north (front) elevation, view facing south

Photograph 2 of 12

VA_NorfolkCityCounty_SquiresHouse_0002

House driveway and house west (side) view, perspective facing north

Photograph 3 of 12

VA_NorfolkCityCounty_SquiresHouse_0003

House garage north and house west (side) view, perspective facing south

Photograph 4 of 12

VA_NorfolkCityCounty_SquiresHouse_0004

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House west (side) and partial south (rear) view, perspective facing north

Photograph 5 of 12

VA_NorfolkCityCounty_SquiresHouse_0005

House south (rear) elevation, view facing north

Photograph 6 of 12

VA_NorfolkCityCounty_SquiresHouse_0006

House living room, perspective facing northeast

Photograph 7 of 12

VA_NorfolkCityCounty_SquiresHouse_0007

House living-room colonnade to library, perspective facing southwest

Photograph 8 of 12

VA_NorfolkCityCounty_SquiresHouse_0008

House staircase, perspective facing southeast

Photograph 9 of 12

VA_NorfolkCityCounty_SquiresHouse_0009

House living-room mantel, view facing northwest

Photograph 10 of 12

VA_NorfolkCityCounty_SquiresHouse_0010

House east (side) and sun-porch view, perspective facing northwest

Photograph 11 of 12

VA_NorfolkCityCounty_SquiresHouse_0011

House north (front) perspective, view facing southwest

Photograph 12 of 12

VA_NorfolkCityCounty_SquiresHouse_0012

House north (front) perspective, view facing westward

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 100 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 Office of Planning and Performance Management, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.